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Title	Review of the RTE screen version of John McGahern's 'Amongst Women'
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Publication Date	1998
Publication Information	Kenny, J. (Summer 1998) Review of the RTE screen version of John McGahern's 'Amongst Women', dir. Tom Cairns. 'Film West' 33, 66.
Item record	http://hdl.handle.net/10379/763

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Epic Success.

Amongst Women

RTÉ 1 (17, 24, 31 May, 7 June). Dir.: Tom Cairns. S/play: Adrian Hodges.

As if to adapt John McGahern's honed prose for a feature film were not in itself difficult enough, RTÉ, teamed with BBC Northern Ireland, decided to test both their own mettle and the attention spans of their audience with a four-part TV serial of McGahern's finest, and most distilled work to date, his 1990 novel, *Amongst Women*. Set in the middle decades of this century, the novel centres on Moran, a farmer and ex-guerrilla fighter from the War of Independence, and on how his five children and second wife deal with his patriarchal impositions and, ultimately, with his declining health and eventual death. Practically four hours in total length, this adaptation was remarkably faithful to the epic feel of that story.

While McGahern uses the circular structure so popular in Irish fiction, the screenplay presented the life of the Morans linearly, and the first liberty was taken by showing, in the '1947' opening frame, the deathbed scene of Moran's first wife. While this scene is significant in its absence in the novel, it was used to effect here in that it quickly identified the situation of the family. We were then instantly moved to the occasion of Moran's mock whipping of the eldest child, Luke. Filched from the first chapter of McGahern's infamously banned novel, *The Dark* (1965), this scene's stomach-turning brutality was something of a brave insertion in that, by immediately dehumanising Moran, it made McGahern's feat of combining tyranny and poignancy in a single character as difficult as possible to achieve.

An overall failure to entirely succeed in giving Moran depth was principally due to the fact that the dimension of Moran's republican past was not so acutely measured as in the novel where his repeated sniping at the post-independence country is given resonance by, early on, replaying an instance of his guerrilla activity. Except towards the end, Moran too often appeared here as a motiveless begrudger rather than as an individual molded by intense, and very specific, personal and historical experience. Tony Doyle, however, coped admirably with this difficult part, delivering his lines throughout with the combined portentousness and inward gaze vital to McGahern's original.

With the second episode, beginning with 'London 1956', it was clear that Adrian Hodges had no intention of adhering to any kind of Beckettian fidelity to the text. At this point, augmentation of the children's lives away from home, in Dublin but mainly in London, began. In a way, the new writing, which continued into the final two episodes, was very faithful to McGahern's story in that, originally, McGahern intended to set the novel in London and he had two hundred pages written to this effect. Brian F. O'Byrne, though he forced it in places, behaved well in the laconic role of Luke, and Damien McAdam was excellent as the impudent youngest sibling, Michael. Susan Lynch, Anne Marie Duff, and Geraldine O'Rawe performed generally well as Maggie, Sheila and Mona, particularly in their appropriation of credible individualities for their respective characters, something that McGahern, because his concern was with the archetypal, didn't attempt too extensively.

In another difficult role as the placatory second wife, Rose, Ger Ryan turned in her usual fine performance and she managed to retain a uniformity of local accent sometimes absent in the other characters. One of the highlights was the way the lesser female part of Nell Morahan, assured returned emigrant and Michael's seducer, was brought to life by Aisling McGuckin.

The sumptuous photography of Cathal Black's adaptation of 'Korea' (1995) seems to have set the standard for Sue Gibson's cameras, and there were some beautiful shots of Moran with his animals. The wardrobe department also did its work well, though the Morans' clothes could have shown more signs of the graft of farm work.

The adequate sound track for a McGahern adaptation is, to my mind, complete silence (Cathal Black knew this for his eerie adaptation of 'Wheels' in 1976), but here the repetitious strings of

Niall Byrne's original music were much too melodramatic and loud. Nevertheless, Patrick McCabe's notable strategy of allowing the period of a piece dictate its own soundtrack was used to great effect in places, especially where radio and jukebox tunes were made to thematically interact with the story-line. Praise is due for attention to discreet period details: while Michael O'Hehir at the match was perhaps an easy mandatory insertion, the economic commentary just audible on the background radio ('but the tragedy is passing; the land is now on the way to filling our bellies') was not. Many viewers who lived through the time portrayed appear to have found the documentary content sufficiently affective to make it painful to watch, and it will be interesting to see what the BBC's audience makes of it when it is screened for them later this year.

For my TV license money, *Amongst Women* is the best screening of McGahern so far—it is superlative compared to McGahern's own flawed screenplay, *The Rockingham Shoot* (1987)—and is in the same league as the recognised adaptations of important Irish fictions like 'The Ballroom of Romance' and 'The Dead'. Far too often, RTÉ's blindness to what is relevant and promising is a sorrowful mystery (e.g. the *Fr. Ted* rejection); small qualifications aside, they have, on this occasion, gotten it joyously right.

John Kenny

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