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Re-Imagining Ireland, Occupying Iraq: Colin Teevan's *How Many Miles to Basra*

Irish dramatists have always occupied a prominent place in the English theatre – and that prominence has been particularly marked since the mid-1990s. Conor McPherson, for instance, has not premiered an original full-length play in Ireland since 1995; his subsequent six full-length plays all appeared in London first.¹ Sebastian Barry's *Andersen's English* toured England in 2010; his 2008 *Dallas Sweetman* was staged in Canterbury Cathedral, and *The Pride of Parnell Street* premiered in London in 2007 – and only the last of those three plays has ever been seen in Ireland. Frank McGuinness last premiered an original play in Ireland in 2002, when *Gates of Gold* appeared at the Gate Theatre. His subsequent three original plays have all premiered in England, as have his adaptations of *Oedipus*, *Helen*, *Phaedra*, *the Caucasian Chalk Circle* and *Miss Julie* – so that, of the ten plays that he has had produced since 2002, only three premiered in Ireland.² Since 2001, many other Irish writers have premiered important new works in England or Scotland: Enda Walsh, Tom Murphy, Marina Carr, Edna O'Brien, and others.

The critical methodology that dominates the study of Irish drama causes some scholars to relate these developments to Ireland's colonial relationship with Britain, or to see the movement of writers like McPherson and McGuinness as comparable to the 'exile' of Joyce and Beckett. As Clare Wallace suggests, such approaches are misguided. Reviewing a book about McPherson, she agrees that 'McPherson has quite openly stated that he prefers his work to premiere in London for financial reasons and because of the quality of critical reception there, and he is fully entitled to make that choice'. 'However', she writes 'this no more makes him an exile than it does David Beckham' ('Imagining Mischief' 125). Her point, in other words, is that theatre,

like football, has become globalised: the movement from one football team to another involves a trajectory between hubs on a global network – and something similar can be said about the movement from Dublin to London to produce plays.³

In making her point, Wallace highlights the ways in which Irish dramatists are attracted to London – not because of colonialism, and not because of cultural insecurity, but because London – and, to a lesser extent, Edinburgh – offer access to a global marketplace. Those spaces showcase Irish work, bringing it to the attention of publishers, theatre festivals, the mass media, the amateur theatre circuit, and (very occasionally) Broadway producers too. This benefits the individual writers and practitioners, but it is sometimes important as an act of cultural diplomacy. Culture Ireland, for instance, has invested significant resources in bringing Irish work to the Edinburgh Festivals and to other international destinations since its establishment in 2005.⁴ As a result, in many recent cases, the primary intention of Irish writers and Irish companies presenting work in Britain is not to engage with an English or Scottish audience, but to use London or Edinburgh as gateways to a much wider global market.

That development has been well documented (see Dudley Edwards), and there have been some interesting debates about whether the export of so many of our best plays is good for the development of Irish drama at home. But one unexpected consequence of that debate is that it works to obscure the importance of a number of significant Irish plays that have been produced in Britain. Those plays are difficult to categorise: they are often self-evidently ‘Irish’, but appear to have been written specifically with an English or Scottish audience in mind – to such an extent that those plays may not “translate” into an Irish context.

One of the best examples of such work is Frank McGuinness's *Speaking Like Magpies*, his 2004 play for the Royal Shakespeare Company. McGuinness offers a very detailed account of the Gunpowder Plot, and explores the relationship between Catholicism and Protestantism in a way that is certainly relevant to Ireland, but which seems directed more towards contemporary English debates about religion and national identity: indeed, the play assumes a very detailed knowledge of and concern for English history. As with most of McGuinness's plays, its authorial viewpoint is that of an outsider, of someone who wants to use play and provocation to challenge the values of his audience. So it represents a very interesting collision of an Irish mindset with an English subject matter. But it is debateable whether that play would receive a sympathetic response from an Irish audience.

My interest here is in considering similar plays: works that were written for an English audience and which display evidence of their author's Irish viewpoint – but which might not necessarily 'translate' into an Irish context. Those works can be placed in a much longer tradition within Irish drama, stretching back to writers like Farquhar, and including Sheridan, Goldsmith, Shaw, Wilde and others – but again, there are some differences between the present and the past. There are a surprisingly large number of such plays, and many of them were written by people whose work is much more appreciated in England or Scotland than it is in Ireland: writers such as Stella Feehily, Nicola McCartney, Chris Lee, Ailis Ni Riain, and Ursula Rani Sarma. However, the play I want to discuss in the present article is *How Many Miles to Basra?* by Colin Teevan, a Dublin-born writer who has had twenty plays and adaptations produced in Britain since 1999.⁵ My purpose in doing so is to consider how the success of writers such as McPherson has tended to obscure a significant sub-genre within both Irish and British drama – one that

allows the cultures of Britain and Ireland to mix and engage dialogically – of which Teevan’s work is an especially good example.

How Many Miles to Basra? was originally written for radio, in the immediate aftermath of the dispute between Tony Blair’s government and the BBC, about Andrew Gilligan’s reporting on the ‘sexed-up’ dossier that falsified the case for going to war in Iraq. The play was first broadcast on BBC Radio in July 2004, and was then developed into a stage play, which premiered in 2006 at the West Yorkshire Playhouse. It has subsequently been produced in the US, and it received a rehearsed reading at Dublin’s Abbey Theatre in 2009.

The play is in many ways unique. It is an Irish investigation of the war in Iraq and the relationship of that conflict to earlier British military operations, including those in Northern Ireland. It is a play that explores the growing tension in our culture between postmodernity and belief, asking what place there is for conviction in a society where few certainties remain. And its primary concern is with the ways in which the media is used to affect public opinion about war. Teevan suggests that questions about what is – and, more importantly, what is not – reported are rarely determined by the need to tell the truth. Such questions are instead influenced by other factors: personal ambition, interpersonal and inter-institutional rivalry and, in particular, by individuals’ need to atone for their past mistakes. Teevan makes the interesting – and indeed the provocative – suggestion that the war in Iraq on the one hand, and the conflict between the Labour government and the BBC on the other, had much in common. Both conflicts involved the making of dishonest statements; both saw innocent individuals being sacrificed due to the ambitions of people in power; both used a rhetoric of ethics and

civilisation to justify actions that were neither ethical nor civilised. He wants, then, to analyse the war in Iraq, but he also shows how that conflict reveals general forms of human behaviour that have occurred in the past, and which will recur in the future.

The action takes place in April 2003, shortly after the beginning of the invasion of Iraq. The statue of Sadaam has just been toppled, and some of the characters are already expressing the belief that the war is over (*Basra* 40) – the irony of which would have been grimly obvious to the play's Leeds audience in 2006.

The play concerns four British soldiers who have been posted near Basra. At the start of action, the youngest member of the squad opens fire on a group of Bedouin civilians at a checkpoint, killing all of them. The troops subsequently discover that the Bedouin were *not* planning to attack them, as they had feared – and had *not* been brandishing weapons, as they had assumed. Instead, they were carrying hundreds of dollars in their car – bringing blood money or ransom to a nearby tribal leader in order to free one of the men's wife and child, who had been kidnapped. The squad's sergeant – an English soldier called Stewart – decides to atone for the killing by completing the Bedouin's journey, paying the ransom and freeing the woman and child. He pretends to his men that he has permission from his superiors to carry out this operation; and conflict arises between all of them when his deception is revealed. The soldiers eventually reach their destination but are killed accidentally by an air-strike; the British Ministry of Defence later falsifies the circumstances surrounding their deaths for propaganda purposes. The play concludes with a consideration of whether there can sometimes be morally acceptable reasons to tell a lie: it may be better, the argument goes, to pretend that the soldiers died heroically rather than revealing the futility of their actions. Given that the case for going to war in Iraq was itself

based on a convenient untruth, there is an obvious intention on Teevan's part to allow the status of the soldiers to act as a metaphor for the actions of the governments that invaded Iraq in 2003.

However, the play is not a straightforward political commentary: indeed, it is both enriched and complicated by the characterisation of an embedded reporter, working for BBC radio, who has been placed with the four British soldiers. The reporter is a woman, originally from Northern Ireland, who is accompanied by an Iraqi translator called Malek. Almost everything negative that happens to the soldiers occurs due to her presence. The original murder of the Bedouin occurs when Stewart is distracted by her use of a satellite phone; the soldiers are stranded in the desert when they attempt to rescue her from a hijacker: and she later orders one of the troops to retrieve something from a car that is resting on a land-mine – and therefore causes the soldier's death in the ensuing explosion. Refuting strongly the notion that an embedded journalist is an objective and disinterested observer, Teevan shows how this character drives most of the play's action forward. Given her behaviour, it is not surprising that he chooses to give his heroine a militaristic name: she is called Ursula Gunn.

Basra has much in common with other plays about the war in Iraq. Like Judith Thompson's *Palace of the End* (2009), it presents us with soldiers who believe that they are bringing civilisation to Iraq – but that belief is challenged by the presence on stage of an Iraqi character who is far more civilised than any of the Western invaders.⁶ Malek has lost his family, and his livelihood – he was the curator of a museum in Basra (48), and had studied in London. He is the voice of moral authority in the play, making statements such as the following. 'Why do all your English words that are to do with the most important things like heart and soul come from the language of the shopkeeper? Compensation? Redemption?

Recompense? Saving?’ he says (84), with Teevan possibly alluding to a remark by Hugh in Friel’s *Translations* (1980) that commerce is an activity to which the English language is particularly well suited. Later, Malek pointedly reacts to one of the soldiers’ repeated verbal attacks on him. ‘You reduce a country to rags. Then you call us ragheads’ (64).

The play is also similar to the National Theatre of Scotland’s *Black Watch* by Gregory Burke (2007). Both plays seek to present ordinary soldiers as victims of the war rather than its perpetrators. The soldiers in Burke’s play act mostly from a sense of duty, or have joined the army because it is the only job available to them – and their loyalty to the history of their regiments, and to each other, gives them a kind of integrity that politicians can never achieve. Teevan is somewhat less sentimental in his characterisation than Burke is in *Black Watch*, but in both plays there is a sense that the death of British soldiers is unjust and unnecessary, and that those soldiers represent a form of authenticity that is unattainable by those in power.⁷

Indeed, Teevan draws a parallel between Tony Blair and his protagonist Stewart. Stewart leads his men out into the desert in a misguided attempt to undertake what he claims is the morally right course of action. Later one of his men will say ‘We are out in the middle of nowhere risking our necks for a lie’ (59) – and it is not entirely clear whose lie he’s talking about: Blair’s or Stewart’s. That character, whose name is Freddie, is later crucified, and his body mutilated by his assailants. In part, the brutality of that death can be seen as revenge for his persistent brutishness and racism, but he is also being presented in a somewhat sacrificial manner, as indeed are all of the soldiers – who die because of a lie, and whose deaths result in further lies.

So *How Many Miles to Basra* follows many of the conventions that have been established in plays about Iraq in Britain, the United States,

Australia, and Canada. What sets it apart from those plays – and what makes it in some ways more complex – are its references to Ireland, of which there are quite a few.

Its title is likely to be an allusion to the 1974 Jennifer Johnston novel *How Many Miles to Babylon*, which concerns two Irish soldiers in the First World War. And there is of course the presence of the Irish character, Ursula. But perhaps more significant is that the protagonist of the play – Stewart – served in Northern Ireland. While there, he murdered a young Irish girl at a military checkpoint.

I see her laughing, still, always laughing when I see her. In the back window, green Vauxhuall Kadett. Laughing as it pulled away from the checkpoint. And her hair was long. Black. Curly. Her eyes, blue. I could see them. And as the car starts to pick up pace, moving away from us, she raises her hand. And we've been on stag four, five hours, and this is the middle of the night, and I'm tired and twitchy. And she points her index finger and forefinger at me like a gun. She cocks it. And I can see her lips mouthing 'Bang, bang' ... and I am full of rage. Being where I am and what I am, I close my eyes to calm myself. And when I open them the glass has shattered. And the car is screeching to a halt and jolting forward and rolling back and she is coming out through the shattered back windscreen like, like an avenging angel, still smiling even though there is this hole in her head. (*Beat*). There's not a day goes by I don't see her smiling face and she is saying: 'Bang, Bang, you're the one.' And I am the one. I miss her as if I loved her. Or as if I were dead and it was my life I missed. (88-9)

Stewart was not present when his men killed the Bedouin at the checkpoint in Basra but, as the senior officer, he is responsible for an action that almost exactly reproduces his own experience in Northern Ireland. Referring to the act he committed in Ireland, he states that an ‘internal inquiry found I’d acted within the rules of engagement’ (39) – that is, the military establishment sought to establish his innocence by referring his actions to a set of abstract principles. Yet Stewart is honest enough to know that he killed the girl because of his anger. He carries a newspaper clipping with her photograph around with him as a reminder of his guilt, allowing Teevan to emphasise the ways in which the media shape our relationships with the past – while also determining how military errors are seen by the public.

There are many ways of reacting to this feature of the plot. One is to see it as Teevan’s ironic commentary on the suggestions that British troops were well qualified to hold Basra due to their experience in Belfast – an assertion made many times in the early years of the war, though it would eventually prove utterly misguided (see Fidler). But another response is to see this plot as raising questions about the motivation of the people who made the decision to invade Iraq. Stewart’s need to atone for the death of the Bedouin at the checkpoint is strongly influenced by his desire to atone for what he did in Northern Ireland. So for that reason, he undertakes what he believes is the honourable and morally right course: he tries to pay the ransom for the wife and child of the man his squad killed. Yet that course of action will prove disastrous, leading to the death of all of his men and many Iraqis also. The futility of that gesture – and the recurrence of the murder at a checkpoint – suggests that there is a need to break the cycle that gives rise to these events. We cannot atone for what we did in one country by trying to fix another country, shows Teevan.

His point, then, is that we need to be sceptical about people who make bad decisions for what they think are morally praiseworthy reasons. At the end of the play, Stewart's wife will react cynically to his attempts to do the right thing: 'Men who want to save people are dangerous to be around,' she says (110). Earlier, Malek expresses similar sentiments: 'I wish the world would stop trying to help Iraqis,' he says (45). Both realise that selflessness is often just a form of vanity.

The parallel between Basra and Northern Ireland might seem easy to understand: the suggestion *seems* to be that in both conflicts, the people who were motivated by high ideals were far more dangerous than those who were simply opportunistic or racist. Teevan does not resolve all of contradictions that his play stages, but he does suggest that the media should aim to present them in all of their complexity, rather than reducing events to easily understood stereotypes and clichés.

What complicates the situation, however, is the presence of Ursula. As I have mentioned above, Ursula is the cause of many of the problems in the play: Stewart makes the decisions that lead to his men's death – but Ursula's interference makes those decisions necessary.

Like Stewart, Ursula claims to be in Iraq due to events in Northern Ireland – specifically the death of her brother.

I lost my brother, Dominic... to an RUC bullet. An accident. I mean, they're not even meant to kill anyone, rubber bullets. Nor the police, they're not meant to kill either... He was going to a school disco... But there was no inquiry into the mistake. They didn't even apologise. They just told lies about him, what he was doing, who he was friends with, to cover up their mistake... The truth must be known. That's why I became a journalist. To tell

things like they really are. It's the least we owe those upon whose suffering our world is built. (79)

These are powerful words, implying that the apparently neutral Irish journalist was inspired to do something noble because of the Troubles. She was inspired not just by the actions of the police who killed her brother, but by the authorities who covered-up the truth about what happened (as always seems to happen in Ireland, the cover-up is almost as damaging as the original crime). And indeed, it is likely that Ursula actually believes the story that she tells about herself, as suggested when she later says that 'Everything decent I've ever done is because of him. Every place I've not had the courage to go, he has held my hand and walked with me. In the valley of death, no evil shall I fear' (89).

The problem, however, is that Ursula never lives up to the values she espouses. She constantly lies to the soldiers in order to progress her own story – lying, that is, in order to expose a truth. At one point, for instance, she refuses to tell the troops that she has a satellite phone when they are all stranded in the desert. Most damningly, in the play's final scene she lies to Stewart's wife – now his widow. Returning Stewart's belongings, Ursula pretends that Stewart used to keep a photograph of his wife in the tobacco tin that he carried around with him, though the audience knows that he actually kept a picture of his Irish victim there. That is, Ursula tries to pretend that Stewart thought more warmly and more frequently about his wife than he really did. Ursula is trying to compensate – not only for her own involvement in Stewart's death, but also because she appears to have had an affair of some kind with him. She then claims that on the morning he died, Stewart had told her that he loved his wife. 'Thank you for saying that,' replies the wife, 'Even if it's not true' (112) – which of course it is not. Ursula, in other words, has

become another person who tells a simple lie rather than trying to represent a complex truth, perhaps believing that she is doing the wrong thing for morally acceptable reasons. The wife knows the truth anyway, and it is therefore she rather than Ursula who seems praiseworthy and dignified as the play reaches its conclusion.

Ursula's Irishness plays an important role in these events. When at the start of the play she attempts to persuade Malek to act as her guide, she is deliberately ambiguous about her nationality. 'You are American?' asks Malek. 'No' she replies, describing herself first as British and then as Irish. It is the latter nationality that gains Malek's attention, as does her subsequent revelation that she is carrying plenty of US dollars. (43). While of course Ursula could describe herself as both British and Irish, she later chooses to highlight certain elements of her Irish background in order to ingratiate herself with Malek. 'Maybe you'd do an interview for me. Later maybe?' she asks. 'No, I shall show you Kabro a Generals, Miss Ursula. I shall translate for you and you shall pay me. Let us keep the relationship colonial' (46). 'I come from a colony too, remember' says Ursula – to which Malek replies: 'Then you understand.' Malek, then, rejects Ursula's suggestion that there is an affinity between them because both are from a colony. Ursula might believe that she is from a country that is postcolonial, and might believe that as a journalist she is neutral. But she has money and power and the ability to influence her audience's understanding of the truth, and that makes her one of the colonisers rather than one of the colonised, in Malek's eyes anyway.

Implicit in Malek's words is a rejection of the notion that our identities can be determined by the past. The history of Ireland cannot and should not alter his relationship with Ursula, he believes – which is perhaps an appropriate opinion for someone who was originally an archaeologist, and who therefore understands the risks involved in trying

to see the past in an objective and dispassionate fashion. So, for Malek, understanding the past is one way of being liberated from it. This contrasts strongly with Ursula, who believes that her choice of profession has been determined by the death of her brother. And it also contrasts with the actions of Stewart, who believes he must atone for killing someone in Northern Ireland. The actions of both characters, then, are influenced by their personal involvement in the Troubles – and that history in turn leads them into disastrous decisions in Iraq. Teevan's suggestion appears to be that a refusal to understand the Troubles is one symptom of a moral confusion that also led to the invasion of Iraq. And that moral confusion is present in both Britain and Ireland, but has a different outcome in both countries.

For an Irish audience, Teevan raises some challenging questions – about whether it is possible for Ireland genuinely to be neutral in the war in Iraq, about the ways in which Irishness and the country's colonial past are used as a kind of tradable commodity, and about the place of Ireland in the global balance of power and prosperity. Yet, like many of the plays mentioned at the beginning of this article, *How Many Miles* speaks both from and to British society, allowing people in that country to consider the reasons for the actions of their government, as well as the motivations of the BBC and other media outlets. And it also highlights the status of those soldiers who must fight in a war that few of their fellow citizens support.

The plays of writers like McPherson and McDonagh have been enormously successful when staged in England – not because those writers were specifically engaging with English society, but instead because London offers them a route into the global marketplace. Teevan's work, in contrast, has not received the same kind of global attention, in part because he has sought to engage to a far greater extent

with specific places, and with the lived politics of ordinary Irish and English people today. That said, plays like *Basra* have resonances that go beyond Britain and Ireland. It is a play that calls for a more ethical relationship between the media and those who wage wars – and although it is scathing in its treatment of the British government, it also reminds us of our own responsibilities, suggesting that if we want to be told the truth, we must be willing to take the time to understand it.

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¹ The plays are *Saint Nicholas* (1996), *The Weir* (1997), *Dublin Carol* (2000), *Port Authority* (2001), *Shining City* (2004), and *The Seafarer* (2006). The short play *Come on Over* premiered in Dublin’s Gate Theatre in 2003, as part of a trio of short plays that also comprised work by Brian Friel and Neil Jordan. His adaptation of the Daphne du Maurier short story ‘The Birds’ appeared at the Gate in 2007.

² The three plays by McGuinness that premièred in Ireland were *Gates of Gold* (2002) and the Ibsen adaptations *The Wild Duck* (2003) and *John Gabriel Borkman* (2010).

³ I discuss this issue in detail in *Theatre and Globalization*.

⁴ For full information see www.cultureireland.ie/

⁵ The full list of adaptation and original play by Teevan may be viewed on www.irishplayography.com/

⁶ Thompson's play features three monologues. The first is an imagined testimony by Lynndie England, the disgraced US soldier who was convicted of abusing prisoners at Abu Ghraib. Her characterisation contrasts with that of a fictional Iraqi woman, who is the speaker in the third monologue. The second monologue is by David Kelly, the UN weapons inspector who committed suicide in the wake of Andrew Gilligan's report for the BBC about the 'sexed-up' dossier.

⁷ In the context of the present article it may be interesting to note that the play's director John Tiffany has written of the inspirational power of Galway-based company Druid Theatre's presentation of all of Synge's plays in Edinburgh in 2005. (See *Black Watch* xi)