

# *The Critic and the Author: Response*

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It is difficult to know how to respond to Dr Peter Harris's generous, lucid and discriminating review, beyond thanking him for the kindness of his praise. It is a great pleasure for me, also, to renew in print a dialogue with him begun in São Paulo in 1993 at a point when we have now both completed the enterprises we were then starting. And I am certainly happy to join with him in saluting Munira Mutran for all she has done for Irish studies in Brazil. For my part, I had to travel to São Paulo to have the opportunity to teach a postgraduate course on Irish drama to a group of advanced students all committed to that subject, and without the catalyst of that experience *The Politics of Irish Drama* might not have been written.

All of Dr Harris's compliments are welcome – you can never overpraise a book to its author or a baby to its parents – but some of them are hardly deserved. He focuses on my selection of plays, and speaks of 'a writer who has had the courage to make difficult choices'. It was not quite like that. I did not take stock of the full wealth of Irish drama in English written over the last century and a half, and pick out what seemed to me the most significant plays. I probably should have done, but I didn't. Instead, I tended to follow the phenomenon that interested me, the politics of the representation of Ireland implicit in the drama, wherever it seemed to lead, whether to major or minor plays. And some of the works that I most admire ended up on the cutting-room floor for arbitrary reasons.

So, for instance, *Faith Healer*, to my mind still Brian Friel's greatest play, was to have been the centrepiece of a chapter, balancing the chapter I devote to Tom Murphy's *Bailegangaire*, that other masterpiece of late twentieth-century Irish theatre. But when I came to write that chapter – pressed for space as I was – I realised that I had little to say about *Faith Healer* relevant to my argument that I had not already said earlier in the book. So, to my very great regret, it went. My omission of Friel's *The Freedom of the City* from the central core of the book, for which Peter Harris reproaches me, came about for a somewhat different reason. The politics of that play's reception followed fairly predictable lines: English audiences and reviewers attacked it, seeing in it – quite wrongly I believe – a piece of Republican propaganda; the Irish, raw from the horror of Bloody Sunday and its aftermath, admired it for the forcefulness of its satire. *Translations*, equally applauded by both English and Irish, North and South, for my purposes seemed a more significant case for concentrated attention.

There remains the peculiar phenomenon of Irish drama itself in its contemporary manifestation. Dr Harris ponders the peculiarity of Irish writers' failure to rejoice, even

in the period of our new-found affluence. (He is of course right to see the ominousness in that deplorable phrase, the 'Celtic tiger', in the light of what happened to the Asian tiger economies; the best Irish economists can now hope for is a 'soft landing' when the party's over.) Maybe we have been hard up so long, we can not believe our luck. But marketing, image, the traditions of what is expected of Ireland and Irish writing, certainly come into it. To show upon the stage a characteristic Irish couple *de nos jours*, he a software specialist, she a management consultant, might accurately reflect the social realities of middle-class Dublin, but would not be noticeably different from presenting such a couple from London, New York, or indeed no doubt São Paulo. And it is difference still that Ireland has to offer. So we continue to find tenanted the theatres of the world those pubs in the West of Ireland filled with lonesome characters leading lives of voluble desperation. It's what is expected of Irish playwrights, it's what they do, and in some cases they do it supremely well.

I agree whole-heartedly with Peter Harris 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', or even the existence of a million Irish men and women who want that presence to continue. One of the objectives of my book was to complicate a sense of the politics of Irish drama that had previously equated it simply with colonial and postcolonial politics. However, without wanting to accuse Dr Harris of being an Arnoldian – would that be an accusation? – I am from my end suspicious of an essentialism that defines our Irishness in terms of an ancient inheritance predating our colonial and postcolonial history. I don't think I am as intemperate as Shaw's Larry Doyle, who says that 'When people talk of the Celtic race, I feel as if I could burn down London'. But, given the choice, I would prefer Shaw's semi-spoof theory of climate as the determining condition of Irish identity, rather than an ancestral predisposition to Celtic melancholy. Certainly what we need at present, when the *nouveau riche* Irish society is reacting with quite sinister aggression and prejudice to its first limited experience of multiculturalism, is a view of our culture that is complex, open and flexible. But it may be some time before we get such a view, and longer still before it finds its way into Irish drama, conditioned as that drama is by what others think of us as much as what we think of ourselves.