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Book Review: Staging Intercultural Ireland: New Plays and Practitioner Perspectives

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The Immigrant Experience in Ireland

A ll scholars of world literature, especially those trained in the traditions of Western thought, must ultimately wrestle with the question of privilege: in opening up a space for all voices to be heard, care must be taken to avoid coopting those voices. Academics must always be aware of our own motivations so that discussions of multicultural literature do not appear anthropological, mere examinations of other cultures from a worldview that seems ubiquitous but which comes from a place of unconscious—perhaps—superiority. Critics from Edward Said, in Orientalism, to Gayatri Spivak, in “Can the Subaltern Speak?” to Chinua Achebe in “Image of Africa” have fearlessly warned against such tendencies, as the perspective of Western privilege encourages us to remain external to our projects, never fully acknowledging our existing privilege from others, so convinced are we that we are teachers.

Charlotte McVor and Matthew Spangler, Editors

STAGING INTERCULTURAL IRELAND: NEW PLAYS AND PRACTITIONER PERSPECTIVES
CORK UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2014, $57.95

Thus it was with some trepidation that I approached Staging Intercultural Ireland: New Plays and Practitioner Perspectives, a unique collection by editors Charlotte McVor and Matthew Spangler. The project itself gathers eight plays and six interviews with various playwrights and practitioners who are working in Ireland, all of whom focus on the migrant and immigrant experience, and some of whom are immigrants themselves. I need not have feared. The book was compiled with an eye toward genuine understanding of the difference between multicultural approaches (those which might focus on how “different” such plays might be) and intercultural (those which allow for voices and techniques to enhance each other in order to highlight the importance of context for both author and audience). It is also refreshing in its inclusion of more than merely authorized texts—addition to photographs, providing visual contexts, the essays preceding each play establish the context for the play both historically and theatrically, and the interviews address issues of theatre practice that we don’t often see in anthologies of plays. These wider discussions allow for a more complete and comprehensible understanding of just how innovative these projects are, especially in a country where theatre is so tied to national identity. As Kasia Lech notes in one of the interviews included, “Irish theatre for a long time was very self-focused because it was creating itself. Now, it has to focus on the outside and it’s hard because you have to do that without losing yourself and there is obviously a danger. But if we allow the foreign influence, we’re going to get colonized again to some extent” (372).

The first play included is Cave Dwellers, by Nicola McCormay, first produced in 2001. It is, a Man, a Young Woman, a Boy and an Old Woman are seeking their escape from conflict at home, and they wait in a cave for the man to come who will transport them to a new life. With a nod to Waiting for Godot, we see their inability to connect with each other, to trust one another, or to save themselves. They are existentially torn between wanting to help each other, recognizing their humanity regardless of political side, or wanting to take from each other in order to survive. It is a series of settings and challenges that as a politically themed play, the Abbey directors (which at the time included O’Riordan), went against the Theatre’s patron Annie Horiman’s ban on political plays. In fact, O’Riordan resigned as an Abbey director when Horiman objected to actor Sara Allgood reading a short work at a private suffragette meeting in London. Emmet would be revisited as a subject in Lennox Robinson’s 1915 The Dreamers. Mangan is the subject of Louis D’Alton’s The Man in the Clask, 1937, while Swift is the focus in G. Sidney Paternoster’s The Dean of St. Patrick’s Cathedral, 1913, and Arthur Power’s The Draper Letters, 1927. The year 1945 saw Roger McHugh’s Rosa, as the chapter details the Abbey’s pattern of b Commodrama. Clearly the Abbey’s approach of urban plays are well-established by Mannion’s book. A few copycats exist, such as John Synge’s death as 1908, when it was 1909. The back cover’s notations for the front cover photograph as “from under O’Casey Bridge” may need clarification. While the photo was presumably taken from under Dublin’s O’Casey Bridge, the image depicts a glance from below to the Samuel Beckett Bridge.

The Urban Plays of the Early Abbey Theatre represents a major contribution to Irish theatre scholarship. By detailing and defining the urban traditions of the early Abbey Theatre, Mannion suggests that the Abbey Theatre’s emerging repertoire—reminding us that as urban theatre, the Abbey, while richly founded on rural plays, was mindful of the urban tastes of its audiences. As Mannion states in her Introduction, “setting lingers.” Indeed.

—Massachusetts Maritime
All the World’s a Stage

BY KELLY MATTHEWS

I
n All Dressed Up: Modern Irish Historical Pageant, Joan Fitzpatrick Dean traces the evolution of Irish pageantry from Gaelic League Language Week Pageant to Up State Theatre Company’s 2014 Mijana Rendulic’s Táin. The book itself becomes a step on the way to making the speculative pageant a viable option for a young female immigrant. As Dean notes, regarding Macnas’s award-winning stadium show The Táin, “This Irishland was lusty, pagan, and valiant. It was as if de Valera had never existed.”

“I don’t think that was the issue,” says Miguel Jimenez, who addresses the challenges faced in such projects, as they strive to overcome the stereotypes assumed about them while creating connections to and with their new homeland.

The anthology is a remarkable achievement in world literary studies, as it begins to bridge that gap between the academic voices and the voices of practitioners and immigrants themselves; each perspective adds to the nuances of the others, and the book itself becomes a step on the way to true intercultural understanding.

—George Fox University

Joan Fitzpatrick Dean

ALL DRESSED UP: MODERN IRISH HISTORICAL PAGEANT
SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2014

Indeed, Pearse serves as a starting point for the trajectory of Irish pageantry: his pupils at St. Enda’s school performed an elaborate, Irish-language tribute to Cuchulainn in 1909, “an equestrian pageant staged in the open air” with the title character in a horse-drawn chariot. Notable audience members included O’Riordan, O’Grady, Edna Martyn, the Count and Countess Markievicz, and W.B. Yeats. All Dressed Up traces the lineage of Celtic and Christian pageantry from the Gaelic League and Pearse’s Irish republicanism to the post-colonial patriotism of Ulster Cycle heroes, to the Aonach Tailteann and the Dublin Civic Weekes of 1927 and 1929, to the 1932 Eucharistic Congress, to Mitchell MacLiammóir and Hilton Edwards’ ambitious productions for the Tostal festivals of the 1950s. Dean is at her best when describing each pageant’s elaborate choreography, as in her description of the 1954 Pageant of St. Patrick, a watershed moment in the development of the pageant genre. It was after this point in contemporary history that pageantry turned its sights on audiences external to Ireland, a tradition that continues in today’s medieval dinners at Bunratty Castle, within driving distance from Shannon Airport, an example that springs “without tears,” as Dean describes most historical pageants of the modern era.

After the mid-twentieth century, cinema and, later, television arose and developed into significant competition for pageant audiences. It was not until the 1980s, as Dean documents, that the Macnas theatre company was able to re-cast the pageant genre as populist street theatre, challenging the boundaries between spectators and performers. As Dean notes, regarding Macnas’s Táin, “This Irishland was lusty, pagan, and valiant. It was as if de Valera had never existed.”

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In chronicling the hey-day of historical pageantry, Dean brings to the fore several colorful personalities who played significant roles in the perpetuation of this curious dramatic art form. Earliest among these is Louis Napoleon Parker, English dramatist, who set conventions for pageants that were to resonate beyond the settings of rural Dorset, where he staged his first production in 1905. Parker’s rules dictated the amateur status of pageant performers—he quipped that “Nobody is too good to be in a Pageant and almost everybody is good enough”—and he declared that each performance should end with a communal singing of the national anthem. Dean reaches into pageantry’s origins to chart the distinct nature of this genre as compared to other forms of drama (I confess I yearned for a mention of the bravado of James Joyce’s “Araby”). Parker’s influence was to be felt far and wide, and it soon impacted Irish practitioners such as Fred Morrow, one of eight brothers from Belfast and a leading force in the Ulster Literary Theatre for over thirty years. As Dean tells it, “Fred Morrow’s enthusiasm for Irish historical pageantry crossed disciplinary lines between theatre and the visual arts, the political no-man’s-land between Ascendancy and advanced nationalism.”

In the Free State, Michæl MacLiammóir and Hilton Edwards were to become two of pageantry’s leading lights. In addition to founding An Taibhdhearc and the Gate theatre companies, MacLiammóir (born Alfred Wilmore and a seasoned expert in self-creation, as Dean notes) and Edwards created or assembled three large-scale nationalistic pageants during their respective careers, including one, The Pageant of the Celt, that was sponsored by Solidier Field, Chicago in 1934.

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