



Harris, Peter James. *From Stage to Page: Critical Reception of Irish Plays in London Theatre, 1925-1996*. Oxford: Peter Lang, 2011.

Irish theatre has always been a global phenomenon, especially in the English-speaking world; Sheridan, Goldsmith, Boucicault and Shaw established the reputation of Irish-born playwrights. The tours by the Abbey Theatre to England and America carried an image of Ireland abroad, and provided a platform for Irish playwrights dealing with Irish topics to speak to a worldwide audience. The Irish Theatrical Diaspora studies project has encouraged an assessment of what happens when Irish plays are ‘cut loose from their familiar moorings’. And it is in this broad context that Peter James Harris in *From Stage to Page* examines the critical reception of Irish plays on the London stage. Harris has taken eight plays, one from each decade from the 1920s through to the 1990s, to explore the critical reception of Irish plays on the London stage. The production and critical reception of each play is set against the backdrop of Anglo-Irish relations, developments in the theatre and with a listing of the most popular productions on the London stage for each decade. In addition, Harris frames his analysis of the first-night criticism of each production in the light of its political and artistic context against the background of the editorial policy of each publication and the social and political views of the relevant critic.

The book was researched and written in the period after the Good-Friday Agreement in 1998, and Harris argues that this not only shaped the development of recent history in Northern Ireland, and the wider sphere of Anglo-Irish relations, but also provides a framework ‘to view the whole post-Independence period’. Harris sets out his stall very clearly both in his choice of plays and the way he handles the complex relationship between context and criticism. He weaves together the separate strands of the Irish play on the London stage, the main political events of the last eighty years in Anglo-Irish relations, and the critical reception of the selected plays, into a coherent narrative. The criteria for selection, the way he privileges the political context over the artistic, and the distinction he makes between Irish plays in London and Irish theatre in London, may be open to debate. But, like all good scholars, Harris asks questions that have not been asked before, and even if he has not answered all the questions posed, he has opened up the territory for future scholars.

Harris takes Brian Friel’s definition of an Irish Play as ‘plays written in Irish or English on Irish subjects’ in its broadest sense. On that basis he excludes the likes of Steele, Sheridan, Goldsmith, Wilde, and Shaw from consideration. But this approach also excludes some of the modernist and impressionist drama of Sean O’Casey, Denis Johnston and Samuel Beckett, because they do not deal with an Irish subject.

The assumption that the eight plays have something distinctive to say about Anglo- Irish politics is open to question. To take an earlier example; London audiences, despite the topic, did not read any political intent into Boucicault's Arrah-na-Pogue. The different reception, politically and culturally, that Irish plays receive in Ireland and in London could have been expanded, though Harris deals at some length with this issue in his treatment of Brian Friel's Freedom of the City. Global appropriation takes the edge off national issues. A national culture, in this case drama, is defined not just by how we see ourselves, but also by how others see us. This is particularly true of Sean O'Casey's Dublin trilogy, and Brian Friel's Dancing at Lughnasa, where foreign productions generally privilege the comedy at the expense of the tragedy, and the social relation over the politics underlying the play. Non-Irish productions tend to be constrained, or repackaged, with the dark edges removed. Another factor which could have been examined in more detail is the difference between a commercial production and one by The Abbey or Gate Theatre, which comes with its own cultural and political baggage.

By limiting the choice to eight plays, one in each decade from the 1920s on, Harris has allowed himself enough space to deal with each play in the context of its time and reception. One of the advantages of this approach is that the commentary on each play almost stands on its own, and can be read in its own right, which allows Irish audiences and critics to see the play from a different perspective. His choice of three plays by Brian Friel, two by Sean O'Casey, and one each by Lennox Robinson, Brendan Behan, and Marina Carr is certainly open to debate. Harris acknowledges the problem of choosing a representative play from each decade. Few would quibble with the choice of O'Casey and Friel – they are without doubt the most renowned Irish playwrights of the twentieth century. But the choice of the plays by Robinson, Behan and Carr is more problematic. Harris has to work far harder to shoehorn these plays into the critical and political framework of the book.

Having spent ten pages recounting the political background to Anglo-Irish relations from 1920 to 1933 and outlining the state of European politics in the early 1930s, Harris in the chapter on Lennox Robinson's *The Big House* (1934) has to accept that 'few critics referred directly to current Anglo-Irish relations in their reviews of *The Big House*'. One critic admitted his almost 'total inability to understand the Irish character, Irish politics' and stated that he had 'no inclination to remedy the deficiency'. Robinson himself hoped the play would be seen in a wider European context rather than as a specifically 'Irish play'. Like O'Casey, he recognised the limits of the Irish play, and that the time had come for Irish playwrights to move beyond the village and address the world.

The intellectual framework of the book, its emphasis on the political background and critical response, leaves little space to provide an extended analysis of the plays selected. Brendan Behan's *The Hostage* (1958) is an Irish play by Brian Friel's definition. But the production at the Theatre Royal Stratford East by Joan Littlewood was substantially different to the Irish language version, *An Giall*, which had premiered

at *An Damer* in Dublin a few months earlier. The London production was an all-pervading attempt to make the play both interesting and amusing for English audiences. Seven new characters were added and two removed from the Dublin production. The countless cups of tea in the original Irish version are replaced with a drunken interlude that conformed to an old-fashioned and caricatured version of Ireland. In addition, in the London production, the Irish Republican Army is portrayed as more brutal and fanatical than in the original version. Despite Brendan Behan's statement that *The Hostage* 'is my comment on Anglo-Irish relations' – in reality, this was a new play developed by Brendan Behan, Joan Littlewood and the workshop methods of the East Stratford Theatre Company. The German critic Heinz Kosok has suggested that *The Hostage* should be seen as a play that holds an intermediate position between the Irish and British tradition.

Harris is on far safer ground with the O'Casey and Friel plays. His analysis of both *Juno and the Paycock* (1925) and *Red Roses for Me* (1946) sets the template for what he is trying to achieve with this book. O'Casey was both an interpreter and participant in the history of his time. He tried to find a way to express the dissonance of the twentieth century.

*History and politics are woven into the fabric of his life and work. He was in many ways 'a politician who could not help being a writer'. Juno and the Paycock is set in 1922 during the Civil War. The subtlety of Civil War politics was little understood by the English critics, and Juno was generally seen as an extension of the War of Independence and a commentary on the ongoing political differences between the two countries. Red Roses for Me, while located in the period of the 1913 lock-out, is about a vision of a new world that says as much about the expectations of the masses in Britain in the post-World War Two period as it does about Ireland in 1913. In both these chapters Harris draws out the ambivalence of many English critics in their attitude to O'Casey's work. He was praised as much for his poetic language as he was abused for his commentary on Anglo-Irish affairs. But Harris manages to capture the growing realisation by an important section of the English critics that O'Casey was one of the great dramatists of his time.*

The choice of Marina Carr's *Portia Coughlin* (1996) is interesting. Observe the *Sons of Ulster Marching to the Somme* by Frank McGuinness would appear to be a better choice for the 1990s in terms of its commentary on political and cultural relations between the two islands. Marina Carr is part of a new generation of Irish playwrights such as Conor McPherson, Enda Walsh and Martin McDonagh, who are as much international writers as they are Irish, having finally broken free of the village to speak to the world. Even where their work is set in Ireland it does not conform to received images of Irishness. *Portia Coughlin* challenged British audiences. It unsettled their conception or vision of modern Ireland. Both in Britain and America there was an element of disbelief at the image of Ireland being portrayed. This is a harsh and brutal play that refuses to romanticise contemporary Irish social reality. The play is located in the midlands of Ireland, but for all of that it is not an Irish play; it has a universality that allowed the London critics to draw a line under the 'Irish Problem'. They could not ignore the play's Irish origins,

but the critics' expansive tapestry of comparisons included Henrik Ibsen, Harold Pinter, Eugene O'Neill, Edward Albee and Henry James. The play was produced during the long cease-fire leading up to the Good-Friday agreement of 1998 that ended the recent phase of 'the troubles'. The reception of Carr's play also revealed a positive inclination by the London critics in the post-conflict period to evaluate an 'Irish play' on its merits without attempting to locate it in the context of Anglo-Irish relations.

The three Brian Friel plays, *Philadelphia Here I Come* (1967), *The Freedom of the City* (1973) and *Translations* (1981), dominate the book. Harris quotes Dominick Shellard in his chapter on *The Freedom of the City*, 'context is everything for theatre', to situate the political background of the play. Friel's play is set against the background of 'Bloody Sunday' in Derry in 1972. The British Army on that day killed fourteen civil rights demonstrators. Friel responded with his angriest and most directly political play, *The Freedom of the City*. A substantial portion of this chapter is given over to a political analysis of the situation in Northern Ireland and the emergence of the civil rights movement in the late 1960s. The play is contextualised within this framework, and Harris recounts in great detail how the reactions of the London critics were largely determined by their attitude and understanding of the explosive events unfolding in Northern Ireland. Perhaps, Harris could have used this situation to expand on the reactions of the London-Irish section of the audience to the play in so far as it could be determined.

Peter James Harris handles the complex relationship between context and criticism very well. In general, he lets the material speak for itself. The book is mercifully free of jargon and can be read with profit by the general theatregoer as well the academic. The statistical information and the notes are contained in stand-alone sections outside the general narrative for the specialist to follow up. Perhaps a longer introduction and afterword to set the parameters and pull his conclusions together might have been useful. However, these are small quibbles about a book that is a pleasure to read and adds to our knowledge of the Irish play on the London stage.

*Paul O'Brien*