



Provided by the author(s) and NUI Galway in accordance with publisher policies. Please cite the published version when available.

Title	The theatre of Marie Jones: telling stories from the ground up
Author(s)	Lonergan, Patrick
Publication Date	2016-11-11
Publication Information	Lonergan, Patrick. (2016). The theatre of Marie Jones: telling stories from the ground up. <i>Studies in Theatre and Performance</i> , 1-2. doi: 10.1080/14682761.2016.1254414
Publisher	Taylor & Francis
Link to publisher's version	http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14682761.2016.1254414
Item record	http://hdl.handle.net/10379/6661
DOI	http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14682761.2016.1254414

Downloaded 2019-02-24T03:45:35Z

Some rights reserved. For more information, please see the item record link above.



The Theatre of Marine Jones: Telling Stories from the Ground Up
Edited by Eugene McNulty and Tom Maguire
Carysfort Press, 2015.

It's sometimes asserted that Irish women writers are doubly marginalised: first by their nationality and then by their gender. If that statement is true, we might add to it that Marie Jones has been marginalised a third time, in that much of her work uses popular forms such as musical hall, comedy and popular music – styles of performance which have gained little attention to date within Irish theatre studies. She has been neglected for other reasons too: her focus on working class characters and preoccupations, her interest in collaboration, and her exploration of Ulster protestant experiences and cultures, as well as Irish nationalism. Yes, her worldwide hit *Stones in his Pockets* has been written about frequently, if not always admiringly – and yes, Jones's work has appeared occasionally in studies of theatre from Northern Ireland, notably Imelda Foley's *Girls in the Big Picture* (2003). But as this collection demonstrates unambiguously, there is much more to be said about her plays, both individually and collectively.

The book features nine essays, organised in broad chronological order. They start with Jones's work with the feminist collective Charabanc, move to the establishment (and demise) of her company Dubbeljoint, and conclude with explorations of her major successes such as *Stones in His Pockets*, *Women on the Verge of H.R.T.* and *A Night in November*. The editors have also gathered interviews with key practitioners and collaborators: the scholar and director David Grant, Charabanc co-founder Brenda Winter, playwright Tim Loane, and the director Paula McFettridge. It's not a criticism of the collection to state that the essays succeed best as introductions to Jones's work: they demonstrate that it merits attention and they point out areas for future exploration. And the interviews offer insights that will provoke and stimulate practitioners who are contemplating re-staging some of these works. So the sense here is that this is the beginning of a critical appraisal of Jones's *oeuvre* – one that should encourage new research and future performances.

For that reason, the book's key contribution might be its introduction, which effectively lays out the contours of Jones's career, while also identifying the three fundamental characteristics of her work: "an openness to collaboration with others... engagement with popular culture ... and an unerring sense of what works on stage" (5). What is admirable here is the editors' willingness to critique as well as champion the object of their study: they are frank in laying out the importance of Jones's writing and stagecraft, but equally frank in identifying what they perceive (fairly) as occasional flaws – ideological heavy-handedness or artistic misjudgements, for example.

Yet their selections also identify the critical lacunae that have led to Jones's work being ignored and underrated. For example, in addition to acting as co-editor, McNulty authors an essay that does the important work of highlighting key plays and practices from Charabanc, the collective of five Northern Irish actresses (Jones among them) that was founded in the early 1980s. However, he also

places Jones in the context of the critical reaction to John McGrath (a figure who appears in this book on many occasions). Jones and McGrath have similar working practices, comparable relationships with their audiences, and a shared interest in popular forms. That Jones has been neglected while McGrath is relatively celebrated allows for the identification of a blind-spot in Irish theatre criticism insofar as social class and popular theatre are concerned.

Other essays point out areas for reconsideration. Charlotte Headrick's essay on *Lay up Your Ends* does important work in tracking the reception history of that play – an approach that is enriched by a brief discussion of Headrick's own direction of its American premiere. By shifting the critical focus away from close reading and towards audiences and practitioners, Headrick offers a useful framework for the consideration of Jones's achievements more generally.

We also gain interesting insights from essays that provide broad surveys, such as Deirdre O'Leary's exploration of material culture and consumerism, Wei H. Kao's analysis of Jones's play in the context of the Northern Ireland Troubles, and Catherine Rees's exploration of gender. In a similar vein, Fiona Coffey's exploration of the theme of controversy in relation to Jones's plays with *Dubbeljoint* provides both depth of analysis and breadth of coverage, tackling (among other issues) the difficult topic of the nationalism of Jones's plays during this period.

The book is inevitably patchy in its coverage, and a mild criticism might be that there is too much overlapping discussion of some plays, especially *A Night in November*, while others go relatively under-explored. Such a problem is inevitable, however. Jones is a prolific author: the collection's appendix lists almost 40 plays that she has either authored, co-authored or collaboratively devised. Relatively few of these plays are in print, though some are available in Belfast's Linen Hall library. Clearly there is a need for a more detailed analysis of her work in its entirety: something that can only be achieved by a full-length monograph.

The remaining essays highlight the potential value of such a study, in that they demonstrate how a close examination of key plays can give rise to new insights. Shonagh Hill's essay on *Women on the Verge of H.R.T* is a particular highlight, viewing that play as offering a radical form of resistance to what Hill describes as neoliberal attempts to govern public expressions of female aging. This analysis is persuasive and allows for a re-reading of many plays by Jones – and other authors too.

Overall, this is a readable and stimulating collection that ought to resituate Jones in the Irish dramatic canon. It deserves to be read but, more importantly, it deserves to be emulated: it demonstrates that Irish theatre studies needs to dedicate new attention not only to Jones but also to popular theatre, matters of social class, and the politics and practices of theatrical collaboration.

Patrick Lonergan, National University of Ireland, Galway