

Tom Murphy's Alice Trilogy: Through the Looking-Glass of the London Critics

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Abstract: *Tom Murphy is generally considered to be one of Ireland's two most important living playwrights. Although Alice Trilogy, which premiered in London at the Royal Court Theatre in November 2005, was his first new play in five years, it was awarded no more than a tepid reception by the London critics. The article begins by tracing intertextual links between Murphy's trilogy and Lewis Carroll's Through the Looking-Glass and what Alice found there (1872), arguing that an awareness of these links is particularly helpful in understanding the psychology of the angst-ridden central character of the play. A survey of nineteen reviews of the play published in the London press reveals that, for the majority of the critics, the intertextuality between the two works was, surprisingly, not considered to be noteworthy. The article also makes passing reference to the first Brazilian production of Murphy's play, a studio performance of an unpublished Portuguese translation, staged in São Paulo in December 2006.*

Nobody could ever accuse Tom Murphy of being unduly optimistic about the human condition. His plays depict the outcasts of society with a relentless bleakness and, although there is humour in his writing, it is not generally the laughs that remain in the mind after having watched a Tom Murphy play. In his essay entitled "Tom Murphy and the children of loss", in *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century Irish Drama* (2004), Nicholas Grene states that:

Messed-up lives, dead-end states, the extremes of dereliction and despair – these provide the staples of Murphy's drama, whatever the form and milieu. (212)

Nonetheless, plays such as *The Gigli Concert* (1983) and *Bailegangaire* (1985) hold out the redeeming possibility of transcendence of grim circumstances, grotesque though the means may be. Christopher Morash (2002) describes *The Gigli Concert* as being:

[...] part of a theatre of exorcism that emerged in the 1980s, where the past is conjured up, neither to be mocked nor to open old wounds, but so that it might be accepted and healed (259).

In his survey of twentieth-century Irish drama Christopher Murray (1997) registers the reaction of audiences to the play's "combination of compassion and an ethic derived from music":

It was (quack scientist) King's triumph over tragic circumstances which had Irish audiences on their feet in a standing ovation when *The Gigli Concert* had its première at the Abbey (226).

However, besides the notable hits Murphy has also had a few misses. In her overview of his oeuvre José Lanters (1997) recognises that "the extreme reactions evoked by his plays are reflected in the many ups and downs of his career", and concludes her essay by quoting from a 1991 *Irish Times* interview in which Murphy stated:

The risks have sometimes left me with injured legs, but sometimes they've paid off. My motto is, 'If you can do it, why bother?' (231)

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Alice Trilogy (2005), which opened at London's Royal Court Theatre on 16 November 2005, was Murphy's first new play in five years, and once again it was an exercise in risk-taking. Like another new Irish play, which followed it onto the Royal Court stage in January 2006, Stella Feehily's *O Go My Man*, the focus was upon the well-heeled middle class of the Celtic Tiger economy. It should have been a surprise to no one that, although Murphy had celebrated his seventieth birthday earlier in the year, neither the advancing years nor Ireland's newfound Euro-wealth had brought about any mellowing in his perception of the human predicament.

The play depicts its eponymous central character at three moments in her life, in the 1980s, in 1995 and in the present. The title suggests that we should perhaps respond to what we see on stage as a series of three one-act plays, rather than as three acts in a single drama. What Murphy offers us is essentially a triptych, three juxtaposed images bound into a single unifying structure. The name of the central character provides the optic through which to view the three pictures, for Alice is an inescapable reference to the heroine of Lewis Carroll's classic tales *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) and its sequel *Through the Looking-Glass and what Alice found there* (1872), as is made clear by a quotation from the latter work in the third play in the trilogy.

In the second of Carroll's books Alice passes through the looking-glass on the chimney-piece in her drawing-room and finds herself in Looking-glass House, in which the normality of her own world is inverted so that "the things go the other way" and "the books are something like our books, only the words go the wrong way" (7). She soon

discovers that she is caught up as a pawn in a giant chess game, in which the characters she meets on her journey to the eighth square are dramatis personae of increasing grotesquery in the same game. As in the previous book Alice wakes at the end to find that the whole adventure has been no more than a particularly vivid dream. Carroll describes his book as a fairy-tale, and the story of its creation, improvised to entertain the young Alice Liddell and her two sisters in a rowing-boat on a summer's afternoon, has already acquired a legendary quality of its own. Both books are prefaced with a dedicatory poem, in the first case addressed to all three sisters, but in the second to Alice alone. Carroll was forty years old when the second book was published and, although he was to live for another twenty-six years, the poems, which frame *Through the Looking-Glass* are tinged with a melancholy recognition of life's ephemerality:

Come, hearken then, ere voice of dread,
With bitter tidings laden,
Shall summon to unwelcome bed
A melancholy maiden!
We are but older children, dear,
Who fret to find our bedtime near. (IX)

The book's epigraph closes with the rhetorical question, "Life, what is it but a dream?"

In Tom Murphy's play, although Alice is no longer a little girl, she is nonetheless trapped in a looking-glass world. In her case, the proportions of this world are no longer those of a dream but of a nightmare. The first play in the trilogy is set in 1981 and it introduces us to an over-stressed, twenty-five-year-old Alice seeking respite from the daily routine of her married life in the solace of her retreat in an attic room. Here, amidst the family's discarded broken furniture, reminded of the mundane reality from which she is trying to escape by the remote thump-thump, thump-thump of the washing machine in the house below, she washes down her Valium with coffee strongly laced with whisky and smokes a cigarette before rushing off to collect her three children from school. (One has a strong sense of having travelled back to the mid-60s and an encounter with the middle-class housewife of the Rolling Stones' "Mother's Little Helper".) It is here too that Alice communes with her alter ego Al. The black and white contrasts of Jeremy Herbert's set for the Royal Court production were redolent of Carroll's chessboard and, when Derbhle Crotty's Al steps out from the frame of a cheval mirror to join Alice in her looking-glass world, she too is dressed in black, wearing whiteface makeup. Juliet Stevenson's blonde Alice wears blue jeans and a light-blue blouse, reminding us of the image created, for better or worse, by Walt Disney's cartoon version of Carroll's character.

The dialogue between alter ego and ego is conducted in the interrogatory form of an inane television quiz-show, opening with, "Your name, age and profession, please?" (4). However, from this very first question there is an ironic sub-text underlying the

banality of the questions and answers, for Alice has no profession. Despite the promise of her top-of-the-class results at the Loreto school for girls, her skills in mental arithmetic, her general knowledge and her command of French, Alice is now restricted to the mundane role of a housewife, a fact underlined by the music-hall misogyny of the later question, “Why do women have small feet?” (15), to which Al herself provides the answer “So that they can stand close to the sink” (22). Of course, the ludic-interrogatory mode is also that employed by Alice’s interlocutors in *Through the Looking-Glass*, particularly in the case of her meeting with Humpty Dumpty:

“In that case we may start fresh,” said Humpty Dumpty, “and it’s my turn to choose a subject –” (“He talks about it just as if it was a game!” thought Alice.)
“So here’s a question for you. How old did you say you were?” (71)

Although it is Humpty Dumpty and Al who are, respectively, the quizmaster and – mistress, Tom Murphy’s Alice shares Humpty Dumpty’s playful attitude to language itself. Just outside the attic room is the wire-mesh-and-timber aviary where Alice’s husband Bill keeps the budgerigars which serve as his relaxation in the odd moments between his work as an up-and-coming young banker and his four nights a week of evening classes. Alice, however, describes it as an apiary, no doubt, in recognition of the alliterative qualities of Big Bill the banker’s interest in “breeding budgies and babies and suchlike” (19):

Alice I know that it’s an aviary –
Al But ask her, go on, ask her and she’ll tell you.
Alice I prefer to call it an apiary.
Al She calls things what she likes.
Alice Should I call things by what other people have decided for me?
Al Her mind, her life.
Alice My mind, my life. (12)

Humpty Dumpty likewise sees his relationship with language as a question of control:

“I don’t know what you mean by ‘glory,’” Alice said.
Humpty Dumpty smiled contemptuously. “Of course you don’t – till I tell you. I meant ‘there’s a nice knockdown argument for you!’”
“But ‘glory’ doesn’t mean ‘a nice knockdown argument’,” Alice objected.
“When *I* use a word,” Humpty Dumpty said in rather a scornful tone, “it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less.”
“The question is,” said Alice, “whether you *can* make words mean different things.”
“The question is,” said Humpty Dumpty, “which is to be master – that’s all.”
(74-5)

For Tom Murphy's Alice, however, her interlocutor is no nursery-rhyme character: her alter ego is a dark presence seeding her mind with the appalling thought that, if she is to commit suicide by driving her car into the docks, she should take her three beautiful children, aged six, five and four-and-a-half, with her. The budgies also acquire a sinister force in Alice's topsy-turvy looking-glass world. As in Alfred Hitchcock's film *The Birds* (1963), Bill's pets constitute a nightmarish threat. Twice Al refers to the impenetrable rationale of their daily routine, their occasional outbursts of chirping "for reasons best known or unknown to themselves" (13 + 24), an echo of the leitmotif, repeated eleven times, in Lucky's monologue in *Waiting for Godot*, that rambling catalogue of divine and human irrationality. (Beckett 1965. 42-45) The first play in the trilogy closes as Alice rushes off to collect her children from school and the theatre is filled with waves of head-splitting sound from the budgies, "singing all together like a hacksaw cutting through wire" (24), reminding us of the shrieking violin in another Hitchcock film.

Notwithstanding the irrational shrillness of the budgies there is no murder in the shower for Alice or for her children. The second play in the trilogy takes place thirteen or fourteen years later. It is no longer in her attic hideaway that Alice seeks escape from her humdrum quotidian round. A serious car crash some ten years previously has frightened her off both driving and drinking. It is now her husband who has turned to drink, even though he is the high-flying "area manager for half the banks in the country" (37). Meanwhile Alice seeks what she describes as her "opium for the housewife" (35) in a fortnightly book-club meeting and a creative writing class every Tuesday night. We meet her on one such night walking through a badly lit lane by the gasworks wall. Out of the shadows a voice calls her name and emerges cautiously into the light. The voice is that of the famous television newsreader James Godwin, Jimmy, her former flame of twenty-one years ago, to whom she has written on the off-chance of a meeting. Dressed in black, like Al in the first play, Jimmy likewise serves as a mirror to Alice – they both have three children, for instance, "nearly *touché* there" (34). Like Al too Jimmy reveals an undercurrent of violence beneath his slick surface. To begin with, their meeting, after a separation of more than two decades, seems to hold out the possibility of a return to the halcyon days of adolescent innocence. They hold hands in silence and Alice asks, "Which of us is dreaming this?" (36), the very question that Lewis Carroll's Alice raises at the end of *Through the Looking-Glass*:

"Now, Kitty, let's consider who it was that dreamed it all. This is a serious question, my dear ... You see, Kitty, it *must* have been either me or the Red King. He was part of my dream, of course – but then I was part of his dream, too!" (Carroll 131)

For Tom Murphy's Alice, however, the dream quickly sours and becomes a nightmare as her 'Red King' surrenders to his paranoia about his colleagues in the television studios. This quickly extends to Alice herself as Jimmy conceives of the possibility that she may have set up their meeting in order to obtain compromising

photographs for the purposes of blackmail. The second play in the trilogy ends as he threatens her with violence:

Jimmy Do you realize, because of your ‘fantasising’, that I could hurt you now. I could? I could?

Alice You could.

Jimmy And I would like to. Would that ‘reality’ suit you? Fear of consequences are (sic) not stopping me. I could kill you right now? I could?

Alice You could, Jimmy, but you won’t. (47)

Much to the relief both of Alice and of the theatre audience Jimmy fails to put his threat into action and takes his black-coated malevolence off into the night.

The final play in the trilogy is set in the present. Alice, now nearing fifty, is sitting in an airport lounge with her husband. Although she eats nothing herself he steadily munches his way through a plate of fish and chips during the course of the play. In the final scene of *Through the Looking-Glass* Alice is also sitting down to a meal. At the head of a table of fifty guests, sandwiched between the Red Queen and the White Queen, Alice does not manage to eat anything at all, for the Queens order the waiters to remove every dish before she can make a start on it. In the case of Tom Murphy’s Alice there is a very plausible reason for her lack of appetite, for she and her husband are at the airport in order to receive the body of their son, which is being flown home after his premature death in an accident abroad. While her pragmatic husband eats his meal we hear Alice’s interior monologue. In the first play in the trilogy Alice’s alter ego referred to her ego in the third person: now Alice refers to herself in the third person. Bereft of her favourite son, her “gallant escort” (34) of ten years previously, Alice refers to God as “the Almighty Terrorist” (61). Like Lewis Carroll’s Alice, she is unable to provide a rational explanation for the disorienting world in which she exists:

There is no explanation for what cannot be explained, no comfort for what cannot be comforted. ... But she accepted the explanations and the religious platitudes for the sake of those who offered them. (61)

Trapped in “a nightmare that is pretending to be a dream” (53) she recalls her self of “twenty-five, no, thirty years ago when everything seemed possible” (56):

Dreaming. She was a great dreamer. Back then she was a fool to any kind of suggestion: suggestion did not take no for an answer. ‘It’s no use trying,’ said Alice, ‘one cannot believe in impossible things.’ ‘You haven’t been practising,’ said the White Queen. (56-7)

This, of course, is almost an exact quotation from the conversation that Lewis Carroll’s Alice has with the White Queen on the occasion of their first meeting:

“Now I’ll give *you* something to believe. I’m just one hundred and one, five months and a day.”

“I can’t believe *that!*” said Alice.

“Can’t you?” the Queen said in a pitying tone. “Try again: draw a long breath, and shut your eyes.”

Alice laughed. “There’s no use trying,” she said: “one *can’t* believe impossible things.”

“I dare say you haven’t had much practice,” said the Queen. “When I was your age, I always did it for half an hour a day.” (Carroll 62)

However, it is not the White Queen who enables Alice finally to escape from her depressed introspection but the Waitress in the airport restaurant, who unburdens herself of her own nightmare, confiding to Alice that, having lovingly fostered her sister-in-law’s baby for over a year, she and her husband had recently returned the baby to its mother, who, Medea-like, had killed the child just two days previously. Finally, at the very end of the play, Alice is jolted out of her solipsism to extend the hand of empathy to the Waitress, embracing her and admitting that:

... she loves the waitress, Stella, and clings to her for a moment in sympathy and in gratitude for releasing this power within her. (66)

Although this transcendent moment was insufficient to unlock the “strange, savage, beautiful and mysterious country” (23) that Alice had sensed within herself at the end of the first play, the final image in the London production, of tears running down Juliet Stevenson’s equine face, was an indisputably powerful theatrical moment.

Curiously, the London critics failed to detect any intertextuality between Tom Murphy’s play and Lewis Carroll’s *Through the Looking-Glass*. Of nineteen reviews published in daily and weekly papers in the ten days following the play’s opening on 16 November 2005, only three even so much as mentioned the nineteenth-century precursor of Murphy’s stage character. In the *Times*, Benedict Nightingale mentioned Alice only in terms of frustrated expectations:

The title of Tom Murphy’s new play suggests that we should expect a three-parter along the lines of Shakespeare’s *Henry VI*, but with Lewis Carroll’s flax-haired princess rather than a doomed king. However, it lasts just over two hours and is called a trilogy because it observes an Irish woman in a doleful 1980, a wretched 1995 and a 2005 somewhere the other side of despair. (*The Times*, 17.11.05)

In the *Daily Express*, Ruth Leon described Murphy’s Alice as emerging “through the looking-glass of her thoughts” (*Daily Express*, 17.11.05), while Susannah Clapp referred

to Juliet Stevenson's portrayal of Alice as being "... a woman trapped behind her own face like Alice behind the looking-glass" (*Observer*, 20.11.05).

On the other hand, two thirds of the critics pointed out parallels between Murphy's writing and that of Samuel Beckett and, in some cases, that of Virginia Woolf. Most of the eleven critics who detected evidence of Beckettian influence saw this as having been inadequately absorbed. Thus, the *Times* reviewer described the play as:

... a short trilogy as might have been penned by Samuel Beckett in collaboration with a dozen depressed housewives. (*The Times*, 17.11.05)

A few days later, the *Mail on Sunday* echoed this analogy:

Imagine *Desperate Housewives* written by a wannabe Samuel Beckett and an exceptionally depressed Virginia Woolf and you'll have the flavour of Tom Murphy's *Alice Trilogy*. (*Mail on Sunday*, 20.11.05)

Carole Woddis, in the *Herald*, asked why Murphy's play sounds "disturbingly like a thin amalgam of Samuel Beckett and Virginia Woolf?" (*Herald*, 25.11.05). In the *Independent on Sunday*, Kate Bassett felt that the play was "too obviously indebted to Samuel Beckett" (*Independent on Sunday*, 20.11.05), while the *International Herald Tribune* stated that "... the show nods in the direction of the greatest Irish playwright of them all – Samuel Beckett – without beginning to approximate his power" (*International Herald Tribune*, 23.11.05). Probably the most seriously pondered view of the question of Beckettian influence, however, was voiced by Michael Billington, the elder statesman amongst the London critics, who has been reviewing plays for the *Guardian* since 1971:

Dramatists, as they get older, often do away with the impedimenta of realism. Tom Murphy here focuses with Beckettian directness on the decline of his eponymous Irish heroine over a quarter of a century. The result is a strange, poetic, poignant study of a life half lived, and of suffering stubbornly endured. (*Guardian*, 17.11.05)

It is regrettable that very few of Michael Billington's colleagues in the press corps were prepared to extend the same level of tolerance towards Murphy's work. The management of the Royal Court would certainly not have wished to adorn the theatre's billboards with such damning comments as:

... fuddled, feeble ... drama-lite ... emptily verbose ... glowering lack of dramatic purpose (*Evening Standard*, 17.11.05);
... both precious and thin (*Financial Times*, 18.11.05);
... two hours of relentless misery ... theatrical masochism (*Daily Telegraph*, 18.11.05);

... badly engineered (*Independent*, 18.11.05);
... irritating ... pretentious ... tiresome (*Daily Mail*, 17.11.05);
... very disappointing (*Independent on Sunday*, 20.11.05);
... exasperating (*International Herald Tribune*, 23.11.05);
... rather tedious (*Jewish Chronicle*, 25.11.05);
... often dreary (*Sunday Telegraph*, 27.11.05).

Although several of the critics referred to Tom Murphy's status as one of Ireland's leading contemporary playwrights, second only to Brian Friel, very few saw fit to comment on the play's Irishness. Thus, Murphy's focus on a sector of Irish society that has rarely featured in the work of Irish dramatists was not mentioned by any of the nineteen critics. Only Michael Billington ventured to argue that the virtue of the play is that it "implies some malaise in Irish society not confined to women," although later in his review, rather than attempting to specify what this malaise might be, he fell back on generics. Thus, for Billington, the second play in the trilogy "beautifully brings out both the wan despair of middle-age and some baffled affliction within the Irish temper," concluding his review with the affirmation that, although the play's "final meaning is elusive ... it admits us to the solitude and despair within the Irish soul" (*Guardian*, 17.11.05).

Of more interest to the critics were Juliet Stevenson's struggles with her Irish accent. The reviewers were unanimous in declaring that Juliet Stevenson's performance as Alice was the great strength of the production. They referred to her:

... mesmerising performance (*Guardian*, 17.11.05);
... lyrical self-pity (*Evening Standard*, 17.11.05);
... virtuosic performance (*Daily Telegraph*, 18.11.05);
... talent for sadness (*Daily Mail*, 17.11.05);
... wrenching intensity (*Sunday Express*, 20.11.05);
... tour-de-force of virtually solo acting (*What's On*, 23.11.05);
... mixture of suppressed fury and almost inaudible restraint (*Herald*, 25.11.05).

On the other hand, her unsuccessful attempts to produce a convincing Irish accent were the object of general reprobation. The critic of *The Times* described Juliet Stevenson's accent as "iffy", while Michael Billington wrote that her "Irish roots were only fitfully suggested". Alastair Macaulay said that an Irish accent that "comes and goes" was her only obvious fault (*Financial Times*, 18.11.05). The *Daily Mail* described her accent as "dim to non-existent", while Martina Shawn, writing in *What's On*, said that her accent was "forced to tour all over the place". Given that most critics did not believe the play's Irishness to be of particular significance, Juliet Stevenson's difficulties with her accent were considered to be a blemish on her otherwise outstanding performance, but not a problem as far as the production as a whole was concerned.

Curiously, given their evident dislike for Tom Murphy's text, the critics seemed to think that the production itself was successful, largely due to the positive qualities of Ian Rickson's direction. Here the praise was indeed fulsome: the critics described the production as:

- ... expertly judged (*The Times*, 17.11.05);
- ... wonderfully spare (*Daily Express*, 17.11.05);
- ... sensitive (*Time Out London*, 23.11.05);
- ... characteristically meticulous (*Mail on Sunday*, 20.11.05);
- ... spare, eerie and gripping (*Independent on Sunday*, 20.11.05);
- ... a superb study in claustrophobic detail (*Herald*, 25.11.05).

Writing this now, over a year after seeing the play, I still feel that the London critics were unduly harsh. I took my son, then twelve years old, to see the play and neither of us enjoyed the experience as much as some of the other plays we went to see. A young adolescent can certainly be forgiven for finding the neuroses of a fifty-year-old woman less entertaining than the farcical mayhem of Dr Prentice's clinic in Joe Orton's *What the Butler Saw*, for instance (the shared theme of both plays being that of mental health). For my own part, although I was enthralled by Juliet Stevenson's portrayal of the central character, neither she nor Tom Murphy was able to make me *care* very much about her angst. Like many of the London critics, I found myself siding with Alice's long-suffering husband who, dull though he may be, is more sinned against than sinning. Perhaps this was the risk that Murphy took with this play, for he must have known that it would be difficult to write the tragedy of a wealthy married woman whose principal problem throughout the major part of the play is that she has no problems. In this sense, Tom Murphy's Alice is much like her nineteenth-century namesake – both characters are lost in a labyrinth of irrationality, but this does not earn them the right to the theatre-goer or reader's empathy: one observes the plight of both Alices with dispassionate detachment.

By way of a post-script, it is worth noting that, on 6 October 2006, almost a year after its world premiere in London, *Alice Trilogy* opened at the Abbey's Peacock Theatre in Dublin. The production, directed by Tom Murphy himself, and starring Jane Brennan as Alice and Mary Murray as Al, was a sell-out success. There can be no doubt that the Abbey's audience holds Tom Murphy dear to its heart – in 2001, for instance, his work was celebrated with the six-play season *Tom Murphy at the Abbey* – but it is interesting to conjecture that his *Alice Trilogy* may have struck a chord with the Irish audience that failed to resonate with London's theatregoers.

Two months later, on 5 December, I was fortunate enough to be present at the play's first performance in Brazil. In a sensitive translation by Domingos Nunez, who also directed the play, the presentation took place in a small studio theatre high above the Avenida Paulista in São Paulo. Curiously, I found Alice to be considerably more likeable as a character in Brazil than I had found her in London. This may have been

because Marcia Nunes, who played the role, and Sylvia Jatobá as AI, achieved a playful, almost sisterly, empathy between ego and alter ego that was very different from the sinister darkness pervading their dialogue in the London production. Similarly, both Jimmy and Bill were played with an aura of warmth by, respectively, Marco Antônio Pâmio and Walter Granieri, which lent a humanity to the characters that was somewhat lacking at the Royal Court. Granieri's Lear-like stage persona in particular brought a tragic intensity to the Alice's long-suffering husband. Perhaps the Brazilian cast was responding to a glimmer in Tom Murphy's text that Ian Rickson and the London critics failed to spot in the corner of their looking-glass.

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