

The Politics of Irish Drama

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Nicholas Grene, *The Politics of Irish Drama: Plays in Context from Boucicault to Friel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

I am one of those people who will never wittingly leave a loose end untied, and it is thus a source of considerable satisfaction to have been granted this opportunity to bring two projects neatly full circle. In the Acknowledgements to his most recent work, Professor Nicholas Grene refers to the fact that the seed for the book was first planted in his mind whilst teaching a graduate seminar on Irish drama in Brazil in 1993. He goes on to thank Munira Mutran for having invited him to teach the course and for her generous hospitality whilst he was in São Paulo. At that time I myself was in the early stages of my own doctoral research into Sean O'Casey and I managed to catch the first two days of the two-week course before heading off on a lengthy trip to the UK which was eventually to take me over the Irish Sea to Dublin. Having bent Professor Grene's ear in my direction before I left Brazil I was able to call in at his Trinity College study for an impromptu tutorial, after which he kindly invited me to join him for lunch and coffee in the Trinity Staff Common Room. Six years later, 1999 witnessed the fruition of the seeds which had been germinated respectively in Brazil and Ireland with, on the one hand the publication of Professor Grene's book and, on the other, the viva voce for my doctorate at USP. Since Munira Mutran was undoubtedly the Juno to these two projects it is particularly appropriate that this dialogue should be taking place in the pages of the *ABEI Journal*, the Irish Studies mouthpiece which she has been instrumental in bringing into existence. If this preamble seems unduly subjective in the context of an academic journal that is no mere accident, for it seems to me that the subjectivity of interpretation lies at the very heart of Nicholas Grene's book and, for that matter, of my own doctoral dissertation too.

Nicholas Grene opened his own contribution to "The Critic and the Author," in the previous issue of this journal, in which he discussed Christina Hunt Mahony's *Contemporary Irish Literature*, with three obviously heartfelt questions: "Where do you start? Who to include? Who to leave out?" – which must have caused him a few sleepless nights as he drew up his own selection of plays and playwrights for *The Politics of Irish Drama*. It is for this reason, presumably, that he takes the unusual step of placing a Chronology at the beginning of his book, before the Introduction even, rather than as an Appendix. His listing of Irish Theatrical and Political events in the period from 1860

to 1998 serves as a reader's map to the book, the plays selected for discussion being helpfully emphasised in bold text. We are thus introduced to a book whose perimeter is marked at the outset by the staging of *The Colleen Bawn* in New York and which closes with the Good Friday agreement. A more careful examination of the Theatrical events listed reveals that the book's course will be charted from Boucicault's *The Shaughran* in 1874 to Barry's *The Steward of Christendom* in 1995, departing from New York and arriving in London. Ports of call will include 13 playwrights out of the 20 mentioned, and 23 plays out of the 43 listed as Theatrical events. A clear indication of the captain's preferred route may be inferred from the fact that 4 out of the 13 playwrights to be discussed each have 3 plays singled out in bold: Yeats, O'Casey, Murphy and Friel. If this survey appears to be unduly statistical in nature it is intended to draw attention to the clarity with which Nicholas Grene's Chronology reveals the shape and intent of his book at the very outset: the reader is reassured that here is a writer who has the courage to make difficult choices.

The justification for these choices comes immediately afterwards, in the four-page Introduction, admirably succinct and mercifully clear of the cobwebs of theory. Indeed, in setting out to focus upon the reading of a limited number of plays, Grene eschews the "more theoretically inflected analyses of broader cultural manifestations." As someone who finds the convoluted prose of the most noteworthy postcolonial theorists ever more indigestible, I read this introductory announcement with considerable relief. One of the great advantages of *The Politics of Irish Drama* is that it is eminently readable, argued throughout with the elegant simplicity that one would expect from an accomplished and experienced lecturer.

Professor Grene's book, then, may be seen as the advancement of an argument, presented in nine polished and beautifully illustrated stages (his 1993 course was also composed of nine lectures – it's a cabalistic number!). The premise of the argument is that the politics of Irish drama is the term that best describes the complex fusion of poetics and dynamics formed by the amalgam of subject, playwright and audience which occurs during the performance of a play, and that the result of this interaction is a form of representation that goes far beyond mimesis. Having come to university lecturing myself through acting, directing and the teaching of educational drama I am naturally predisposed to accept such a premise. Nicholas Grene recognises the essential difference between drama and other literary forms, which is the remarkable phenomenon of the performance – to attempt to isolate the theory of drama from its practice is, if the Aristotelians will forgive the crudeness of the analogy, to emasculate the Minotaur.

Although the author is at pains to stress that his selection of plays and playwrights is not made with the intention of producing a "linear chain," the nine chapters of *The Politics of Irish Drama* nonetheless represent stages in the development of an overall argument. Thus, the opening chapter lays out the chart for the journey that is about to be undertaken, revealing not only how *The Colleen Bawn*, *John Bull's Other Island* and *Translations* offer different stage interpretations of Ireland but also how each play makes

use of an onstage interpreter, whose perceptions are, in their turn, mediated by the master interpretation of the playwright. The representation of Ireland on stage is therefore shown to be the result of the multi-faceted interpretation fashioned by the interaction of the perspectives of stage character, audience and playwright.

In the following chapters, Nicholas Grene goes on to examine some of the forms this interpretative activity took over the course of the 20th century. Chapter 2 looks at the variations upon the theme of strangers in the house developed by Yeats's *The Land of Heart's Desire*, Lady Gregory's *The Travelling Man*, the Yeats/Gregory partnership's *Kathleen ni Houlihan*, and Synge's *The Shadow of the Glen*. Synge also features in the following chapter which, under the punning title of "Shifts in Perspective," deals with *The Playboy of the Western World*, a supreme case of the impossibility of establishing a common accord between playwright and audience with regard to the representation of Ireland proposed by the former. The following chapter offers a fresh insight into Sean O'Casey's *The Shadow of a Gunman* and *Juno and the Paycock*, based on an analysis of questions of class and space in the two plays, and O'Casey reappears in Chapter 5, where *The Plough and the Stars* is considered together with Denis Johnston's *The Old Lady Says 'No!'* and Brendan Behan's *The Hostage* as one of a group of plays advancing reactions to revolution. Chapter 6 moves on to consider two visions of postcolonial Ireland, Yeats's *Purgatory* and Beckett's *All that Fall*, detecting differences but also asserting affinities between, particularly in the sense that the two playwrights are perhaps the least Irish of the writers under consideration in their determination to go beyond the specificities of Irish place and culture. Chapter 7 examines the perspectives upon emigration offered by Friel's landmark success *Philadelphia, Here I Come!* and Murphy's *A Crucial Week in the Life of a Grocer's Assistant* and concludes with the versions of pastoral presented in two pairs of one-act plays, Friel's pairing of *Winners* and *Losers* under the title of *Lovers*, and Murphy's *On the Outside/On the Inside*. The penultimate chapter takes a further pair of plays by Tom Murphy, *A Thief of Christmas* and *Bailegangaire*, which offer a reshaping of Ireland's past in order to illuminate its present. Chapter 9 also deals with plays which respond to the past, Frank McGuinness's *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme* and Sebastian Barry's *The Steward of Christendom*, both of which return to the polemical question of the participation by Irish soldiers in the First World War. This is a question of particular interest to me, for my thesis focused upon the rejection of O'Casey's *The Silver Tassie* by the Abbey Theatre and upon the impact that the decision had upon O'Casey, both personally and professionally. Grene reminds his readers that McGuinness's play was written in an attempt to expiate what the playwright described as the "curse that came upon the Irish theatre with the rejection of *The Silver Tassie*," a process which may one hope that the successful production of Mark-Anthony Turnage's opera at the London Coliseum in February 2000 has now satisfactorily completed.

This undignified whistle-stop tour of Professor Grene's book obviously omits the most interesting point on the journey, the conclusion. It cannot have been an easy

matter to summarise in a mere eight pages an argument which had set out to embrace such an eclectic collection of drama, seeking to stress the diversity of the chosen plays and the heterogeneity of the representations of Ireland therein presented. Interestingly, inevitably perhaps, he emphasises the shared characteristics of the plays he has analysed, characteristics which make the Irish play “a distinct and distinctly marketable phenomenon,” which “constitutes a separable category, fulfilling its own contrastive function in relation to the metropolitan mainstream.” He argues that Irish drama is recognisable by its difference, by a sense of otherness which is equally perceptible to audiences abroad and to those in Ireland itself. This latter point is a particularly interesting one for, in drawing attention to the fact that Irish audiences experience a sense of the difference of the worlds portrayed on stage from their own, Nicholas Grene is homing in on one of the most striking features of Irish drama, which is its tendency to portray marginal worlds, depicting spaces and characters which are “always out there, somewhere other than the metropolitan habitat shared (more or less) by playwright and audience alike.” The fact that Professor Grene is an Irish academic obviously lends an authority to such an observation that would be unavailable to a foreign critic, and it also gives credibility to the explanation that he offers for this continuing focus on the worlds of poverty, deprivation and oppression.

To the outsider, like myself, it is sometimes hard to understand why Irish writers seem so reluctant to rejoice. Even now, when the Irish economy is enjoying unprecedented rates of growth, prompting the coining of the term “Celtic tiger” (a term that leaves one’s heart in one’s mouth if the recent fate of the Asiatic tiger economies is recalled), there seems to be no change in the predominant spirit of gloomy introspection. One can not imagine, for example, an Irish collection of verse being published under the title of *Look! We have come through!* In March 2001 the latest overnight success story from Ireland on the United States publishing scene, Nuala O’Faolain, was asked by *Newsweek* whether she was happy with her success. Her reply was symptomatic: “I can’t believe it, ‘cause it’s not sad enough.” Professor Grene opens his conclusion by referring to the continuing strength and international success of Irish drama, which is an ever-popular presence on the London stage. He cites Conor McPherson’s *The Weir* as an example and also mentions the names of Billy Roche, Marina Carr and Martin McDonagh. It is, of course, too early to say with certainty that these writers will receive canonical status. McPherson’s follow-up to *The Weir*, *Dublin Carol*, was unenthusiastically received by London critics, and the jury is still out on McDonagh’s merits (judging by the vehement contempt expressed by one notable Irish academic during IASIL 2000, who described McDonagh as a “gobshite,” the critical community has yet to reach a point of consensus!). However, the playwrights themselves seem to be united in the gloom and violence that characterise the world they choose to depict. The success of Marie Jones’s *Stones in His Pockets*, which won an Olivier Award for Best New Comedy at the 25th Award Ceremony in February 2001, may be no more than the exception which proves the rule. Professor Grene’s explanation for this phenomenon, that just as “the partitioned island has continued

to manifest symptoms of its fractured state, so the dramatists have returned repeatedly to probe and to examine, to attempt therapies of self-analysis," is certainly consistent with the tenets of postcolonial criticism, but I can't help feeling that there is something more profound underlying the difference of Irish drama than reaction to the continuing colonial presence of the British in the North. I very much hope to live to see a united Ireland but, at the risk of being dismissed as Arnoldian by Professor Grene, I have a deep-rooted suspicion that the end of partition would not be enough to bring about a sea change in Irish drama.

Professor Grene's book, then, is certainly a most thought-provoking contribution to the literature on 20th century Irish drama. Of course, every reader will have his own reservations about the selection of plays that form the backbone of the study. In my case I found it incomprehensible that Friel's *The Freedom of the City* should not have been included in the central core of the book, but the author is very careful to defend himself against such criticism in the pages of his introduction. What I find more worrying, however, is that there is an issue of profound importance that is being ignored or, rather, denied in the book: the possibility that Irishness may be more ancient than politics and stem from roots that lie even deeper than the country's colonial and postcolonial history.