

Eamonn Jordan. *The Theatre and Films of Conor McPherson: Conspicuous Communities*. London: Methuen Drama, 2019, xi + 235 pp., £75.00 (hardback), £28.99 (paperback), £64.80 (PDF ebook).

Patrick Lonergan. *Irish Drama and Theatre Since 1950*. London: Methuen Drama, 2019, ix + 263 pp., £65.00 (hardback), £17.99 (paperback), £17.27 (PDF ebook).

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Methuen Drama's wide-ranging 'Critical Companions' series, under the overall editorship of Kevin J. Wetmore, Jr and Patrick Lonergan, covers material from the 20th and 21st centuries, discussing playwrights, theatre makers, movements and periods of international theatre and performance. The main focus of each volume is provided by a single author who draws on original research to survey and analyse a body of work. This is supplemented by additional essays and interviews with practitioners to provide alternative perspectives. These additions to the series adapt this format to address subjects very different in scope. In *The Theatre and Films of Conor McPherson: Conspicuous Communities*, Eamonn Jordan focuses on the *oeuvre* of a single Irish dramatist: Conor McPherson. In *Irish Drama and Theatre Since 1950*, Patrick Lonergan examines changes across a whole theatrical culture in Ireland and the wider diaspora. In a survey of Irish theatre scholarship in 2002, Adrian Frazier noted that this field was "distinctive in its adeptness with a historical, archival approach; its theoretical curiosity about linkages between theatre, culture and politics; and its sharp sense of academic community" (9). Each of these volumes manifests these strengths, though I feel they are hindered by the format that the series has dictated.

A challenge facing both writers is that the material with which they are engaging is already very widely known, in no small part due to their own scholarship in the area. Associate Professor in Drama Studies at University College Dublin, Eamonn Jordan's published criticism on Conor McPherson stretches back to a 2004 essay for *Irish University Review* and includes numerous conference presentations and essays alongside *The Theatre of Conor McPherson: 'Right beside the Beyond'* which he co-edited with Lilian Chambers in 2012. Professor of Drama and Theatre Studies at

National University of Ireland, Galway, Patrick Lonergan has already produced a ground-breaking account of Irish theatre history in his *Theatre and Globalization – Irish Drama and the Celtic Tiger Era*, and in the volumes which he has co-edited, including *Irish Theatre – Local and Global Dimensions* (2012) with Nicholas Grene and “*Echoes Down the Corridor*”: *Irish Theatre – Past, Present and Future* (2007) with Riana O’Dwyer. In joining this series of ‘Companions to’ then the requirement of both authors was to provide both an over-arching narrative and insights new to those already immersed in Irish theatre scholarship, while making both accessible to a readership that might be coming to this material for the first time.

Jordan concerns himself primarily with McPherson’s scripts for theatre and film to identify recurrent dramaturgical and screenwriting tropes. His argument is that these texts remain an approximately stable source across each and every iteration - particularly important given the frequency of remounts and subsequent productions of McPherson’s work. He contends that the text contains genre signals, dramaturgical fundamentals and sequences that provide for continuity and “something of true substance with which to engage” (3). Importantly, he also identifies the ways in which McPherson has been able to control the staging of his writing in his role as director for stage and screen. Jordan’s work is an act of critical engagement where insights come from the interaction of his personal experience and memory in dialogue with published primary materials, production details, the scholarship of others and reviews. He is also careful to include viewpoints that diverge from or counter his own, acknowledging the limits of his own highly-developed critical sensibility. While he largely avoids engaging directly with the array of theatrical criticism of his subject and many of the theoretical approaches that inform it, Jordan nonetheless draws on a range of frameworks from other fields to elucidate his understanding and support his perspective. He argues that McPherson’s work is conditioned by the experience of neo-liberalism in Ireland as a consequence of the Celtic Tiger period of economic boom and the subsequent economic collapse after the global banking crisis.

Lonergan’s approach is markedly different, motivated by his focus not on text but on theatre. His discussion seeks to synthesise the analysis of theatrical events as systems of representation and as significant acts with social, political and cultural resonances of their own. His central argument is that “Irish theatre does more than simply hold a mirror to its society; it is often an agent not just of

reflection but of change” (6). To support his argument, he relies on an eclectic range of archival sources, including: prompt scripts, programmes, production photographs, newspaper articles, letters, reviews, and interviews. This historiographical practice is concerned with the staging of works as performance events that are situated in very specific moments in place and time, producing markedly different receptions whenever they are re-staged. Paradoxically, he is able to demonstrate that by returning to the same concerns over time, Irish theatre and its society evolve in cycles rather than by linear development. One significant achievement is to draw out the ways in which successive acts derive from and depend on the achievements and frustrations of what has gone before. Lonergan’s attentiveness to his archival sources is made all the more acute by his direct experience of many of the works in production. Similarly, Jordan is able to draw on his own extensive experience of McPherson’s work in production on stage and screen. The contrast between the two methodologies here does not require any resolution in favour of one over the other: each author demonstrates the ways in which the approach they take supports the reader’s absorption in their respective subjects.

Jordan’s survey of McPherson’s *oeuvre* recognizes the ways in which pinning down individual plays or films into a single category – a stage of the writer’s development, trope or theme – would result in a distortion that inhibits obvious connections. Thus, while he organizes his discussion into six chapters where there is a focus on specific examples of McPherson’s work under particular thematic or formal categories, the discussion resonates between these appropriately throughout. The detailed discussion of a topic in any single chapter, then, can be extended across the materials discussed throughout the book. The effect of this organization is generative, acknowledging and trusting in the capacity of the reader to “foster links that I have forgotten to reinforce, ignored, not considered pertinent or missed entirely” (5).

In chapter one, the discussion positions McPherson as a master storyteller from the earliest monologue plays that launched his career in the 1990s. In chapter two, Jordan turns to McPherson’s engagement with the representation of crime and criminals on stage and screen. The turn to “Convergent Realities: Ghosts and the Uncanny” in chapter three might have been the focus of a whole volume in itself. It resonates further with chapter four (“Apocalyptic Dispossessions”) and the discussion of Christmas in McPherson’s plays in chapter five. The final main chapter examines the

ways in which McPherson's settings – specifically in *The Weir* – draw on and examine 'a pastoral sensibility'.

In a way similar to Jordan, Lonergan's chapters correlate with the decades of a broad chronology of Irish theatrical culture, within which he is able to weave continuous threads by addressing specific tropes within the cultures of Ireland and their representation on the stage. The deftness with which this is done comes out of a rigorous scholarship and detailed engagement with the archives that sustains a particular argument for each chapter and a convincing arc across the volume as a whole. Thus, in his first main chapter, he suggests that the 1950s was particularly noteworthy for the internationalizing of Irish Drama. His main discussion is of the work of Samuel Beckett and Brendan Behan, in ways that are interesting if not surprising. What I found most illuminating is the way in which he traces the career of Siobhán McKenna from her first casting as Joan of Arc in her own Irish language translation of Shaw's *Saint Joan* for Galway's An Taibhdhearc in 1949, through to productions in English in London, Paris and New York. He argues persuasively that McKenna pioneered an Irish stage presence as serviceable not just for the representation of Irish settings but for the translation and representation of cultures and experiences.

Lonergan demands that "the meanings of the term 'Irish theatre' must be expanded" (109): it is the achievement of each of these books that they succeed in this expansion. They are not the first to argue that the category of Irish theatre includes work originating or staged on the island, and must take account of productions and performances in other places, most obviously in Britain and North America, as well as in translation. In addition, Lonergan seeks to expand the category by proposing that theatre is more than the *oeuvre* of playwrights and its history must embrace discussion of stage design and directors. In chapter four, he argues that the *oeuvre* of Garry Hynes as a director at Druid Theatre constitutes its own form of authorship as "an act of reappropriation and adaptation that is different from but analogous to the work of playwrights" (117). This argument is persuasive and sustained almost entirely throughout Lonergan's work. There is an occasional foray into analysis of text in its own right rather than performance – as in the discussion of Christina Reid's *Tea in a China Cup* that premiered at the Lyric Belfast in 1983 (128-31).

Both of these volumes have been written in the aftermath of the #WakingtheFeminists movement that was spurred by the exclusion of women from the centenary programme at the Abbey Theatre to mount a detailed and robust critique to the exclusion and denigration of women across the theatre sector in Ireland. As a middle-aged white male historian of Irish theatre, each author uses the privilege of his own position to identify both the role played and obstacles faced by women. This task is more difficult for Jordan, given that he is writing about the *oeuvre* of a middle-aged white male dramatist. Nonetheless, he explicitly takes up and gives space to the criticisms of McPherson's works offered by Lisa Fitzpatrick, amongst others, about the exclusive masculinity within his plays and includes essays by Fitzpatrick and early career researcher, Maha Alatawi.

Lonergan's critique of the exclusion of women permeates every chapter and he contributes to a standard to which all future scholarship will be held, just as #WakingtheFeminists had done for all future theatre makers. For example, in his chapter on the internationalization of Irish theatre, he draws attention to the differential judgements applied to women adapting or responding to Chekhov – Marina Carr and Lucy Caldwell – by reviewers and critics (103-8). He devotes much of chapter four “to considering how Irish theatre has been reimagined from feminist perspectives [...] to assert the centrality of feminist theatre-making to the development of the Irish tradition since 1950” (111). The re-appraisal of the male-dominated canon of Irish dramatic literature that this begets is welcome precisely because of the ways this domination conditions the production opportunities afforded the women excluded from or included within it through original stagings, frequency of revival, publication and critical treatment (137).

One of the great strengths of each of these volumes in particular is that they motivate the reader to go back to both the primary material and the range of critical work within the field. In *The Theatre and Films of Conor McPherson* this is supported by detailed notes accompanying each chapter. There is also a URL included to a website that proposes to offer both recommendations for further reading and a chronology. It is unfortunate that more than a year after publication this ‘Companion’ Website has only links to buy the book. There is no such website for *Irish Drama and Theatre Since 1950*. Its citations are referenced within the text and references and further reading are provided in an extended section. The inconsistency in approach here reveals something of the dilemmas facing book

publishers: to engage with the facility of online resources or to offer the text as a complete object with its own integrity. It would certainly be an asset to lecturers and students alike to be able to access additional sources online.

A further potential strength to each volume is the inclusion of additional perspectives, through interviews and essays. Eamonn Jordan interviews McPherson himself; adding the two short essays by Lisa Fitzpatrick and Maha Alatawi mentioned above; and an even shorter (two page) commentary from *New York Times* theatre critic, Ben Brantley, that is little more than an endorsement of McPherson's craft. Jordan's interview and the two additional essays overlap significantly with the coverage and perspectives in his own analysis, even to the extent of repeating some of the basic production details and context provided already. The previous anthology of essays Jordan co-edited with Lillian Chambers, *The Theatre of Conor McPherson*, provides a strong contrast in the richness and diversity of perspectives to what is available here.

Loneragan's volume adds perspectives from playwrights Thomas Kilroy and Mary Elizabeth Burke Kennedy: the former writing on Irish theatre in the 1950s and 1960s; the latter on Irish theatre in the 1970s. These are supplemented by a piece from director Louise Lowe reflecting on contemporary experimental theatre practice. Given the masterful account of the period in his own writing, including the judicious use of primary sources, I am not sure that these contributions added much to the work overall. The potential of such contributions to create a genuine dialogue with the work of the main author is inhibited by the brevity of the entries and the limited engagement with them by the main authors in the course of the main text and their own concluding chapters. There is a sharp sense of missed opportunity. This might have been addressed through a more dialogic drafting process or indeed through additional space online for longer contributions.

There is in both volumes the pleasure of reading a theatre history as a kind of whodunit, where narrative suspense derives from the explanation of how an outcome which we know from the start has come into being, by drawing out unexpected, forgotten and misremembered details. Frazier had proposed back in 2002 that,

[w]hat is admirable about the way debate is conducted regarding Irish theatre history is that the terms of reference for an argument are basically the historical archive [...]. The debate is

unending for many reasons: because the documents are inadequate for certainty; because the archive can be expanded by extending the boundaries of what is relevant; because the issues, while basic, are also subtle; and because the scholarly brains engaged are high performance machines. (6)

It is a tribute to both volumes that they not only sent me back to the primary material, but also to the body of critical works and archival sources cited so judiciously here. Thus, the sensation was, to paraphrase Eliot, to come back to the place from where I started and to see it as if for the first time.

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