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11 | Druid Theatre's *Leenane Trilogy* on Tour: 1996–2001

Patrick Lonergan

The international success of *The Leenane Trilogy* helped to make Druid Theatre one of Ireland's most celebrated companies – but it also made [helped to make] (could we revert to this phrasing, as in its current form, the sentence implies that it was *exclusively* the international success of the Trilogy that made McDonagh famous and this is not so⁹ Martin McDonagh one of Ireland's most controversial dramatists. I want to consider how Druid's five-year tour of McDonagh's plays managed to generate these apparently contradictory responses, suggesting that Druid's impact on McDonagh's career has been undeservedly neglected. By doing so, I want to offer an analysis of the impact of Irish theatre on tour on Irish theatre criticism.ⁱ

1

Druid's tours of *The Leenane Trilogy* lasted from 1996 to 2001. A co-production with London's Royal Court Theatre, *The Trilogy* played in thirty-one venues in Ireland, north and south, and was also produced in England, Australia, the United States, and Canada. Its production history offers an excellent example of the

many different ways in which it is possible to speak of Irish theatre on tour: I want therefore to give an overview of that history before proceeding to a consideration of the productions themselves.

The Beauty Queen of Leenane premiered in Galway on 1 February 1996. It was chosen by Druid's artistic director Garry Hynes to mark two special occasions: the twenty-first birthday of Druid, and the opening of a municipal theatre in Galway. The production then toured to Longford, Kilkenny, and Limerick, before transferring to the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs in May 1996. *Beauty Queen* arrived in London at a time when new writing was becoming increasingly popular, especially at the Royal Court. Under the artistic directorship of Stephen Daldry, the Court premiered new writers such as Sarah Kane and Mark Ravenhill, and helped to raise the international profile of other important dramatists, many of them Irish.ⁱⁱ Following its London premiere, *The Beauty Queen* went on one of Druid's famous 'unusual rural tours',ⁱⁱⁱ playing in Skibbereen, Portmagee, Lisdoonvarna, each of the three Aran Islands, Arrain Mor, Rathlin Island, and Erris Island. Druid also visited larger venues in Tralee, Enniskillen, and Derry, before concluding in Leenane in County Galway, itself. A week later, *Beauty Queen* transferred to the West End. By this time, McDonagh had won a number of awards for the play, and was developing a reputation for bad behaviour after a highly publicized drunken argument with the actor Sean Connery.

In June 1997, *A Skull in Connemara* and *The Lonesome West* premiered, again in Galway, joining *Beauty Queen* to become *The Leenane Trilogy*. McDonagh's reputation for loutish outspokenness was by this time well established, as he may himself have been acknowledging when he gave the most loutish and outspoken character in his *Trilogy* – Mairtin in *A Skull in Connemara* – the Irish version of his own name.

After its West End run, *The Trilogy* ran for a week in Cork, and played for ten days at the 1997 Dublin Theatre Festival, where the production was named 'Reuters Play of the Year' (by a three-person jury that included Marina Carr) in a festival that also featured new work from Robert Lepage and Thomas Kilroy.

McDonagh's international profile grew throughout 1998: *The Trilogy* appeared at the Sydney Festival, and *Beauty Queen* opened in New York, where it later won four Tony Awards. *The Lonesome West* opened with its original cast on Broadway in 1999 and, although it was less popular than *Beauty Queen*, it was nominated for four Tony Awards. In the same year, Garry Hynes directed local casts in Australian and Canadian productions of *The Beauty Queen*.

The Irish media had kept its readers apprised of McDonagh's success, both nationally and internationally, with the result that Dublin theatregoers expressed frustration that his plays were not more frequently produced in Dublin. These complaints appeared even before *The Trilogy* premiered there, with letters to the *Irish Times* complaining that Druid was neglecting Dublin audiences. Druid company manager Louise Donlon replied to these complaints by stating that Druid's 'first commitment is to its audiences in Galway and its touring venues in Ireland'.^{iv} The plays were performed at the 1997 Dublin Theatre Festival some months later, but did not receive a sustained run in the Irish capital until 2000, when *The Beauty Queen* played at the Gaiety, a large commercial theatre. In 2001, *The Lonesome West* appeared at the same venue. The final Druid production of McDonagh's Leenane plays was a two-week run of *The Lonesome West* in Galway in October 2001.

This five-year tour involved a variety of venues and audiences, and achieved many objectives. The premiere of *Beauty Queen* in Galway was an act of localized, civic celebration. *The Trilogy's* tours in Ireland

– including visits to some of the most isolated parts of the island – are an excellent example of the capacity of subsidized theatre to operate as a force for cultural inclusion. As a co-production with the Royal Court, *The Trilogy* formalized a partnership between Irish and English theatre that has since been a feature of the work of such writers as Conor McPherson, Sebastian Barry, and Stella Feehily. *The Trilogy* can also be seen as an example of event-driven theatre, which made it ideal for the Sydney Festival and the Dublin Theatre Festival. The 1999 productions of *Beauty Queen* in Sydney and Toronto – with local casts directed by Garry Hynes – offer an interesting way of thinking about Irish theatre on tour: the Druid aesthetic remained in place, but audiences received the plays as local productions. And on Broadway and in Dublin, the plays appeared in commercial, rather than subsidized, venues.

This variety is important when one considers how debate about McDonagh's work had become increasingly contentious while the plays were on tour – so that, by the time *Beauty Queen* reached the Gaiety in 2000, McDonagh's work was considered objectionable in two ways. First, it was argued that he was parading images of degraded Irish stereotypes before middle-class, urban audiences, portraying rural Ireland as a 'benighted dystopia' in a way that allowed those audiences to evade their responsibilities to the genuinely marginalized members of Irish society.^v The second accusation was that McDonagh's 'depiction of the Irish is particularly problematic when it's exported, because ... It feeds the whole *Angela's Ashes* view of Ireland. When it travels, it's taken at face value'.^{vi} These debates rarely included consideration of the role of Druid in the reception of McDonagh, with analyses often proceeding directly from McDonagh's scripts to inferences about audience response. Writing about a 2002 production of *The Lonesome West* in Avignon, Ian Kilroy could remark that 'Druid's role in the rise of

McDonagh seems to have been air-brushed away'.^{vii} Although this claim was slightly hyperbolic, it does have some validity, since many of the criticisms directed against McDonagh persist because Druid's influence on his career has yet to receive substantial attention. To illustrate this, Druid's influence on the reception of McDonagh's work must be considered.



Illustration 9: Garry Hynes in rehearsal. Courtesy of Hardiman Library, NUI Galway. [courtesy Druid Theatre Company, photos by Ivan Kincyl]



Illustration 10: Martin McDonagh. Courtesy of Hardiman Library, NUI Galway. [courtesy Druid Theatre Company, photos by Ivan Kincyl]

2

Garry Hynes – both at Druid and the Abbey Theatre – has had an important impact on the development of contemporary Irish playwriting, by commissioning and directing some of the most significant plays of recent years, including Murphy's *Bailegangaire* (1985) and Carr's *Portia Coughlan* (1996).^{viii} Questions about McDonagh's work should thus include a consideration of Hynes's influence on his writing. Contrary to Richard Eyre's assertion that McDonagh had 'sprung from the womb a fully-fledged playwright'^{ix}, Hynes did not just discover McDonagh but, as Michael Ross states, she developed him too – working with him to cut scenes and lines from his original scripts, and suggesting additions – many of them significant. For example, *The Lonesome West* originally involved only three characters; the fourth – presumably Girleen – was added at Hynes's suggestion during rehearsals.^x

Insert new text

working with him to cut scenes and lines from his original scripts, which developed through many drafts^{xi}. For example, *The Lonesome West* originally involved only three characters, the two brothers and a female character from England; it was only in later drafts that the female character became Girleen, while Fr Welsh was added

Similarly, questions about the impact of Synge on McDonagh might start with Hynes, whose reputation is founded on her productions of *The Playboy of the Western World* (1975, 1977, 1982, 1985, 2004–5). McDonagh had not read Synge before he wrote the *Leenane* plays; but he had done so before they

premiered, as shown when he told an interviewer in April 1997 that ‘the darkness of [*The Playboy*] amazed me. I thought it would be one of those classics that you read in order to have read, rather than to enjoy, but it was great’.^{xii}

McDonagh is frequently described as a provocative playwright, but Druid also has a history of challenging its audiences’ assumptions, ideals, and pieties. For example, Hynes explains that she chose *Beauty Queen* to mark the opening of the Town Hall Theatre from a desire to surprise her audience. The opening night audience, she said, would arrive at the theatre, ‘expecting a particular kind of play’ – presumably a work similar to Druid’s signature pieces such as *The Playboy* and *Bailegangaire*. ‘For the first few moments’, said Hynes, ‘the audience will feel “oh lovely, this is a Druid play, we know where we are”’. And then’.^{xiii}

The style of performance employed by Druid is particularly important in this regard. As Fintan O’Toole observes, McDonagh’s plays are an ideal vehicle for Druid’s acting style, which is famous for exploding ‘naturalism from within, starting with the apparently familiar and making it very strange’.^{xiv} Hynes’s style of direction during *The Trilogy* therefore presented the absurd naturalistically. When she directed *The Lonesome West*, she stated that actors and director

have to absolutely believe that Valene will not allow his brother to eat a packet of his Tayto [potato crisps]. If you think of that as a joke, and take that attitude to it in rehearsal, then the play doesn’t exist.^{xv}

This presentation of the strange as if it were familiar is evident throughout the *Trilogy*. Each play in *The Trilogy* represents one of the major institutions in Irish life – *Beauty Queen* deals with the family, *Skull* with the law, and *The Lonesome West* with the church – at a time when the place of those authorities in Ireland were being severely undermined by revelations about political corruption, and institutional and familial abuse.

The Leenane Trilogy therefore confronts many uncomfortable Irish truths, and is troubling precisely because of its resemblance to, but divergence from, the apparently familiar.

This meant that the plays were received in a variety of ways by audiences throughout Ireland. An excellent example of this is the contrasting responses of audiences in Leenane and the Aran Islands – two places that McDonagh himself presents as interchangeable – to the *Beauty Queen*. During the first scene of the play, Mag and Maureen debate the merits of the Irish language. Irish, says Mag, ‘sounds like nonsense to me. Why can’t they just speak English like everybody? ... Where would Irish get you going for a job in England? Nowhere’.^{xvi} Uinsionn Mac Dubhghaill explains that Mag’s statement exposes a ‘deeply-felt conviction, held in many Gaeltacht communities, that Irish is of no value’. This feeling, he suggests, is ‘not often articulated openly in public, for fear of jeopardizing the community’s chances of getting any grants that might be going’. The performance of this line on the Aran Islands meant that someone ‘on stage [is] saying what many privately feel, and the audience [in Inish Mor] is loving it’.^{xvii} However, when the play was performed in Leenane, the audience was silent during the same scene, because, Mac Dubhghaill proposes, Mag’s opinion came as ‘an unwelcome reminder in an area where the decision to abandon Irish as a community language is still uncomfortably close’.

There are numerous other examples of this kind of diversity. In her review of the Belfast production of *A Skull in Connemara*, Joyce MacMillan points out that ‘some of the audience at the Lyric clearly found the tone objectionable, and one or two walked out’.^{xviii} She notes that the audience responded interestingly to McDonagh’s reference to an IRA bombing. When Thomas states that ‘I would *like* there to be bodies flying about everywhere, but there never is’, Mick

suggests that he should '[g]o up ahead North so. You'll be well away. Hang about a bookies or somewhere'.^{xix} Understandably, this line generated different responses in Belfast, Armagh, Sligo, Tralee, and Dublin. The important point however is that Druid's tours of *The Trilogy* allowed audiences throughout Ireland to explore distinctively local preoccupations.

As with Joyce, Synge, Murphy, and many other important Irish artists, Garry Hynes's imagination might be said to be dominated by the image of the mirror – the cracked looking glass – that presents the audience with a skewed version of itself. This has been a literal feature of her versions of *The Playboy of the Western World* and her inaugural Abbey production, *The Plough and the Stars* (1991), and features in her versions of plays such as Stoppard's *Real Inspector Hound* (1980) or Mark O'Rowe's *Crestfall* (Gate Theatre, 2003). It also operates metaphorically throughout her work. *The Leenane Trilogy* may be considered in the context of this tradition, since it involves audience members in the theatrical event by drawing their attention to the artificiality of the action. It is also a central, if neglected, feature of Martin McDonagh's writing, which in its entirety explores the divergence between representation and reality. McDonagh's ability to exploit, and draw attention to, his audiences' willingness to receive information passively has dominated his six produced plays, explicitly so in *The Pillowman* (2003). This explains Fintan O'Toole's suggestion that if Martin McDonagh had not existed, Garry Hynes would have invented him.^{xx} McDonagh and Hynes are driven by similar preoccupations; the disproportionate emphasis on McDonagh's input into their joint success therefore seems inappropriate.

The most important impact of Druid on McDonagh is the theatre's touring policy. Before *The Leenane Trilogy* premiered, Druid had (according to Garry Hynes) visited seventy-one different venues in Ireland and abroad,

including London, Sydney, and New York. Hynes explains that by the time they premiered *The Beauty Queen*, touring was 'not just something we do after we do everything else', but was in fact central 'not just to the strategic policy of the company but to the artistic policy as well'.^{xxi}

When Druid took *The Trilogy* abroad, the company already had a well-developed reputation. It first toured internationally in 1980, bringing four plays to the Edinburgh Festival.^{xxii} Visits to London with *The Playboy of the Western World*, *Bailegangaire*, and *Conversations on a Homecoming* followed, and there were also tours to Sydney and New York. This meant that the arrival of Druid at the Royal Court in 1996 marked the *return* of a company whose style was familiar to many London critics. To an extent, this was also the case in Sydney, where the company has a 'huge following' after tours of *The Playboy of the Western World* and *At the Black Pig's Dyke*.^{xxiii} Put simply, *The Leenane Trilogy* would probably not have appeared in London, New York, and Australia if Druid had not already developed relationships with producers and audiences in those places. The assertion that McDonagh's work was received at 'face value' by international audiences thus overlooks the fact that Druid toured McDonagh with a reputation behind them, and put a great deal of energy into maintaining the integrity of that reputation. The company ensured that the premiere of the play in each of the major Anglophone theatrical centres was directed by Garry Hynes, illustrating its commitment to determining the reception of McDonagh's work. The evidence available in Ireland suggests that these efforts were for the most part successful, and that perhaps more can be learnt about the plays by considering their reception in terms of the local issues – social, cultural, or political – in each location on the tour.

3

Although Druid presented almost identical versions of the plays in London, Sydney and New York, there were substantial differences in the responses of audiences in each place.

The reception of McDonagh in London may, for example, be considered in terms of the role of celebrity in British culture. The importance of celebrity to the British theatre intensified considerably during the 1990s: increasing numbers of Hollywood stars appeared in the West End, and writers who had become well-known in other media, such as Irvine Welsh, Ben Elton and, notoriously, Jeffrey Archer, had plays produced on the strength of their reputations. Writers also achieved success by writing *about* celebrities. Terry Johnson's *Cleo, Camping, Emmanuelle and Dick* (1998), which presented Barbara Windsor, Sid James and Kenneth Williams, was very successful. Similarly, *The Play Wot I Wrote* (2001) by Sean Foley and Hamish McColl is not only about Morecambe and Wise, but also starred a different celebrity on each night of its performance, featuring guest appearances from Ralph Fiennes, Kylie Minogue, David Beckham, and numerous others during its London run.

This fascination with celebrity has influenced the media's relationship with many playwrights, notably Martin McDonagh and Sarah Kane. McDonagh, in the words of Fintan O'Toole, became famous not for his writing, but for 'telling Sean Connery to fuck off'.^{xxiv} Similarly, only three years after her debut, Sarah Kane was forced to produce *Cleansed* under the pseudonym 'Marie Kelvedon', which was, according to David Grieg:

partly a private joke and partly a serious attempt to allow her work to escape, briefly, from the shadow of being [written by] 'Sarah Kane, the controversial author of *Blasted*'.^{xxv}

Another important feature of McDonagh's reception in England is the way in which he exposed anxieties about Ireland's role in British society in the 1990s. At the start of that decade, Anglo-Irish relations were dominated by the Troubles; by the turn of the century they were dominated by the influx of Irish investment capital into British commercial property. McDonagh's work plays provocatively with the confusion generated by this transformation. His plays are accused of presenting the stereotypical Irish male as an inexplicably violent rural caveman, feeding into stereotypes associated with the Irish during the IRA's bombing campaign in England. Yet McDonagh's public persona plays against a new Irish stereotype: the cosmopolitan *nouveau riche* Anglo-Irishman. Particularly in the case of *The Beauty Queen, The Trilogy* highlights the existence of anti-Irish prejudice in Britain. McDonagh states that many aspects of Mag's description of her time in London

came from stories my mum told me – she worked in similar jobs when she first came over from Ireland. And, like the play, she had to have a black woman explain what those abusive words meant.^{xxxvi}

It appears then that McDonagh's consideration of the role of the Irish in Britain confused many, especially when they realized that the playwright did not conform to received images of Irishness.

The plays reached Australia at a time when that country was undergoing a growth in cultural self-confidence. Like Ireland, Australia was becoming more aware of itself as occupying a role on the global stage, and culture was an important element of its attempt to come to terms with this development. Hence, media coverage, both of the original 1998 Druid production and the 1999 touring Sydney Theatre Company production directed by Garry Hynes, focussed more on what the plays might be saying to Australia, than on what they might be saying about Ireland. The Irish

origin and setting of the plays was certainly considered: when the question of authenticity arose, it was treated as if the reader would understand that the plays are self-evidently inauthentic. One report for the visit of the touring production to Canberra encapsulates this well, telling readers that 'of course it's not an Ireland that exists any longer', and that 'one might argue that *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* is actually a post-modern play written about the stage Irish more than the real people'.^{xxvii} Considerably more attention was paid to McDonagh's use of Australian soap opera. Indeed, in the 1999 tour of *Beauty Queen*, the lead role was given to Maggie Kirkpatrick, one of the stars of *Prisoner*, *Cell Block H*, implying that Australian producers wanted to highlight this aspect of the play. So while Irish critics worried about Australians taking McDonagh literally, in Australia, his plays appear to have become part of that country's debate about how its own cultural exports play out for overseas audiences.

Similarly, in New York, both *The Beauty Queen* and *The Lonesome West* were received in the context of American preoccupations. Whereas in Britain, McDonagh was presented as the 'bad boy' of British theatre, American journalists celebrated him as an example of the American 'rags to riches' narrative. A major news report broadcast on NBC focused on his overnight success, concluding with the message that 'McDonagh's take is five percent of the box office. So, with a good five-week run, he could leave America with \$100,000 in his pocket' (the play, it should be noted, ran for almost a year).^{xxviii} Similarly, *Beauty Queen* was seen as one of a number of foreign imports needed to shake Broadway out of a perceived lethargy. 'Sometimes you don't even know what you've been craving until the real thing comes along', wrote Ben Brantley in the *New York Times*, who thought that watching *The Beauty Queen* was 'like sitting down to a square meal after a long diet of salads and hors d'oeuvres'.^{xxix} This might be some

kind of subliminal evocation of the impact of the Irish Famine on American life, but Brantley's explicit statement is that the function of the play is not to represent Ireland, but to transform American drama. *The Lonesome West* was also received in terms of American society: because it opened soon after 1999 high-school shootings in Colorado, it became part of the debate about the relationships between violence and art in America, with Garry Hynes being called upon for her opinion on American gun-control in pre-publicity for the show.^{xxx}

There is little evidence that audiences took either of the Druid productions on Broadway at 'face value'. Maeliosa Stafford, who played Coleman in *The Lonesome West* on Broadway, stated that 'New York audiences "get" everything, they are with us, they understand Martin's dark humor.'^{xxxi} Dawn Bradfield, who played Girleen in the same production, agreed, stating that she was surprised most by the conservatism of American audiences: 'there was a huge reaction to the bad language and to taking the piss out of the priest'.^{xxxii}

So, just as Irish people's engagement with an American film in *The Cripple of Inishmaan* prompts the observation that, 'Ireland mustn't be such a bad place so if sharks want to come to Ireland', the performances of McDonagh's play in Britain, America and Australia were used to initiate discussions about localized concerns.^{xxxiii} The evidence available in Ireland – while no substitute for actual attendance at the plays – suggests that although some audiences do take the plays as literal representations of Irish life, it is possible to consider McDonagh's international reception from many perspectives.

In 1999, the rights were released to *The Leenane Trilogy*, after which some versions of the plays were produced independently of Druid, and in ways that might be troubling for an Irish audience. For example,

when Bernard Bloch directed and translated *The Lonesome West* as *L'Ouest Solitaire* at the 2002 Avignon Festival, he stated that

the directorial approach will be to look at the fratricidal combat of the Connor brothers as a conflict reminiscent of the Northern conflict between Protestants and Catholics'.^{xxxiv}

Similarly, one of the earliest regional US productions of *The Beauty Queen* took place in 1999 in Virginia, where the director declared outright that the play is 'a true representation of Ireland, particularly in the north'.^{xxxv} This suggestion that the senseless violence portrayed onstage might serve as a direct analogy for political violence in Northern Ireland might worry some Irish audiences. But it is worth observing that many theatre companies superficially invoke military conflicts in productions of everything from Sophocles to Shakespeare as a way of creating the appearance of relevance and depth, frequently where none exists.

There are, however, many examples of positive treatments of the plays. In November 1998, a *Los Angeles Times* critic, reviewing an American production of *The Cripple of Inishmaan* at the Geffen playhouse, stated that McDonagh's negative representation of the Irish arose from his being a Londoner. This gave rise to a well-informed debate in the letters page of that newspaper about the Irish elements of the play.^{xxxvi} In the same year, the Court Theatre of Christchurch, New Zealand, also produced *Inishmaan*, accompanying their production with a programme that included background information about McDonagh, the Aran Islands, Robert O'Flaherty [Robert Flaherty] [director of *Man of Aran*], and many other aspects of the play. It also produced an educational resource kit for students, which included an interesting 'before and after' exercise. Student audiences were asked before the show to write down three stereotypes commonly associated with the Irish; they then had to consult their list at when the play had

finished, and discuss how McDonagh had undermined their preconceptions. Drawing attention to the difference between the world that 'we live in' and the 'world [that] is imagined by others', the booklet asked its audience to consider how the play might apply to New Zealand.^{xxxvii}

The diversity of these responses is important: the same play means different things, to different people, at different times. To suggest therefore that people abroad took the plays at 'face value' is a disservice to the sophistication of audiences and theatre practitioners throughout the world. It also ignores the efforts made by Druid to ensure that the plays were received appropriately, and it ignores the success of those efforts. How then can the persistence of the view that McDonagh's reception abroad is objectionable be explained?

4

Irish awareness of the international reception of McDonagh is derived by reports appearing in the news, rather than the arts, sections of Irish and British newspapers. The opening of *The Beauty Queen* on Broadway prompted the *Sunday Times* to declare that Druid's achievement proved that it was 'hip to be Hibernian'.^{xxxviii} The *Irish Times* also emphasized the value of the play, not by discussing its subject matter but by printing comments in praise of Druid from Mick Lally and Jennifer Aniston (an interesting blend of *Glenroe* and *Friends* that interestingly resonates with McDonagh's own mix of tradition and post modernity).^{xxxix} [The *Irish Times* also emphasized the value of the play, not by discussing its subject matter but by printing comments in praise of Druid from Mick Lally and Jennifer Aniston.^{xl} This of course was an interesting blend of *Glenroe* and *Friends* that resonates with McDonagh's own mix of tradition and post modernity.] And a month later, that newspaper also ran an article about how Druid's achievement showed that

is was 'hip to be Irish'.^{xli} A similar process was under way in the British media, where the success of McDonagh's play was mentioned in articles with headlines such as 'Broadway bows to Brits'.^{xlii} Throughout the subsequent coverage in both countries' media of the play's success at the 1998 Tony Awards, there was genuine pleasure at Garry Hynes's achievement in becoming the first woman to win a Tony Award for best director. Yet these reports never involved substantial discussion of the theatrical elements of Druid's work, or the relationship of that work to contemporary Irish and British society. Instead the plays' success was invoked in ways that can only be called nationalistic. This is unfortunate, since the work of Druid can in no way be considered consistent with the notion that it might be hip to be Hibernian, or that Britannia might be cool.

One consequence of this is that our understanding of McDonagh's work has been conditioned by journalism that was written by people who often [in some cases] had no knowledge of theatre, leading to reporting that is often inaccurate, superficial, and sensationalistic. *Time* magazine reported that the performance in London's West End of *The Leenane Trilogy* and *The Cripple of Inishmaan* made McDonagh 'the only writer this season, apart from Shakespeare, to have four plays running concurrently in London'.^{xliii} This report transformed quickly into the wild assertion that McDonagh was the first playwright *since* Shakespeare to have four plays running in London.^{xliv} In his early interviews, McDonagh stated that he had not seen many plays, but talked intelligently about Joe Orton and Synge, and explained that his use of an Irish idiom was an attempt to escape the influence of Pinter and Mamet.^{xlv} Such references dropped out of later interviews, in which McDonagh was portrayed as 'an upcoming enigmatic pop-star', an iconoclast, out to puncture the complacent self-regard of London's

theatre elite.^{xlvi} Confronted with a mass of contradictory and self-evidently absurd information, some commentators began to think that the writer himself might be a fraud.^{xlvii}

A second consequence of this focus on the international reception of McDonagh is that Druid's rural and provincial tours of the plays have been ignored. Serious touring in rural Ireland has long been central to Druid, and its Irish tours are a significant aspect of *The Leenane Trilogy's* production history. Of the thirty-one Irish venues where the plays were produced, only six could be described as urban: the remaining twenty-five included provincial and rural locations throughout Ireland, north and south. Druid's Irish tours were not separate from the international performances. A week before *The Beauty Queen* transferred to the West End, it played in Leenane itself. Two months before *The Lonesome West* opened on Broadway, Druid cast Pat Shortt and Jon Kenny of the comedy-duo D'Unbelievables in the same play, and brought them on an eleven-venue Irish tour.

This complicates the suggestion that McDonagh is writing for the urban middle class. It may well be true that urban audiences throughout Ireland reacted complacently to his plays, but it is troubling and ironic that those audiences' reactions have been considered sufficient to define the reception of the plays for Ireland in its entirety. The omission of rural and provincial Ireland from discourse about the plays means that our understanding of McDonagh's reception in Ireland is incomplete and imbalanced. That omission fails to take account of the fact that Druid's touring policy asserts the *value* of provincial and rural Ireland. Druid made this assertion by bringing the plays to provincial and rural venues; and by bypassing the capital, directly representing Ireland on the international stage. Druid's tours of *The Trilogy* should therefore be seen as part of the company's history of challenging Dublin's claim to

be a cultural centre that could define Galway as peripheral.

5

Why has the role of Druid Theatre in Martin McDonagh's career been 'airbrushed' away? In part, this erasure occurs because criticism of McDonagh's work operates within a globalized framework, in which information that is accessible across national boundaries will, understandably, tend to be favoured over subjective accounts of individual performances. Hence, there has been a tendency within discussions of McDonagh to proceed directly from textual evidence to inference about audience response, with journalism used as a surrogate for actual attendance at performances. While there is much value in such an approach, a number of [three] problems arise from it.

First, theatre fundamentally involves the subjective experience of individual performances: audiences do not receive a text that can be reduced to essential categories of meaning but experience performances within contexts that generate a nexus of meanings. Martin McDonagh's texts are closed objects, which may be subjected to literary analysis, but Druid's five-year tour of *The Trilogy* was an evolving process that generated a variety of responses. As is particularly notable in the contrast between audience reactions to *Beauty Queen* in Leenane and the Aran Islands, those responses are often not just various but divergent. The issue that arises here is that in establishing the relationship of an Irish play to Irish society, performances are more relevant than play texts. Druid's tours of Ireland disrupt the notion that it is possible to speak of a homogenous 'Irish' response to McDonagh, revealing instead that there are a multiplicity of responses, all of them equally valuable.

The second problem that arises is how Irish critics might understand the global reception of McDonagh's

work. Critical responses to McDonagh appear to be grounded in the assumption that the viability of Irish culture should be determined by an analysis of its performance overseas. Irish critics often worry about what the plays might mean for audiences on Broadway, while ignoring the meaning of the plays for audiences in Leenane itself. Brian Friel may have been correct when he suggested that Irish drama exists to be overheard abroad; but it is also the case that Irish audiences and critics are now displaying the self-consciousness of people who believe that others are listening to them. Irish criticism is thus in danger of engaging with other cultures only insofar as they confirm our sense of who we think we are, while also overlooking evidence within our own borders.

A third problem is the issue of methodology. How may a theatre criticism that styles itself as national (as Irish criticism currently does) meaningfully address the work of writers such as McDonagh, whose reputation and reception are strongly predetermined by both global and local factors? Furthermore, how can such a criticism address the fact that much of the material used in studying such writers – journalism, marketing, programme notes – now operates within an internationalized media that sometimes involves the diffusion of inaccurate information? It has been shown above that much of what we think we know about McDonagh has been derived from news stories that involve the promotion of celebrity or nationalism, rather than accuracy. This essay has attempted to come to terms with this situation, by showing how textual analysis, the use of secondary sources, and the material evidence derived from attendance at productions and archival material may be combined. What arises from this discussion is not a homogenous interpretation of McDonagh's work, but rather an exploration of the variety of subjective, localized responses generated by his writings and their

production. The variation between understandings of McDonagh's script and the various productions of *The Trilogy* reveals the need to move beyond existing categories of criticism. By analysing these productions in their social context, I sought to provide a model for what such a criticism might entail: textual analysis, attendance at performances, archival work, reception analysis, social contextualization, and discussion with practitioners. This implies that globalization is not simply transforming the manner in which Irish theatre is organized – by making international touring easier, for example – but that it also affects the manner in which theatre must be received and studied.

This gives rise to two suggestions. The first is that Irish criticism must engage with international responses to Irish work, looking both inwards and outwards, to bring local knowledge into a global conversation [cut]. The second arises from the fact that, although there is evidence that many productions of Martin McDonagh rely upon and reinforce internationalized stereotypes about Irishness, there is also evidence that many productions are using those stereotypes creatively, both in Ireland and elsewhere. Just as Irish critics should condemn stereotypical representations of Irishness on the global stage, we must also be alert to the danger of essentializing the responses of non-Irish audiences.

An awareness of the relationship between Druid and McDonagh is therefore essential. Such an awareness offers a better understanding of McDonagh's writing, complicating the criticisms most frequently directed against him. Additionally, such an awareness makes it difficult to accept uncritically the many assumptions that persist about McDonagh's career, and his place in Irish theatre. The relationship between Druid Theatre and McDonagh thus reveals the benefits of looking both outwards *and* inwards, bringing local knowledge into a global conversation about an important Irish dramatist.

First Productions

Martin McDonagh, *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*.

Directed by Garry Hynes, Town Hall Theatre, Galway, 1 February 1996.

Martin McDonagh, *A Skull in Connemara*.

Directed by Garry Hynes, Town Hall Theatre, Galway, 3 June 1997.

Martin McDonagh, *The Lonesome West*.

Directed by Garry Hynes, Town Hall Theatre, Galway, 10 June 1997.

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- ⁱ I wish to acknowledge the assistance of the Irish Research Council for the Humanities and Social Sciences, which provided funding in support of the work from which this paper derives.
- ⁱⁱ Interestingly, more attention has been given to the Royal Court than to Druid in considerations of McDonagh's career to date: see Aleks Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre* (London: Faber and Faber, 2001), and Dominic Dromgoole, *The Full Room* (London: Methuen, 2000).
- ⁱⁱⁱ This phrase has been used throughout Druid's history to describe its pioneering tours of rural Ireland, especially during its first twenty years of operation. cf. Jerome Hynes (ed), *Druid: The First Ten Years* (Galway: Druid Performing Arts and the Galway Arts Festival, 1985).
- ^{iv} Louise Donlon, 'Waiting for Druid', *Irish Times*, 16 May 1997, p.13.
- ^v Victor Merriman, 'Settling for More: Excess and Success in Contemporary Irish Drama' in Dermot Bolger (ed.), *Druids, Dudes and Beauty Queens: The Changing Face of Irish Theatre* (Dublin: New Island, 2001), pp.55–71
- ^{vi} Karen Fricker, 'Ireland sees power of "Beauty"', *Variety*, 21–27 August 2000, p.27.
- ^{vii} Ian Kilroy, 'Artscape', *Irish Times*, 6 July 2002, Weekend section, p.5.
- ^{viii} Hynes was artistic director at the Abbey from 1991–1993, and worked with Druid from 1975–1990, and from 1994 to the present.
- ^{ix} Jack Bradley, 'Making Playwrights', in the programme for *The Cripple of Inishmaan* (London: Royal National Theatre, 1996).
- ^x Michael Ross, 'Hynes Means Business', *Sunday Times*, 18 May 2003, Culture section, p.10.
- ^{xi} Michael Ross, 'Hynes Means Business', *Sunday Times*, 18 May 2003, Culture section, p. 10.
- ^{xii} Fintan O'Toole, 'Nowhere Man', *Irish Times*, 26 April 1997, Weekend section, p.1.
- ^{xiii} Paddy Woodworth, 'Druid – Celebrating in the Present Tense', *Irish Times*, 24 January 1996, p.10.
- ^{xiv} Fintan O'Toole, 'Murderous Laughter', *Irish Times*, 24 June 1997, p.12.
- ^{xv} Michael Ross, 'Bad Boy Back on the Block', *Sunday Times*, 12 July 1998.
- ^{xvi} Martin McDonagh, *Plays 1* [*Plays 1*] (London: Methuen, 1999), pp.4–5.
- ^{xvii} Uinsionn Mac Dubhghaill, 'Drama Sails to Seven Islands', *Irish Times*, 27 November 1996, p.12
- ^{xviii} Joyce McMillan, 'The Life and Soul', *Herald* (Glasgow), 28 November 1997, p.21.
- ^{xix} McDonagh, *Plays 1*, p.89.
- ^{xx} O'Toole, 'Murderous Laughter', p.12.
- ^{xxi} Mac Dubhghaill, 'Drama sails', p.12
- ^{xxii} These were Hynes's own plays, *Island Protected by a Bridge of Glass* and *The Pursuit of Pleasure*, and *Bar and Ger* and *A Galway Girl* by Geraldine Aron. See Jerome Hynes, *Druid – The First Ten Years*, pp.25-27.
- ^{xxiii} Victoria White, 'First Bite at the Big Apple', *Irish Times*, 18 September 1997, p.12.
- ^{xxiv} Fintan O'Toole, 'Martin McDonagh is Famous...' *Guardian*, 2 December 1996, p.11.
- ^{xxv} David Grieg, 'Introduction' to Sarah Kane, *Complete Plays* (London: Methuen, 2001), p.xiii.
- ^{xxvi} Liz Hoggard, 'Playboy of the West End World', *Independent*, 15 June 2002, pp.10–13.
- ^{xxvii} Jeremy Eccles 'Freak Redefines Beauty', *Canberra Times*, 12 August 2000, Section A, p.12.
- ^{xxviii} NBC News Transcripts, 'Playwright Martin McDonagh Takes Broadway By Storm', Today Show, 16 April 1998.
- ^{xxix} Ben Brantley, 'A Gasp for Breath Inside an Airless Life', *New York Times*, 27 February 1998, Section E, Part 1, p.1.
- ^{xxx} Philip Hopkin, 'The Queen of Broadway is Back!', *Irish Voice*, 4 May 1999, p.17.
- ^{xxxi} Diana Barth, 'Maeliosa's Malevolent Turn', *Irish Voice*, 11 May 1999, p.26.
- ^{xxxii} Michael Ross, 'Dawn Bradfield is Rising Once Again As The Star of Jane Eyre', *Sunday Times*, 23 November 2003, Culture section, p.16.

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- xxxiii Martin McDonagh, *The Cripple of Inishmaan* (London, Methuen, 1997), p.55.
- xxxiv Quoted by Kilroy, 'Artscape', p.5.
- xxxv Sue Van Hecke, 'Irish Actors Lend Authenticity, Insight To "Lonesome West"', *Virginian-Pilot*, 20 January 2000, p.W6.
- xxxvi LA Times, 'Theatergoers Come To The Defense Of "Cripple Of Inishmaan"', *Los Angeles Times*, 7 November 1998, Calendar, Part F, p.4.
- xxxvii Court Theatre website
<http://www.courttheatre.org.nz/handlers/getfile.cfm/4,14,63,37,html>, accessed 1 September 2003.
- xxxviii Michael Ross, Mick Heaney, Gerry McCarthy, Marian Lovett, and Brian Boyd, 'Be Here Now', *Sunday Times*, 10 May 1998. p.2.
- xxxix Helena Mulkerns, 'Broadway Toasts McDonagh's Play', *Irish Times*, 25 April 1998, p 3.
- xl Helena Mulkerns, 'Broadway Toasts McDonagh's Play', *Irish Times*, 25 April 1998, p 3.
- xli 'It's Hip to be Irish', *Irish Times*, 20 June 1998, Weekend section, p.1.
- xlii Matt Wolf, 'Broadway bows to Brits', *Guardian*, 27 May 1998, p.14.
- xliii Mimi Kramer, 'Three for the Show', *Time*, 4 August 1997, p.71.
- xliv Those who made the claim include: Diana Barth, 'Man of Aran', *Irish America*, 28 February 1998, p.55; Sean O'Hagan, 'The Wild West', *Guardian*, 24 March 2001, Weekend section, p.24. At various times, both Noel Coward and Dion Boucicault had five plays running simultaneously in London, while W. Somerset Maugham had four. Undoubtedly, many other examples exist.
- xlvi O'Toole, "Nowhere Man".
- xlvii Karen Vandavelde, 'The Gothic Soap of Martin McDonagh' in Eamonn Jordan (ed.), *Theatre Stuff: Critical Essays in Contemporary Irish Theatre* (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2000), p.292.
- xlviii See, for one example, Mary Luckhurst, 'Martin McDonagh's Lieutenant of Inishmore: Selling (-Out) to the English', *Contemporary Theatre Review*, Volume 14, Number 4 (November 2004), pp.34 – 41.