Fall 2008

Book Review: Modernism, Drama, and the Audience for Irish Spectacle

Kathleen A. Heininge
George Fox University, kheininge@georgefox.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/eng_fac

Part of the English Language and Literature Commons

Recommended Citation
http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/eng_fac/62

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of English at Digital Commons @ George Fox University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications - Department of English by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ George Fox University. For more information, please contact arolfe@georgefox.edu.
The Audience for Irish Spectacle

Reynolds begins by considering the relationship between audiences and the Irish theater, exploring the evolution of Yeats and the Revivalists as they move away from a seemingly inclusive nationalist agenda toward a more elitist idea of who their audiences might be. Yet she also reminds us that the Revivalist's ideal was not necessarily their reality, as an audience will always be made up of individuals—not the "homogeneous abstraction" (17) that scholars often discuss— who generally refuse to abide by the ideals set before them. In one of the only quibbles that I have with the book, I would suggest that this part of the argument could, perhaps, be more developed. While it is true that "each individual sits or stands next to another who possibly holds a different aesthetic, political, social, sexual, gender, religious, or class bias and therefore responds differently to the material on display" (26), Reynolds seems to discount elements well-known in dramatic and comic theories that suggest the cognitive audience responses to a performance is often impacted by the response of the individual proximate members. Inappropriate laughter, for example, or a failure to laugh when expected, are some examples of the phenomenon of audience. Anecdotes telling of audience responses, responses such as howls of laughter to Boucicault's performance of Richard II (ostensibly because of his Irish accent), or the titters and guffaws when seven coffins, one after the other, were brought out during early productions of Synge's Riders to the Sea force the question of individually appropriate or differentiated responses when an audience perceives anything en masse. Still, the assertion about the individuality of audience is one of the only places where Reynolds's argument gave serious pause.

Given, then, the way audiences were conceptualized by the Revivalists, the chapter on Synge and his Playboy premiere takes on a relatively new dimension. Reynolds develops a reading of the meta-audience within Synge's play to suggest that Synge did indeed expect the Abbey audience to respond to Playboy with dismay at the very least, suggesting that political intent does indeed change the way that we think about the conjunction of modernism and revolution. Reynolds goes on to make similar points about Dublin Suffrage Week, which was its own kind of metatheater in its performance of gender as it stages Ibsen's Rosmersholm; about the death of Terence MacSwiney, which was spectacle in an entirely new way, and on Irish cultural relations throughout the 1980s and early 90s, and this documentary impact. It also allows for the possibility that the scripts will be tested in non-Charabanc productions. Only productions by a variety of companies can test the ultimate value of scripts that had an undeniably political impact on the culture from which they emerged.

Recent years have been good for those interested in Northern Irish drama— particularly for those interested in Charabanc. Linen Hall Library (Belfast) has long had a collection of Charabanc materials (posters, programs, scripts). The University of Notre Dame (Indiana) library has now acquired a comparable collection. Digital images of Charabanc posters and programs have been made available on the website of the Western Institute of Irish Studies (www.wisconsin.org). Finally there are reliable scripts and a fine critical study to go along with these collections of ephemera. Irish theatre scholars can only be grateful.

Kathleen Heininge

The Audience for Irish Spectacle

By including chapters on Dublin Suffrage Week, the death and funeral of Terence MacSwiney, and the 1924 Tailteann Games, Reynolds expands our conception of Irish spectacle in exciting and provocative ways.

Reynolds begins by considering the relationship between families and the Irish theater, exploring the evolution of Yeats and the Revivalists as they move away from a seemingly inclusive nationalist agenda toward a more elitist idea of who their audience might be. Yet she also reminds us that the Revivalist's ideal was not necessarily their reality, as an audience will always be made up of individuals—not the "homogeneous abstraction" (17) that scholars often discuss— who generally refuse to abide by the ideals set before them. In one of the only quibbles that I have with the book, I would suggest that this part of the argument could, perhaps, be more developed. While it is true that "each individual sits or stands next to another who possibly holds a different aesthetic, political, social, sexual, gender, religious, or class bias and therefore responds differently to the material on display" (26), Reynolds seems to discount elements well-known in dramatic and comic theories that suggest the cognitive audience responses to a performance is often impacted by the response of the individual proximate members. Inappropriate laughter, for example, or a failure to laugh when expected, are some examples of the phenomenon of audience. Anecdotes telling of audience responses, responses such as howls of laughter to Boucicault's performance of Richard II (ostensibly because of his Irish accent), or the titters and guffaws when seven coffins, one after the other, were brought out during early productions of Synge's Riders to the Sea force the question of individually appropriate or differentiated responses when an audience perceives anything en masse. Still, the assertion about the individuality of audience is one of the only places where Reynolds's argument gave serious pause.

Given, then, the way audiences were conceptualized by the Revivalists, the chapter on Synge and his Playboy premiere takes on a relatively new dimension. Reynolds develops a reading of the meta-audience within Synge's play to suggest that Synge did indeed expect the Abbey audience to respond to Playboy with dismay at the very least, suggesting that political intent does indeed change the way that we think about the conjunction of modernism and revolution. Reynolds goes on to make similar points about Dublin Suffrage Week, which was its own kind of metatheater in its performance of gender as it stages Ibsen's Rosmersholm; about the death of Terence MacSwiney, which was spectacle in an entirely new way, and on Irish cultural relations throughout the 1980s and early 90s, and this documentary impact. It also allows for the possibility that the scripts will be tested in non-Charabanc productions. Only productions by a variety of companies can test the ultimate value of scripts that had an undeniably political impact on the culture from which they emerged.

Recent years have been good for those interested in Northern Irish drama— particularly for those interested in Charabanc. Linen Hall Library (Belfast) has long had a collection of Charabanc materials (posters, programs, scripts). The University of Notre Dame (Indiana) library has now acquired a comparable collection. Digital images of Charabanc posters and programs have been made available on the website of the Western Institute of Irish Studies (www.wisconsin.org). Finally there are reliable scripts and a fine critical study to go along with these collections of ephemera. Irish theatre scholars can only be grateful.

Kathleen Heininge

The Audience for Irish Spectacle

By including chapters on Dublin Suffrage Week, the death and funeral of Terence MacSwiney, and the 1924 Tailteann Games, Reynolds expands our conception of Irish spectacle in exciting and provocative ways.
concerns about “appropriate” behavior of women in the public eye. When she looks at the hunger strike of MacSwiney, she considers whether she would have liked to say, she’d just got on with the way she was, living as an Irishwoman in a way that compels us to consider the intersection of modernism and revivalism, and to realize that one cannot escape the argument about intention within both movements.

In one of her more provocative moves, Reynolds weaves in the idea of the Catholic Church as part of spectacle. While she does not come out and state that the Church is explicitly invoking spectacle in the same political manner, she does suggest that the Church is complicit in the politics of spectacle, both as participant (through its rituals) and as manipulator (through its influence over the production of events such as MacSwiney’s funeral, and of the reception of events such as suffrage speeches or certain plays). It would be interesting to see whether Reynolds believes that there is a difference between religious and political spectacle.

In the end, we see that, as Reynolds suggests is true for MacSwiney, the spectacle itself ends up as an abstraction that is invoked for political gain, an abstraction that “allowed anyone to ventriloquise” (137) the subject of that spectacle. This ventriloquism, with its implication of falsity and manipulation, should lead us all to question the very concept of spectacle wherever we see it: when are we being manipulated, and will it make a difference if we recognize it for what it is? Is all theater merely propaganda within its cultural moment? And can we ever divorce spectacle from the cultural moment that prompts it? These are questions that seem all the more fitting when considering the prolonged spectacle of this election year, but which also require a reconsideration of our pat categories of modernism and revivalism.

—George Fox University

EMMA DONOGHUE

Touchy Subjects
Harcourt, 2006, $24.00

Reviewed by MARILYN RICHTARIK

THE PROTAGONISTS of these short stories by Emma Donoghue often are oversensitive and quick to take offense, and the topics they tackle are both awkward and delicate in nature. But the stories are “touchy” in another sense, too, capturing moments of intense contact. Donoghue presents a variety of characters: male and female; young, old, and middle-aged; gay, straight, and transgendered; Irish and otherwise. Her sympathy extends to all of them.

One of the most talented and prolific of the younger Irish writers, Donoghue is blissfully unburdened by the notion that Irish nationality is a well-defined or especially meaningful category. Of the nineteen stories in this collection, four (“Touchy Subjects,” “Oops,” “Do They Know It’s Christmas?,” and “Speaking in Tongues”) feature Irish people in Ireland and three (“Through the Night,” “The Sanctuary of Hands,” and “Baggage”) depict Irish characters outside of Ireland, while the national origins of characters in the other twelve stories are ambiguous, though some are clearly from the British Isles and others are North Americans. Named locations include Dublin, Los Angeles, Toronto, Florence, the French countryside, Limerick, Manchester, Belfast, New York City, and a Louisiana swamp.

The stories in Touchy Subjects are unified by time rather than place, and Donoghue records with superlative skill the tensions and contradictions of life at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Younger people in these stories are making their way in a world transformed by technology and global mobility yet filled with the same old conflicts and elusive possibilities of contentment. Here, too, are representatives of a slightly befuddled older generation, like the Irish mother in “Through the Night” who views her daughter as “heded in by rules, miserably committed to something known as ‘attachment parenting.’” (In her day, Rose would have liked to say, they’d just got on with it, wasn’t a lot of telly, and had a laugh when they could.) The dilemmas in these stories are the universal human ones—involving dealings with children, parents, significant others, siblings, friends, pets, God—presented, at times, in unfamiliar guises. No matter how much things change, Donoghue reminds us, there are some constants in life. When a character in another story exclaims, “This is unfair, it’s oppressive, it’s humiliating,”—her mother replies equally. “Sure it’s Christmas.”

Readers from the Irish Studies community will be particularly interested in the ways in which Donoghue explores the contours of contemporary Ireland. The nearly perfect title story is perhaps the most telling example of this. Sarah, an Irish expatriate in her late thirties, has flown in to Dublin from Seattle, en route to a business meeting in Brussels, in a last-ditch attempt to get pregnant. Her best friend, Carmel, has convinced her husband, Padraic, to donate sperm for the purpose. The story is the meeting between Sarah and Padraic to make the exchange (via syringe, it should be noted, not “the old-fashioned way,” though Padraic jestingly suggests that that might be easier). Donoghue achieves both poignant and humorous effects by switching the point of view back and forth between Sarah and Padraic, who barely know each other but are brought together at Finbar’s Hotel, recently refurbished by a “Dutch rock star and his Irish wife,” for reasons that strike them both as politically incorrect. “He knew Irish society was meant to be modernizing at a rate of knots,” Padraic thinks to himself, but this was ridiculous.” To make matters worse, this being Dublin after all, the hotel’s reception manager turns out to be Padraic’s cousin, who regards with disapproval his apparent assignment with an attractive single woman. His confidence, among other things, falters, and it is by resorting to a phone call to his wife that he is able to complete his mission. “Carmel should consider a career move. She could make a mint on one of those chat lines,” he reflects near the end of the story, while Sarah tries to remember how to pray: “Mostly what she said was please.”

The scenario of “Touchy Subjects” is reminiscent of a similar plot line in director Lawrence Kasdan’s movie The Big Chill (1983), in which a happily married womanloan her husband to a single friend who wants to be a mother. This is but one example of the collection’s witty, eclectic intertextuality. E. M. Forster’s novel A Room with a View is mentioned in “The Dornin of the Virgin,” in which an inexperienced and narrowly focused male protagonist chases around Florence according to the dictates of the modern equivalent of Baedeker’s guide until a death in his own hotel exposes to him his own lack of imagination. In “Speaking in Tongues,” about a passionate encounter (and perhaps the beginning of a romance) between a female Irish-language poet and a lesbian university student, Donoghue experiments with a prose version of the technique used so successfully by Brian Friel in the love scene between an Irish-speaking girl and a British army officer in his play Translations. An old man trying to drum up tourist business in “Enchantment” adapts a line from Field of Dreams, the 1989 film starring Kevin Costner, when he is asked to explain his actions: “If you build the signs, they will come.”

Some of these stories are barely more than satiric sketches. Married academics in “Do They Know It’s Christmas?&rdquo; visit the fact that his parents in Belfast do not put their three badly trained dogs on a patch with their grandchildren. A middle-aged gay man in “Oops” believes that his inadvertent fumbling with a new-fangled family planning device is responsible for his eldest friend’s pregnancy, and more or less adopts their daughter as his own special project. A stay-at-home father in “Pluck” becomes obsessed with a single hair growing under his girlfriend’s chin. Characters such as these are exaggerated, but with enough truth to remain recognizably human. In my opinion, though, the best stories in the collection are among the longer ones: “Touchy Subjects,” “The Sanctuary of Hands,” “Write Or,” “Speaking in Tongues,” and “The Welcome.” In all of them, characters yearn for human connection, sometimes finding it in unexpected places (as, in the title story, Sarah’s desire for a baby leads her to uncomfortably intimate encounter with Padraic).

By virtue of Donoghue’s precise diction, powers of description, and keen eye for the subtleties of human behavior, meaning emerges in all of these stories from the everyday details of life. Searing moments of revelation are rare in this collection, as are patches of purple prose. There are, however, epiphanies in the true Joyce sense of “a sudden spiritual manifestation, whether in the vagary of speech or of gesture or in a memorable phase of the mind itself.” And the stories are frequently both hilarious and profoundly moving.

Few of the stories in Touchy Subjects achieve the transcendence of the best pieces in Donoghue’s last short story collection, The Woman Who Gave Birth to Rabbits. Nevertheless, they are consistently entertaining and often illuminating about the “new” Ireland, the Irish abroad, and the way we live now.

—Georgia State University

In Memoriam

Nuala O’Faolain
1940-2008

In the fall of 2008, IRISH LITERARY SUPPLEMENT PAGE 15