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“Anything But Stand Still”: Billy Roche’s *On Such as We*

Patrick Lonergan¹

Like many of Billy Roche’s plays, *On Such As We* dramatizes a clash between two Irelands, one traditional and the other modern (or perhaps modernizing). That conflict is presented in terms of a dispute between the play’s protagonist Oweney (the owner of a Wexford barbershop) and a local businessman called P.J., who never appears onstage. Their antagonism is caused mainly by the decision of P.J.’s wife Maeve to begin an affair with Oweney; the play concerns her uncertainty about whether to remain with a husband she no longer loves, or instead to join Oweney for a more fulfilling yet less secure life. The presentation of that dilemma allows audiences to understand the conflict at the heart of the play between an authentic Irish past and a gaudy, materialistic future. Given that it received its premiere in 2001 – at the peak of the Celtic Tiger era – *On Such As We* can therefore be seen as both pertinent and prophetic.

The play can also be seen as a response to the problem of acceleration in contemporary culture – an issue that was receiving a great deal of attention in both popular and academic literature at the time of the play’s premiere. Those discussions were occasioned by a growing awareness that, in contemporary business, nothing lasts forever. Vinyl was replaced by compact discs, which are in turn being replaced by digital downloads; videotapes disappeared with the advent of the soon-to-be obsolete DVD; and perhaps, for reasons of environmental protection as well as fashion, the book may eventually be replaced by an electronic equivalent. “To avoid frustration”, notes Zygmunt Bauman, “one would do better to refrain from developing habits and attachments or entering into lasting commitments. The objects of desire are better enjoyed on the spot and then disposed of; markets see to it that they are made in such a way that both the gratification and the obsolescence occur in an instant” (*Individualized Society* 156). The increased commodification of culture, that is, results in a situation where the gap between consumption and desire has been reduced to almost nothing.

On Such As We appeared at a time when many critics and scholars were attempting to come to terms with the transformation of culture that had been occasioned by the combined impact of the mass media, digital culture, and globalization on our ability to receive and process information. In 2000, for example, James Gleik drew attention to the “acceleration of just about everything” in global culture, noting that many aspects of human life, from commerce to employment to culture, had accelerated considerably (116). That acceleration has resulted in a situation in which people now “multitask” cognitively, Gleik suggests: that is, they have become more used to performing a number of simple

tasks simultaneously rather than, as would have been the case in the past, devoting their attention to one specific complicated activity. Eleven years earlier, David Harvey had related multitasking to the impact of capitalism, which, he states, has been “characterized by continuous efforts to shorten turnover times, thereby speeding up social processes while reducing the time-horizons of meaningful decision-making” (229).

Both writers’ insights seem accurate if somewhat generalized. The public generally have shown an enthusiasm for devices that are designed to save them time or that allow them to perform multiple tasks simultaneously: microwave ovens, remote controls, and speed-dialling telephones are common examples of that phenomenon. Gleik in 2000 described how a manufacturer of portable CD players was offering users the option to play back their CDs with the gaps between songs removed, saving the user perhaps forty seconds when listening to a sixty-minute album. What is significant about this example, of course, is that it illustrates how the time we use to engage with culture has become more compressed. But it is also notable that Gleik’s example has itself become outdated in a very short period of time, since digital music players such as the Apple I-pod have largely supplanted portable CD players since the turn of the century.

For the present purposes, the most important form of acceleration occurred when capital’s focus moved from production to culture. The production of culture “has become integrated into commodity production generally,” notes Harvey (61), responding to Frederic Jameson. He continues:

The mobilization of fashion in mass (as opposed to elite) markets provided a means to accelerate the pace of consumption not only in clothing, ornament and decoration but also across a wide swathe of life-styles and recreational activities (leisure and sporting habits, pop music styles, video and children’s games, and the like). A second trend was a shift away from the consumption of goods and into the consumption of services – not only personal, business, educational, and health services, but also into entertainments, spectacles, happenings, and distractions. (285)

This alteration in the pacing of mass mediated entertainment was not imposed by an elite on an unsuspecting and helpless public, states Harvey. Rather, it was a reaction by those controlling the mass media to the exercise of viewers’ decision-making – principally by means of the remote control, according to Gleik. Robert Levine cites studies that show that the television no longer has viewers, but “grazers”: people who change channel up to twenty-two times in one minute, who “approach the airwaves as a vast smorgasbord, all of which must be sampled, no matter how meager the helpings” (Levine qtd. in Gleik 183). As a result of such “grazing”, audiences form superficial views of the programming, which

reduces their satisfaction levels and their attention span. Networks have responded by ensuring that the audiences will not be given any reason to hit the remote control button. Gleik mentions how a “new forward-looking unit within the NBC” has been taking “an electronic scalpel to the barely perceptible instants when a show fades to black and then re-materializes as a commercial. Over the course of a night, this can save the network as much as fifteen precious seconds, maybe even twenty”. However, writes Gleik, saving time is not the main point of this exercise. “The point,” he argues, “is that the viewer, at every instant, is in a hurry” (175).

Similarly, the growth of fast-cutting and double or triple cutting in cinema and television has meant that the speed with which people process images has increased. The Irish theatre producer Michael Colgan offers a useful example of the consequences of this transformation:

I recently went to see *L.A. Confidential* with my sixteen-year-old daughter and my mother. It starts with cross-cutting, cameras flashing, simultaneous sounds, half-sentences, over-lapping dialogue, American slang, characters talking in unison, everything topping everything. I was giving it my best just to hold on to it, not helped by my mother who was giving it her complete best but was hopelessly lost and my daughter said “What’s wrong?” I said, “Nana doesn’t understand it” and Sophie said “Doesn’t understand what?” She had time to talk to us and she understood every single thing that was going on. The speed, the density was perfect for her. Her world is an entirely different world from ours. It’s not a failure of the imagination to say it would be easier for my mother to sit through three and a half hours of *King Lear* than it would be for my daughter. My daughter would be bored by that. (qtd. in Chambers et. al. 83)

So, as Gleik and Harvey note, many people now perform their tasks in work differently, but the point here is that they also are watching theatre and other forms of culture differently too. Colgan’s example of a movie from 1997 illustrates that different generations have become used to receiving culture differently. His mother’s reception of culture involves concentrating on one specific point for a protracted period. His daughter performs a number of cognitive tasks simultaneously: she is multitasking, in other words. Colgan’s perceptual processes combine both extremes. He admires his mother’s concentration and his daughter’s versatility, but relates entirely to neither.

Colgan’s anecdote – together with the works of Bauman, Harvey, and Gleik – can be used to illustrate the way in which audiences’ responses to theatre are changing, both in Ireland and internationally.² It is almost certainly the case that the organization of time

within theatre is being altered. The traditional three or five act structure of plays has generally been replaced by loosely structured series of short scenes (often between twelve and fifteen per play) that tend not to last longer than fifteen minutes each. The risk of an audience losing concentration is minimized with action taking place quickly enough to be perceived, but too quickly to be analysed, and by the frequently gratuitous use of shocking images such as explicit on-stage sex or intensely cruel violence.³ Audiences have generally responded positively to the ways in which some new dramas attempt to provoke spontaneous emotional reactions from them rather than considered intellectual responses – since this is what they have become used to in almost every other visual medium, from cinema to television news reports.

If we now receive culture at a faster speed, it is also significant that the world has itself become a faster place. As Arjun Appadurai notes, “few persons in the world today do not have a friend, relative or co-worker who is not on the road to somewhere else or already coming back home, bearing stories and possibilities” (7). Irish dramatists are clearly no exception in this regard, as is evident from the success of such playwrights as Martin McDonagh and Conor McPherson in New York, of Enda Walsh in Germany, and of Frank McGuinness in London..

Rather like globalization itself, mobility is evident in ways that are difficult to measure. Freedom from restraint of one’s mobility is indispensable to the success of organizations and individuals in the globalized world; inhibition of mobility is increasingly been seen as an indicator of disadvantage. Zygmunt Bauman, who writes about these issues in great detail, suggests that, in our times: “Mobility climbs to the rank of the uppermost among the coveted values – and the freedom to move, perpetually a scarce and unequally distributed commodity, fast becomes the main stratifying factor of our late-modern or postmodern times” (*Globalization 2*). As Bauman points out, one of the most interesting analyses of the current importance of freedom of movement is Richard Sennett’s *The Corrosion of Character* (1999). Sennett illustrates the importance of mobility in our society by means of a perceptive comparison of Bill Gates – the most successful businessperson of the globalization era – with John D. Rockefeller. “Gates seems to be free of the obsession to hold on to things”, Sennett notes: “His products are furious in coming forth and as rapid in disappearing, whereas Rockefeller wanted to own oil rigs, buildings or machinery for the long term. Lack of long-term attachment seems to mark Gates’s attitude towards work” (61). Rockefeller’s power was signified by possessions occupying physical space, but Gates’s power is signified by his freedom from temporal attachment – by the fact that his success is built on the short lifespan of everything he produces. Gates therefore becomes a significant example of a value that has come to dominate all of our lives – the temporary nature of our relationships with everything that

we produce or consume. Sennett interestingly dubs Gates and those who share his values as examples of “Davos Man”, named after the Swiss resort at which, each year the World Economic Forum meets.⁴

In some senses, P.J. in *On Such As We* can be understood as an Irish example of Sennett’s “Davos man”. He is no Bill Gates, but he seems to be similarly desperate to remain free of temporal or physical attachment. He has taken control of many of the shops in Wexford, replacing their individualized shop fronts and products with material described by Oweney as “Neon, plastic, hollow crap” (94). P.J.’s interest is in the impermanent and the temporary. As Maeve explains:

He never stays put. When he’s here, he wants to be there. When he’s there he wants to be somewhere else. And he wants to knock everything down – the house where he was born in case somebody sees it, the old hotel for spite, the whole neighbourhood if necessary. Anything but stand still (33).

This description contrasts with Oweney, who is “old-fashioned and proud of it”. Whereas P.J.’s actions are a denial of his past, Oweney is committed to a linear sense of history, as represented by his barbershop: “My da had this place before me and his da before him and I’ll be straight about it – I’m hopin’ my young lad’ll take over after me” (32). This rootedness to one location is emphasized throughout the play, as for example when the audience is told that Oweney does not have a car (27).

As is appropriate for a play set in a barbershop, the dominant image in the text is of the mirror – with P.J. and Oweney functioning dramatically as reflections of each other. P.J. generates obedience from people by hiring thugs to commit acts of violence on his behalf, but Oweney inspires loyalty by means of kindness and generosity. Oweney’s sensitivity is evident when he tells Maeve that he will walk with her through a wood, but P.J. tears down an orchard at the back of his house in order to build a pool-room. Whereas P.J. does not want to have children, Oweney is on the other hand an apparently affectionate father to his own three children, as well as being a self-professed “mother” (6) to Laurence, one of the young men to whom he leases accommodation. When one of P.J.’s hired thugs is sent to prison for an assault which P.J. had ordered him to commit, he receives no support; in contrast, Oweney shows great concern for his young tenant Laurence when he is summonsed to court for the theft of Christmas trees.

There might appear to be a rather simplistic morality at work here, with the overwhelmingly negative characteristics of P.J. contrasting favourably with the essential decency of Oweney. It could be easy for an audience to think that since P.J. is overwhelmingly bad, so too is the modernity that he represents – and that, similarly, the

traditional values shown by Oweney are good simply because he himself seems a decent man. The fact that at the end of the play Oweney has taken P.J. “down a peg or two” (94), and that Oweney is still in business while P.J. has left town, might lead us to believe that Roche’s hero has been successful and that, by extension, we are to understand that traditionalism has triumphed over gaudy modernity. However, many aspects of the play combine to show that Roche is attempting [instead](#) to avoid creating such an impression.

Firstly, Oweney is not as admirable a person as we might assume, and Roche leaves many aspects of his character interestingly unresolved. Oweney is estranged from his wife, who forced him to leave their home. Furthermore, Oweney tells us that his “oldest girl Sharon is still not talkin’ to me. She turns away or crosses the street whenever she sees me comin’ now” (32). When asked by Maeve to explain this, Oweney can only say that [his wife](#) asked him to leave because of his “ramblin’ and gamblin’ and stayin’ out late at night” (32) – an evasive explanation that no member of the audience can be satisfied with ([though Maeve does not pry further, interestingly](#)). The cause of this separation is not explained. Instead, Roche hints at possible causes. Oweney certainly gambles, as we find out late in the play’s second act, when Oweney tells us that he is “after winnin’ a nice handy little two hundred smackers for meself anyway. . . . Twenty pound win double on Sergeant Major and Planxty Jones” (72). In other words, he bets against long odds. So this is one possible cause of his estrangement from his wife (as well as his lack of a car). It is therefore apparent that the audience is intended to regard Oweney as being in certain respects flawed.

Furthermore, the play concludes unsatisfactorily for many of the main characters. Maeve tells Oweney as consolation for her unwillingness to pursue a relationship with him that “the two of us will live forever” in memory (90), because Oweney showed her a reflection of herself that was “beautiful”. This vision is instantly subverted, however: Maeve then tells Oweney that she has decided to stay with her husband because she must make a success of her marriage: “at the end of the day Oweney it’s a *reflection* on me if I don’t” (91, emphasis added).

Similarly, the other couple in the play – Sally and Leonard – end the action very happily and romantically. Yet a great deal of what we see of Sally is contradicted by what the other characters say about her. There is a hint that she has had some form of relationship, albeit probably a brief one, with Eddie, one of the play’s least likeable characters. The play’s last action is of Leonard crossing himself before getting into bed – an image that contrasts with a statement that Ritchie makes about how Sally “caused quite a stir up there [at the convent where she lives] from time to time Sister Veronica had to put her on the pill and everything I believe” (19). Ritchie himself seems a very likeable old man, yet we are told that he treated his wife badly, and that she at one stage ran away

to Swansea in order to be free from him. From these and many other examples, it seems that Roche is trying to direct our attention to an undercurrent in his description of an apparently idyllic setting. This is play in which most of the characters appear to be very likeable – but much of what is reported about them shows that they are not just performing to the audience, but to each other as well.

Another significant example of this tension between appearance and reality is the play's presentation of popular culture. Although Oweney and some of the other characters are trying to resist the forces of modernization, he – and everyone else in the play – is highly literate in popular culture, albeit in its [older](#) manifestations. While Oweney is able to recount to Maeve the story of the 'Swan Lady' from Wexford (29) and Sally thinks that Matt's portrait of Laurence makes him look like "Labhraic Loinseach" (61), the majority of references in the play are to popular culture. The play is filled with a variety of popular songs, all of which are American or English, most of them originating in the 1950s and 1960s. We also have references to American television programmes such as *Mister Ed* (about a talking horse) or to international events such as the sinking of the Titanic, or such global personalities as Che Guevara.

Furthermore, the play is clearly based on the Western genre of cinema, which, as Luke Gibbons has shown, has played an important role in the production of Irish culture. In a public interview at the Peacock Theatre in 2001, the play's director Wilson Milam said that although Roche had never confirmed that he had intended to structure the play like a Western, Milam's own view was that the play certainly resembled one – *Shane* (1953) in particular, he thought. The play certainly uses many aspects of that genre: there is the presentation of Wexford as a small, self-contained unit being threatened by external forces, and there is also the showdown on the main street at the conclusion of the play. Furthermore, *On Such As We* is filled with references to the Western genre, as for example when Laurence recounts a scene at the courthouse on Christmas Eve:

It was like the Wild West up there at one stage. Hank was up for breakin' your man's nose, there was another lad up for hittin' a fella in the forehead with a hatchet and Malachy Morris was charged with knockin' off a horse and cart. (68)

All of Roche's plays are nostalgic – "old fashioned and proud of it", like Oweney – but in *On Such As We*, that nostalgia is consistently destabilized. The sentimental portrayal of Oweney, Roche's use of [old-fashioned](#) music, and his use of the Western plot structure are all intended to celebrate the recent past. On the surface, Roche's play appears to be a critique of the attack by modernity on tradition. Yet it is also a celebration of certain forms of mass mediated popular culture.

Interestingly, however, if Roche's use of these forms is in fact a celebration of late modernity, the directorial style employed by Milam was in many ways a celebration of mobility, being like P.J., "afraid to stand still". Although written in two acts, the play combines a number of run-together scenes that take place over the course of two weeks. In its 2001 Peacock production, the action occurred, often simultaneously, in three performance spaces – so that when a character left one room, his or her instantaneous appearance into another room signalled a chronological shift of hours, days – even weeks. In the course of a play lasting less than two hours, the audience was therefore asked to keep up with sudden chronological shifts forward in time on almost thirty occasions – making the pace of the play remarkably fast, and ensuring that audiences' attention would never be allowed to waver. The audience, that is, was being asked to multitask cognitively – we were, like PJ, constantly in a state of being hurried – and the directorial approach was clearly an attempt to bring to the theatre the techniques of fast-cutting that had become more popular in cinema. In some ways, then, the directorial approach seemed to celebrate speed, mobility, acceleration – and thus to contradict (or at least contrast with) the themes of the play.

The marketing of the play could also be regarded as a celebration of mobility. Although the play can be seen as many things – new work from one of Ireland's leading playwrights, a "Christmas" play, a love story – the Abbey simply used a portrait of Brendan Gleeson (shown below) to market the play. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, Gleeson occupied an important role in the Irish theatre, with his brilliant performance as Fluther Good in the Abbey's 1991 production of *The Plough and the Stars* a highlight of a career that also involved playwrighting: Passion Machine produced his work in 1987 (*The Birdtable*) and 1994 (*The Last Potato*). But the Abbey's use of Gleeson's portrait was due mainly to the fact that he had acquired a high profile abroad as an actor, notably with his performances in such internationally successful movies *The General* (Boorman, 1998) and *AI – Artificial Intelligence* (Spielberg, 2001). The Abbey's portrait of Gleeson provides no indication of the play's theme or plot; no value may be ascribed to Gleeson's character. All we are told is that Gleeson – whose face we know from his cinema performances – has returned to Ireland to perform in a play. And that knowledge is deemed sufficient to attract an audience.

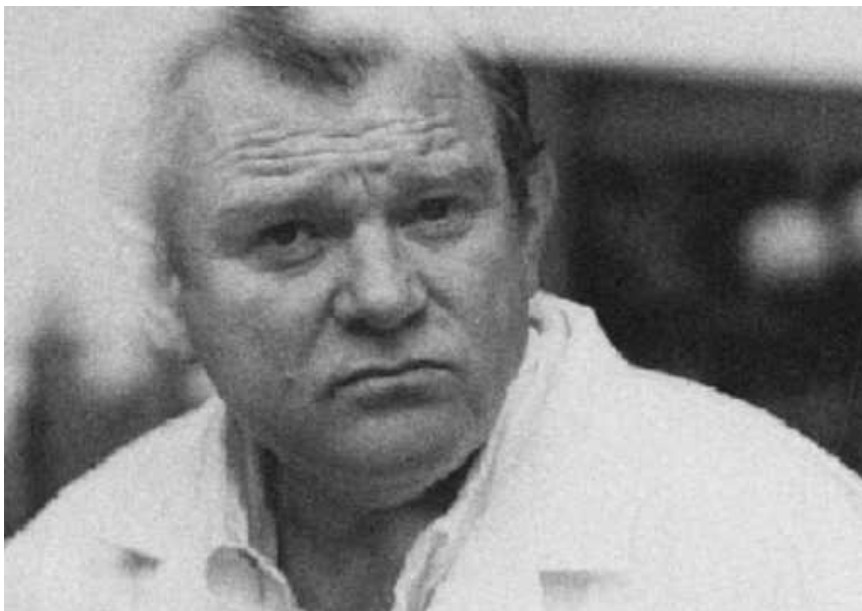


Figure 1: The Abbey Theatre's Marketing of *On Such As We*

The apparent triumph of traditionalism in the play is thus complicated in many ways. Roche undermines it by hinting at darker sides [of](#) his characters' lives, and with his use of popular culture. The manner in which the play was produced – with its overlapping scenes and its use of celebrity to market the play – also contrasts interestingly with Roche's apparent celebration of traditional values. And most importantly, there is the plot: Roche shows that, despite his admirable qualities, Oweney's lack of mobility means that he cannot be successful in the globalising world, as is made evident at the play's conclusion, when Maeve returns to P.J. This shows that *On Such as We* must be regarded as a lament for a dying culture, rather than as a celebration of an embattled one.

As such, Roche illustrates the importance of mobility. P.J.'s success is represented through his power to move freely and without impediment; for all of his good qualities, Oweney's lack of mobility is represented as disadvantageous to him. So, as an act of social critique, the play's views on mobility are clear. Yet the play itself is an example of the significance of the need for cultural forms to be transferable across national boundaries: with its use of the Western genre and the fact that its linguistic register is from a globalized popular culture, the play's Wexford setting will not prevent anyone from understanding it. Roche's characterization and the play's music indicate regret for the passing of certain values; but the production's pace and innovative use of chronology show that those values have not just passed, but are gone forever. Thematically and structurally, Roche's play implies that the ability to move freely and quickly is a sign of success in the globalized

world, but, characteristically, he invites audiences to contemplate – and ultimately to regret – that this is so.

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¹ This is an edited version of a paper that appeared in *Ihla Do Desterro*, number 58, 2010.

² This discussion appears in more detail in my book *Theatre and Globalization* (2009), where I explore the impact of these processes on the development of the Irish monologue.

³ The critic Aleks Sierz refers to the emergence of this development in Britain as an example of “In-yer-face Theatre”, but in fact these characteristics have become common in many other media – especially television and cinema. They are also common in drama outside of Britain. I discuss this issue in more detail in a chapter on Martin McDonagh in *Theatre and Globalization* (2009)

⁴ These issues are discussed at length and developed by Bauman, 1998.