Interview with Declan Hughes

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Abstract: *In this interview which took place in Rio de Janeiro during the IX Symposium of Irish Studies in South America in 2014, Munira H. Mutran (MHM) and Camila Luly (CL) asked Declan Hughes (DH) questions about his plays and his crime novels.*

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Declan Hughes is an award-winning playwright, novelist and screenwriter. He co-founded the Rough Magic Theatre Company in 1984 and was its artistic director until 1992. His plays include *Love and a Bottle* (1991), adapted from George Farquhar's play; *Tartuffe* (2000), adapted from Molière's play; *Digging for Fire* (1991); *Halloween Night* (1997); *Shiver* (2003) and *The Last Summer* (2012). His first crime novel, *The Wrong Kind of Blood* (2006), won the Shamus Award for Best PI novel and the Le Point magazine prize for best European crime novel. Subsequent novels include *The Colour of Blood* (2007); *The Dying Breed* (2008); *All the Dead Voices* (2009); *City of Lost Girls* (2010) and *All the Things You Are* (2014). Declan Hughes is currently Writer Fellow at the Oscar Wilde Centre for Irish Writing, Trinity College, Dublin. He lives in Sandycove with his wife and their two daughters.

CL: In 2011, in his course on contemporary Irish drama at University of São Paulo, Shaun Richards discussed, among tragedies set in the rural kitchen, a comedy about a group of friends in a pub talking about identity and sense of place issues. That was your play *Digging for Fire* (1991). Why have you decided to work on those topics by using humour?

DH: Well, any treatment of contemporary issues, of contemporary manners and mores, of friendship and marriage and so forth, you're inevitably going to have humour there, the human comedy. Even when these things are painful at the time, as they are, the getting of wisdom, and the shedding of illusions, ultimately one is more likely to look back and laugh, or allow a wry smile – in *Digging For Fire*, nobody dies, no children are hurt involved – it's about that time in your late twenties when the next phase is beckoning but hasn't quite arrived, when adulthood is nominally present but the temptation to live like a student is still very powerful. I guess what made the play unusual in Ireland in 1991 was that the characters – suburban, culturally deracinated people who could easily be from Glasgow, or Seattle, who don't seem to have that

"otherness" that the world prizes as "Irish" – these people hadn't really been seen much on an Irish stage before, yet they totally existed, indeed, they were the middle class who either went to the theatre or whose parents went, so there was a certain amount of excitement about their being represented in this way. And of course, the drinking and talking is a bit Irish, I guess.

CL: In your book *Plays 1,* there is a rewriting of George Farquhar's Restoration Comedy *Love and a Bottle*: under the same title you have added the subtitle "with George Farquhar". What do you mean by that?

DH: George Farquhar's version of *Love and a Bottle* would be unstageable now – and what I did, what I had to do to get it on, was far more than would be covered by the terms 'adaptation' or 'version' – so I took the example of a screenwriter's process. One writer takes a script so far, then hands over to another writer who has free rein to take what he thinks is important and valuable. So I took the characters (playing fast and loose with some of them), made it a play within a play which Mr Lyrick is writing (because Roebuck, the swaggering hard drinking roué who gets all the women is so evidently a writer's wish-fulfillment projection) and invoked Don Juan, among other things. It would have been unfair to Farquhar (and to me) to suggest to an audience that that stuff (and the more highly sexualized action) was down to him.

CL: Lyrick, an aspiring writer, illustrates the challenges and dilemmas which playwrights faced in the Restoration age. George Farquhar himself was one of those. As a contemporary playwright, do you think the challenges have changed?

DH: Well. You've still got to make a living. The challenge of being a young writer, writing well enough to make an impression on an audience, on critics, on theatre companies so that they'll commission you to write for them, and in the course of this, make enough money to keep body and soul together and enough of a reputation to make yourself reasonably attractive to women, or men – I guess for all the different media available, that never really changes, does it?

CL: In *Love and a Bottle*, the female characters change their attitude towards Roebuck, the Irish rake. Does it represent the current social reality of women?
DH: There is a feminist direction in *Love and a Bottle* and, because of the sexual politics, I push him into an extreme.

CL: You are coming up with a new play by the end of the year. Is it a comedy? What is it about?

DH: It's based on something that happened. It was about ten or twelve years ago; I was renting a house and my children were babies at that stage; they were 1950s houses and the couple next door had moved in as a young couple in about 1950, raised a family and then all the children had moved on. Across the street, the old lady of a similar vintage who had lived in the house all her life died. And then, we noticed this young couple

and their children had spent some time in the house over the summer, they'd done it up very good, painted rooms, done a garden, done a lot of work there. And then one Sunday night, I was out doing something in my garden and there were many big cars on the pavement outside the house. They were playing music, and Mary from next door beckons me over and conspiratorially says: "*He*, he hasn't done as well as the others – there's five other children – he hasn't done as well as the others and he's hoping that they'll give him the house. But they're not going to". And I thought, Oh I'm going to have that. So basically this is a story about four sisters who meet in the family home, on a Sunday before the house goes on the market. While the men are down, this is set in 2002, the day Ireland play Spain in the World Cup, and lose. And the four sisters have their last dinner in the house. And one of them has her hopes and one of her sisters is going to try to help her. But many other things come out in the mix and we see their parents on a particular night, when the marriage is in the balance. So there's a flashback and a flashforward. It'll be funny, because, you know, it has to be. It always is. But it could be, I hope, a lot more. It's a play called *The Family Home*. So we'll try and reflect the life, and the ghosts of a life that they've lived in that house.

CL: I'm looking forward to reading that.

MHM: Now we move to your crime fiction. Your first Ed Loy novel *The Wrong Kind of Blood* had a very good reception. John Connolly stated about it that "art crime fiction has come of age". Would you say something about the genre in Ireland before coming of age?

DH: Well, John is one of the kind of outliers. He published his first book in 1999, *Every Dead Thing*. Or 2000. But he sets all his work in the United States. And I remember him saying to me, having a conversation around that time he did the thing: hardboiled fiction – was it possible to write in Ireland for the conditions he perceived? Writing wasn't impersonal enough to state or be raised in particular ways. So I had, from reading Chandler and Hammett and in particular an American writer called Ross McDonald, an obsession with this particular kind of fiction. It seems to me, for two reasons, I mean, crime writers always talk about the social side of crime fiction, that it shows you – and this is true, it's not to undermine them – systems of works. You see justice. You see all these kinds of things: a realistic version of society in action, that very often, certain kinds of literary fiction don't seem so interested in depicting. But as forcefully for me, it's to do with something that the American critic Geoffrey O'Brien said in his book, *Hardboiled America*. He talked about the elements of noir in hardboiled. The faithless woman, the glimpse of red lipstick, the dull glint of a gun, the sound of saxophone, the screech of a car, the late night light. These elements, and the violence, they're the trees and rivers and the leaves, like flowers and animals for a lyric poet. They are the constituent parts of a particular kind of vision of reality. So yes, the lens of the hardboiled to look at society is important to me from a sociological point of view. But it's also very much an aesthetic. It's like a musician favouring a particular style of music because he can hear it, you know. So I am answering your questions but it's by digression. So I was

in, I don't know, I was in love with this kind of fiction. My first play was about Dashiell Hammett and Lillian Hellman and the creator of the hardboiled genre, the Bach and Louis Armstrong of hardboiled crime fiction. I know some of you aren't particularly genre-interested or savvy but the difference between, say, the hardboiled, or noir style, and the classical detective story. The hardboiled noir – the classical detective story operates in a fixed system, a fixed society. Small village, classical, or even a country house. There's a number of suspects. Yeah, Agatha Christie absolutely. Everybody knows who everybody is on the social scale. When the murder is solved, everything returns to normal. It's the comic form, without any modern tinkering. You can play around with that form, but it's true that you can't carry it too far. When Hammett came along, he had been a detective, he was a communist, and his basic assumption was that society is corrupt from the top down. And the actions of the gangsters mirrored the actions of the oligarchs, the rich. So this was quite a cynical vision in which you have a detective making as many good choices as he possibly could within a context where it was difficult to see how much good could be done. So that's the style. Seems to me, mysteriously I thought but, the assumption that society is corrupt in Ireland. Yeah, okay, that's a reasonably astute match. And I worried away at this for years before I began to write the first novel. And a couple of things happened sociologically. The Celtic Tiger happened in the late 90s, and there was this thing that you couldn't write a novel like that because, where do all the gangsters come from? Where do all the strangers come from? Everybody knows everybody. Dublin's too small. Then suddenly you've got a ring road and the M50, it's full of cars at five in the morning. Who knows all of those people? That's not the Ireland I grew up in. You know, that had changed. All these people are coming into the country. There's loads of money and when people are getting loads of money, very, very quickly and very suddenly, they get very excited. They do a lot of reckless stuff because they think they're entitled to it. So they're entitled to take lots of drugs, they're entitled to have more than one partner. They cheat on their wives, cheat on their husbands. And, so, they do a lot of stuff that detectives find interesting in terms of being able to work with and writers to write. So all of those conditions kind of came together for the Boomtown. Dublin became a Boomtown, a gold-rush town kind of like San Francisco in the late 20s, Chandler in the 40s in Los Angeles when a lot of people, you know, were making a lot of decisions very very quickly. And a lot of money. And those energies are all over the place. And so that's where we go with it. And I mean, I wasn't the only one. Around the same time Gene Kerrigan was writing, and I started writing, Tana French writing away in Derry. There's a significant number of people, as often in any artistic community, with the same brilliant idea.

MHM: Some of your novels depict crime, violence, drugs and drinking too much and sex without love. They also show billionaires, the new rich and their vulgarities, the homeless and the outsider as well, in slightest details – houses, cars, perfumes, paintings, women's make-up or the way they are dressed, etc. A vivid world, Dublin.

DH: Oh, Dublin's nothing new under the sun, and I'm certainly not saying I'm not doing what any other Irish writer hasn't done before. Musical marriages are always

interesting to me, I think you know, I'm not as successful as U2, neither is anyone else but it would be fun to be. U2 is a distinctively Irish band, they do Irish things. Just hard to put a finger on what they are, in a way... So yes, I am, I am, I mean, in 2000, in Dublin, and Joyce... Um, I'm walking the streets and looking at things and saying, and if you ask me what I hoped apart from, you know, large sums of money, etc. I would hope that people would in twenty years, in fifty years, read my books and think that's, that's Dublin for a certain number of years. That's the vividness of a certain time of Dublin. The sensual appeal of things. I mean Ed likes women, he's led by his nose, he smells a lot, that seemed very important to me as the sensual appeal of what he's doing and his interaction with that world. I mean, any boom where people are making lots of choices and things are going very fast, is really exciting because it's heady. There is a design, it can be crazy. I think when we design a house there's two or three styles going on at once, as if a person couldn't bear, was so greedy, that they couldn't bear to just settle on one, you know we had to have it all. Had to have all the men, louder music, stronger wine, wilder women, you know. And that's persuasive to me. And the orange girls is just, and anyone who knows Dublin for ten years throughout the south and County Dublin and girls, at their ages of twelve, suddenly, whatever their complexion, they would have this sort of deep, pancake, dark orange pancake. All over. You'd see the seam at the neck. It was just crazy, like, why are you doing this? And people said oompa loompas, they called them. It's kind of amusing, and it seemed like a sort of visual index of a certain kind of vulgarity. I want you to see how much money I'm spending, you know, and of course I share a slight quip on that. But, the novelist's job isn't to be a judge of, or scold, you know, the novelist's job is to go "woah, look at that!" You know? And there is a comic quality. A fascination.

MHM: From *The Wrong Kind of Blood* to *The City of Lost Girls* there is an element that "thickens the plot" and action with allusions to the Bible or literary allusions which show that you are adding much more to the conventional crime fiction. Are these layers of meaning done consciously or unconsciously?

DH: Oh no, they're all pretty conscious. I mean there's a number of levels on which the novels work. There's a basic "Ed Loy gets a case". Missing girl – has to find her; a murder from the past, that the *Garda*, the police don't want to solve so he has to undertake it. But each of the books has a sub theme, it doesn't become the main theme but it's the main metaphor. In the first book the property themes is big – the notion was it was going to be called "City of Cranes". And there's a passage in the book, all around you see these cranes, like monsters of the city, as if the developers have taken over. As if the mortals are dwarfed. It's also a backstory, an Oedipal story. And Ed Loy is a nod to Sam Spade, who is Dashiell Hammett's detective. Loy is the Irish for spade and you dig with it, which is what a detective has got to do. Also, most famously, most people are introduced to the word "loy" in *Playboy of the Western World* where Christy Mahon claims he killed his father with a loy. And the first book has, as you know, that Oedipal theme of what has happened to the father that he hated and he needs to know the truth about it. The second and third books are both about using the family, institutional chur-

ch. It's a big theme, but Loy is operating on a day to day... It's not as if it's talked about all the time, it's just a secret that gradually emerges and in all of their voices. It's the after the Troubles. It's what happens when the soldiers go home and you look at people who have been involved with the Republican movement and you can see some of them were politicians all along, that's what they wanted to be. Some of them effectively were criminals and enjoyed that side of it. That's what they have turned.
Yeah, that's right. And again to the heart of that irreconcilable kind of truth, never being able to forgive who did such deeds and yet wanting to move through it to new things. The fifth book is interesting because we talk about the Martello Tower. I mean there is the figure of Jack Donovan, he's a kind of Irish artist pastiche you know, so I'm kind of playing around with the kind of artist that I'm deeply suspicious of, you know. The one who quite, acknowledging he has that indefinable something, but no one quite understands, but everybody loves. That filmy, misty, Irishy. You can't feel the "Terrible Beauty". People are going "oh my god there's something called The Terrible Beauty" and then it cleans up at the American box office. So it's that, it's having fun with the artist. The idea of the artist in a serial killer book; we very often see the serial killer in terms of artistry; in terms that they have a pattern, they have a notion, they have a scheme. They have a way around that stuff. Could he be the killer? … But yeah, those layers of meaning are consciously done but you're trying not to overburden the book. You don't want it of any novel, you know. I mean, I have moderately high ambitions – there's no limit to what crime fiction can do, particularly. It's infinitely flexible as a form. I think that the main, the principal difference between crime fiction and literary fiction is it's still possible to write lots of bad crime fiction and have it published and even have it sell. But, at the best of times, not enough people want to read good literary fiction, let alone bad literary fiction. That's why it has kind of fallen away. I think the walls between the two very genres, sub-genres are becoming a lot more permeable and the stories we tell, are broader, more flexible.

MHM: Ed Loy, in all your crime fiction, fascinates the reader: he is sensitive and violent, romantic, idealistic and cynical – above all, he has principles and strives to achieve some kind of justice. It is well-known that the hero of sagas and legends has died. For example, Sean O'Faolain's *The Vanishing Hero* shows the traditional hero's disappearance from the 1920s novel to be replaced by the anti-hero. Would the need we have for some kind of heroic character explain Ed Loy's popularity?

DH: Actually I share that need. I'm not too interested in heroes. It's attraction that draws you in. And if you've ever been attracted to the wrong person you know exactly what I'm talking about. What's interesting about Loy is that he pulled right back until all you really know about him is what he does and what he says. The fact that he has a house, has a car: he does the work. I try to give him some human characteristics. Some personal vanity, which I'm used to. And some bad habits. But I tried not to describe him too... A lot of people say, what does he look like?
MHM: I'd like to know.

DH: Well, I don't know! A woman I know, in passing, came up to me and she said, "I'm really enjoying your book (this was after the first one came out), but I'm having trouble because I keep thinking of you." "Well, try Sean Penn." "Okay that'll work". But, I suppose it's a way of reading that I hope, that by showing you is a kind of anti-hero. Yeah, an anti-hero who's not always likeable. Who loses his temper, who does dumb stuff and tries to compensate for that. Who has, you know, as we say now has issues around drink, anger, women, various things that characterize men of certain age. I never wanted to take it so far as to apologize or criticize, because they don't seem to me interesting things to do in fiction. Because it's always metaphor, what I hope is that you are at Ed Loy's elbow, you know, with him. Then the world, that lens, is enhanced by his sensibility. And that's, to me, the joy of the crime fiction that I enjoy. Even general fiction that I enjoy the most, I was talking to Ciaran [O'Neill] and Nick [Grene] at lunchtime and they were saying that when you really read "The Great Gatsby" you are Nick Carraway for a few days. You know, and so too with the best, y'know, Philip Marlowe. Although, interestingly, as the books go on, I find you have to push [the protagonist] to one side, and really let other voices in. In the first three books, there is an interesting phenomenon I'm not entirely proud of. If you're a woman and you sleep with Ed Loy you're not going to survive. Then I had a little meeting with myself, at the front office. I said, You're a modern man, you can't keep this up, this is ridiculous. This is wrong! So in the fourth book he meets a woman, and then in the fifth she becomes part of his life.