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THE JOYS AND MYSTERIES
OF THE PECULIAR

A look into the life and portfolio of prolific Irish playwright, Martin McDonagh

Born in London in 1970 to two Irish immigrants, Martin McDonagh started out writing short stories, then progressed to radio plays, most of which were not broadcast. Cultural legend has it that it was the almost unique commissioning of three plays (The Leenane Trilogy) by Galway’s Druid Theatre Company that changed everything for McDonagh. While on attachment to the National Theatre in the mid-1990s, McDonagh wrote The Cripple of Inishmaan. In 1997 he ended up having four plays performed in London, an extraordinary achievement for any writer, let alone a fledgling one.

Success brings rewards and pressures for writers, who now must promote and speak about their work, and also re-invent themselves, like Grammy-winning musicians – we know what you can do, so now let’s see something different. McDonagh has gone on to repeat and expand what and how he writes for over 20 years. His plays are consistently produced throughout the world. Acclaimed films followed theatrical successes, including Six Shooter, In Bruges, Seven Psychopaths and Three Billboards, Outside of Ebbing, Missouri.

McDonagh’s work is marked by complex diasporic intuitions, sensibilities and awarenesses. It was with plays not set in London but in Leenane (The Beauty Queen of Leenane, A Skull in Connemara, and The Lonesome West) and on the Aran islands (The Cripple of Inishmaan and The Lieutenant of Inishmore) that McDonagh found his creative voice – a view, disposition or sensibility where the tragic and the comic misalign, where the sense of who is the hero or villain is never clear-cut.

In the films: the influence and impact of Ireland is evident in the moral values formed during Dublin childhoods of the two on-the-run hitmen in In Bruges; and the inclusion of ‘Raglan Road’, performed by The Dubliners during a crucial moment in the film substantiates the significance of Ireland. Seven Psychopaths has a Hollywood-based Irish writer struggling with writer’s block, and in Billboards the Irish connections are subtler, found in character names (Hayes and Connolly) as well as in the two-time inclusion of the traditional Irish air, ‘Moore’s Melody’ at key moments.

All McDonagh’s writing is noted for its innovative, disruptive tragi-comic impulse, leading to decisive distortions of known / perceived realities. Such work is not performed necessarily with authenticity in mind, but with something more obscure or tangential. Regardless, McDonagh’s works are concerned with the nature of the reality, with violence, the precarity of justice, and the importance of stories.
Grotesque storied spaces abound, whether it is those imagined by the writer facing police interrogation and execution in The Pillowman, the gratuitously realised narrative projections of Marty in Seven Psychopaths, or the interrogations of colonial exploitation through the lens of Hans Christian Andersen’s fairy tales in McDonagh’s latest, A Very Very Very Dark Matter. Stories shape the lives of his characters and their communities. Stories enable and disable, manipulate and motivate, prompt fear and heroism. Sometimes a story is a necessary lie that allows characters to remain safe from an appalling reality, and sometimes stories are deviously self-constructed so that characters can better deceive others.

In Irishmaan’s stories offer assertive accounts of characters fighting back against sexual violation, and by rejecting confining or suffocating narratives, characters start to imagine their lives differently. Funny, malicious, inaccurate, out-of-date gossip is another form of storytelling in Irishmaan. Fragments of knowledge arising from Europe about Adolf Hitler are shared with nothing of the horrors that are about to befall a continent. Driven as much by curiosity and boredom as voyeurism, characters seem obsessed with rumour, lies, innuendo and mis-truths.

In McDonagh’s writing seemingly familiar or standardised character-types that we are all pre-programmed to place are initially presented as well-known entities. In The Lonesome West, two brothers are labelled the ‘Kings of Odd’, McDonagh’s works allow kings and queens of odd to (mal)function brilliantly. Characters are highly opiniated, self-absorbed, only on occasion up to any good.

These figures are idiosyncratic in terms of irrationality and obscure logic, deviant in terms of uncanny behaviours, offbeat in terms of their strange relationship dynamics. Most of all they are peculiar in how they defy genre norms and audience expectations. While these are buffoons, idiots, grotesques, or gargoyles-like figures, McDonagh’s mischief-making occurs when characters regarded to be caring become ruthless, the mean-spirited generous and benign, or the seemingly shady unexpectedly inclined towards... Out of such distortions we get to glimpse the uncanny, and out of the politically incorrect, outrageous but fluctuating mindset of characters we get insight about the uncertainty of individual selves, our own masks and performances. However, it is the potential humour that emerges from such inconsistencies that proves to be one of the true joys of McDonagh’s work. Sometimes the humour is playful, sometimes sinister and sometimes its transgressions can be offensive. Unfiltered, corrosive viewpoints on gender, sexuality, race and disability are expressed by characters, but this offence is invariably and forensically tempered with, reversed, ridiculed. Perhaps, laughter triggers us to be less rigid, circumspect, judgmental, absolute.

Interestingly, most spectators root for Ray (Colin Farrell) in In Bruges, despite him being a child-killer, something almost unheard of in film history. The question is why so, and by what sleight-of-hand does McDonagh position the spectator thus?

Equally, in Billboards, a detestable racist / corrupt cop ekes out some form of... (fill in the gap yourself), but ‘redemption’ surely is not the word, and the vigilante-inclined, justice-obsessed mother, Mildred Hayes, maintains our sympathy; despite her transgressions of the law. As for the characters we want to get their ‘comeuppance’, McDonagh invariably stalls the process of appeasement / punishment. Even as McDonagh misleads and disorients, it does not result in us feeling slighted.

Joy is to be discovered in the allegedly familiar being distorted, pleasure to be had in pettiness and self-absorption of McDonagh’s characters, an unexpected optimism found in character taboo transgressions of socially agreed norms. The spectator’s vantage point is never singular but multiple. Nothing is ever as it first seems.

Eamonn Jordan teaches in UCD and has published a book and co-edited a collection of essays on the works of McDonagh. His most recent publication is The Theatre and Films of Conor McPherson: Conspicuous Communities (Methuen / Bloomsbury).