

REVIEWS

A COLLECTION OF UNIQUE RANGE AND SCOPE IN THE FIELD OF IRISH THEATRE STUDIES

Nicholas Grene and Chris Morash (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Irish Theatre*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016. 764 pp. ISBN 978-0-19-870613-7.

Regarding its massive size and the amount of scholarship this monumental book represents, the reader's first reaction is the feeling of awe; *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Irish Theatre* is a so far unparalleled product in this field. The opening sentence of the editors, Nicholas Grene and Chris Morash in their "Introduction" strikes a note that resonates throughout the volume: "The most important word in the title of this book is 'theatre.'" The emphasis on this key-word introduces a book which, and hence its unparalleled nature, covers the long period from the late nineteenth century to the early twenty-first by taking account of the most crucial aspects and areas of Irish theatre as a branch of art and a cultural practice. Discussions of playwrights and play texts, theatre companies' work and performing styles, theatre-makers and critics as well as the contexts and constraints in or under which they used to work or have been working, constitute an astonishingly huge assemblage of information and insights with a wide scope.

The editors brilliantly solve the evidently difficult problem of placing the forty-one chapters of *The Oxford Handbook* into twelve parts with headings which reflect as well as serve the joint principles of diversity, inclusivity and establish internal connections, with the greatest representatives re-appearing in different contexts. My focus in this review is mainly on the strategies and methods of editors and contributors to identify signposts and analyze historically grounded phenomena while creating linkages across the oeuvre of particular authors and the activities of theatre companies along with the subjects they dramatize and the performance styles they develop. Since it is not possible to mention all the forty-one chapters in a review, my choice is to provide examples of how the book addresses the multiple areas of work in and for the modern Irish theatre. In doing so, it is extremely helpful that the twelve parts enter into dialogue with each other as their appointed boundaries prove to be fluid and the chapters within them are divided into sections under subheadings which structure the material under investigation and orientate the reader.

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Part I, under the title "Nineteenth-century Legacies," introduces the subject of traditions that several twentieth-century Irish playwrights drew on. Stephen Watt's chapter, "The Inheritance of Melodrama" assesses and comments on phenomena and events of the Irish theatre of the past with their later echoes. Watt argues that Dion Boucicault's and J.W. Whitbread's rather popular domestic and historical melodramas, though not considered as works of the modern Irish theatre yet, respond "to the changes wrought by modernity," influencing Sean O'Casey first of all. Also in this part, Wilde's dramatic work is looked at by Michael McAteer from the angle of the theme of sacrifice, which continues in later Irish playwriting too, by mapping it in the context of international politics. As a companion to Part I, Part III, "Models and Influences" offers chapters which trace other, mainly foreign sources and trends in respect of their contribution to developments in the modern Irish theatre. In the chapter "Modernism and Irish Theatre 1900-1940" Richard Cave elaborates on the highly creative use of these influences to arrive at the conclusion that "[t]he plays of Yeats, O'Casey, and Johnston and the enduring style and methodology of Gate theatre productions are notable not so much for challenging the tenets and practice of realism as for recovering and exuberantly rejoicing in the potential of all the arts that make up theatre." Also in Part III, Brad Kent's chapter titled "Missing Links: Bernard Shaw and the Discussion Play" summarizes the ways in which Shaw, aware of Ibsen having already undermined the conventions of the well-made play, forged his own version of the discussion play.

Part II under the title "Theatre and Nation" follows the emergence of new theatres or companies and the manifold links between playwrights and theatres' activities as they contributed to nation building, Irish cultural life in general, and national self-knowledge in particular. Here "The Abbey and the Idea of a Theatre" by Ben Levitas strikes the note when considering the tempestuous first performance of *The Playboy of the Western World* a moment when "the theatre was released both from the romantic ideal of unifying ethnic cohesion and the heroic pretensions of artistic autonomy and superior detachment." This was the event, Levitas argues, which transformed the Abbey into an institution earning the name "a people's theatre" as it "was not only identified as a radical theatre but also became a reminder of the complexity of democratic polity." The author of *The Playboy*, J.M. Synge, has a considerable presence in this part while he, a pivotal figure in Irish theatre, haunts many of the others. In the chapter "The Riot of Spring," Mary Burke re-evaluates Synge as a playwright whose drama "rebukes the sanitized Revival fantasy of the Irish peasant, ultimately harking back to what he saw as the unruliness that was always acknowledged in ancient Irish literature." Synge's radically idiosyncratic revivalism had its echoes in the dramatic

work of a generation starting their career after WWII. Akin to "Theatre and Nation" to some extent, Part VII, titled "The New Revival," collects chapters addressing fresh developments in postwar Irish drama which do not, however, break with the approach of the best of their elders and display openness to both national and foreign influences. In the chapter "Urban and Rural Theatre Cultures" Lisa Coen turns to the work of M.J. Molloy, John B. Keane and Hugh Leonard. About Molloy she writes: "Molloy shares with Synge an interest in valorizing the traditional rural Ireland diminishing before his eyes," while for her Leonard's *Da* offers physical comedy comparable with Alan Ayckbourn's *How the Other Half Loves*, a success at the Abbey's Peacock stage in parallel with *Da*. The dramaturgical novelty Brian Friel, Tom Murphy and Thomas Kilroy brought into Irish theatre is discussed in two other chapters of Part VII. Exploring the theme of exile in Friel and Murphy, Anthony Roche claims that what many of their protagonists "seek to enact" is a "flight from self-awareness," which indirectly criticizes the Irish society at that time.

Part IV, "Revolutions and Beyond" deals with the theatrical portrayal of the Easter Rising and events of the turbulent years following it, which led up to the foundation of the Irish State. O'Casey's Dublin plays are, naturally, of particular relevance here, and the chapter "O'Casey and the City" by Christopher Murray expertly discusses the role of language and revisionist politics in this trio from the 1920s. The self-exiled writer's later, non-realistic drama is represented by *Red Roses for Me* in the same chapter. A play which recreates history "as fantasy," it embodies "O'Casey's greatest tribute to a city he earlier saw falling into ruin" Murray contends, worthy of being acknowledged also as a Dublin play although of a different kind than its predecessors. Part VI under the heading "Contesting Voices" looks at authors, trends and phenomena that brought some notable artistic revolution into the post-revolutionary world of Irish theatre and implied a strong claim for change. In "Women and Irish Theatre before 1960," Cathy Leeney starts from the premise that "Women's early twentieth-century engagement with cultural and political nationalism, their creative output, and their access to the machinery of representation connects with their fight for rights as full citizens." What follows in the chapter is the recovery and celebration of the boldly unconventional approach of female playwrights, for instance that of Eva Gore-Booth, whose deploying the ritual form at the closure of her *The Buried Life of Deirdre* is suggestive of reincarnation after death. In the chapter "The Little Theatres of the 1950s," Lionel Pilkington writes about non-mainstream companies and theatre clubs, whose activities asserted "new forms of social and political possibility" while they anticipated the late twentieth-

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century's increasing concern with "interconnections between audience and performer."

Parts V and IX, "Performance 1" and "Performance 2" address issues of staging, design and direction, concentrating on the scene before 1960 and then after that, respectively. A specific link between the two periods is established by their mirror chapters on the Gate Theatre, the cultural and artistic history of which has become an important area of Irish Theatre Studies recently, involving the foundation of the Gate Theatre Research Network. Paige Reynolds's "Design and Direction to 1960" already devotes some pages to the extent in which the founders of the Gate were engaged with and took care of the technical side of the production process. Following it, Eibhear Walshe's chapter "The Importance of Staging Oscar: Wilde at the Gate" argues that thanks to Hilton Edwards and Micheál MacLiammóir, the Gate embraced the task of "shaping popular cultural perceptions of Wilde's drama and persona in Ireland in the twentieth century." Similarly, the Gate has been instrumental in making Beckett more known in Ireland and convincing the international public about the writer's Irishness. Julie Bates's chapter in Part IX, "Beckett at the Gate," outlines how the new artistic manager, Michael Colgan's endeavours saved the Gate from "its steady decline and dwindling reputation" after the death of its founders in the 1980s. Next Bates explores details of the Beckett Festivals hosted by the Gate and then touring the productions to several countries worldwide. The Gate's activities also crop up in other chapters of Part IX. In "Defining Performers and Performances" Nicholas Grene evaluates the work of outstanding Irish actors and actresses after 1960, including Donal McCann, one of whose great achievements was playing the role of Captain Boyle in a legendary Gate revival of *Juno and the Paycock* under the direction of Joe Dowling in 1986.

"Diversification" is the title of Part VIII, the chapters of which are concerned with significant changes in Irish theatre after the 1960s. In some ways these continue the story of the art as presented in Part VII under the heading "The New Revival," mainly because of the continued presence of authors like Brian Friel and Tom Murphy. Here it is not their work on the page but rather their inspiration of and relationship with new phenomena in the Irish theatre world that two chapters focus on: Marilyn Richtarik's "Brian Friel and Field Day" and Shelley Troupe's "From Druid/Murphy to *DruidMurphy*." The Field Day's strong ties with the theatre of the Troubles provide a link to the next chapter, "From Troubles to Post-Conflict Theatre in Northern Ireland" by Mark Phelan. Before dealing with the theatre of the North following the Good Friday Agreement, Phelan takes account of the dominant features of the "Troubles play" for the sake of underlining the differences. The playwright whose drama he suggests to be

a kind of epitome of “the change that has taken place in Ulster dramaturgy since 1998” is Owen McCafferty, whose post-Troubles plays such as *Quietly* embrace more than the issue of the presence of sectarian tension even after the peace process. In Phelan’s view, the change also means that new companies come into being whose aim is to call attention to the necessity of “stop talking about the past” and name things “that we should learn to begin discussing.” Flanking Phelan’s chapter, Victor Merriman’s headed “‘As We Must’: Growth and Diversification in Ireland’s Theatre Culture 1977-2000” also addresses the theme of new companies, this time in the South. Merriman gives information about 1990s debates, ensuring a natural transition to Part X, “Contemporary Irish Literature,” where most of the playwrights discussed started their career in the 1990s. Helen Hausner Lojek’s chapter on Frank McGuinness, “Negotiating Differences in the Plays of Frank McGuinness,” and Clare Wallace’s “Irish Drama since the 1990s: Disruptions” are both dedicated to the renewal of dramaturgy which subverts the clichés of labelling the Irish play for a world-wide public. Appropriately, a chapter is devoted to the women’s side: Melissa Sihra in “Shadow and Substance: Women, Feminism, and Irish Theatre” captures the newness of female authors as follows: “the younger generation of women in theatre now largely self-identify as feminists, due in part to the integration of feminist discourse in education, the visibility and vocalization of LGBTQ groups, the dismantling of its misogynist, bra-burning, ‘man-hating’ associations, and the move towards equality for all.”

Despite the fact that Part XI, “Ireland and the World” is the longest one in the book, comprising six chapters and Part XII, “Critical Responses” contains only one, they talk to each other meaningfully. Beckett, the probably most influential giant of Irish theatre re-appears in Part XI as well: Rónán McDonald in “Global Beckett” discusses the playwright’s haunting of and appropriation by theatres of the larger world in the era of postmodernism. After John P. Harrington’s chapter “Irish Theatre and the United States” and James Moran’s “Irish Theatre in Britain,” “Irish Theatre in Europe” by Ondřej Pilný raises timely questions about the classification of Irish plays in European countries and the transferability of their texts and contextual aspects. A subchapter in Pilný’s contribution posits O’Casey and Behan as test cases, opening a window to the politics of producing their plays in the Czech Lands and some other Central European countries. In a way like the three chapters about Irish theatre in the world, the last two chapters of Part XI also offer an overarching view from their angle. “‘Feast and Celebration’: The Theatre Festival and Modern Irish Theatre” by Patrick Lonergan reaches back to The Abbey Theatre Festival in 1938 before introducing the reader to the foundation of the Dublin Theatre Festival and its relationship

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with the state, concluding that the festival “has become one of the key spaces in which Ireland has learned to perform itself.” “Reinscribing the Classics, Ancient and Modern: The Sharp Diagonal of Adaptation” by Christina Hunt Mahony examines multiple aspects of adaptation work for the Irish stage from Gregory and Yeats to Tom Murphy’s rewriting of Russian plays in the 2000s. As a finely tuned coda, Eamonn Jordan’s chapter “Irish Theatre and Historiography” in Part XII pulls the threads together by revisiting many of the subjects the book addresses in the light of critical views, distinguishing also the various theoretical discourses that have informed scholarly approaches during the last few decades. While doing so, Jordan places due emphasis on the international character of critical responses by quoting and referring to scholars of Irish theatre from other countries in addition to Ireland.

Undeniably, there are points in the book where the reader might frown and disagree. For instance, in Part I Michael McAteer compares women characters in *The Importance of Being Earnest* and *Cathleen ni Houlihan* on the basis of superficialities, ignoring generic, stylistic and contextual differences when he states that “As Aunt Augusta storms into Algernon’s residence and demands that Jack Worthing find himself some parents fast, so the Old Woman of Beare pushes her way into the Gillanes’ little cottage to demand their son for a bit of sacrificing.” Also, the separate chapter on Yeats in Part II by Terence Brown is somewhat disappointing because it relies on and quotes from sources which date back to decades ago despite the fact that international Yeats studies have been flourishing and coming up with new findings since then. The relative absence of Lady Gregory from Parts II and III as a contributor to the nation building role of early twentieth century theatre is even more to be lamented. Her work is not devoted a separate chapter as is the case with Yeats and Synge; an introduction to the best of her plays is grouped together with other women’s writing for the theatre before 1960 by Cathy Leeney in Part VI. It may not be fair to mention other lacks in such a huge scholarly enterprise as *The Oxford Handbook of the Modern Irish Theatre*, yet it is hard to understand why George Fitzmaurice’s name is mentioned only once and just passing across the almost eight hundred pages.

On the whole, while it is comprehensive and visits many so far neglected or understudied areas, this volume remains reader friendly and free from the overuse of intimidating critical jargon, which ensures and enhances its appeal to both the general, and the professional reader. The detailed “Chronology” at the beginning is an extremely useful guide to the study of the material presented in the book, which itself strategically keeps to a chronological order where possible. Grene and Morash have done an incredible job, the fruit of which breaks new paths and reconnects with traditions in chapters by authors from three

generations and from several countries. The publication of this decoratively bound, detailed and high-quality handbook with a range of carefully selected and meaningfully placed illustrations is a real milestone in the history of writing about the modern Irish theatre, hopefully becoming available in all major university libraries. Grene and Morash's collection is an excellent source of culturally and philologically grounded scholarship, providing valuable information and an intriguingly adventurous intellectual journey for researchers and teachers of Irish theatre studies as well as theatre-lovers for many years to come.

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AN UNEXPLORED RELATIONSHIP: THE SUBLIME AND CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

Kamila Vránková, *Metamorphoses of the Sublime: From Ballads and Gothic Novels to Contemporary Children's Literature*. České Budějovice: Jihočeská univerzita v Českých Budějovicích – Pedagogická fakulta, 2019. 168 pp. ISBN: 978-80-7394-753-8.

This remarkable study of the sublime attracts attention by "suggesting various possibilities of the employment of the sublime in literary interpretation." This objective is achieved by simultaneously applying two rather diverse approaches: the discussion of the theories of the sublime in Pre-romantic and Romantic Anglophone literature in the wider context of a twentieth-century (chiefly Post-structuralist) philosophical thought, and the use of theoretical approaches to the sublime in the interpretations of the past and contemporary Anglophone children's literature. The complementary nature of these perspectives establishes the scholarly value of this book.

Interpretations of children's literature based on the aesthetic and ethical implications of the sublime demonstrate that good books for children do not contain simplified representations of reality derived from the authors' ideas of children's perceptions, feelings and understanding, but that they contain deeper and more complex levels of meaning connecting children's worlds with those of the adults. Moreover, valuable children's literature often shows the flawed nature of the adults' world. As the author points out in her interpretation of *The Wonder Book* by Nathaniel Hawthorne: "the adulthood [...] does not mean maturity, the experience that does not bring either knowledge or improvement."