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Tackling A Live Subject

Irish Theatre Magazine, issue 11, summer 2002.

The ramifications of the controversy over Sebastian Barry's latest play echo well beyond the "Hinterland", argues Patrick Lonergan.

What, exactly, is so bad about *Hinterland*? Using aspects of the career of Charles Haughey, the play explores Sebastian Barry's well-known preoccupations with fatherhood, power, memory, and dislocation. Early press responses focussed only on the play's treatment of Haughey, however, and reports that his solicitors were examining Barry's script created the public belief that *Hinterland* was "about" the former Taoiseach in a biographical sense. That perception proved difficult to dispel.

The controversy took off three days after the play's 6 February premiere, when it was subjected to a stunningly vituperative attack by *Irish Times* Literary Correspondent Eileen Battersby, who called it "a vulgar, tacky travesty" and a "naïve undergraduate revue treatment" of a complex figure; its satire was "moronic," claimed Battersby, and its author "cowardly." The notion that the play was not just controversial but badly written was also given airing on the 18 February Rattlebag when, in an interview with Ben Barnes, presenter Myles Dungan repeatedly emphasised the Abbey's "right to fail" and fretted about *Hinterland* being sent abroad as a bad ambassador for Irish drama.

Barnes moved quickly to defend the play and the Abbey's duty to produce it. Highlighting the irony of the media complaining about an invasion of Haughey's privacy, he pointed out that, although the Abbey is often criticised for being "irrelevant as far as contemporary culture is concerned", *Hinterland* showed that it was grappling "with contemporary social and political mores". People are entitled to form opinions, Barnes argued, but "it is not acceptable to us that journalists who know little or nothing about the theatre and rarely, if ever, come are queuing up to tell us how bad a play *Hinterland* is." Apparently unaware of the further irony in doing so, the press rushed to report Barnes's comments, with the *Irish Independent* giving them front-page coverage. Most damagingly, on 24 February – the day after *Hinterland* concluded its Dublin run – *The Sunday Times* published two articles critical of both Barnes and the Abbey, which included a claim by Michael Ross that the theatre has "lost its sense of purpose" and that its problems are caused by "a private fiefdom directed by a couple of stubborn personalities".

The Abbey has clearly been damaged by this controversy. Following the *Barbaric Comedies* debacle in 2000 and the dreadful mishandling of the theatre's proposed redevelopment, Barnes was justified in saying on Rattlebag that the reputation he brought to the Abbey for having a "safe pair of hands" must now surely be gone. This is unfortunate: under Barnes, the Abbey has achieved many successes – notably its Tom Murphy season – while also significantly improving its administrative structures. The failure of the Abbey to publicise these successes is worrying. There may be no such thing as bad publicity, but a theatre that needs to galvanise public support to resolve its difficulties with funding and redevelopment would benefit much more from praise than controversy.

And the negative effects of the *Hinterland* fracas ripple far beyond Abbey Street. Last year, Barry confessed to apprehension about *Hinterland*'s Dublin opening. Following the poor reception of his last Dublin premiere, *The One True History of Lizzie Finn*, Barry felt that, "There are certain towns I don't want to go back to unprotected, and Dublin is one of them." Barry was approaching the Abbey "with infinite caution", he said, because of "a sense that it's only 10% an arena for theatre and 90% it has other concerns".

Barry's difficulty with producing work in Dublin is shared by many other Irish writers – notably Conor McPherson, who stated recently that he intends to premiere his plays in London because "he won't put up with the level of criticism here". Having his first Dublin premiere in a decade labelled "moronic" is unlikely to convince Barry – and other writers like McPherson – that success is possible on this side of the Irish Sea. The *Hinterland* controversy may have damaged the Abbey, but it is also one further example of how the poor standard of theatre criticism in Ireland is undermining the development of new writing.

The literary qualities of *Hinterland* deserved more attention – and so did its politics. At a post-show discussion at the Abbey, director Max Stafford-Clark – famous for his controversial work with writers like Mark Ravenhill and Andrea Dunbar – rejected the criticism of *Hinterland*, stating that its strengths will be evident in "five or ten or twenty years". While there is some truth in such statements, the need for the play's defenders to talk down its politics has stripped *Hinterland* of much of its immediacy. As Barry implied when he stated that "my horrible thesis is that [politicians like Haughey] are part of us", *Hinterland* wants to make audiences uncomfortable *now*. Irish audiences deserved to have this discomfort articulated and resolved.

With Marina Carr's *Ariel* – about a murderous midlands politician – due to premiere at the Abbey in October, and as John Breen prepares his new play *Charlie* for a September tour, it looks like people will be talking about *Hinterland* for some time to come. We can only wait for the in-depth and open-minded analysis – terribly lacking in its consideration by Irish critics – that *Hinterland* so richly deserves.

