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‘This is what I need you to do to make it right’

Conor McPherson’s first film project, *I Went Down* (1997), is all about screwing it up, then making it right. The film follows the fortunes of two hapless and somewhat accidental gangsters as they careen around the Irish countryside in a series of stolen cars desperately seeking a fugitive and a set of forged dollar printing-plates. McPherson’s characters are familiar types: inarticulate Irish men trapped in narrow identities because of their inability to change. Yet what makes *I Went Down* a successful black comedy is the way the McPherson’s screenplay, and the finished film, modulate these character types with a genial humanity that is, in the end, redemptive.

McPherson was commissioned to write the script for *I Went Down* by director Paddy Breathnach and producer Robert Walpole, after they saw his play *The Good Thief*. The film is thus the result of all three men’s interest in exploring genre in an Irish context, as well as bearing the hallmark of McPherson’s abiding interest in the complex relationships within all-male communities. *I Went Down* hybridises the male-dominated genres of the buddy road movie and the gangster flick; instead of the wide horizons of California highways or the gritty streets of New York, the film is set against a background of small country roads, the industrialised bogs of the midlands, and insalubrious north Dublin. While the film is thus inflected by American film culture, it is undeniably Irish, not only due to its physical landscape but also its social and cultural landscape in which men struggle to be heroes.

*I Went Down* is the story of Git Hynes (Peter McDonald) and Bunny Kelly (Brendan Gleeson). Git has been in prison for eight months, in the process losing his girlfriend Sabrina (Antoine Byrne) to his best friend Anto (David Wilmot). On his release, Git goes to see Anto and becomes embroiled in a fight between Anto and two tough guys. Git defends Anto but in the process blinds Johnner (Michael McElhatton), the henchman of local gangster Tom French (Tony Doyle). French demands Git repay the debt by taking on a job for him. The job involves joining forces with Bunny to track down French’s missing associate Frank Grogan (Peter Caffrey). Predictably, the job does not go as planned and Bunny and Git end up kidnapping Grogan after French employs a hitman to kill him. Grogan tries to escape but he is brought eventually to French. French and Grogan are former accomplices on a forgery job that went fatally wrong in the past. Though the two men appear to have reconciled themselves in the present, French double-crosses Grogan and kills him, then shoots at Bunny. Git shoots French, saving Bunny, and the two of them bury the dead men and take the forged
dollar printing-plates. The end of the film sees Git and Bunny, now wealthy men, leaving their disastrous personal lives behind them and travelling together to America.

The plot of the film follows the schema of a crime thriller, as the relatively innocent Git becomes increasingly involved in an underworld of guns and gangs. There are frequent double-crosses and missed opportunities. These plot machinations serve to make the two central male characters dependent on one another; though they were strangers at the beginning of the film, by the end a strong friendship has been established. Though both of the men has a significant female other, and both also have sexual encounters with women during the film, they exist within an almost exclusively male community of fellow gangsters and friends, and their relationship, which is unquestioningly a straight friendship, is defining in this context, in which masculine identity is connoted or granted by your connections with a significant male figure.

Git is defined by a series of relationships with men. He ‘went down’ for a crime that his father committed, in order to spare him the hardship of prison. As a result of his prison sentence, Sabrina switched her affections to Anto and the end of their relationship is thus framed as a conflict between the two men, rather than a stand-alone relationship between Sabrina and Git. While we might expect Git to fight for Sabrina, in fact, it is Anto that he fights for, saving him from a punishment beating for unpaid gambling debts. In this scene, in the backroom of a bar, Git is revealed as a real fighter, easily knocking down the first aggressor and then taking on Johnner who is wielding a broken bottle. Though Git is quiet, polite and calm, this early scene suggests he is capable of real violence and ruthless behaviour in defence of a man he has been close to ‘since I was six years old’. The final edit of film emphasises this relationship and the sense of an all-male community even more than McPherson’s screenplay does, as it cuts several scenes between Sabrina and Git, thus prioritising the male-male bond over the male-female bond.

Once French has bullied Git into taking on the task of finding Grogan, he is paired with Bunny. Initially, Bunny is introduced as a hard-man, capable of hurting even his own grandfather. He is older than Git and seeks to dominate the younger man, insisting that they follow his plan, and literally being in the driving seat of the car. Yet this assumed authority is undercut from early on, when Bunny is shown imploring his wife Theresa to let him into his own house after she changed the locks, and when he bungles an attempt to get petrol. Unbeknownst to Git, they are driving in a stolen car, meaning that when they stop for petrol,
Bunny has to force the petrol cap, alerting the pump attendant to them as thieves. In response, Bunny ties up the attendant and robs the till. Git’s disgust at Bunny’s actions is given weight by the film when the two men are forced to dump the stolen car in a field just as a heavy downpour begins. Bunny then compounds this failure by stealing a second car which backfires loudly as they drive off and then breaks down. All of these car-related incidents mean that the two men are late to meet their liaison and, as a result, have failed in their first task.

The initial expectation then that Bunny and Git will fall into a Father/Son binary is complicated from the outset by Git’s obviously superior logic and ability to operate as an intelligent gangster, as against Bunny’s ‘act first, think later’ approach. However, Bunny’s aggressive approach is later endorsed in several situations that call for force, such as the kidnapping of Grogan and the confrontation with the hitman. In the hitman scene Git’s compassionate approach and tendency to reason rather than act are out of place and result in him almost losing his life, until Bunny unexpectedly appears and saves Git’s life (which Git will later reciprocate). This moment signals a shift in their relationship as the two men begin to function as a team, illustrated when they simultaneously pull their guns on the hitman as he tries to escape. When Git says ‘All everybody’s been doing is lying to us. But we hang onto him. Do this on our terms. We can walk away…. I say let’s stop fucking around and use this bastard’, he not only stops empathising with Grogan, but realises that as a team he and Bunny have bargaining power that they don’t have as individuals.1 The moral here is clear: both men must learn from each other in order to survive and, in the end, to succeed. Bunny and Git’s alliance thus becomes an interdependent relationship, in which they successfully shift between dominant and subject, teacher and pupil, aggressor and protector.

Bunny is also defined by significant male relationships, as we learn in a pub scene where he confesses ‘a terrible secret’ to Git, which is that while in prison for armed robbery he had a homosexual relationship with his cell mate. Though Bunny is attempting to reconcile with his wife, Tom French is threatening to tell her the secret, thus forcing Bunny to work for him. Bunny is not able to define himself as he is subject both to his wife’s refusal to talk to him and, most importantly, to French’s blackmail. Bunny’s limbo is not because his sexuality is in question, but because he is unable to set his own self-defining boundaries. Indeed, Bunny insists that he is ‘not a queer’ and hence the primary function of his confession to Git is not as

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a revelation about Bunny’s character but as a representation of their (straight) male bonding. The film further shies away from the suggestion of Bunny as queer, or the potential of two men as romantic partners, when immediately following Bunny’s confession, Git catches sight of two attractive women and Bunny leads him over to chat them up. Though the film concentrates on Git’s night of passion with ‘the Girl’, it is also keen to confirm Bunny’s heterosexual status, showing him waking up the next morning next to a naked woman. Neither woman is named, indicating their roles as plot devices to illustrate the male characters’ virility, which the screenplay doubly emphasises with the Girl’s exclamation over Git’s physical endowment, and the two men’s discussion of the women’s ‘tits’ (though both these bits of dialogue are cut from the film’s final edit).

The homosocial bonds of the gangster world, and the adjunct-status of women, are further reinforced in the extended references to Tom French’s wedding, at which Frank Grogan was best-man. The photograph that French gives Git to help him identify Grogan is actually a wedding photo, torn so that the two men are visible but the bride is cut out. Likewise, during a flashback to the wedding day, French is shown not with his new wife, but with her uncle, the gangster Sonny Mulligan, whom it transpires Grogan murdered. French’s wife never appears in the film, but she is often referred to because she has had an affair with Grogan. Like Sabrina, she appears to be a pawn between two men. This is hilariously undercut when it becomes apparent that Mrs French has absconded with the money she was meant to give to Grogan on behalf of French. As Bunny says, ‘I’m fucking delighted. She did yous both’, in a rare instance of female self-determination which is at least discussed if not seen.²

The focus on men over women is not exclusive to I Went Down but is typical of McPherson’s work in general, as profoundly seen for example in his play The Seafarer (2006), which focuses exclusively on a group of male characters, using women as plot devices between the men, who are referred to but never appear onstage. When female characters do appear, as Valerie in The Weir (1997) or Marie in Shining City (2004), they are more than a match for the male characters. And in Port Authority (2001), though again it is an exclusively male play, the three characters see their relationships with women as ways of defining themselves. Yet time and again women are more absent than present in McPherson’s drama and films. In his early monologue play This Lime Tree Bower (1995), later adapted and directed by McPherson as the film Saltwater (2000), the family at the centre of the plot consists of a

² McPherson p.97.
father, two sons and one daughter. Both play and film are only really interested in the male characters, however, and Carmel, the daughter does not appear in the stage version, while in the film she is given very little screen time. In fact, her boyfriend Ray is a far more developed and important character (in the play he is one of the three monologists, the other two being Carmel’s brothers Joe and Frank). Though McPherson’s film have larger casts than his plays, this focus on the male characters remains constant, as in The Eclipse (2009) in which a man fears he is being haunted by his dead wife, yet the central conflict is later revealed as being between him and his father-in-law. While women can be empowered, as in the seduction of Git by a confident and sexually predatory young woman, in general McPherson is more interested in exploring meaningful relationships between his male characters as a way of illustrating the struggles for self-definition within the tropes of Irish masculinity.

Within I Went Down there are several male archetypes: the powerful bully, the dutiful son, the loyal best friend, and the errant husband. Each of these is complicated, either because Git as the loyal son and best friend is continually let down by both his father and Anto, or because Bunny’s extra-marital affair was while serving six and a half years for armed robbery, an event which has done at least equal damage to his marriage as the sexual relationship with his cell-mate. Masculinity as a performance is pointed up also by certain culturally specific archetypes, from the American-style gangster to the cowboy. Tom French aspires to be a big crime boss to the extent that he speaks with a slight American accent. Yet his small-time operations are far from the glamour and power associated with a crime lord. Likewise, though Bunny avidly reads a cowboy novel, his attempts at charisma are hapless at best, as illustrated by his appalling sartorial choice in cowboy-style footwear.

What McPherson is keen to show, then, is how Git and Bunny attempt to play certain social roles – the dutiful son and best friend, the tough guy – but because these roles don’t fit them, they fail at them or, worse, are failed by them. There is a certain degree of self-conscious awareness of these performances, as when Bunny bullies Git into following his plan by saying ‘Stay here and be a boy then. The men are getting in the car.’ In forging a friendship, what each of these men learns is not merely a different perspective, but to see that they no longer fit the roles they earlier performed. Ironically, leaving these roles behind involves them being selfish and ignoring others’ needs, but this is something the audience inevitably

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3 McPherson, p.25.
champions as, in rejecting these roles, they achieve something closer to independence and self-actualisation.

What these archetypes, and Git and Bunny’s failure to fit into them, ultimately illustrate is the limited models of masculinity and, in particular, the limits of traditional conceptions of the male hero. In *I Went Down* traditional heroic roles tend to go wrong, so that when Git saves his best friend from a beating, he ends up in an even more morally compromised position. And, instead of instilling ethics in Git, Bunny-as-father-figure teaches him how to load a gun and use it to intimidate ‘fucking culchies’. There is thus no moment in which male heroism is not either impossible or corrupted by its context and consequences. The quandary for Git and Bunny is how to behave as a result, and what the film eventually endorses is not acting true to type, but forging their own terms.

The ending of the film illustrates this shift in values as Git and Bunny, with Grogan and French dead, become the gangsters themselves. They decide not to stay in Dublin, however, but to go to America, changing the narrative and continuing the buddy road trip. Their attitude to America is filtered through pop culture rather than experience, as shown by this exchange: ‘Bunny: The States is brilliant. Git: You been there? Bunny: Yeah. Nah, I mean just on the telly and that…’. America is both a known quantity and an unknown space, representing the promise of a new life and wider horizons. Of course, the promise and the reality are frequently very different, and since the masculinities performed on ‘the telly’ are not any more liberating than those functioning in a Dublin gangster community, there is a strong likelihood that Git and Bunny will be just as hapless and unsuccessful in America as they have been in Dublin.

There is an echo here of an earlier play that also tackles the narrow limits of masculine identity, Brian Friel’s *Philadelphia, Here I Come!* (1964) In Friel’s play, the schoolmaster Boyle tells Gar on the eve of his emigration that America is ‘a vast restless place that doesn’t give a curse about the past’ and again Boyle is gaining this information from the idea of America, rather than any direct experience of it. Gar turns to emigration partly because of the limited economic opportunities available to him in Donegal, but mostly because of the paucity of emotional possibilities open to him as a young man. He dreams that in America he will be freed of both kinds of constraint and he aspires to the American freedom of

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4 McPherson, p.37.
5 McPherson, p.67.
expression and lifestyle that Bunny also does. In the thirty years since the first production of *Philadelphia* some things have not changed, in particular the idea of Ireland as antithetical to the full development of masculine identity. What has changed, however, is the ability of two men to bond as a way of overcoming the constraints they feel. In Friel’s play, the central male relationship is within Gar himself, between his public persona and his private self. This relationship is created out of necessity because of the absence of emotional support in other areas of Gar’s life, due to his mother’s death, his father’s emotional distance, and the inability of his male friends to be honest with one another. However, the honesty of the relationship between Git and Bunny and the challenge that each poses to the other, offers a different model, in which male collaboration can effect positive change, as Bunny says, ‘the benefit of the doubt can even save your life. I’m learning that.’

If Git represents the emotional evolution of Gar, then there are plenty of other ways in which McPherson’s screenplay – and indeed his stage plays – embody the lack of development in the Irish male’s ability to articulate himself. Bunny, in particular, struggles to speak meaningfully, constantly repeating himself, breaking off in the middle of sentences, and making abstract statements which he is then unable to explain. Git, in contrast, measures his words, speaks infrequently but is clear and logical. As argued above, Git learns the importance of action over words from Bunny, but we might say that Bunny learns the reverse too. In the final scene between Bunny and Sabrina, he is much more measured and calm and he says what he means. In this scene too, Bunny is much more stylishly dressed and well groomed, and both his language and his appearance indicate his advancement in the male hierarchy. In contrast, the most loquacious character in *I Went Down* is Grogan whose constant stream of words and stories results in him being gagged, shut in the boot of the car and, eventually, killed. Whereas the Irish theatrical model of Christy Mahon in J.M. Synge’s *The Playboy of the Western World* is to envision the Irish male as coming into full existence through the performative power of narrative, in McPherson the less said, the better.

McPherson is not the only Irish playwright turned successful film-maker, as Martin McDonagh’s *In Bruges* (2008) demonstrates. McDonagh’s film has striking similarities to *I Went Down*, partly because it adheres to some of the same generic conventions of gangsters involved in a plot gone wrong. The central concept is that hitmen Ray (Colin Farrell) and Ken (Brendan Gleeson) are hiding out in Belgium after Ray accidentally kills a child during a

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7 McPherson, p.103.
hit. The relationship between Ray and Ken is remarkably similar to that between Git and Bunny, not least because of the consistency of Brendan Gleeson’s presence and levity. In this role, Ken takes a more obviously fatherly role to Ray, consoling him for his mistake and looking after his wellbeing. The echoes here are more than simply an older man caring for a younger protégée, however, as Ken also learns from Ray, analogously to Bunny and Git’s relationship.

Unbeknownst to Ray, Ken is under orders from their gangster boss Harry (Ralph Fiennes) to kill Ray for his mistake in shooting the child. Ken fails to do this, however, choosing instead to give Ray a second chance. When Harry travels to Bruges to carry out the killing himself, Ken sacrifices his own life in order to save Ray. In an interview about the film, Gleeson says of his character that ‘the interaction with Ray allows him to see that it is possible to think in another way, because he’d begun to believe that the only way was Harry’s way…. Ray allows him to see a sense of hope, and in turn that liberates himself to begin to hope again … and there is redemption of some nature.’\(^8\) This change in Ken’s character mirrors the effect Git has on Bunny in I Went Down and again illustrates the ways a supportive masculine community can effectively act as a counter to the oppressive male archetypes that these men, partly because of their criminal occupation, and partly because of their identity as Irish, struggle with.

In both I Went Down and In Bruges, the capacity to change is the most hopeful aspect of the plot, and this is something which is strikingly absent in each writer’s plays. In McDonagh’s Leenane and Aran trilogies, and McPherson’s The Seafarer, Port Authority and Dublin Carol, the male characters all seem permanently isolated within their individual contexts and thus also within their limited identities. However, on film the men are able, despite still being very limited characters, to overcome a sense of resignation and oppression in order to be a little more self-realized. When Ken dies in order to save Ray, the soundtrack of In Bruges plays the Dubliner’s song ‘Raglan Road’. This romantic and tragic song becomes a ballad of Ray’s life, suggesting the wife he lost but still loves (he still wears his wedding ring) and his willingness to ‘lose his wings’ at the end of the day. Neither McPherson nor McDonagh would make the case that their male characters are angels, but in their mutually supportive humanity these comic-tragic men achieve something close to heroic nonetheless.

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The failed male hero is a central feature of Conor McPherson’s work on both the stage and the screen. In this, McPherson follows a tradition within Irish culture of representing tortured and torturous male characters, a tradition so longstanding that the trope has become entirely normalized in plays and films from Samuel Beckett to Jim Sheridan. In *I Went Down* McPherson generates humour from the constant cock-ups and madcap recoveries of Git and Bunny as performers out of their depth, yet he also generates emotional resonance with his creation of characters, adeptly given life by Peter McDonald and Brendan Gleeson, who try, come what may, to make it right.

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9 Indeed, McPherson paid homage to this tradition by directing Beckett’s *Endgame* for the ‘Beckett on Film’ series in 2001.