

Eamonn Jordan (ed). *Theatre Stuff: Critical Essays on Contemporary Irish Theatre*, (2000). Dublin: Carysfort Press.

Optimism about contemporary Irish drama seems to have diminished recently. At the 2001 *Irish Times*/ESB Theatre Awards, a member of the judging panel lamented the scarcity of new Irish plays, stating that he wanted to describe 2001 as a good year for Irish theatre – but couldn't. Media reports on Irish theatre enhance this sense of gloom: the Abbey has lurched from controversy over its production of *Barbaric Comedies* to criticism of its proposal to relocate to Dublin's docklands; the Gate has publicly disagreed with the Arts Council over its funding; and despite its international success, Galway audiences are reportedly frustrated by what they perceive to be Druid Theatre's irrelevance to them. What makes this apparent negativity difficult to understand is that, as recently as 1999, many commentators were declaring that Irish theatre had entered a new golden age, and that a second renaissance had been signaled by the emergence of plays like *The Steward of Christendom*, *Portia Coughlan*, and *The Weir*. As reports of the demise of the Celtic Tiger illustrate, this sudden shift from celebration to despondency is not exclusive to commentary on Irish theatre – and perhaps what is most evident in such reports is the Irish media's tendency to exaggerate. The value of *Theatre Stuff*, an excellent collection of essays from Carysfort Press, is that it brings clear-headed analysis to a debate that has hitherto been dominated by marketing and excessively exuberant journalism.

The collection explores recent Irish theatre from many important perspectives. Younger writers such as Billy Roche, Marina Carr, Sebastian Barry, Conor McPherson, and Martin McDonagh receive much needed attention, and the work of such established writers as Frank McGuinness and Tom McIntyre is also considered. The essays are written by established and emerging critics, with papers by Declan Kiberd, Christopher Murray and Terry Eagleton joined by valuable work from Melissa Sihra, Karen Vanderveldt, and other young scholars. The collection also includes an interesting piece on theatre criticism by Jocelyn Clarke, who was recently appointed Commissioning Manager at the Abbey, and a stirring assessment of the Irish theatre scene by Bruce Arnold.

The book makes immediately obvious the difficulty of clearly describing contemporary Irish drama. Such playwrights as Friel, Leonard and Murphy, who rose to prominence in the 1960s, are still producing new work, but the 1990s have seen the emergence of writers whose techniques and themes differ significantly from those used by many of their predecessors. These differences are explored in the most important essay in the collection, Fintan O'Toole's "Irish Theatre: The State of the Art". O'Toole argues that, following the Revival and a second phase that began in the late 1950s, Irish drama has now moved into a third phase "too new to be fully defined, but [its] outline can at least be tentatively suggested"(48). This third phase dramatizes Ireland as a fragmented society, presenting "isolated pieces of a whole story no one knows" (54). Citing *Dancing at Lughnasa*, which famously reveals the fate of the Mundy sisters before the play's conclusion, O'Toole claims that a loss of tension and suspense in Irish drama has stimulated the "re-emergence of poetry":

Because we no longer have one shared place, one Ireland, we can no longer have a naturalistic theatre of recognition in which a world is signaled to us through objects and we tacitly agree to recognise it as our own. We must instead have a theatre of evocation... This will demand new ways of seeing and new categories of criticism. (57)

It's easy to agree broadly with O'Toole's remarks, though they are necessarily schematic and may obscure rather than clarify some important characteristics of contemporary writing. For example, the most influential plays in the "third phase" must be, as O'Toole points out, Friel's *Faith Healer* and Murphy's *The Gigli Concert*, yet both writers emerged in the 1960s. Similarly, some of the more conservative work now being produced comes from younger writers, as recently demonstrated by Bernard Farrell's *Lovers at Versailles* (2002), which, some superfluous contemporary references aside, could have been written before the Abbey burned down. Nevertheless, O'Toole's call for new categories of criticism is important, and his article valuably initiates an important debate.

The relationship between these second and third phases is illustrated in the collection's opening essays, written by the playwrights Thomas Kilroy and Declan Hughes. Kilroy describes himself as of the earlier generation of writers, whose work he defines as "a mixture of traditional material and formal inventiveness" (3). With the emergence of a younger generation, Kilroy interestingly describes an "eerie sensation of watching some of the work of one's contemporaries and, worse still, of one's own, becoming historical while one is still alive" (2). As a writer and a founder member of Rough Magic, Declan Hughes has been one of the dominant voices of that younger generation. Asking why contemporary Irish literature continues to ignore contemporary Ireland, Hughes complains that Irish writers:

Persist in defining ourselves by the ethnic, the pastoral (and that qualified form, the tragic pastoral). Even if we do it in an iconoclastic way, the iconography remains powerfully the same: half door, pint bottle, sacred heart... And the rest of the world colludes in this because they want us to be Irish too; hell, they'd like to be Irish themselves. (12)

A comparison of these articles offers some valuable insights. Kilroy's interest in tradition is sincere, but makes him feel "historical" while he is still alive – a feeling shared by huge numbers of Irish people at present – yet Hughes considers tradition to be "habit in fancy dress" (11) and is utterly impatient with it, a trait which he too shares with many Irish people. However, there is a great deal in common between the two writers. Kilroy notes with approval that, when Tom Murphy decided in 1959 to write his first play, he declared that "one thing is fucking sure, it's not going to be set in a kitchen" (5). Forty years later, Hughes, in similarly iconoclastic mood, also writes with distaste for "the country kitchen" (11), and in doing so carries on a tradition at least as old as Boucicault – that of Irish dramatists being motivated by the desire to undermine received notions of Irish identity and culture. This reveals a confusion among writers and critics about the role in Irish drama of identity, tradition, and other problematical concepts. The value of this collection's articulation of the need for further debate on these issues should not be underestimated.

Another important feature of *Theatre Stuff* is its attention to the Irish independent theatre sector. Joseph Long's assessment of the sector will be useful to those who know little about companies like Rough Magic, Passion Machine, and the other important groups that have emerged since the 1970s. It is sometimes assumed that the existence of these companies is in itself evidence of a healthy independent theatre in Ireland, despite the fact that the area faces huge challenges with funding, management, succession, and the need to balance international success with local obligations. A major problem is that many plays by independent companies remain

unpublished, and therefore have not received the attention they merit – one thinks of *Pigtown* by Mike Finn, *Alone it Stands* by John Breen, *Guess Who's Coming to the Dinner* by Roddy Doyle, and many of the hugely popular Passion Machine productions as recent examples of plays that really ought to be in print. For these and other reasons, the inclusion in *Theatre Stuff* of essays on Calypso Productions and Barrabas is a welcome contribution to a neglected part of the Irish theatre scene.

Theatre Stuff shows that the most important figures in Irish drama remain Brian Friel and Tom Murphy. It is always gratifying to see the seriously underrated Murphy given attention; and Declan Kiberd's essay on *The Gigli Concert* is one of the collection's highlights. While the two essays provided on Friel are of a high quality, it is disappointing, given the extremely up-to-date perspective of the book's other papers, that they consider two plays from the 1970s (*Living Quarters* and *Freedom of the City*), when the more recent *Wonderful Tennessee*, *Molly Sweeney*, and the underestimated *Give Me Your Answer, Do!* all need attention. Although he is mentioned in passing, a surprising omission from the collection is Beckett, who looms large over 1990s Irish drama, not only because of his influence on younger writers – evident in the dominance in recent years of the monologue form – but also in the huge influence of the Gate Theatre's Beckett Festivals, which provided a blueprint for Irish theatre practice throughout the decade.

However, to criticize an already comprehensive publication for such omissions is clearly unreasonable – indeed, the value of *Theatre Stuff* is that it identifies areas that need further attention. Provocative, intelligent, accessible and well presented, *Theatre Stuff* is an important contribution to the study of contemporary Ireland. It shows that Irish theatre is neither in a golden age nor in the doldrums, but is exciting, bravely experimental, and alive.