

Frank McGuinness's *The Match Box*

"Grief softens the mind," says Shakespeare's great character Queen Margaret – it makes people "fearful and degenerate". There's only one valid response to such feelings, she claims: "Think on revenge and cease to weep."

In making those remarks, Margaret places herself in a long line of heroines whose desire for revenge is both glorious and horrifying. Her precursors are figures like Sophocles' Electra and Euripides' Hecuba; her ancestors include Hester Swayne in Marina Carr's brutal *By the Bog of Cats*.

All of those women choose vengeance over grief - and in doing so they go beyond good and evil, committing terrible acts that we can nevertheless understand and perhaps even admire. The plays that dramatize their stories are thus both mythic and intimate: they reveal aspects of the human condition that we all recognize (much as we might prefer not to), and they show how one person's decisions can unravel a family, a society, or an entire world.

Frank McGuinness's *The Match Box* responds to this tradition, and also reimagines it. The character of Sal is rooted in time and place, moving between an England and an Ireland that we can recognize as being part of our own world today. But Sal's efforts to come to terms with tragedy transcend the here and now, making her seem both timeless and absolutely real.

Watching this play, we quickly realize that it's no coincidence that McGuinness has written adaptations of the Greek tragedies, re-inventing Electra, Hecuba, and Helen for contemporary audiences. He has also given us new versions of many of the great female characters of modern drama: Phèdre, Miss Julie, Nora Helmer, Hedda Gabler, Yerma, and Chekhov's three sisters, among others.

This fascination with strong female characters extends into his own drama. One of his earliest successes was *The Factory Girls*, a 1982 play about five women who stage a sit-in at a Donegal shirt factory when they are threatened with unemployment. In 1999, he premiered the intensely moving *Dolly West's Kitchen*, a play about war, sexuality and family that features the unforgettable matriarch Rima West. And more recently he gave us *Greta Garbo Came to Donegal*, a 2010 drama that explores the tensions between the real woman and the iconic figure named in the title.

It's easy to understand why McGuinness is drawn to such characters. All of them are very different from each other, but what they share is a determination not only to face the truth about themselves but also to act upon the consequences of those truths. McGuinness's plays always show that it's not enough for us to know who we are: we must also have the courage to *be* who we are.

And this characteristic is what makes McGuinness one of our leading international playwrights. His 1985 masterpiece *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme* demanded that we face truths that, at the time of its premiere, were resisted by many people: that Irish people fought in the First

World War; that Ulster Protestantism is worthy of respect and understanding; and that the love of men for each other can be ennobling, beautiful, carnal and dangerous – just like the love of men and women. It is a sign of McGuinness's insight and bravery that those assertions are far less likely to be contested now than they were 30 years ago.

Since then, he has allowed us to recognize ourselves in other ways. *Someone Who'll Watch Over Me* (1992) is based on Brian Keenan's captivity in Lebanon, and maps the relationship between Ireland and England onto the broader conflict between Islam and the West. Written for British theatres, his plays *Mutabilitie* (1997) and *Speaking Like Magpies* (2005) use the familiar figures of Shakespeare and King James to explode English history from within, emphasizing the role of Irishness and Catholicism in the making of contemporary Britain. And one of his greatest plays yet is *There Came a Gypsy Riding* (2007), a drama that forces us to accept the reality of youth suicide in Ireland today.

Like those earlier works, *The Match Box* tells us things that are challenging but absolutely necessary. And, again like his earlier works, it finds drama by placing opposing forces into states of tension with each other: Ireland with England, words with actions, parents with their children, creativity with destruction – and forgiveness with revenge. By working through and ultimately resolving such conflicts, McGuinness underlines the importance of one of his most enduring themes: tragedy, he shows, is not an ending, but a starting-point.

Patrick Lonergan is Professor of Drama and Theatre Studies at NUI Galway