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Rethinking Masculinity

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Authentic Irish manhood has long been the concern of several self-appointed vanguards. However, just exactly what may constitute authentic Irish manhood has not, until quite recently, been the subject of serious critical and theoretical reflection. Moreover, Irish playwriting (and theatre production) has a notoriously male-dominated history. Because of this masculinist and often misogynistic slant to Irish theatre writing, there is a sense, for the masculinities scholar at least, that any piece of erudite theatre scholarship can make critical inroads into the deconstruction of Irish masculinity in performance.

Perhaps the most exciting and productive element of current Irish theatre scholarship is its highly collaborative nature. Thus edited collections stand as one of the richest sources of critical material. Evolving in parallel with, and as a critical response to, a new wave of Irish theatre that began in the early 1990s with playwrights such as Conor McPherson, Marina Carr, Enda Walshe and Mark O'Rowe, the growth of the edited collection as an invaluable research tool has been phenomenal. Given not only the masculinist nature of Irish theatre in general, but more specifically the violently inflected lad culture which drove much of this new wave, the essays contained in recent edited collections of Irish theatre scholarship will hold critical resonance for the masculinities scholar, even where the essay itself does not specifically address issues of gender and/or masculinity. General collections of essays such as Dermot Bolger's *Druids, Dudes and Beauty Queens: The Changing Face of Irish Theatre* (Dublin: New Island Books, 2001), Eamonn Jordan's *Theatre Stuff: Critical Essays on Contemporary Irish Theatre* (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2000), and Melissa Sihra and Paul Murphy's *The Dreaming Body: Contemporary Irish Theatre* (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe Ltd, 2009) contain critical interrogations of gender and sexuality that are invaluable to any examination of masculinities in performance. Less traditional volumes such as *Theatre Talk*, a collection of interviews with and by Irish playwrights, practitioners and critics, and *Critical Moments*, a festschrift of the reviews, theatre essays and cultural commentaries of Fintan O'Toole – one of Ireland's leading theatre critics and social commentators, and assistant editor of the *Irish Times* – prove invaluable reference books.[1] Not only do both collections hold vast primary sources in terms of reviews, production histories and rehearsal vicissitudes, but they also provide rich commentaries on the drives and inspirations behind contemporary Irish playwriting, whilst simultaneously mapping the state of the nation and the masculinist sociopolitical climate that engendered the dramas.

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Two recent collections are of remarkable critical value in terms of masculine performatives. First is Lisa Fitzpatrick's 2010 interdisciplinary collection of essays, *Performing Violence in Contemporary Ireland* (Carysfort). Apart from valuable chapters dedicated to the work of playwrights Conor McPherson, Martin McDonagh, Gary Mitchell and Martin Lynch – all of whose work is underpinned by an epistemology of masculine violence, both personal and political – the volume also contains analyses of broader social performances such as processions, parades and commemorations, and raises pertinent ethical questions regarding Irish politics, nationalist and loyalist memory, and the role of the spectator. Melissa Sihra's *Women in Irish Drama: A Century of Authorship and Representation* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007) gathers a far-reaching selection of essays which interrogate and critique patriarchy and the misogynistic figuring of female characters, playwrights, practitioners and 'Mother Ireland'. Sihra is also polemic in her reimagining of the collection format. She authors several interchapters which simultaneously fold a history of women in Irish theatre into a tightly focused history of gender and sexual politics in modern Ireland.

Two recently launched monographs sit not only as prerequisites for the study of masculinities in Irish theatre, but also have further resonances for gender and performance studies in a broader Western context. First is Fintan Walsh's *Male Trouble: Masculinity and the Performance of Crisis*. After a theoretically and culturally enlightening introduction, Walsh embarks upon a psychoanalytically inflected critique of the much-misaligned notion of 'masculinity in crisis'. Positing this discourse of crisis as a 'cultural performative in itself, rather than an epistemology',[2] Walsh interrogates the notion of masculinity in crisis not just in drama and theatre, but also in live art, public spectacle, social happenings, guerrilla performance and film. Of particular interest to the Irish theatre scholar are the chapters on Mark O'Rowe and (for comparative purposes) Mark Ravenhill. However, the theories and praxes of masculine performatives in the work of artists Ron Athey and Franko B, in the films *Jackass* and *The Passion of the Christ*, and in social spectacles such as Fathers 4 Justice and escapologist David Blaine, provide critical frameworks which easily transpose onto the analysis of any theatre event.

The second monograph is Brian Singleton's *Masculinities and the Contemporary Irish Theatre*. Taking the 1990s new wave as his starting point, Singleton frames his focus both as a theoretical intervention into 'the notion that masculinity is a pre-ordained fixed identity' which seeks to expose 'the numerous masculinities at play in Irish society', and also as an 'uncovering of voices and lives that have not heretofore been represented by literary and theatre critics, or historians of Irish theatre, despite the fact that throughout the period under scrutiny multiple and alternative masculinities have permeated the Irish stage'.[3] What follows is an in-depth sociocultural examination of masculinities and theatre in Ireland, which, like Sihra's collection, is ever-mindful of the political struggles and histories of counternormative gendered and sexual identities in Ireland. Immediately noteworthy is Singleton's broad scope of examination. As well as the expected discussion of performances and paradigms of masculinity present within Irish dramas on the stage, we get a shrewd investigation of the (primarily) male personalities and macho politics which have driven the Irish theatre industry over the last thirty years or so.

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Overall, although the published research available to the scholar of masculinities in Irish theatre is relatively small in the sense of monographs and essays dealing directly with the topic, the collaborative and interdisciplinary nature of Irish theatre and performance studies in general offers a field of research which, given some shrewd mining, uncovers a wealth of available material that is steadily growing in both quality and quantity.

NOTES

1 Lillian Chambers, Eamonn Jordan and Ger FitzGibbon, eds., *Theatre Talk: Voices of Irish Theatre Practitioners* (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2001); and Julia Furay and Redmond O'Hanlon, *Critical Moments: Fintan O'Toole on Modern Irish Theatre* (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2003).

2 Fintan Walsh, *Male Trouble: Masculinity and the Performance of Crisis* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 8.

3 Brian Singleton, *Masculinities and the Contemporary Irish Theatre* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 3.

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