

## Book Review

### *Making Theatre in Northern Ireland: Through and Beyond the Troubles*

By Tom Maguire (University of Exeter Press, 2006)

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Tom Maguire's stated focus in this book is interventionist theatre in a colonial context, and his aim is to relocate theatrical output from Northern Ireland, specifically concerned with representing 'the Troubles', within a 'wider understanding of the ways in which culture can intervene in processes of representation and public politics' (12). A further stated aim is to redress an imbalance in the ways in which certain playwrights, and a select number of their plays relating to the politics of the North, have been allocated serious critical weightings at the expense of many other writers and their work. In Maguire's opinion, this critical imbalance has not only 'skewed the sense of theatre history' (16) in Ireland, but has overlooked the importance of audience response in the North to a range of other productions.

There are some interesting aspects to this study that go beyond the stated aims and analyses, not least the fact that Maguire himself grew up as part of 'the aspirant Catholic working class in North Belfast', (12) and was involved in the popular political theatre movements in Scotland in the 1980s and 1990s, an experience that significantly influenced him to believe that theatre can contribute to an understanding of cultural identity that does not rely on narrow definitions of ethnicity. My own interest in this aspect of Maguire's work goes beyond the fact that I, too, grew up in North Belfast, but within its aspirant Protestant working class community, and am relieved finally to see an analysis of theatre in Northern Ireland that takes place within specific cultural and political theoretical contexts, and which starts from an understanding of the complexity of identity in the North. I also think Maguire's work here represents a refreshing challenge to existing and, in my opinion, largely outdated understandings of what it can mean to be a nationalist (or unionist) today in the context of Northern Ireland, and he achieves this challenge primarily through the lens of culture rather than politics, while making clear throughout that the two are always linked.

This challenge appears early in the book when Maguire explicitly states his insistence on the use of 'Northern Ireland', a normally highly contested term and state, which, for me, often takes up too much time in studies of Irish cultural politics, most often at the expense of any serious critical engagement with the various aspects of life and identity within the place. For Maguire, theatre in Northern Ireland is not only worthy of study in its own right, but is discussed and analysed as a cultural product within a geopolitical state that has never been entirely isolated or insulated from the influences of the rest of the island of Ireland and/or the British Isles as a whole:

disaggregating playwrights or plays from Northern Ireland which are concerned with The Troubles from the mainstream of Irish theatre history allows a closer analysis of the ways in which plays in performance are situated as part of the contexts within which they are rendered meaningful. The most important element of this context is that Northern Ireland is *both* Irish *and* British. If this is not acknowledged, much of the cultural specificity of the experience of living and working within or responding to the boundaries of this state is lost (8).

Maguire goes on to argue that events such as Seamus Heaney's 1985 resistance to being included in an anthology of British poetry, requires an accompanying acknowledgement that, even for nationalists, the experience of living within Northern Ireland has been one of hybridity, conditioned by both the British state and a sense of Irish identity. This is both a radical and liberating approach, which in no way undermines or precludes a questioning of the legitimacy of the political state of Northern Ireland. What it does allow, however, is an analysis of specific theatre output from Northern Ireland dealing with 'the Troubles' within a situated perspective that explores the ways in which 'a play in performance might engage its audience', (9) and, furthermore, permits the hybridity of Northern Irish identity to be discussed within a number of different cultural and political contexts, including Irish, British and European. For Maguire, this 'situatedness' also 'allows attention to be drawn to the inter-relationships between theatrical and other cultural representations of the conflict' (12).

The book contains nine chapters in all, each of which contains categories within which the plays are discussed: Chapter 1, 'Introduction: Staging Northern Ireland' contains 'Terms and Definitions', 'The Critical Context', 'Theatre, Ideology and Propaganda', and 'The Shape and Approach of the Book'. Chapter 2, 'Direct Engagement', addresses the issue of representing the immediate reality of a conflict situation and, accordingly, includes an extensive discussion of the pros and cons of realist drama, particularly in relation to the representation of political violence on stage. It also aims to 'identify plays which engage with the challenge of tackling the Troubles head-on' without resorting to clichés; Chapter 3, 'Authentic History', and Chapter 4, 'Failed Origins', include different approaches to the ways in which history has been perceived to have functioned as just 'one more arena in which the conflicts of the present are played out' (45); Chapter 5, 'Utopian Myths', Chapter 6, 'Gendered Troubles', and Chapter 7, 'Let the People Speak: Community and Theatre', include what might be expected from their titles; Chapter 8, 'Theatre After the Cease-fires',

attempts to negotiate with a post- conflict context; and, finally, Chapter 9, 'The Art and Politics of Staging the Troubles', draws together aspects of the earlier discussions to show that whilst much drama in the North has relied on cliché, there are many examples of plays that reveal extensive variation in approach and form. The book contains an extensive Bibliography, as well as a Playography, which contains details of new productions listed by year, playwright, title, production company, and venue. It also contains a number of illustrations, and a Chronology of Key Events.

Maguire acknowledges that there are 'countless variations of theme under which the material might have been grouped, any of which might have been just as illuminating' (19). But he justifies his choice of structure and category grouping on the grounds that his main aim has been to relate the selected plays to their actual conditions of performance and reception in an effort to delineate both the meanings of a performance and its significance for its audience, which, according to Maguire, 'extends beyond signification into the realms of the emotional and affective' (19). Maguire further acknowledges that the selection of productions for analysis was problematic, and explains his criteria for selection as being plays: 1) in which the political conflict is a dominant given, rather than an incidental backdrop; 2) that had their original production on the island of Ireland; 3) were written by people from or with a close association with Northern Ireland – the exception to this is his discussion of Rona Munro's *Bold Girls* (1990), which is included for its contribution to both internal and external conceptions of the relationship between gender and nationalism in Northern Ireland. The remaining plays examined were selected as exemplars of a particular kind of intervention.

One of Maguire's aims in this study is to redress what he considers to be existing imbalances in the critical discussion of certain plays within the existing canon of Northern Irish theatre, and he names Brian Friel's *Translations* and Frank McGuinness's *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme* as two plays that have received intense critical interest. As a result, Maguire has deliberately avoided using such 'canonised' drama in his analysis, preferring instead to concentrate on plays whose importance can be gauged through their overt engagement with the politics of 'the Troubles', and whose performance history and/or audience response has not been disengaged from the drama itself. In addition, Maguire's selection criteria include such things as an acknowledged bias towards productions that he has had first-hand experience of, as well as those plays for which there is a published script so that readers might be able to access the same. The exceptions to this are analyses of JustUs's *Binlids* (1997), Martin Lynch's *The Stone Chair* (1989), and Tim Loane's *Caught Red Handed* (2002), for which no published scripts are widely available. Overall, the book contains an extensive number of productions that have not attracted any significant critical attention.

I do, however, have a couple of gripes concerning the book. My first complaint relates to Maguire's insistence that his study takes place within a colonial context, which suggests that post-colonial theory will play a central part in the study. Maguire does state that the failure of the British state to accommodate the needs and aspirations of all the people within Northern Ireland has fuelled most of the recent Troubles, and that:

these elements need not imply a mechanistic application of concepts generalised from other contexts to Northern Ireland, an approach lambasted by Foster (2001), for example. Each context of colonialism is different in its particularity: post-colonial theory can alert us to ways in which specific power relations, nonetheless, have been configured historically, and continue to be configured across colonised societies (13).

But whilst he has extensively addressed and analysed the complexity of identity in the North, I don't feel that Maguire successfully situates the ways in which post-colonial theory has come to be played out in Northern Ireland (as opposed to the Republic of Ireland and/or Britain). His early statement that the colonial history of Northern Ireland is a 'particularly complex configuration given the presence of an indigenous population, a long-standing settler colony and the continuing presence of a former colonial power which operates on many levels as a metropolitan centre of influence' (13) is inadequate in capturing the ways in which post-colonial theory has functioned quite differently, politically, in the North of Ireland, and the ways in which it has been viewed in very different ways from within the two main political perspectives. These days, for many nationalists/republicans, post-colonial theory has come to represent the means by which past wrongs can be corrected and imbalances redressed. But it has also come to be understood as the opponent of political and historical revisionism, which is often favoured by unionists/loyalists as a means of moving forward. For republicans, 'moving forward' is a euphemism for side-stepping responsibility for past wrong-doings and a means of abrogating any responsibility for the social and cultural imbalances that exist in the North of Ireland as a result of its colonial history. As a result of their centrality to an understanding of Northern Irish cultural and political identity, these political perspectives play an important role in any cultural product, including drama.

My second gripe probably has less to do with Maguire than with his publisher, and relates to the persistent need to claim books such as this as being the 'first of its kind....', or the 'only one to address [one thing or another]'. In keeping with this demand, Maguire has felt the need to argue that he is doing something critically that either hasn't been done before, or hasn't been done well or extensively:

Whilst post-colonial theory has been introduced in some discussions .... and feminist critical approaches are being increasingly developed ... exploration of the ways in which a play in performance might engage its audience has been underdeveloped (9).

I would much prefer to see a work such as this sit comfortably alongside existing studies on theatre in the North, than set themselves up as doing something entirely separate. Perhaps this is just sour grapes on my part, since I'm one of the critics mentioned in Maguire's survey, but I don't think that good scholarly work, such as this, should feel the need to be quite so dismissive of other work, particularly when there is only a very limited sample of any individual critic's work mentioned or used in Maguire's assessment.

Although I acknowledge that work on audience response and performance history is all too rare, particularly in monographs, there has been a great deal done in this field to date and I honestly don't think a book as good as this one needs to set itself apart from such existing critical work.

However, these things are always about personal preference, and I would not want what I, personally, see as minor weaknesses to overshadow the fact that this is a significant and very welcome contribution to the field of Irish theatre criticism. It is beautifully produced and edited, and is written with a clarity often missing from contemporary studies, which is not to suggest that it is simplistic either in methodology or theoretical framing. Rather, Maguire has incorporated complex theoretical material into his discussions and analyses, without allowing that material to overshadow the main focus of the book, which consistently remains the production of drama in the context of the Troubles.

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### Editorial Note

*Performance Paradigm* issues 1 to 9 were reformatted and repaginated as part of the journal's upgrade in 2018. Earlier versions are viewable via Wayback Machine:

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