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

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understanding. (The current costly upgrading of the formerly substandard Divis Flats, including removal of the rooftop generator, is one of many signs that post-Troubles Belfast is morphing rapidly.)

In *Somewhere Over the Balcony*, the cross-cultural dynamic was created because unionist/Protestant actors were portraying nationalist/Catholic characters. A more common Charabanc practice was to devise plays (like others in this anthology) that included characters from both communities. In *Now You're Talking* (1985) Protestant and Catholic women gather in a reconciliation centre and find substantial commonality—in part because none of them likes the American supervisor of the centre. The three acts of *Gold in the Streets* (1986) sweep through various Belfast communities in different decades (1912, 1950, 1985). *The Girls in the Big Picture* (1986) departs from Charabanc's typical urban Belfast setting to present rural women whose boredom is relieved primarily by the local cinema and basket teas.

These Charabanc plays share an ensemble structure resulting from the influence of

company members who helped devise the scripts. There are no "lead" roles. The spare sets are low-cost and easily transportable, which allowed touring productions to be mounted in leisure centers and parish halls. Setting and atmosphere are established by recorded sounds, lighting shifts, and dialogue. The plays' most distinctive characteristic, however, is the occasionally risky black humor with which they presented the lives of women, celebrating women's skills and resiliency under challenging circumstances.

Harris has supplied helpful support material for the scripts: production notes for all Charabanc plays, photos, a glossary, alternate endings for *Now You're Talking*. She has also provided an introduction that could only have been written by someone as familiar with the company, its members, and its productions as she is. It is an insider's narrative, admiring and informative. The major omission of material that would facilitate future productions is an indication of the music used, particularly the tunes to which the plays' important song lyrics were sung.

Charabanc's first and perhaps best-known play *Lay Up Your Ends* (1983), which focused on a 1911 Belfast linen mill strike, is missing from this collection. That regrettable absence resulted from the complexity of obtaining rights. Early in Charabanc's history Marie Jones (*A Night in November*, 1994; *Stones in His Pockets*, 2001) emerged as the lead playwright. The first three plays in this anthology are credited to "Marie Jones: Devised by the Company." Jones alone gets credit for *Somewhere Over the Balcony*. *Lay Up Your Ends*, however, owes a debt to Martin Lynch (*Dockers*, 1981; *Interrogation of Ambrose Fogarty*, 1982), who guided the company through the devising of their first play. The complexity of the play's authorship complicated rights sufficiently to prevent its inclusion.

Unfortunate as the absence of *Lay Up Your Ends* is, the presence of authoritative texts of these four plays is a gift to those who value women's theatre, Irish theatre history, and unusual theatrical methods. Charabanc had an important impact on Irish theatre and

on Irish cultural relations throughout the 1980s and early 90s, and this book documents that 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 powerful effect 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.wiisonline.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. *

—Boise State University

The Audience for Irish Spectacle

PAIGE REYNOLDS

Modernism, Drama, and the Audience for Irish Spectacle
Cambridge University Press, 2007, \$95.00

Reviewed by
KATHLEEN HEININGE

IN A BOOK ABOUT DRAMA and Irish spectacle, one would naturally assume that the reactions to Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World*, Yeats's and Gregory's *The Countess Cathleen*, and O'Casey's *The Plough and the Stars* would be discussed, and one might be concerned that this is all well-worn territory. While the reactions to these plays are discussed in *Modernism, Drama, and the Audience for Irish Spectacle*, by Paige Reynolds, and while the treatments of the plays and the concomitant situations themselves offer little that is really surprising or new, what is surprising and new is the context of these treatments amid other much less familiar incidents of 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.

The overarching argument that spectacle in Ireland forces a new way of looking at Irish modernism proves compelling. Reynolds insists that modernism in Ireland is different in that it has to negotiate between the ideals of European or international modernism and Irish revivalism, two seemingly dichotomous movements. She calls Irish modernism a "subset" of both. Forcing a cultural materialist reading of a wide variety of plays, including many that are virtually ignored by most scholars, Reynolds considers the historical moment of the plays, the intent of the writers, the intent of the producers, and the audience reception, in order to buoy her argument. In effect, she argues that spectacle, in all of its manifestations, is manipulated for aesthetic and political ends, and she suggests that such spectacle is rarely "accidental" or even unwelcome.

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 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 different aesthetic, political, social, sexual, gender, religious, or class biases 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 conglomerate audience response to a play 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 then 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 revivalism. Reynolds goes on to make similar points about Dublin Suffrage Week, which was its own kind of meta-theater 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

the ways Irishness was invoked as part of dramatic spectacle, to varying effect (or, as she points out, affect); the investment in what constitutes "Irish" is ubiquitous but somewhat fluid, for writers/producers and for audience. In grappling with what it means to be Irish and to foster Irishness, spectacle in Ireland cannot avoid being political, as it is ever intertwined with an agenda that seeks to set the Irish apart from the English in every way, even when those ways seem specious. To exhibit the political nature of spectacle, each of the dramatic presentations at which Reynolds looks tells us a bit more about what was going on not only within the theatrical world of Ireland (and not even only in Dublin), but also within popular culture at the time. The intersection of the worlds of sport, theater, private/public, and politics does much to further the argument about modernism in Ireland: it was far more than an intellectual exercise, and the way that spectacle was invoked shows that.

This expanded concept of dramatic spectacle, of course, leads to questions about the intentionality of both "author" and "audience." If it is true that Yeats and Synge and O'Casey anticipated and even welcomed the troubled reactions to their plays, knowing that antagonizing audiences might prompt the audience members to join the cause, then does the same intentionality apply to events such as Dublin Suffrage Week, to the hunger strike and funeral of Lord Mayor of Cork Terence MacSwiney, to the Aonach Tailteann Games and their staging of Irishness for an international community? The question is complex, and the answers still more, implicating everyone from authors to critics and audiences. While Reynolds certainly analyzes the formal theatrical productions that make up part of these events, she also looks at the events themselves and their circumstances. When she looks at Dublin Suffrage Week, she considers the gendered and moral implications behind Elizabeth Young's production of Ibsen's *Rosmersholm*, but she also speculates on the "performance" of the Christmas fair and the tea-room, "productions" designed to alleviate expressed

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with unforeseen consequences; about the 1924 Tailteann Games, which manipulated audiences to see a fictional version of Ireland through the very idea of spectacle; and about O'Casey's staging of *The Plough and the Stars*, which, as Reynolds points out, refuses to point out the commonalities in the Irish audience (202) in favor of demonstrating the varieties of audience members and spectacle. Each of these incidents of spectacle were political in their environment, and manipulated theater in ways that can almost be considered propaganda.

In each chapter, Reynolds is cognizant of

concerns about "appropriate" behavior of women in the public eye. When she looks at the hunger strike of MacSwiney, she considers the way that the body is staged as specifically Irish in opposition to the British authorities; the Irish funeral itself, deprived of a body by the British authorities who feared unrest and who then redirected the casket away from Dublin, reinforces her point. When she looks at the Games, she goes beyond the discussion of the plays that were presented, showing us also the way that the Games were conceived and executed by the elite and for the elite, an elite who glossed over the poor and decaying conditions of

most of Dublin (a discussion that necessarily leads to O'Casey). In each of these chapters, Reynolds gives us an analysis of intention and of reception 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 ventriloquize" (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

MARILYNN 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 American. 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 "hedged 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, watched 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—," his mother replies equably, "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 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 barely licit. "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 assignation with an attractive single woman. His confidence, among other things, falters, and it is only 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 woman loans 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 Dormition 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?" resent the fact that his parents in Belfast do not put their three badly trained dogs on a par 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 oldest friends' 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," "WritOr," "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 to her 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 Joycean sense of "a sudden spiritual manifestation, whether in the vulgarity 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

A Woman of the World

In Memoriam



Nuala O'Faolain
1940-2008