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The Art of Popular Culture: From ‘The Meeting of the Waters’ to *Riverdance*

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Hollywood and Contemporary Irish Drama

Shortly after winning the 2007 Man Booker Prize for her novel *The Gathering*, the Irish author Anne Enright explained to a BBC Radio 4 Today audience that “When people pick up a book they may want something happy that will cheer them up. In that case they really shouldn’t pick up my book. It’s the intellectual equivalent of a Hollywood weepie.”¹ The phrase “the intellectual equivalent of a Hollywood weepie” was immediately adopted by those seeking to characterize *The Gathering*, a novel that chronicles the attempts of its affluent Dublin heroine to grapple with her family history, her brother’s suicide, and her faltering marriage. By likening her novel to a Hollywood melodrama for smart people, Enright’s shorthand blithely breached commonly assumed divides between text and film, elite art and popular entertainments, Irish and American cultures. The casual nature of her characterization suggests an easy converse in the twenty-first century between the high culture of Irish literature and the low culture of popular Hollywood melodrama.

In recent decades, the clear distinctions between high art and popular art have been challenged by innumerable literary and cultural critics. But the “divide” once presumed to separate high and low cultures has been bridged by figures in the Irish theatre since the start of the twentieth century – even in that bastion of corrupted popular art, Hollywood.² Beginning in the early twentieth century, when D. W. Griffith and his band of actors first began making films in this small California suburb, Hollywood has been the hub of commercial film production, one where key figures in twentieth and twenty-first century Irish dramatic history, including Liam O’Flaherty, Micheál Mac Liammóir, Stephen Rea, and Conor McPherson, have worked with varying degrees of success.³

Today, I’d like to examine how contemporary Irish playwrights portray Hollywood and, in particular, how they engage the cinematic and narrative patterns we’ve come to associate with American movies. In Donal O’Kelly’s *Catalpa* (1995), Martin McDonagh’s *The Cripple of Inishmaan* (1996), Marie Jones’s *Stones in His Pockets* (1999), and Geraldine Hughes’s one-woman show, *Belfast Blues* (2003), the central characters grapple with the effects of Hollywood on their characters and their society. All four plays depict Irish and Northern Irish characters entangled in the film industry, men and women who trek between the States and Ireland and whose lives are indelibly marked by their direct association with Hollywood. By purveying a tantalizing version of the American Dream, Hollywood promises the aspiring Irish screenwriters and actors in these plays creative and financial opportunities unavailable in their homeland. Many of these characters, however, are thwarted in their pursuit of big screen success; consequently, they make evident the risks and costs of consenting to the Hollywood myth, and they expose its limits, in part by “talking back” to a film industry that fails them. Nonetheless, contemporary Irish plays maintain a surprising optimism about Hollywood – an optimism that suggests the American film industry provides these playwrights a productive tool for exploring Irish identity and history in a moment of rapidly changing, globalized popular culture.

A growing body of scholarship examines how mass culture - and in particular American mass culture - represents Ireland and Irish identity to local and global audiences. For instance, in *Screening Ireland* Lance Pettitt recounts how American,

British, and Irish film and television have conveyed their interpretations of Irishness to audiences, while the 2006 collection *The Irish in Us* examines cultural forms ranging from television shows, country music, and Hollywood film to advance the claim that Americans have embraced "Irishness" because it allows them ethnicity without abandoning the benefits of whiteness.⁴ We have also been treated to incisive readings of now canonical films directed by Americans like Robert Flaherty's *Man of Aran* (1934) and John Ford's *The Quiet Man* (1952). In the hands of literary, film, and cultural critics, these films become devices exposing American perceptions of an Irish investment in the land, imperialism, or regionalism.⁵ There are, of course, notable exceptions to this critical trend of reading Ireland through American eyes. Elizabeth Cullingford, for instance, has studied how Irish writers including Roddy Doyle, Patrick McCabe, and Tom Murphy employ tropes derived from the Hollywood Western to critique imperialism - a point also voiced by Fintan O'Toole and Luke Gibbons in their observations about the intermingling of Irish and American frontier culture.⁶ Rather than explore further how American mass culture represents Ireland and Irishness, today I'd like to turn the tables and examine how these plays - as well as Jones's *The Girls in the Big Picture* (1986) and Darren Thornton's *Wunderkind* (2006) - portray American popular culture, and in particular how they depict Hollywood and classical narrative film.

Told from the point-of-view of Matthew Kidd, a failed screenwriter, Donal O'Kelly's one-man play *Catalpa* (1995) recounts an actual historical event: the 1876 rescue of six Fenian prisoners from Fremantle, a British penal colony in Australia.⁷ This successful mission, led by the American whaling ship captain George Anthony and organized by John Devoy's Fenians, was celebrated with great fervor by Irish-Americans. In contrast, Kidd's pitch of his film depicting the *Catalpa* rescue to "those tinseltown know-it-all morons from Hollywood" is a dismal failure, due in part to his inability to articulate his vision, to physically control his hostility, and to respond nonchalantly to the producers during their meeting.⁸ From the outset, Hollywood stymies the Irish writer, driving him to self-recrimination rather than self-realization. As Kidd laments, "Foolish man! Foolish foolish man! What I could have said was...What I should have said was...Why didn't I just **show** them...The pictures in my head...Why didn't I - " (12).

Upon expressing this regret, Kidd takes on the posture of a "gawking seabird" and the stage lighting signals "the change from the sad grey world of Matthew's bedsit to the vibrant technicolour world of his imagination" (12). Kidd then performs over twenty different speaking roles, as well as providing various sound effects to convey the planning and execution of the Fremantle rescue, as well as the sea journey to Australia and the return to America. Throughout its two acts, the play engages familiar Hollywood narrative tropes: George Anthony is portrayed as the poor but noble upstart who marries above his social station and through heroics must prove his suitability as spouse to the beautiful Gretta and parent to their young daughter Pearl; the narrative climax captures the narrow escape of George, his loyal crew, and the rescued prisoners from the British fleet that outmatches them in material resources but not in spirit; and the neat conclusion segues from the ticker-tape parade welcoming the returning Fenian heroes to New York, to George, who has gallantly refused public glory for domestic contentment, returning to the wife and child who faithfully await his return.

In *Catalpa*, O'Kelly masterfully uses language to depict images recognizable from classical Hollywood cinema. For instance, as narrator, Kidd describes the opening scene of the film from the point of view of a seabird that flies over the sea coast,

providing a sweeping point of view shot that pans over the “Choppy choppy waves green-brown tossing toss-schloss waves” (13) and the nineteenth-century whaling town, New Bedford, Massachusetts, to establish the setting of the film. The narrator then shifts from the bird’s view to an omniscient perspective in order to “Zoom in close to an upstairs window in the primitive office of clerks, where a young man observes you [the seabird] through a telescope – Kevin Costner or Tom Cruise – you flap your wings and rise but George Anthony – for it is he – keeps the telescope trained on the dark grey horizon” (15). At this moment, the point of view shifts again and becomes aligned with that of George, the film’s protagonist.

This opening scene employs the onomatopoeia and sound symbolism of poetry to recreate the sea waves or the bird’s flapping wings, as well as playing with syntax and employing repetition, rhyme, and rhythm to convey the visual world of Kidd’s film. *Catalpa* is Hollywood ekphrasis, a poetic and dramatic description of a film, a play where sound and sense work together to create an image in the audience’s mind. But those poetic devices are tightly bound to cinematic convention. O’Kelly exploits our shared fluency in Hollywood visual forms, harnessing in this opening scene our awareness of the establishing shot (the extreme long shot or bird’s eye view) and the screen caption announcing place. He also understands the power of film editing; for instance, we are presented with two images – the hero’s slyly phallic “telescope trained” (15) on a whaling ship and “poor Pearl teething...round red cheeks” (15). These images are juxtaposed to demonstrate the tension between George’s affinity with the sea and his love for his family. O’Kelly also references Irish literary tradition in this scene. The sound symbolism recalls the opening scene of Joyce’s *Ulysses* in which Stephen Dedalus walks along the Sandymount shore. Through his allusion to Stephen, O’Kelly recalls another unappreciated artist in crisis (hence Stephen’s affinity with Kidd) and another young man torn between family and vocation (hence Stephen’s affinity with George).

While the film within the play elicits from Kidd a virtuoso performance, it is book-ended by his failure in Hollywood – and Hollywood’s failure of its audiences. In the opening scene of *Catalpa*, Kidd confesses, “I come along all arrogance and boldly striking out – pioneering new horizons, taking the art of cinema to previously unscaled heights: - Matthew Kidd, Oscar-winning screenwriter of – *Catalpa!* The Greatest Movie....never made!” (11). But as my brief summary reveals, Kidd’s professional hubris isn’t unfounded. His film would tidily suit any number of film genres: the big-budget historical epic, the underdog story in which ramshackle immigrants do battle against the evil empire, the love story that reaches across classes, and perhaps most obviously, the rousing maritime adventure film, a genre containing films from Errol Flynn’s *The Sea Hawk* (1940, dir. Michael Curtiz) to *Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World* (2003, dir. Peter Weir). The devices O’Kelly poaches from commercial film, in tandem with the remarkable language of the play and an astounding performance, successfully lure the theatre audience into Kidd’s film, as the critical acclaim heaped on *Catalpa* testifies. However, theatre business ultimately robs the play of the film’s consolations of heroic achievement and domestic harmony. When Kidd’s account of the *Catalpa* adventure comes to an end, the lighting alters and shifts attention away from spirited performance to dreary bedsit, and the play ends with a “Slow fade to black” (63). The film within the play celebrates individual accomplishment and collaboration, the performance confirms the power of language and individual imagination to create vivid images. But the final image of the play is silent and bleak, and reminds the audience of the reality lurking behind the fictive consolations of Hollywood film.

In addition to its critique of popular culture, *Catalpa* highlights the ways in which Irish history dovetails neatly with Hollywood convention. In part, this convergence reflects claims scholars have long made about Irish historical events such as the 1916 Easter Rising being deliberately performative.⁹ *Catalpa* suggests a similar affinity between nineteenth-century political events and twentieth- (and twenty-first) century commercial film. In particular, the play reveals that Irish nationalist discourse and classical Hollywood cinema both rehearse familiar tropes and invoke stereotypes to elicit a form of canned sentiment from their audiences.

When George first meets John Devoy, the real-life Fenian leader who planned the *Catalpa* mission, the play's dialogue grafts poetry onto popular film, but it also links these high and low cultural forms to the romantic rhetoric of Irish nationalism:

Devoy: Ten years ago shimmer shimmer...
in the land of my birth shimmer shimmer...
revolution freedom throw the yoke of oppresh –

shimmer shimmer into flashback.

Fighting Fenians wait for the word to rise up and
strike the blow that'll break the grip of the
Saxon knave.

Even Irishmen in the British Army swear their
allegiance to the secret Fenian army the IRB –
Irish Republican Brotherhood brotherhood
brotherhood sinister music to suit.

High wideshot cramped attic of Dublin pub,
hunched backs in whispered sedition,
zoom down and in on central bunch of six in
British Army uniforms bibles in hand: -

- I swear, in the name of God,
Cranston, Darragh, Hassett, Hogan, Harrington
and Wilson,

- and in the name of dead generations....

Door bursts in,
soldiers and polis they swarm,
chaotic with panic and fear: (21)

Here, Devoy recounts the arrest of the Fremantle Six, the men whom George is charged to rescue. The "shimmer, shimmer" of the sea describes not only the environment, but also the flickering visual effect that sometimes prefigures a flashback in film or television. When spoken by Devoy and woven into the republican idiom wafting throughout this passage, the words "shimmer shimmer" also allude to the allure and dangers inherent in republicanism: despite the resilience of nationalist cliché – reflected in phrases like "revolution freedom," "Saxon knave," and "dead generations" – the ideals of republicanism, as we see from the compromised Fenian values demonstrated throughout the mission, waver. These political ideals are a mirage, the text suggests, a fantasy or apparition shaped by memory, a point underscored by the fact that this is a flashback from Devoy's point of view. The "shimmer shimmer" also intimates that national affiliation can blind individuals to the always changing nature of political rhetoric and commitments. Thus, the play allows for an interesting exploration of the revisionism that occurs when Irish national history meets Hollywood.

The film *Catalpa* also heavily celebrates the value of male community – a theme that drives not only Irish republicanism, but also the genres of the heroic epic and the maritime film. In Kidd's film, George's commitment to his family is offered as the prime motivation for his willingness to lead the Fremantle rescue. Yet the bulk of the play-film centers on his interchanges with other men, ranging from his wealthy father-in-law to the presumptuous Devoy, his lascivious cohort John Breslin, and the fanatic IRB member Duggan. In different ways, the sea journey and rescue regularly advance the familiar notion that social and political sentiment binds men in productive ways. George and his whaling shipmates suffer poignantly when they lose one of their crew to an accident; the loyal First Mate Smith heroically defies captain's orders to rescue George and his cohorts when their return to the ship goes awry; George and Breslin reach détente despite their different aims. This focus on masculinity is furthered by the one-man theatrical performance of *Catalpa*, which replicates the homo-social world of the naval adventure film; in these films, the majority, if not all, of the roles are performed by men – just as, in the one-man show of *Catalpa*, all of the roles are performed by one man. In both the film and the play, audiences are allowed the less familiar pleasure of watching men perform a wide range of intense emotions, as well as offering male bodies as a spectacle for display and consumption.

But in its depiction of gender, Kidd's performance reveals some of the worst features of the Hollywood adventure film. Since the appearance of Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" in 1975, critics have engaged with her influential claim regarding the "male gaze," a point of view that denies women agency and relegates them to objects.¹⁰ Though Mulvey's assertions have been belabored, Kidd's account of the Fremantle rescue provides a textbook example of her thesis. In his film, the women are objects of erotic desire: both Breslin and George yearn for Marie, the sexy French maid. They are victims: Gretta, Pearl, Marie, and George's mother-in-law are all somehow betrayed by men. And they are disembodied moral arbiters: George's mother-in-law, Gretta, and Marie loom as specters, chastising George for his commitment to the mission. Here, the invocation of Hollywood film reinforces the reductive stereotypes of women embedded in this historical narrative.

The gender stereotypes in the film are exacerbated, I would argue, by the nature of the one (or two) person play. Interestingly, many contemporary Irish dramas about Hollywood are one or two person shows: *Catalpa* is a one-man play, *Belfast Blues* is a one-woman play, and *Stones in His Pockets* is a two-person play. Performed with few or no costume, set, or property changes, these are "talky" productions that refuse the visual spectacle associated not only with commercial film, but also with strands of popular Irish theater from Boucicault to *Riverdance*. The "spectacle" in these productions arises from the ability of actors to adopt and dexterously perform a variety of roles in a single, live performance. But even the most dazzling performances frequently reduce gender to mincing pantomime or burly exaggeration. However, in *Catalpa* – and in *Stones in His Pockets*, which I'll discuss later – the exaggerated "drag" performance of femininity by a male actor further diminishes the already marginalized female characters.

In his notes to the play, O'Kelly explains that he wanted to explore heroism through the story of the Fremantle mission, but to avoid "Rambo-like storylines which infect human development in a very debilitating way" (8). He posited that the "obvious way" to tell the story was "to write a movie," but concluded "a storyline like *Catalpa* would be a multi-million dollar blockbuster, with all the conservative ramifications that entails" (8). Making a clear distinction between art and commerce, O'Kelly

chooses the form of the theatrical one-man show with its simple mise-en-scène to avoid the corrupting forces of Hollywood. But the play itself belies this reductive reasoning. In *Catalpa*, the generic, character, and visual conventions of the Hollywood film add emotion and depth to his play, as well as riveting the audience. The special effects of *Catalpa* are of the “imagination” (10) – but its muse is clearly the blockbuster film. So the play offers a complex critique of Hollywood. It focuses on the failure of the Irish screenwriter, as well as the larger failure of the Hollywood system to recognize talent. But these disappointments are ultimately transcended by the virtuoso performance Kidd offers in the privacy of his bedsit. After his failure in Hollywood, Kidd can unfurl his imagination and unleash a totally compelling performance shaped by his welding of evocative poetic language and his utter command of the visual and narrative tropes that drive the adventure film. As a result, *Catalpa* ultimately portrays Hollywood as the provocative and productive stimulus for better Irish art.

This same mix of failure and promise characterizes another contemporary Irish play engaged with Hollywood, *The Cripple of Inishmaan* (1996). Martin McDonagh situates the story of his protagonist Cripple Billy within the filming of the 1934 documentary *Man of Aran*. The promised arrival of the American film director Robert Flaherty and his crew upends life in Inishmaan and stimulates in Cripple Billy the desire to become a film star. Ironically, life on this rural western island is powerfully informed by mass culture even before Flaherty’s appearance: Billy sits on the hedgebank and stares endlessly at the cows, as if he were enraptured by a film or television program; the elderly Kate and Eileen act their roles as Billy’s “pretend” aunties since they are in fact not related to him; Johnypateenmike behaves as if he were the Louella Parsons of Inishmaan, exchanging tidbits of gossip with a rapt audience for power and goods; and, more generally, the community is characterized by the extreme, senseless violence of a Hollywood action film.¹¹ But as Johnypateenmike reveals, the advent of the American film company promises to place those behaviors in their proper mass cultural context by offering to “make film stars of whosoever should be chose to take part in it and will take them back to Hollywood then and be giving them a life free of work, or anyways only acting work which couldn’t be called work at all, it’s only talking” (13). Here, Hollywood promises the denizens of this impoverished community relief from the labors that consume their lives.

A key term in most late twentieth-century explorations of Irish identity, authenticity is a particularly vexed topic in studies of McDonagh and his creative work.¹² The realistic sets and full casting of *Cripple* allow for an easier embrace of Irish authenticity. The play does not demand from its audience the imaginative leaps required by one- or two-person plays nor does it so aggressively remind audiences of the performer’s role in creating these characters. Even so, the content of *Cripple* initially appears to suggest that essential national or ethnic identities are irrelevant. Despite the fact that Johnny insists success in Hollywood is predicated on good looks, Cripple Billy travels to Aran in order to audition, and he is swept away to Hollywood by the director for a screen test to fill what the fisherman Babbybobby imagines must be “good parts in Hollywood films about cripple fellas” (61). When Billy soon after returns to Inishmaan, he explains that the filmmakers chose not to cast him, and found instead “a blond lad from Fort Lauderdale” (92) to play the crippled Irishman, a part Billy was literally born to play. By divesting the Irish character of all but his race and gender, Hollywood highlights a brand of Irishness defined by whiteness, masculinity – and handicaps, literal and figurative. McDonagh depicts Hollywood as a meritocracy that values talent over essence: as the “Yank” director

explained, "'Ah, better to get a normal fella who can act crippled then a crippled fella who can't fucking act at all'" (92).

A play about the movies, *Cripple* highlights the confusion between reality and reproduction, genuine and counterfeit encouraged by theatre and film. Ironically, Billy appears most authentically Irish when he is trapped alone running his lines in a squalid hotel room in Hollywood. When he rehearses the script, he gives voice in a rich Irish peasant dialect to themes of mother-love and oppression. A verse of "The Croppy Boy" in the film's dialogue allows him both to perform and to inhabit his actual homesickness, an instance that occurs notably when he is without an audience. Aidan Arrowsmith reads this moment and Billy's subsequent rejection of Hollywood as a sign of "Billy's distaste for such a stereotyped representation," but Billy is more than just an enlightened Irishman rejecting emigrant nostalgia.¹³ The scripted grief expressed by Billy, a monologue that addresses imminent death and mourning for home and family, also allows him a space for real feeling. This interlude grants him permission to inhabit stereotypes that encapsulate and reflect his genuine emotional responses to the displacement and isolation engendered by emigration. The script affords Billy the legitimate opportunity to feel part of a larger community, just as the shared rhetoric of religious ritual provides a feeling of community to its adherents. Billy wisely feels conflicted about the canned sentiment articulated by this film, but he nonetheless identifies, however briefly, with its content.

Like Matthew Kidd in *Catalpa*, Billy finds a moment of transcendence thanks to his Hollywood-induced failure and isolation. These plays provide a provocative refutation of the collaborative nature of film and theatre by suggesting that the artist produces his best work in isolation. Of course, the immediate contact with Hollywood enables each of these characters to give voice to his best work as screenwriter and screen actor, respectively. A site notorious for subordinating the vision of the artist to mass taste and commerce, Hollywood becomes a catalyst for their finest productions. Though of course, the greater irony is that each of these men languishes without an audience for his opus.

In *Cripple*, McDonagh ultimately advocates the salutary effects of Hollywood on Irish identity. Billy's excursion to Hollywood reveals to him that his character is not as fixed as he had imagined when living in Inishmaan. When he returns home, he tells Babbybobby that his identity as the abandoned cripple boy almost drove him to suicide, but that his adventures in Hollywood proved to him that "there are plenty round here just as crippled as me, only it isn't on the outside it shows" (92). By the end of the play, the minor characters rest easy in the fact that "Ireland mustn't be such a bad place so if the Yanks want to come to Ireland to do their filmmaking" (14). And Cripple Billy gets the girl; the attractive, belligerent Helen for whom he pines the entire play finally agrees to a courtship, as long as it falls under cover of night so as not to ruin her reputation. But unfortunately, at the play's conclusion, the myth Billy constructed about himself to find his way to Hollywood – that he was dying of tuberculosis – also turns out to be true. In the final scene, McDonagh offers audiences the pathos of his protagonist's promised death. Nodding again to Hollywood narrative convention, McDonagh models his conclusion after that of a "weepee," even as he acknowledges his debt to the tradition of modern Irish drama.¹⁴ As with Christy in *The Playboy of the Western World*, the lead character's brush with celebrity is the very device that consolidates his actual and his performative identities; Billy has now literally become the tubercular victim he and Hollywood

invented, just as Christy literally becomes the “playboy” he and his community together constructed in Synge’s 1907 play.¹⁵

Even amidst the nihilistic violence that appears to captivate him, McDonagh provides his audiences the heart-warming narrative of uplift found in popular film. In a recent essay, Laura Eldred notes the affinities between McDonagh’s work and late twentieth-century horror films; she identifies characteristics his plays share with the “average slasher film” such as the expected “violence, gore, pessimism, and camp, self-conscious humour in plots that seem to be more variations on a theme than individual and distinct texts.”¹⁶ This violence, in my opinion, distracts us from the fact that McDonagh is ultimately a profoundly nostalgic, deeply romantic playwright. Under the veneer of *Cripple’s* overt brutality and human unkindness, MacDonagh provides and pleases his audiences with a syrupy illustration of a cohesive, empathetic Irish community and an emigrant narrative that allows for individual achievement, which comes in the late twentieth-century form of self-actualization.

Marie Jones’s *Stones in His Pockets* (1999) presents a plot arc fairly similar to *The Cripple of Inishmaan*.¹⁷ In this two-man play, a Hollywood film company descends on a contemporary small town in County Kerry to film a historical drama entitled *The Quiet Valley*, which centers on Irish dispossession. The play focuses on two extras in the film: Jake, who has recently returned to this small village after living in the States, and Charlie, who hopes to pawn his screenplay for an action film onto someone with the influence to produce it. The making of this film disrupts the community, largely because it disturbs the polarities of truth and fiction, native and foreigner, authentic and imposter. As Charlie ironically notes, “half of America here is playing Irish people and they say I am the outsider.”¹⁸

In this western village, Hollywood and film celebrity have infiltrated the ways of thinking. Characters understand the unfamiliar through celebrity touchstones: twelve-year-olds are inspired by film to emigrate to America to become like “McCauley what’s his name” (59), and all normal children, according to Brother Gerard, imagine they will grow up to become “rock stars, film stars, footballers” (66). Everyone wants an audience. These Irish villagers also recognize the cultural capital earned through celebrity, or contact with celebrity. When the American film star Caroline Giovanni flirts with Jake, Charlie warns him to be careful of the tabloid gossip that might follow, “You know...Extra Gives Movie Star One in a Caravan...know, like your man Hugh Grant and the prostitute” (43). Jake replies, “Made her famous didn’t it...” (43) – though this makes one wonder how many, a decade or so later, recall the name of Divine Brown.

Finding himself in the midst of Hollywood surreality, Jake’s drug-addicted second cousin, Sean Harkin, kills himself in the middle of filming. In part, Jake blames himself. He fears that Sean concluded from Jake’s failed ventures in New York that “there was no American Dream” (60). Another character, Fin, claims that Sean killed himself because he found himself “right in the middle of the world he fantasised about...you know, the beautiful American star, the movies” (74). In reality, the Hollywood fantasy failed to transform Sean and his Irish community from “nothin’” to “somebody.” Turning briefly from its insistent comedy, the play lights on the tragedy of filling Sean’s head with delusions of fame, and of reducing the elderly Mickey’s “whole way of life” to merely “a backdrop for an American movie” (71). Yet despite this hint of skepticism about the Hollywood happy ending, Charlie holds tight to the fantasy that “talent is talent...it wins through in the end” (30). And Jake intends to transform Sean’s story into a movie in which “the stars become the extras and the

extras become the stars...so it becomes Sean's story, and Mickey and all the people of this town" (87). The men still search for comic resolution, and intend to sell out Sean's suffering to make a successful film that they believe more accurately reflects the contradictions of contemporary rural Ireland.¹⁹

In this comedy, Caroline Giovanni is a true Hollywood celebrity. She's an American actress, who (like the real-life Julia Roberts in the films *Michael Collins* and *Mary Reilly*) struggles with her Irish accent. Countered against this young American beauty is Mickey, an aged villager who has built a life around his work years ago as an extra in *The Quiet Man*. But the dreams of Charlie and Jake are predicated on their lack of celebrity. As Jake says, "we have nothing to lose, no money, no reputation, no assets" (88). Under the radar of film celebrity, there rests real hope for risk-taking and for creativity. Though she celebrates the promise of Hollywood and mass audiences, Jones remains equivocal about that success. But that equivocation points to the potential triumph of these two Irishmen. When Jake tells Charlie he is "full of shit" (88) for holding fantasies about his script, it becomes the ultimate compliment because he mimics Caroline's language – though the mincing stage performance of Caroline drains her character of the potential to be much more than a signpost for formulaic Hollywood femininity. Nonetheless, Jake and Charlie's mimicry of the American star's language suggests their own potential achievement in Hollywood, which Caroline describes as "a crock of shit" (24). Even the final shot of the imagined film ends on "a big mound of steaming cow clap" (93). Ireland through the lens of Hollywood might be shit, but it sells.

In *The Girls in the Big Picture* (1986), a play authored by Marie Jones in collaboration with other members of The Charabanc Theatre Company, Hollywood plays a less central, but still important, role in the depiction of rural life in Northern Ireland. This play focuses on the Irish consumers for classical film, rather than on those who hope to make these films. Set in the 1960s, this play chronicles the lives of three thirty-something, unmarried women in a small farming town. Their trips to the cinema do not provide a form of release but underscore the deprivations they suffer because of their position as "spinsters" in the stultifying social climate of their town. In one early scene, the women attend the screening of a "weepie" in which the heroine is falsely accused of betraying her lover, then struck by a car. When her lover discovers his tragic mistake, he wakes her from her coma "like 'Sleeping Beauty' from a kiss" (178), and the film culminates in their reconciliation and engagement.²⁰ Yet in this play, the film's fantasy falls flat; while watching the movie, the women are plagued by derisive comments from a group of young men in the audience, who mock their weight, their marital status, and their lack of sexual appeal. Like McDonagh's *Cripple*, *The Girls in the Big Picture* shows us an Irish film audience that engages the screen and their fellow audience members directly, behaving more like nineteenth-century audiences for the melodrama than twentieth-century audiences of classical narrative film.

Though their action unfurls in the twentieth century, *The Cripple of Inishmaan*, *Stones in His Pockets*, and *The Girls in the Big Picture* are all set in sites that resemble the Hollywood fantasy of a bucolic Ireland uncontaminated by the ills of cosmopolitan modernity. *Cripple* unfolds on Inishmaan among the Aran Islands off the coast of Galway; *Stones in His Pockets* in "A scenic spot near a small village in County Kerry" (14); and *Girls* in a rural Northern Ireland farming town. In each play, the appearance of American film, or the industry that produces it, troubles the routines of the community, but never radically. There are, at best, intimations that this encounter with global mass media might be transformative, though more

frequently the plays suggest that life will proceed as usual once the screen grows dark or the film crew leaves. Frequently, these plays about Hollywood not only suggest that the Irish may soon mine their own backyards for cinematic profit, but also insinuate that contemporary Irish playwrights have joined a long tradition of American film directors from John Ford to Ron Howard who seek global audiences by pandering to familiar notions of Irishness in order to sell their product.

Many of the characters in these Hollywood plays are marked by what the film critic Dudley Andrew labels "demi-emigration," a term that describes the "routine dislocation" in which Irish filmmakers and performers "entered the orbit of the Hollywood marketplace in the satellite London exchange."²¹ Relieved of the sharp break and permanent dislocation that characterized Irish emigration in earlier centuries, these characters move comfortably and intermittently between Ireland and elsewhere, a state of impermanent artistic exile Dermot Bolger has described as a style of commuter culture.²² The playwrights under discussion have themselves experienced a similar form of "demi-emigration," and in their plays the "routine dislocation" of the characters is marked not only by their traverse between Ireland and America, but also by circumstance. All or some portion of each unfolds in temporary shelter: a bedsit, a whaling ship, a film trailer, hotel rooms in Ireland and abroad, a home soon to be evacuated for a job or a marriage or the grave. As suggested by these sites, there is a fundamental lack of rootedness in these plays, but one rendered at times nostalgic since, at least in both *Cripple* and *Stones*, the "commuting" characters return to Ireland's west. As the famous Hollywood icon Dorothy from MGM's *Wizard of Oz* confirms, "There's no place like home."

These plays also stage an Ireland untouched by the wealth of the Celtic Tiger or by recent Northern Irish affluence. In *Catalpa*, *Cripple*, and *Stones*, the central characters eagerly, sometimes desperately, seek the fortune promised by success in Hollywood. In his imaginary revision of his meeting with the producers, Kidd beseeches, "Buy my screenplay, give me the cash, and shoot the movie to make all of our Dreams Come True!" (12). In *Cripple*, Johnnypateenmike depicts the filming of *Man of Aran* strictly in terms of the wealth of its participants: Flaherty is "one of the most famous and richest Yanks there is" whose film "will cost o'er a million dollars," and Johnny marvels that Colman King, the native lead of the film, will make "a hundred dollars a week" despite being "ugly as a brick of baked shite" (13). In *Stones*, the extras sneak food from craft services to feed their families, while Charlie laments the loss of his "video shop that went bust" (18), and Jake announces his distaste for "outsiders coming in and taking jobs" (20). Each play turns on the depiction of an Irish poverty that might be corrected by American affluence - a dynamic arguably less relevant in the aftermath of the Celtic Tiger and in light of the falling dollar.

The relationship between Irish poverty and American affluence comes to light in another contemporary drama focused on Hollywood, *Belfast Blues* (2003), which transfers a concern with celebrity in general and Hollywood more particularly to war-torn Belfast of the 1970s and 80s. This one-woman show, written and performed by Geraldine Hughes, stages her coming of age in Divis Flats, a site of alcoholism and drug use, poverty, and sectarian violence.²³ The early turning point of this autobiographical drama is the moment when Hughes, at age thirteen, is chosen from among 2500 other Irish girls to star in the 1984 made for television movie about the Troubles, *The Children in the Crossfire*. The American director selects Hughes for her poignant description of her alcoholic da's "illness" and its effects on the family. This child's dramatic depiction of her suffering becomes the device that allows her to

escape Northern Ireland. In this docudrama, Hughes's celebrity as a child offers little upon her return to Belfast other than torment from her fellow schoolmates. But she maintains contact with George, the American director of the film. George offers to pay her tuition, and Hughes describes her exodus from Belfast to attend UCLA's School of Theatre, Film, and Television. In Hollywood, she found safety and success.

Unlike *Catalpa*, *Cripple*, *Stones in His Pockets*, or *The Girls in the Big Picture*, *Belfast Blues* maintains an unequivocally rosy attitude toward Hollywood and celebrity. The nuns at Hughes's parochial school seem completely unfazed by offering their pupils up to the American film company – these girls are simply urged to behave themselves since they reflect on the school and on Catholicism more generally. Similarly, Hughes's parents are represented as entirely comfortable with sending their thirteen-year-old daughter to Hollywood. When the film airs, they proudly screen the videotape for friends, but largely understand Hughes's success as financial gain, one that quickly dries up in the rough poverty of Catholic Belfast. Hughes herself presents Hollywood and celebrity as her salvation: this is a textbook "rags to riches" story, patterned on the triumphalism of popular nineteenth-century immigrant tales and on the American Dream narratives that color many Hollywood films. She seems to have internalized this logic, and happily capitalizes on the public fervor for the story of a "wee girl" who through the munificence of American television survives and even thrives amidst the Troubles.

With the exception of *The Girls in the Big Picture*, the main characters of these plays are on a quest for the affluence and renown that they presume Hollywood can offer. They seek an escape from the penury of Ireland and Northern Ireland, as well as larger audiences for their art. On the surface, we see Hollywood thwarting or perverting the ambitions of these Irish characters. Yet in these plays, failure in Hollywood serves ultimately as a catalyst for some positive development: in *Catalpa*, Kidd can now adeptly perform and completely control his glorious account of the Fremantle mission; in *Cripple*, Billy can finally embrace identity and community, despite their frailties and failures; in *Stones*, Jake and Charlie are inspired to rewrite their history and the history of the community; in *Belfast Blues*, Hughes escapes the violent, sordid conditions of her Belfast youth. These plays do not purvey the unremittingly dark critique of Hollywood found in the work of American authors from Nathanael West and Bruce Wagner, to David Mamet and David Rabe. Rather, cross-cultural fertilizations – of Irish and American, high and low culture, anonymity and celebrity – allow the central characters a more authentic, and sometimes more fulfilling, existence. The Irish, it appears, can distill from mass culture its elusive promise.

Even so, each play holds tight to literary tradition, and a particularly Irish literary tradition, which it then runs through the mill of Hollywood generic, narrative, and cinematic conventions. Whether understood as film or play, *Catalpa* is an epic, a work driven, according to O'Kelly, by the question, "What is a hero?" (7). The social determinism and pessimism of *The Cripple of Inishmaan* finds its precedents in the film work of Martin Scorsese or Quentin Tarantino, two directors to whom McDonagh acknowledges a debt, but it also clearly engages with literary naturalism.²⁴ Both *Stones in His Pockets* and *The Girls in the Big Picture* point to the rural realism of Irish drama, and *Belfast Blues* nods to O'Casey's tenement dramas even as it employs documentary images and television footage to lure audiences into its world. Like *Belfast Blues*, Darren Thornton's *Wunderkind* (2006) embraces multi-media spectacle in its narrative about a young Irish director, Sean Quinn, who explains the process of making his first feature, which has been acquired and re-edited by

Hollywood producers eager to transform the film into a fast-paced crowd pleaser. Another one-man play about Irish auteurs and Hollywood, *Wunderkind* unfolds as Sean awaits the final product of his film alone in a London hotel room.²⁵

In their plays about Hollywood, Donal O'Kelly, Martin McDonagh, Marie Jones, Geraldine Hughes, and Darren Thornton capitalize on a widespread familiarity with the formal and thematic norms of commercial American cinema for a variety of reasons: to bridge the divide between high and low cultures; to critique and to celebrate the effects of mass culture on Ireland and Irish identity; to reframe our understanding of spectacle; and to recalibrate established literary traditions. Though these plays offer strong rebukes to Hollywood for its avarice, its arrogance, and its inability to recognize Irish talent, they ultimately advocate for the positive influence of American commercial film on contemporary Irish drama. By reworking narrative and formal conventions derived from Hollywood films, these contemporary Irish and Northern Irish plays demonstrate a productive relationship between high culture and mass culture. The widespread popularity of these productions suggests that they successfully provide audiences an experience that holds the broad appeal of commercial cinema, even as they confirm the unique attributes of live theatre.

NOTES

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¹ Charlotte Higgins, "Anne Enright Takes the Booker," *Guardian* 16 October 2007 <http://books.guardian.co.uk/manbooker2007/story/0,,2192570,00.html>

² The term "divide" comes from Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 1986).

³ For instance, Liam O'Flaherty, who wrote two Irish-language dramas in addition to his corpus of novels and short stories, struggled there as a screenwriter and authored a stunning satire of Hollywood, *Hollywood Cemetery* (1935); Gate Theatre founder Micheál Mac Liammóir's 1952 memoir *Put Money in Thy Purse* recounts his experience performing Iago in Orson Welles' 1949 film adaptation of Shakespeare's *Othello* (1940); in the wake of founding the Field Day Theatre Company in 1980, Stephen Rea has become a bona fide Hollywood star; and the playwright Conor McPherson has in different capacities found success in the film industry: as an actor in *Inside I'm Dancing* (2004, dir. Damien O'Donnell), released in the States as *Rory O'Shea Was Here*, as a writer in *I Went Down* (1997), and as a director in the Michael Caine vehicle *The Actors* (2003), which he co-wrote with Neil Jordan.

⁴ Lance Pettitt, *Screening Ireland: Film and Television Representation* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2000); *The Irish in Us: Irishness, Performativity, and Popular Culture*, ed. Diane Negra (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2006).

⁵ On *Man of Aran*, see Luke Gibbons, "Romanticism, Realism, and Irish Cinema," *Cinema and Ireland*, eds. Kevin Rockett, Luke Gibbons, John Hill (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse UP, 1987) 194-257; Martin McLoone, "Man of Aran," *The Cinema of Britain and Ireland*, ed. Brian McFarlane (London: Wallflower, 2005) 41-51; Pettitt, *Screening Ireland* 77-80. On *The Quiet Man*, see (among other essays): William Dowling, "John Ford's Festive Comedy: Ireland Imagined in *The Quiet Man*," *Éire-Ireland* 36:3-4 (Fall/Winter 2002): 190-211; Luke Gibbons, *The Quiet Man*, Ireland into Film, series eds. Keith Hopper and Gráinne Humphreys (Cork: Cork University Press, 2002); Cheryl Herr, *Critical Regionalism and Cultural Studies: From Ireland to the American Midwest* (Gainesville, FL: University of Florida Press, 1996) 103-105;

James McKillop, "The Quiet Man Speaks," *Contemporary Irish Cinema: From The Quiet Man to Dancing at Lughnasa*, ed. James MacKillop (Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 1999) 169-181; Martin McLoone, *Irish Film: The Emergence of a Contemporary Cinema* (London: BFI, 2000) 52-59; Pettitt, *Screening Ireland*, 64-67.

⁶ Elizabeth Butler Cullingford, "'John Wayne Fan or *Dances with Wolves* Revisionist?': Analogy and Ambiguity in the Irish Western," *Ireland's Others: Gender and Ethnicity in Irish Literature and Popular Culture* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 2001) 161-190; Luke Gibbons, "Synge, Country and Western," *Transformations in Irish Culture* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 1996); Fintan O'Toole, *A Mass for Jesse James: A Journey through 1980s Ireland* (Dublin: Raven Arts Press, 1990). See also Mary McGlynn, "Garth Brooks in Ireland, or, Play That Country Music, Whiteboys," *The Irish in Us*, 196-219.

⁷ First produced by Red Kettle Theatre, *Catalpa* premiered at the Garter Lane Theatre in Waterford in May 1995 under the title *Catalpa: The Movie*. Since its premiere, *Catalpa* has been performed by O'Kelly and others at Dublin's Gate Theatre and various sites in Ireland, as well as throughout America, Canada, and Europe. It won the Scotsman Fringe First Award at the 1996 Edinburgh Fringe Festival and the Critics Prize at the 1997 Melbourne International Festival.

⁸ Donal O'Kelly, *Catalpa* (Dublin: New Island Books, 1997) 12. Future references cited parenthetically.

⁹ William Irwin Thompson, *The Imagination of an Insurrection: Dublin, 1916* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967); Ben Levitas, *Theatre of Nation: Irish Drama and Cultural Nationalism 1890-1916* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002) 227-242. Others have invoked theatrical metaphors to describe the Rising as political spectacle, including W. B. Yeats, "Man and the Echo," *The Collected Works of W. B. Yeats*, vol. 1, *The Poems*, ed. Richard J. Finneran (New York: Scribner, 1997) 372; Shaw Desmond, *The Drama of Sinn Féin* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1923); Tom Garvin, *The Evolution of Irish Nationalist Politics* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1981).

¹⁰ Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16:3 (Autumn 1975) 6-18.

¹¹ Martin McDonagh, *The Cripple of Inishmaan* (New York: Vintage, 1997) 23, 12. Subsequent quotations cited parenthetically. *Cripple* premiered in 1996 at the Royal National Theatre (Cottesloe) in London under the direction of Nicholas Hytner, and opened in 1998 at the The Joseph Papp Public Theater under the direction of Jerry Zaks.

¹² See Introduction, *The Theatre of Martin McDonagh: A World of Savage Stories*, eds. Lillian Chambers and Eamonn Jordan (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2006) 10.

¹³ Aidan Arrowsmith, "Genuinely Inauthentic: McDonagh's Postdiasporic Irishness," *The Theatre of Martin McDonagh: A World of Savage Stories*, eds. Lillian Chambers and Eamonn Jordan (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2006) 243.

¹⁴ A number of critics have tackled the connections between McDonagh and his predecessors in Irish theatre, particularly J. M. Synge. See Jose Lanters, "Playwrights of the Western World: Synge, Murphy, McDonagh," *A Century of Irish Drama: Widening the Stage*, eds. Stephen Watt, Eileen Morgan, and Shakir Mustafa (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2000) 204-222; Shaun Richards, "'The outpouring of a morbid, unhealthy mind': The Critical Condition of Synge and McDonagh," *Irish University Review* 33:1 (2003) 201-216; Anthony Roche, "Re-Working *The Workhouse Ward*: McDonagh, Beckett, and Gregory," *Irish University Review* 24 (2004), Special Issue on Lady Gregory, ed. Anne Fogarty 171-184; Christopher Murray, "The Cripple of Inishmaan Meets Lady Gregory," *The Theatre of Martin*

McDonagh: A World of Savage Stories, eds. Lillian Chambers and Eamonn Jordan (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2006) 79-95.

¹⁵ For more on Christy's celebrity and identity, see Paige Reynolds, *Modernism, Drama, and the Audience for Irish Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2007) 51-56.

¹⁶ Laura Eldred, "Martin McDonagh's Blend of Tradition and Horrific Innovation," *The Theatre of Martin McDonagh: A World of Savage Stories*, eds. Lillian Chambers and Eamonn Jordan (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2006) 210.

¹⁷ First staged by Dubbeljoint Theatre Company, *Stones in His Pockets* premiered at Belfast's Lyric Theatre in 1999; it was staged in London in 1999, in New York in 2001, and around the world subsequently. It won the 2001 Olivier Award and Evening Standard for Best Comedy, received Outer Critics Circle and Drama Desk awards, and the cast (Seán Campion, Conleth Hill) and director (Ian McElhinney) were nominated for Tony Awards.

¹⁸ Marie Jones, *Stones in His Pockets* (New York: Applause, 2000) 21. Subsequent quotations cited parenthetically.

¹⁹ The story of "exploitation, cultural domination, and globalization" found in *Stones* appealed to Mexican dramatist Sabina Berman, who adapted the play for the Mexican stage as *eXtras* (2003). See Jacqueline E. Bixler, "Performing Culture(s): Extras and Extra-Texts in Sabina Berman's *eXtras*," *Theatre Journal* 56 (2004) 429-444.

²⁰ Marie Jones (devised by the company), *The Girls in the Big Picture, Four Plays by The Charabanc Theatre Company: Inventing Women's Work*, ed. Claudia W. Harris (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 2006) 178.

²¹ Dudley Andrew, "The Theatre of Irish Cinema," *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 15:1 (2002): 49.

²² Dermot Bolger, ed. *Ireland in Exile: Irish Writers Abroad* (Dublin: New Island Books, 1993) 7. The work of these "commuters" has been explored by film critics and by scholars who study Irish performers. See McLoone, *Irish Film*; Ruth Barton, *Acting Irish in Hollywood: From Fitzgerald to Farrell* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2006); Adrian Frazier, "Barry Fitzgerald: From Abbey Tours to Hollywood Films," *Irish Theatre on Tour*, ed. Nicholas Grene and Chris Morash, Irish Theatrical Diaspora Series 1 (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2005) 89-100.

²³ Geraldine Hughes, *Belfast Blues: One Wee Girl's Story about Family, War, Jesus, and Hollywood*, dir. Charles Haid and Carol Kane, The Culture Project at 45 Bleecker, New York, 4 March 2004. *Belfast Blues* was developed and produced by The Virtual Theatre Project, and opened in 2003 in Los Angeles, California; it subsequently toured throughout the States and in 2004 was staged in New York by the actress Anjelica Huston and the Culture Project. It won a 2003 Los Angeles Drama Critics Circle Award for Best Writing, among other awards.

²⁴ As Joe Cleary observes in his assessment of contemporary Irish "neo-naturalism," McDonagh's plays offer a "self-consciously camped up or simulacral world comprised of recycled collages of older naturalist conventions, settings and formulas." See Joe Cleary, *Outrageous Fortune: Capital and Culture in Modern Ireland* (Dublin: Field Day Publications, 2007) 99, 100.

²⁵ Written and directed by Darren Thornton, *Wunderkind* was produced by Calipo Theatre Company and premiered in 2006 at the Project Theatre's Space Upstairs, Dublin. It was subsequently performed at the 2007 Edinburgh Fringe Festival. See "Small-Town Boy Sees the Big Picture," *Irish Times* 19 January 2006; Review, "Wunderkind," *Irish Times* 28 January 2006.