Cats and Comedy: The Lieutenant of Inishmore *Comes to Sydney*

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Abstract: *In recent years major Australian theatre companies have increasingly relied on successes from London's West End to attract audiences. In 1999, Martin McDonagh's* The Beauty Queen of Leenane *was so successful for the Sydney Theatre Company that the production went on a national tour. Sydney's Belvoir Street company were therefore delighted to be granted the rights for a recent McDonagh play,* The Lieutenant of Inishmore*, which had its Australian premier in 2003. In pre-show publicity, reference was made to the "savage" satire but most attention focused on the technical challenges of the production. The confrontational nature of the violence and difficulties of presenting it were analysed, while the demands of handling live cats on stage seemed to bring out an unusual level of journalistic curiosity.*

This article reviews the Sydney production of The Lieutenant of Inishmore *arguing that the comedy overwhelmed the satire, and the technical achievements threatened to overwhelm everything.*

By all accounts, Martin McDonagh is not a regular theatregoer but in 2001 he was so impressed by performances of a Sydney company in London that he ensured it was given the Australian rights of his latest West End success, *The Lieutenant of Inishmore*. The company, based at the Belvoir Street theatre in Sydney, was chosen by the playwright in preference to a Royal Shakespeare Company proposal to tour their production to Australia.[1] That acquiring the rights to the play would be seen as a major coup does reveal something of the selection priorities of the major metropolitan theatres in Australia, as well as the status of McDonagh's work there. And both these issues will be briefly examined here. The main focus of this article, however, is the way the Belvoir Street production of *The Lieutenant of Inishmore* was marketed to the public, as well as an evaluation of the production itself which ran for six weeks in late 2003.

One year earlier, when the company's program for the following year was announced, this play was promoted as "the centrepiece of the 2003 season" (Albert 14).

That such prominence should be given to an overseas work in preference to an Australian one highlights an attitude that has become insidious in theatre circles in recent years. For a couple of decades from the late 1960s, local playwriting flourished and audiences responded enthusiastically to seeing their own society on stage for the first time. Regularly set before them were plays where long-held views on political and cultural issues were challenged. Theatre was controversial: it shocked and disturbed. This so-called "new wave" did not last, however. Australian audiences gradually settled back into a comfort zone of entertainment, and a cultural cringe – a hallmark of theatre for over a hundred years – reasserted itself. Rather than clamouring to see their own culture represented on stage, they became more enamoured of fashionable overseas successes. Not that Australian plays disappeared, but they are no longer dominant. Nor indeed has political theatre disappeared, but is now limited to issues affecting the Aboriginal people: "the indigenous theatre practice that thrives on our stages today is Australia's real political theatre" (Bennie 9). Unfortunately, this remains a small serving in the menu of metropolitan companies. With an eye to the box office, they must ensure that the yearly program is based on what will satisfy people seeking diversions from the workaday world, mainly middle-aged, middle-class audiences, or in the words of one disgruntled playwright, a program that will "appeal to older professional women at the end of a hard week" (Sewell 10). As competition for the public's entertainment dollar has grown, marketing of plays has become significant: nowadays a "product" must be "sold". Promoters of sporting events, rock concerts, glamorous musicals and the like go to extraordinary lengths to woo large attendances, mostly the young, but people of all age groups. To promote a play, a label such as "West End success" or "controversial Irish playwright" is likely to grab the attention of potential audiences much more than "new work by unknown local writer".

Martin McDonagh first appeared on the Australian theatregoer's horizon in 1998 when the Druid Theatre Company presented the Leenane trilogy at the Sydney Festival. The venture was such a success with critics and audiences that a year later the Sydney Theatre Company, in conjunction with Druid, mounted its own production of *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* which then toured the country in 2000. Everywhere, the play was confidently advertised as a crowd pleaser. Its Irish setting, albeit one removed from a tourist-board romanticised one, was projected as enticing, and references in the play to emigration had resonance for many Australians, particularly those of Irish origin. No press item failed to mention the humour – always a drawcard – although again qualified by a tantalising infusion of horror. Comments such as "mischievous and incredibly funny", "bitter humour", "dark Irish comedy" (for example, Tsitas 54, Lambert 97, Tracy 121) appeared with almost monotonous regularity. The play's universal qualities, evident in "the fractious mother-daughter relationship" (Lambert 97), were also highlighted. The specific context might be Irish, but the circumstances that gave rise to the relationship could occur anywhere. Publicity was often centred on one of the two actors playing the roles of Maureen and Mag, Pamela Rabe and Maggie Kirkpatrick.

Both are well-known to the general public, so a human interest story could be compiled in which highpoints in their careers, their thoughts on the play, and their role in it were featured. The result was always a successful run for the *Beauty Queen*. Everywhere, the reception was enthusiastic; reviews were positive, and audiences flocked to see how local stars would handle this unusual mix of Irish comedy and horror.

Little wonder that the artistic director of the Belvoir Street theatre, Neil Armfield, was delighted to be granted the Australian rights for the most recent McDonagh work. No doubt, he hoped *The Lieutenant of Inishmore* would also be a hit, and even as the play was being staged in Sydney, the Melbourne Theatre Company announced that this production would be included in its 2004 season. An initial press release from Belvoir Street referred to the play as "controversial" and "a brutal black comedy dealing with Irish terrorism" (Albert 14), and inevitably its London success was favourably reported. But whether this would be sufficient to woo potential audiences had to be considered. For this play, there were no major actors to present to the media, no human interest stories centred on well known figures. Concentrating instead on political messages, especially about somewhere as distant as Ireland, might not prove enticing enough for theatregoers who wanted to be entertained.

So, promotional features took a different tack: they revealed, indeed revelled in, the technical demands of the play. The Belvoir Street theatre is a converted factory rather than a purpose-built theatre. There is a small triangular stage, barely raised from the floor, which juts out from one corner. Tiered seating comes very close to the playing area. As one critic remarked some years ago, it is "a devil of a place in which to try to bring off anything on a scale much bigger than a cockfight" (Radic 72). The technical demands of staging this play were rarely mentioned in discussions of the RSC production, either at Stratford, or the Barbican Pit, or the Garrick, although one comment on the Garrick, that the "the chocolate-box theatre [robbed the play] of impact, making it seem too safe and distanced" (Gardner 21) acknowledged that the theatre space could affect the play's reception. During rehearsals, Armfield stressed the difficulties of the Sydney venue:

> It's very challenging … particularly for a theatre like Belvoir where the audience is watching from three sides. It's much harder to cover your tracks. [The play] is written for a theatre where sleight of hand is a bit more available. I was aware when I first read the play that it needed a special budget and that there would be extraordinary items that were as much a part of the show working as the brilliance of the performers. It's written in a style of modern splatter-film hyper reality, and for an audience that's seen *Pulp Fiction* or *Reservoir Dogs* you have to provide that. This play wouldn't have been written before those films were made (Austin 1).

This would in fact be the most expensive show ever staged by the company in its twenty-year history. With a certain awe, the press reported that a team of film-industry professionals had been hired. There was a special effects manager, an armourer who had to create "some fine splattered-blood effects" (McCallum 14) from the many

gunshots, a props-maker whose job it was to come up with dismembered limbs for Scene Nine which would be so convincing from the front row that when a leg was sawn through it would make the appropriate crunching sound. In the view of the production manager, "this show [was] going to be about, is the next effect going to work, and the one after that" (Austin 1). In addition, the production manager's taking on such unfamiliar work as sourcing dead cats and taking them to a taxidermist to be stuffed was the subject of a special feature. Unlike the Garrick, fake cats just wouldn't work in Belvoir Street.

All unusual pre-show publicity certainly, but cleverly designed to arouse audience interest. Quentin Tarantino's latest film, *Kill Bill Vol 1*, was about to open so the company could take advantage of his work being again in the public's mind. There was also a hope, as Armfield implied, that a technically-adept production of *The Lieutenant of Inishmore* would "appeal to people who wouldn't normally consider going to a play", (Austin 1) presumably men and/or younger audiences. Furthermore, by dwelling on the play's technical challenges theatre journalists were exploiting what has become a national preoccupation. Australians, particularly men, can quickly become engrossed in working out practical solutions for difficult problems or critically examining how others do so. Perhaps it's a throwback to pioneering days when outback settlers, far removed from expert help, had to rely on their own resourcefulness to solve everyday problems. Over time, this has led to a fascination with the question, "how are they going to do that?", and "will it work"? The media were tapping into this fascination by demonstrating in great detail how the production team was going to extraordinary lengths to bring about a confronting, almost film-like realism to the violence on stage, while hinting at the possibility that their efforts might not succeed.

Of equal interest but calculated to appeal to a very different audience was the acquisition and management of live cats. The Tarantino-type violence might attract those who enjoyed such films, especially younger men, but potentially scare off middle aged or female audiences. However, there was also waiting in the wings, as it were, an alternative story to tell, a story about a cat. On the production team no one received more publicity than Rhonda Hall, a trainer of animals for stage and screen. For this play, the story of how Rhonda had saved Meg, an orange cat, from being put down at a suburban pound and turned her into a star was the subject of several newspaper articles. Discovered just by chance was a tabby who after a few rehearsals could sit backstage "unfazed at the guns and bloody mayhem unfolding around her" (Morgan 15), and then calmly take her role in Scenes Four and Seven. Moreover, it was revealed, her two kittens were proving successful understudies! As with the revelations of the technical innovations, a tantalising prospect of uncertainty ran through these articles. Armfield was going against an old adage, never work with animals on stage. Would it all be right on the night?

And of course it was. Brains spilling out of a stuffed dead cat in the first scene and the gruesome punishment of James, the drug pusher, as he's suspended upside down in Scene Two produced the required *frisson* of audience revulsion. Then in Scene Four, when Meg was taken out of a cardboard box to sit on Davey's knee and be covered in

watercolour paint masquerading as black polish, there were audible gasps from the audience as the sentimental element came to the fore. After the violence, this was a relief, and everyone became absorbed in how the scene would turn out. But night after night, the cat behaved impeccably, and was still blissfully unaware of all the excitement it was provoking a couple of scenes later as Davey's futile attempts to make it black were again apparent. For Scene Eight (after the interval), when Padraic arrives, the cat was supposedly out of sight in its box, although frequent [recorded] meows reminded the audience that this was the same cat they had seen earlier. When Padraic, now infuriated at the discovery that his cat, wee Thomas, is dead shoots this half-blackened orange one in the box, the first of the blood-splattered effects came into play. Tarantino-like, the nearby wall was covered by just the appropriate amount of fake blood. More gasps of horror from the audience as the now much-loved orange tabby was dispatched in such a gruesome fashion.

As many would know from reading or seeing the play, this is just the first of many episodes where special effects are required. The three INLA men with their eyes shot out must stagger on to the stage later in Scene Eight with fake blood pouring down their faces, to be followed with more gunshots requiring the skill of the special effects expert to instantly splatter the walls, and even the floor, with blood. Scene Nine features the three men's supposed corpses being hacked up by the reluctant Donny and Davey. The appearance of their heads and limbs, together with sounds of cutting through bones and wrenching out of teeth were all conveyed with gritty realism. An ordinary laundry basket, used as a receptacle for the dismembered "bits", and a scattering of limbs near the front row were cleverly placed to underline the horror for a fascinated yet repelled audience. And the corpse of the blackened orange cat made a final appearance in the same scene, and proved to be another successful product of the taxidermist's workshop. One reviewer concluded that the technical staff were "the stars of this production" (McCallum 14), and the cat trainer even took a bow with the actors at the end.

Commentators on the original English production emphasised the serious message lying behind the blood-splattered mayhem. McDonagh himself, in an interview with the *Independent*, claimed that *The Lieutenant of Inishmore* "was inspired by 'pacifist rage'. The play's deadliest thrust is at the political hypocrisy which says it's OK to murder innocent civilians for the greater good" (Hoggard 10). Reviewers tended to concur. At the heart of Michael Billington's approval, for instance, was McDonagh's "clear moral viewpoint, … [that] in the struggle for a united Ireland, violent means have long overtaken legitimate ends, and the fanatical hardcore blend maudlin sentimentality, sexual Puritanism and a highly selective sense of history". Billington concluded, "like all first-rate satire, the play attacks excess and endorses reason" (17). Irish critics have been more subdued in their reactions, tending to see the satire as overly grotesque. The RSC production in particular was judged as "utterly unsubtle and about as funny as the bubonic plague (O'Toole 16).

Commentators in Sydney did not ignore the play's portrayal of the incongruity of ludicrous affection for cats outweighing concern for people, but in the end there was

unease that the vividly-realised violence was blotting out everything else. Indeed, this production failed to bring out the play's message. Arguably, this stemmed from the absence of a primary requirement of satire: that the object of ridicule should be close at hand. From news reports over the years, many Australians would know something about the violent campaigns of Irish republican organisations, but little about how they function from day-to-day. Their *modi operandi* where the legitimacy of drug money funding terrorism is unquestioned, where "valid targets" are coolly discussed, where English politicians such as Airey Neave are singled out to be shot because he has "a funny name", (McDonagh 29) and where male obsession with freeing Ireland is considered tainted by the intrusion of women are largely unknown. As is the tendency of terrorist organisations to divide into splinter groups. Since these are all subjects of ridicule in the play, they were lost on Sydney audiences. In the pre-production period, the director expressed a view that parallels with Islamic extremists, about whom Australians are concerned since recent bombing outrages in Indonesia, would emerge, so making the satire more meaningful (Litson 11). But in the end the play was too deeply embedded in an Irish context for that to occur.

Another reason why the satire was blunted was due to actors' poor control of an Irish accent. Australians find any Irish accent very difficult to master, the experience described by one actor as battling with "a demon in the mouth" (Verghis 14). To convey a satiric thrust with rapier precision, the accents needed to be assured as well as unobtrusive, and neither was the case at Belvoir Street. The actors playing Padraic, Mairead and the three northerners had no more than an awkward grasp of an Irish accent. The consequences were obvious in several key episodes. In Scene Five, for example, where Christy is explaining Padraic's sin of punishing drug pushers, listeners should sense the rhetoric of fanaticism behind his bizarre rationale:

> It won't be so quick then he'll be to go forming splinter groups, and knocking down fellas like poor Shank Toby, fellas who only do the community a service and do they force anybody to buy their drugs? No. And don't they pay us a pound on every bag they push to go freeing Ireland for them? Isn't it for everybody we're out freeing Ireland? That's what Padraic doesn't understand, it isn't only for the schoolkids and the oul fellas and the babes unborn we're out freeing Ireland. No. It's for the junkies, the thieves and the drug pushers too! (29).

However, when the actor is moving uneasily from a general Ulster accent to Belfast tones to a mishmash of others, including Scottish, the statements just appear ludicrous. Audiences miss the point. Instead, they are diverted, even entertained, by the actor's attempt to control how he is speaking, and inevitably drift away from judging his opinions towards amusement.

Former Druid actor and advisor to the production, Maeliosa Stafford, had warned that "the characters are not funny … [they] are deadly serious" and [the play] "has to be played for its danger and not for its comedy" (Litson 11). But it was difficult to prevent comedy taking over. For any audience, responses to the illogical nature of decisions such as Mairead's shooting

out the eyes of cattle to damage the meat export trade will always include ripples of incredulous laughter. While comic respites from the violence are necessary, intentionally or not, this production went further. Early in the play, for example, grossly inflated responses of Padraic to the news that wee Thomas was poorly, provoked an outburst of laughing, and in such heated moments the actor's control of an Irish accent was wobbly, further distracting the listeners from his display of malevolence. This was not an isolated incident. For Australians in general, used to seeing British television programs such as *Father Ted*, overblown or absurd situations, performed in an Irish accent invariably produce gales of mindless laughter.

The director did make the most of comic possibilities especially in scenes with Padraic's exasperated father, Donny, and long-haired neighbour, Davey. Both represented a sort of normality against which the mayhem exploding around them could be judged. Their comments, especially Davey's, as he milked the pauses before or during his expressionless one-liners, always guaranteed a reaction. Such as his adding a fatuous detail to the feeble explanation to an infuriated Padraic that wee Thomas had a disease causing him to go orange, and [pause] "smell of boot polish" (39). Or his response to Donny's lack of concern when Padraic is taken out to be killed by the INLA men: "No. After your son tries to execute you, your opinions do change about him" (49). Or in the final moments when wee Thomas suddenly appears and the futility of all the violence begins to sink in, Davey muses: "Four dead fellas, two dead cats … [long pause] … me hairstyle ruined" (68). As the play developed, he was increasingly seen as a sort of gormless idiot whom the audience loved. They couldn't get enough of his deadpan humour, leering smiles, and pathetically futile aggression against Padraic. In the end, Sydney audiences just sat back and relished the Irishness of the bizarre incongruities, like painting an orange cat black – just what Irishmen would do – placed in conjunction with the brutal violence of crazy terrorists who get overly emotional about cats yet are liable to shoot anyone.

In an interview with the *Sydney Morning Herald* in February 2003, Edward Albee insisted that the theatre needs to be "inquiring, imaginative and bold" (Hallett 15). He went on, "theatre has become cautious. … People may want something safe and a nice night, but as far as I'm concerned, it's a waste of time if you leave an audience where you found them". As critics have acknowledged, *The Lieutenant of Inishmore* is far from "cautious" and "safe", and audiences in Sydney were rattled out of their comfort zone. The Belvoir Street company took a risk with such a confronting play as well as a challenging one to mount. Yet in spite of difficulties, technically the production was an undoubted success: the special effects worked to perfection throughout the run, and the cats were everyone's favourites, but it was not the success Armfield had hoped for. Attendance numbers were unremarkable. The administrator felt that reviews had overemphasised the violence, and that older people had been put off (Healy). Unlike *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* where comedy was always in the foreground, messages about this play were mixed. Towards the end of the season, word-of-mouth ensured that numbers picked up as the comedy became better advertised. But there was a feeling that something was missing; some critics wondered what was the point of it all. Whereas in the earlier play, the universal context was easy to relate to, this was not the

case with *The Lieutenant of Inishmore*. The satire was too fixed in its Irish environment, and failed to make an impact. Instead, for many people, grotesque violence amidst a sort of comic romp was the lasting impression. A lot of dead bodies in a pool of laughter just about summed it up.

Note

1 While McDonagh clearly approved of the play being given to Belvoir Street, the final decision was actually made by the London producer, Adam Kenwright.

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