

# *Statistics and The Canon: Irish Theatre Historiography Beyond the Diaspora*

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**Abstract:** *This article examines issues raised in the paper “Infinite Rehearsals”, presented at IASIL 2001, which stressed the importance of taking audience reaction into consideration when analysing the historical significance of dramatic texts. Focusing on the author’s current research project, the article goes on to recognise that, desirable though such an approach is, the limitations of research facilities in a country like Brazil render it largely impracticable.*

At IASIL 2001, held at Dublin City University, Chris Morash and Shaun Richards presented a joint panel on Irish Theatre Historiography entitled “Infinite Rehearsals”, in the course of which they raised a number of issues of seminal importance. In this article I wish to take up some of those issues, focusing particularly upon the difficulties faced by theatre researchers working in countries like Brazil, beyond the Irish diaspora. At the outset I should make it clear that it is my intention to ask questions rather than to answer them, problematizing rather than proposing solutions.

Although I was unable to be present at the panel, which coincided with one that I was chairing, Shaun Richards was kind enough to give me a copy of their paper after the session. As far as I am aware the text of “Infinite Rehearsals” has not yet appeared in print so it will be helpful if I begin by summarising some of the main points raised. The authors’ central argument was that it has become necessary to utilise theoretical models other than simply that of postcolonial theory to analyse Irish Theatre. Using *Playboy of the Western World* as an example, Morash and Richards demonstrated how Hans-Robert Jauss’s concept of a *horizon of expectations*<sup>1</sup> could be applied to the play’s rapid passage through the processes of canonisation, automation and reshuffling, thus freeing up the interpretation of the text and its performance from a dependence upon the notion of a sacrosanct original which is subject to inevitable decay. In the course of their paper the authors expressed the conviction that theatrical analysis must go beyond the dialogue if it is to deal with a play’s theatrical specificity, paying equal attention to the didascaly or stage directions, thus giving due recognition to the aural and visual aspects of a dramatic work in addition to its purely literary content. They pointed out

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that this is especially important in the case of Irish theatre, which has been so dominated by the word ever since Yeats's strictures concerning the sovereignty of speech over gesture almost exactly a century ago. Analysis should also take into consideration the means by which plays structure the dimensions of time and space, both on the stage itself and between performers and audience. The vital necessity of concentrating on the complete range of theatre languages was seen as being no less relevant to the study of scripts as dramatic texts than when the object of study is a theatrical performance itself. However, the authors went on to stress the idea that any analysis will still be incomplete if it fails to recognise that the audience also plays a major role in the creation of a theatrical text. They therefore advocated the fusion of theatre semiotics and reader response theory that has been developed by such writers as Patrice Pavis<sup>2</sup> and Susan Bennett,<sup>3</sup> in order to reach a critical model which would retain textual analysis of the dramatic text but replace the author with the audience as the locus of meaning. Only with such an analytical tool would it be possible to give due recognition to the vastly expanded horizon(s) of expectations that a contemporary Irish audience brings to a performance of *The Playboy of the Western World* in contrast with that available to their counterparts in 1907. The proposed model would also facilitate the discussion of the vexed questions of the authenticity and fidelity of a given performance to an author's "original" intentions, given that the Jaussian concept of reshuffling enables a play to be re-historicised in order to make the reality of historical change manifest. The authors concluded by expressing the hope that the theoretical model that they had advanced might enable the discussion of Irish theatre to escape from the ever more restrictive clutches of postcolonial theory and its overwhelming focus on the question of "identity."

I was particularly excited by the ideas contained in this paper because it seemed to me that they addressed many of the concerns that were fundamental to the research upon which I myself was engaged. My own involvement with Irish theatre studies began in 1992 when I was accepted as a Ph.D. student by Munira Mutran, one of the co-organisers of IASIL 2002 and undoubtedly the person who has done most to establish the study of Irish Literature on the Brazilian academic map. I joined her research group, which at that time was studying Irish dramatists through their non-dramatic writings, principally letters, autobiographies and criticism. Munira justified this oblique approach by saying that, as researchers in Brazil, we could not expect to make any significant contribution to the study of the plays themselves but that playwrights' non-dramatic work, having been the subject of far less critical attention, offered the possibility of genuinely original research. Thus it was that I embarked on my study of Sean O'Casey's *Letters and Autobiographies*, little appreciating the profound truth underlying my supervisor's advice.

It was only after I had successfully defended my thesis that I came to understand the wisdom in Munira's words. Free of the strictures of supervised study I drafted a research project which, brilliant though it might have been as a concept, has proved to be entirely inappropriate for the arid research climate of the Brazilian hinterland. My idea, based on the solid foundation of postcolonial theory, was to examine the progress

of Irish theatre from Independence until the end of the twentieth century by means of selecting representative plays and examining the reception of these plays in the former metropolis. As an end-product I envisaged a book-length socio-cultural study which would chart not only the growing assurance of the Irish playwrights in exploring and defining their postcolonial identity but also an inverse collapse of certainties as London critics and audiences fought to come to terms with the multicultural post-imperial kaleidoscope around them. In passing, I should make it clear that, when I drafted the project, I was unaware of John Harrington's endeavour along parallel lines in relation to the reception of seven Irish plays on the New York stage.<sup>4</sup>

The first step obviously was to select the plays that would represent appropriate moments in this tale of cultural and artistic revisionism. I decided to work on a decade-by-decade basis, choosing the "play of the decade" for the 20s, 30s, 40s and so on. With no access to box-office receipts or audience figures, which would have reliably indicated the popular success of the plays in question, I had to fall back on the canonical status of the plays, a more nebulous criterion by far. (In parenthesis, I was interested to see that, in the first months of 2002, John Sutherland used the objective ringing of the cash register in order to structure his cultural history of Britain's past fifty years in his analysis of the books that have featured on the best-seller lists.)<sup>5</sup> In gaining an overall picture of which plays had actually been performed in London during the period I was enormously assisted by the work of the indefatigable Bernice Schrank and William Demastes.<sup>6</sup> In order to prioritise the best or, at least, most representative work of each decade I then embarked on a crude statistical survey of some leading histories of Irish and British theatre, simply recording which plays were registered by each writer. The picture that emerged, was a fascinating one, not least for the insight that it offers into the procedures that underlie the formation of literary canons.

One of the most striking results of this statistical survey was the apparent insignificance of the majority of the Irish plays that were presented in Britain during the period. In the 77 years between Independence and the end of the twentieth century I was able to establish that at least 184 Irish plays had been staged on the British mainland, most of them in London, an average of 2.4 per year, an inconvenient figure, coincidentally identical to the number of children in the fabled nuclear family. Of this total, less than a third, 32.1% to be precise, received any mention at all in the critical texts and theatre histories that I consulted. However, as a rule-of-thumb designed to reveal canonical status, I resolved to take into consideration only those plays that were mentioned in five texts or more. Only 32 plays passed this particular test, 17.4% of the total, which therefore meant that it was precisely that inconvenient four tenths of a play that was destined to pass into the canon every year!

On a decade-by-decade basis, and ignoring the fact that the post-Independence portion of the 1920s was less than ten years, the figures also make for interesting reading. As might be expected, the number of plays staged in the last four decades is almost exactly double the number staged in the first four decades, with the 1960s witnessing

more productions by Irish playwrights than any other period. However, in qualitative terms, it is apparently the 1920s that saw the highest proportion of plays destined for canonical status, followed closely by the 1950s, with the 1980s in rather distant third place. It comes as no surprise to find that the 1930s generated not a single play of canonical significance. As Terence Brown has noted, it was a period in Irish cultural history when “an almost Stalinist antagonism to modernism, to surrealism, free verse, symbolism and the modern cinema was combined with prudery” and the Irish “population at large was protected from the incursions of alien modern thought and art forms.”<sup>7</sup> In strictly numerical rather than proportional terms, however, there is little to differentiate between the four most productive decades, for three of them each produced six canonical plays, with the 1950s just edging into first position with seven.

If we now move on to look at the playwrights whose work has been canonised it is predictable enough that the laurels should be awarded to a very select group. Almost exactly two thirds of the 32 canonical plays were written by three playwrights alone, Sean O’Casey and Brian Friel each producing seven and Samuel Beckett six. The only other playwrights who achieved more than a single entry were Denis Johnston, Brendan Behan and Frank McGuinness, with two each. In terms of individual plays, it would seem that the most important Irish play of the post-Independence period has been *Translations*, with 18 “recommendations,” closely followed by *Waiting for Godot* with 17. Some way behind came *Juno and the Paycock* and *Dancing at Lughnasa* with 13, followed by *Saint Joan*, *The Plough and the Stars*, *Endgame* and *Faith Healer* with 10 each, which just pipped *The Silver Tassie*, *The Quare Fellow* and *The Hostage* on 9. Flawed and simplistic though my statistical methodology undoubtedly was, these are results that few critics would wish to dispute.

For the purposes of my proposed study, unlike John Harrington, I resolved to choose Behan rather than Beckett as the playwright of the 50s, as being more self-evidently Irish in his concerns. Thus, in synthesis, I was able to draw up a list of representative Irish plays for the post-Independence period as follows:

- 1920s *Juno and the Paycock* (1925)
- 1930s *The Big House* (1934 – Lennox Robinson)
- 1940s *Red Roses for Me* (1946)
- 1950s *The Hostage* (1958)
- 1960s *Philadelphia, Here I Come!* (1964)
- 1970s *The Freedom of the City* (1973)
- 1980s *Translations* (1981)
- 1990s *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* (1996)

This, then, would form the corpus of my proposed research. In practical terms, of course, with no library resources to speak of and dependent upon books purchased in foreign exchange as the value of the Brazilian currency plummets, this project is unlikely

to be satisfactorily completed. Munira's words of caution back in 1992 have returned to haunt me a decade later.

Nevertheless, I feel that my statistical survey has not been entirely in vain. One of the questions that I toyed with before I finally settled on my Ph.D. research topic was that of the principles, if any, that guided the play-selection process of the Abbey Theatre at the time of the rejection of *The Silver Tassie*. In his autobiography, Lennox Robinson quotes from a public debate that he and Yeats held on the subject of the Theatre's artistic policy. Robinson had advanced the point of view that there was a very good chance of the Theatre accepting "third-class plays" and Yeats had defended himself by saying that all of the world's theatres of "intellectual attainment" produce "more third-rate plays than masterpieces."<sup>8</sup> Amongst the third-class plays that were staged by the Abbey in 1928, in preference, one might say, over *The Silver Tassie*, were "Before Midnight" by Gerald Brosnan and "Full Measure" by Kathleen O'Brennan. Although a manuscript of the latter play may be consulted in the National Library of Ireland, no trace apparently remains of the former, whereas *The Silver Tassie* has duly entered the canon of Irish theatre. Indeed, the acclaimed production of Mark-Anthony Turnage's operatic version of the play by the English National Opera in February 2000 is likely to assure O'Casey's play of its canonical status for some time to come. So I therefore find myself wondering about the 118 plays from that list of 184 Irish plays that have been staged in Britain since 1922 which were apparently not considered worthy of a single mention in any of the research sources that I consulted. Has the process of canonisation been a fair one? Has some terrible critical oversight been committed in consigning to oblivion such plays as George Shiels's *The New Gossoon*, which opened at the Apollo Theatre on 8 April 1931, or Donagh MacDonagh's *Fading Mansions*, staged at the Duchess Theatre in September 1945? Was the 1950 performance of Austin Clarke's *The Plot Succeeds* at the Lyric truly insignificant? And what about Hugh Leonard's *The Au Pair Man* in 1969? Here in Brazil, beyond the Irish diaspora, where Irish theatre is rarely staged, we can do no more than trust that the arbiters of the canon have got it right.

In conclusion, then, perhaps a brief homily to the canonisers may be permitted. At IASIL 2002, delegates were hugely privileged to receive seminars led by Christopher Murray and Nicholas Grene, two of the leading authorities on Irish Theatre. They were undoubtedly aware of the weight of importance that would be attached not only to their comments but also to their very choice of plays for inclusion in their seminar series. How much greater, then, are the repercussions of their selections when these appear in print. Notwithstanding the protestations of Nicholas Grene to the contrary, the inclusion of plays and playwrights in works of critical analysis, irrespective of the objective of the study in question, contributes to the canonisation of those works. When he introduces a work, itself destined to become a classic of criticism, by saying that he "is not trying to construct a canon of national drama,"<sup>9</sup> he must understand that, willy-nilly, this is precisely what he is doing. For all of those of us around the world who are doomed to know plays through criticism rather than through performance it is inevitable that we will attach more importance to the plays that are mentioned in works of criticism than to

those that are not. Box-office success is, of course, fundamental to a playwright whilst he is alive, but after he or she has gone it is the critics who award the laurels.

## Notes

- 1 Jauss, Hans Robert. *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982.
- 2 Pavis, Patrice. "The Classical Heritage of Modern Drama: The Case of Postmodern Theatre," *Modern Drama*, v. XXIX, n. 1, March 1986, 5.
- 3 Bennett, Susan. *Theatre Audiences: A Theory of Production and Reception*. 2nd. ed. London: Routledge, 1997, 211.
- 4 Harrington, John P. *The Irish Play on the New York Stage, 1874-1966*. Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1997.
- 5 Sutherland, John. *Reading the Decades: Fifty Years of British History through the Nation's Bestsellers*. (London: BBC Consumer Publications, 2002).
- 6 Schrank, Bernice; William W. Demastes, (Eds.). *Irish Playwrights, 1880-1995: A Research and Production Sourcebook*. Westport: Greenwood Press, 1997.
- 7 Brown, Terence *Ireland: A Social and Cultural History 1922-79*. Douglas: Fontana, 1981, 147-8.
- 8 Robinson, Lennox. *Curtain Up*. An Autobiography. London: Michael Joseph Ltd., 1942, 138.
- 9 Grene, Nicolas. *The Politics of Irish Drama: Plays in Context from Boucicault to Friel*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, 2.