Interviewing Roxana Silbert and Tessa Walker

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Roxana Silbert and Tessa Walker visited the University of São Paulo while they were offering workshops on drama in the "Núcleo de Dramaturgia – Novos Autores" promoted by SESI/The British Council in São Paulo to whom we are deeply indebted for the opportunity to meet them. As Roxana Silbert directed Sebastian Barry's play *Dallas Sweetman* at Canterbury Cathedral for the Canterbury Festival in September 2008, the Brazilian Association of Irish Studies invited her for an interview on the production of Barry's play.

MHM – I have been told that Sebastian Barry was commissioned for the writing of the play called *The Miracle Man* or *The Man of Miracles* to be presented at Canterbury Cathedral. Why was the title changed for *Dallas Sweetman* and what does it mean?

RS – Dallas Sweetman is the main character of the play and he is the man of miracles. Dallas Sweetman is the servant in a household in Ireland and he looks after two twins; when he saved them his masters called him the man of miracles. And when he saves the twins he is a young man of fourteen years old and he likes to think of himself as a man of miracles. That's how he identifies himself, because he is a man that has very lowly origins and has aspirations to have a great position in the house. But it is interesting, a lot of the play is either biographically true, and the only piece of complete fiction in the play is Dallas Sweetman. But after we did the play we had several people asking where they could do the historical research on Dallas Sweetman.

MHM – Is Dallas an Irish name?

RS – It is, it is a quite common Irish name. I think that Sebastian wanted to change the title because the play is very much about the little man, and the play is about a very important moment in Ireland's history both culturally and religiously, and he wanted to look at this very important moment in Irish history from the point of view of the little man, a man of no importance, and in a way calling it the man of miracles it would suggest it is a very special man, and he wanted to give just the name because the name

means nothing to anybody, except the man who has it. We co-produced the play in Canterbury Cathedral, but the priests were very upset that he changed the title because they said: “well, Man of Miracles is a much better title for attracting audiences; no one will know who Dallas Sweetman is”.

MHM – Paines Plough Theatre Company commissioned *Dallas Sweetman* for the Canterbury Festival. As the Company “seeks the most exciting space to produce their work” and since the Canterbury Cathedral policy “seeks new works of specific relevance to East Kent”, does it follow that Barry would write something which would be suitable and would produce a play about conflicts between the Catholic religion and the Protestant?

RS: It was a very interesting commission because Canterbury Cathedral came to us. It is an extraordinary event because there’s never been a play in the nave of the Cathedral. So, just a little history on that. Canterbury Cathedral had in the thirties commissioned plays. They had commissioned T.S. Eliot’s play *Murder in the Cathedral*, but it was not done *in* the Cathedral, because the people were against producing a play inside the Cathedral. So this was the first time that a play was commissioned specifically for the nave, produced in the nave. Sebastian Barry is a man who does not need to accept commissions. The money is very poor for commissions. If you are a young writer you need the money to support yourself. If you are a man of Sebastian’s stature who has now written a bunch of novels and plays, you don’t need to accept a commission. You just write a play and then you decide who you want to produce it. So, when I approached Sebastian, I didn’t know him, I had never met him, I loved his work, and I thought that this enormous space in the Canterbury Cathedral needed a rhetorical language to fit it, and there are very few British playwrights that can do that. And interestingly, and we put together the list, most of the playwrights were Irish, because the Irish poetry is still existent in a way that in English theatre is not so prevalent. So I contacted Sebastian with really a cold phone call, I’d never met him, he didn’t know me, and I said: “This is what we’ve been offered; this is why I’m approaching you”. And it so happened that he had a play that he wanted to write, which was a story of twins. And I think that the way this play came about is a very interesting example for the way playwrights think. Because he had the play he wanted to write, he has twins himself, and he comes from a family who has a history of having twins. And the story of twins in this play is true; and that’s the play he wanted to write, and he wanted to write it in this period [1600s]. Then, how that became relevant to Canterbury Cathedral was a much, much different journey for a very long time. So the first play was the story of Thomas Beckett in court. So when I first talked to him, he wanted to write about twins, and when the play arrived on my desk it was about Thomas Beckett. And it is quite dreadful actually. Quite, quite dreadful – that was a surprise. And he said, “It is terrible, isn’t it?”. And I, “Yes, it is quite terrible”. And he then went on to write another play. What the story became, in a way the story of Thomas Beckett became the heart of the play. It was a very odd process. We

didn't feel they fitted together. We spent all of the time in the Cathedral. Another thing that is fascinating about Sebastian is that he loves architecture. And he has a rectory, Sebastian's own rectory, which he pretty much built himself. So he is very interested in stones, he is interested physically how buildings are put together, so he was fascinated by Canterbury. And a combination of all those things became this play: he takes these very random elements and finds a way of really putting them together.

MHM – Sebastian Barry makes parallels not only between Dallas Sweetman and Thomas Beckett, but also with Mountifort; they both open their arms to wait for death. So, was this thought about later in the process to make it connected with the story of Beckett, which had been told before?

RS – I think that when he wrote the first draft, which was about Beckett, he was trying to find what the story of Dallas was. I think it wasn't easy to find a way into it. It is not something that he had thought and tried to write. It was about how to bring these stories together and make sense, emotionally, politically, religiously.

MHM – In *Dallas Sweetman* you have Lucius and all the other people who existed in history. Is this revisiting the past a strong tendency in contemporary drama?

RS – I would say untypical. There are very, very few plays that are set outside the contemporary period. We have very few playwrights who write stories like Sebastian's; he is an exception. I think he chose the period because the story of the twins actually happened in the eighteenth century and he set it in the 1600s, because it was the moment in which the Irish and English Church split. What was very interesting about Canterbury is that Canterbury is an Anglican Church, it's not Protestant. The Anglicans in England believe themselves to be part of the Catholic religion. The Catholics in Ireland hate the Anglicans because they believe the Anglicans betrayed Catholicism. But also because what happens in England today is the split between Muslim and Christian cultures, and I think Sebastian wanted to write about that. But if you try to remember, there are a lot of plays that look at this issue because it affects every single moment of our being in Europe at the moment. Sebastian didn't want to write about the political problem, he wanted to write about the spiritual. So it is a play that also deals with a very specific point at which England split from Ireland.

MHM – How does Sebastian Barry solve the problem of language when writing about past ages?

RS – I think that you can't write the language as it is now, I mean, for example, no one knows what Gaelic sounded like in the seventeenth century, no one knows. So this is an invented language, it is neither actual modern Irish or Irish, nor is it ancient. But in order to write the way people speak you have to get into the way people think, and then

the structures of thinking were different than they all know; and then, the way people think has to be reflected in a language and that's I think why it is very difficult to write historical plays, because it's finding the right language, because you can't write the language of today, because it reflects a different culture, but simply mimic a language of what was spoken then.

MHM – As director of *Dallas Sweetman*, would you tell us what kind of problems the transposition from the text to the stage offered? Did Sebastian take part in the process and what kind of changes were done?

RS – Big changes were done during the writing of the play. There was a lot of sitting around the table and reading the play. What you have in this play basically is traditional Irish storytelling, and the question is how do you make it dramatically, how do you make it interesting to the audience and why do you put it on stage and not simply read it or hear it on the radio. So, what I had to find out was the relationship of Dallas to the audience, why was Dallas speaking to the audience, what was he telling them, why did he want to tell the audience these things, what did he mean to the audience, what did he want on the stage.

MHM – Does the audience assume the role of the judges mentioned so many times?

RS – Yes, for that took a long time to achieve and to arrive at.

MHM – Because it is a trial, isn't it? Mrs. Reddan has one point of view and Dallas lies until he tells the whole story.

RS – We had to do a lot of work on what was true and not true, and we also had to create. I wanted it to feel fluid so that there was always action while we were speaking, but I wasn't simply repeating what he was saying without adding another layer to what he had spoken other than simply portray what was being said. And we worked with music for almost two hours in the play, so we had a special school composed it, that was constant in the play. So we were working on three levels, which is a very dense and poetic test, musical score, and physical score in a way. It is about how language interacts on stage with space, because we were rehearsing in a small space. Canterbury Cathedral is huge, it's enormous, and there's history in every stone. Until we were in the rehearsal we hadn't realized that we needed to create the intimacy of the storytelling, but without losing the sense of epic in the story. And the Cathedral *was* epic in those stones, it was absolutely beautiful. And it was a very extraordinary rehearsal because Canterbury Cathedral is a tour centre, with people coming in all the time, and they couldn't close the Cathedral for us to rehearse because they would lose too much money. So we had to rehearse in the Cathedral with lots of people coming in and out. But you can't hear anything because the acoustics is so bad, and I was really worried about that; actually it

was brilliant because I understood it because I couldn't hear it. And another thing that was extraordinary was that on the hour, every hour, they had a prayer. So whatever we were doing ... we had to stop and we had to wait for the prayer. And it was the best rehearsal process I have ever been through because you never could get tense, you could never get angry or annoyed because you just stopped, and we sat together in silence for five minutes every hour. I was introduced to every single priest, so the relationship that you get at their company was quite extraordinary. You know, to just sit for five minutes every hour made that process really spiritual and it was an amazing thing. But it was very intimidating; I mean, when we were rehearsing in Canterbury we rehearsed in a space where the Cathedral was truly reproduced. And you have this extraordinary burden of history, and Sebastian was terrified to be under that...

Question from the audience – I have a question about the setting. Did you have to put anything extra? After all you were at Canterbury Cathedral. But the stage directions are very few in the play, so you cannot exactly figure out how the setting was devised.

RS – We created the stage area, I worked with a very brilliant designer, Robert Innes Hopkins, who is a theatre designer, wonderful, he is an artist, a sculptor, and he wanted to put into the space a very bold, really lucky old piece of sculpture. And what we had, a very pragmatic problem which was the necessity to lift the stage so that you could see it. Because the Cathedral is very high we wanted to create something that wasn't trying to compete with the height, but which just worked at a horizontal dynamic. So it was high enough and when you looked at it, it took your eye up, but that you were still eyelevel with the characters. And it was an enormous, a very difficult, a very beautiful thing. But what it did was create perspective because it wasn't an enormous stage, it was probably half size of this room. If you were at the top of it you were very high, yet if you were centered you were very close to the audience. Because the play moves, there's a lot of journey. We needed a space where we could create journey, so we wanted a space that was reminiscent of the Irish landscape, which was very important; but also a space that in some ways reflected the main character's state of mind. And the other thing that was very challenging was the lighting, because the lighting didn't just light the stage; it lit the architecture of the Cathedral. So we had the stage, and then a long long way off there is a pulpit like a painting. When Sebastian wrote the play he took a lot of interest in the lighting; he was very influenced by that shade of light on the stage. And there were times when the lighting was very focused on Dallas, and on the entire architecture. And the Cathedral was like another character in the play.

Q – Are the conflicts of 1600s still significant in Ireland?

RS – I think Sebastian feels very strongly about Ireland as a culture that thinks itself as victim. Ireland, the way it manages or identifies itself as a victim of the English and that

suits Ireland to forget that its conflicts were internal, and that a lot of the problems that Ireland created, it created for itself; they were not created by others. And in Ireland, that is still an extremely provocative thing to say; and this is the reason why it was going on in England – it could not be heard in Ireland. So the time to do this play is not easy because that's still very provocative. And also because the moment at which Ireland and England split, which is also a very important moment in English history, is the start of modern England, the way we organize ourselves politically is directly linked to this particular period of time. And given the mess we are currently in, it's an attempt to understand something of where we came from, in order to understand how we got to where we are today. Dallas is fundamentally mad, and he was a mad man, but he is a man who is over opinionated. He thinks of himself a greater man than he is, and he is a man who is unable to face what he has done. And I think that that is emotionally true of many individuals, and I think that is as current as anything. And I think it's also true for both English and Irish cultures, they can't face what they have done, and so they live in a world, in a limbo, because they can't move forward. And what is very beautiful about Sebastian's work is his absolute belief in love.

TW: Yes, this is why *The Pride of Parnell Street* is that as well, it's a love content in his work, very very small gestures, but those gestures can somehow begin to heal. And I think that in terms of where we are in our political history at the moment, we are to emphasize what has happened to us since 2001 and how that's affected Europe. Reconciliation or understanding doesn't occur. I think it's easy to see something in the historical context and try to keep it there. Well, *Dallas Sweetman* feels very relevant, very contemporary. Its language resonates the idea of nations being divided, of political confusion, and fear. I think that if things are doing incredibly and increasingly well, Ireland is still a country with poverty. I think one of the issues is to try to be completely contemporary, completely in the moment, because moments change. You write something which is better understood today; but things change very quickly, time moves on, time changes.

Q – I'm myself directing one of Friel's plays, *The Faith Healer*, which is basically text. And for over a month I've been facing the idea of how to approach the play physically. How does the Paines Plough Theatre Company deal with the physical training of the actors?

RS – We don't have a group to practice. It's very rare because it's too expensive.

TW – I have another job for Shakespeare Company where to have actors committed to training is incredibly difficult. Most theatre companies have the production, literary and directing teams, and then the actors come for specific plays, and we have four weeks of rehearsal. So those actors are working with a host of companies across the country, a lot of different directors, and lots of them are working on television as well.

And often, the best ones make their money on television, and they try to do a play or two a year. So we don't have that sense of group that you have here, that you work with a group over a long period of time. Some companies have a physical approach – European companies consider themselves to be physical theatre. We don't start from physical to bring physicality to text. We start really from the text.

RS – We look for texts that help with physical approach. So this is the way we work, and we're looking for writers that work with us in this way. Plus, we work with choreographers. And one of the things about having a culturally commissioned play is that if you, for example, have these forty-four actors, the plays have to be written for the actors. We don't do that. We say, write what you want to write and we will find the right actors for your play. If it's a play, as for example, *Dallas Sweetman*, which requires Irish actors , because of language, this physicality is a different way of speaking to different relationships. The Irish acting style is different. If the setting is in London, very urban, we would find actors that fit that.

TW – We talked about *The Faith Healer* whose language is so extraordinary and the stories are about relationships, and if that relationship is right and if you can physicalise that character we wouldn't do anything else. I mean, I saw that play and it was three people standing on the stage and talking.

Q – You just mentioned that your work focuses on new works. Besides Sebastian Barry what other Irish contemporary playwrights would you consider ?

RS – Enda Walsh has a history with Paines Plough, Dennis Kelly represents the young generation. Fifteen years ago when I started directing, one of the first plays I directed was *Translations* by Brian Friel, and I saw it in London.

MHM – Did you produce any of Enda Walsh's plays?

RS – Yes, *The Small Things*, a short version.

MHM – Was it well received?

RS – Yes. It was well received, but it didn't do well with audiences. No, it did very badly with audiences. Because it is a very delicate piece, it's very dense, *very dense*, it requires a level of concentration, something from the audience in terms of its difficulty. Another playwright we would like to work with is Mark O'Rowe.

MHM – Have you produced any of Conor McPherson's plays?

RS – No, no, no, too shy. [laughters]. The interesting thing about Conor McPherson is he does not get his works produced in Ireland. *The Seafarer* had to be produced at the

National before it went to the Abbey. And also his work is heavily criticized but we love him. And I think that Tom Murphy is a great, great, great playwright.

Q – How is theatre produced in Britain? Do you have sponsors or government support?

RS – There's a lot of movement between the commercial and the subsidised sectors. For example, *The Weir* started in a theatre that had seats for a hundred people, and it did very, very well. And then we moved to a theatre that had seats for three hundred people, and it did very, very well. And then we went to the West End, which is commercial. And that's most of our usual journey. You know, you can start in the subsidised sector and move into the commercial sector. The commercial sector would never take the risk even on a very well known Conor McPherson's play with four men sitting in a pub. They would never take that risk; they would pick something else. So there's quite a lot of fluidity. For example, we did a project last year with a commercial producer, just as a favour, just as a gift. There's a lot of research about who goes to see you next because it is very interesting to realize that you have people who like opera, you have people who like ballet, you've got people who like Shakespeare, and then you have people who like new things. But the people who go to see new plays are people of a certain type.

TW – I think that we work with small companies. It's a phenomenal work that resonates in some ways in the contemporary world. We are interested in stories that are related to the contemporary world. But it doesn't mean they have to be set now, in a theatre in the centre of London today.

Q – Here in Brazil my company undertakes quite a long theoretical work when approaching a new play. For example, when we produced one of George Bernard Shaw's plays we spent almost a year reading all Shaw's works. Would you tell us how long did it take to prepare Sebastian Barry's play to understand the Irish context?

RS – I think there's a huge difference in Brazil, because the relationship between people who are practicing and people who are academics is very strong. There's a lot of people who are practicing, writers, directors that are ultimately academics. In Britain there's this gap. We get a lot of new audiences for new work because we have a continuous tradition of playwriting from the fifteenth century, sixteenth century; we have a sense of development or the reaction against tradition. It's organic, we're not trying to re-start a theatrical culture. So people don't think about it, because it's as if you are born and become a teenager and you react against your parents or you become not your parents, but if your parents have gone missing you miss them. There's been no break in our drama tradition for five hundred years. And I think that makes a huge difference. And also the tradition is British; it's not imported. You here have Portuguese drama, or Spanish drama, or French drama, we have British drama. And it's a very different culture and history, and we have produced very different work

TW – We know it almost instinctively, culturally, not just because we read lots of plays. When we read plays we can understand instinctively where they fit in, we can understand them because it is in the DNA of our culture. In relation to Sebastian Barry's play we did a lot of research reading different works by the Irish playwright.

Q – Do you use anything apart from reading the author's work?

RS: Yes, I do a lot of research so … I did all the historical research, I did all the religious research, I researched the cathedral, the cathedral's history and its architecture; I spent a lot of time in the cathedral, I spent a lot of time on the art and on the music of that period. I spent a lot of time watching movies of Thomas Beckett. I did all of that. The difference between the way that I researched and the way that you did your research is in terms of time. I had four weeks; we never have more time than that. The reason why I did all that research on my own is to select exactly what I think actors need. You know, I find images … I find the music for rehearsal with the actors. Although I'd love to spend that much time researching and I think that the actors would love that too, that would not be possible for us because I have to work very quickly. When we do new work, we insist on four-weeks rehearsals; so imagine, if we have a two-hour play, you get each scene twice. It's extraordinary that British actors know how to work together and absorb information very, very quickly. However, the audience has to understand the play in the moment that it's spoken: You don't need to know anymore because there would be nothing worse than petrifying the imagination and inspiration when you are producing a play.