

'Because We Are Poor': Irish Theatre in the 1990s

Victor Merriman

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While the unprecedented economic growth of Ireland's 1990s "Celtic Tiger" might be viewed as a sure sign of postcolonial success, Victor Merriman instead argues that at the close of the twentieth century, Ireland more accurately resembles "The Land of the Spree. Independence is retrospectively revealed not as a destination in itself, still less as the inauguration of an ethical project of decolonization but as the ante-room of a global economic order" (32). In other words, Independent Ireland bears all the markings of a neocolonial successor state concerned with little more than the interests of the indigenous bourgeoisie. Citing repeated moments of "postponed decolonization," one key facet of Merriman's book, *'Because We Are Poor': Irish Theatre in the 1990s*, is the ways in which Independent Ireland built an economy while failing to build an equitable and liberated society—remaining "poor" in all the ways that really matter. Committed to the postcolonial notion of academic work for "the public good," Merriman's book examines "the potential and responsibilities of artists, intellectuals and other cultural workers in relation to a national project of decolonization" (7, 2).

Merriman's analysis of the Irish state is integral to his discussion of theatre because, as he explains, they are "intertwining systems of representation and interpretation" of Ireland itself (10). Crucially, the theatre has long been the location for debating the meaning of the Irish nation; the relationships among Irish theatre, nationalism, and colonialism have been illuminated by a wide array of scholars including David Cairns, Joe Cleary, Declan Kiberd, David Lloyd, Lionel Pilkington, Shaun Richards, and Anthony Roche. Though indebted to their work, Merriman's study uses a postcolonial framework to "[ponder] what role, if any, theatre might play in enabling a 'second republic'" (2-3). Influenced by Awam Ampka's notion of drama and "postcolonial desires," theatre that imagines "a social reality based on democracy, cultural pluralism, and social justice" (Ngugi xii), Merriman investigates how a variety of plays staged from 1983 to 1998 navigate the needs for cultural change in a society dominated by negligent or exploitative economic and public policies.

Merriman locates a "neocolonial/postcolonial dynamic" as the main feature of Irish drama (5); that is, he sees theatre responding to both neocolonial conditions and postcolonial consciousness. In a bold move,

Merriman begins his analysis by characterizing W. B. Yeats and J. M. Synge as “prophetic” and “critical interlocutors of the utopian credentials of the nationalist project, and not the canonical founding fathers of Irish cultural nationalism” (99). Indeed, Merriman reads both *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* and *The Well of the Saints* as plays that “speak critically to the actual conditions of 1990s Ireland” (11). As the example of Yeats and Synge demonstrates, much of the drama under examination includes plays from throughout the twentieth century and restaged in the Celtic Tiger era. Composed of both canonical and marginal works, Merriman’s discussion can be loosely divided among plays which negotiate the transitions from anti-colonial fervor to neocolonial frustration (for example, Yeats’s *Purgatory*, Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*, and M. J. Molloy’s *The Wood of the Whispering*); plays which seek to expose the neocolonial present by invoking parallels to a colonial past (Dermot Bolger’s *The Lament for Arthur Cleary*, Tom Murphy’s *Famine*, and Dónal O’Kelly’s *Asylum! Asylum!*); and plays which alternatively figure the past as a “grotesque” spectacle and thereby align themselves with the interests of the state (Marina Carr’s *By the Bog of Cats...* and Martin McDonagh’s *The Leenane Trilogy*).

Merriman provides stimulating readings of these texts and their aesthetic approaches. His discussions of disrupted realism and monologue as performance strategies used to express postcolonial desires are both convincing and thought-provoking. Informing his readings is the assertion that decolonizing processes are most apparent in plays that challenge “official narratives of belonging” (11). Nowhere is this more apparent than in the work of Calypso Productions and Merriman provides a rich discussion of their representations of Travellers and immigrants (including refugees and asylum seekers) in Celtic Tiger Ireland. His readings of older, more canonical works are equally well developed; most welcome, perhaps, is Merriman’s postcolonial analysis of Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* as a work that potentially, and productively, stages “the frustration of desire in a neocolonial state” (107).

Merriman’s most contentious argument is that Carr and McDonagh “restage reductive stereotypes of Irishness” that “implicate audiences in particular [negative] stances toward the poor, the past and Irishness” (209, 196). Their characters, he insists, are “internal outsiders,” and invite modern urbanite audiences to laugh at the rural poor from a comfortable distance, relieved that “‘we’ have left it all behind” (197, 196). While such debates surrounding McDonagh are familiar, Carr’s oeuvre should place her outside such a category. Her consistent interrogation of Irish womanhood, her refusal to condemn unsympathetic characters, and her use of Irish and Greek mythology seek to broaden rather than confine. Moreover, because Ireland’s nationalist agenda figured Ireland as woman, in laying bare both the exploitations and failures of Irish women, I read Carr exposing similar problems in the broader Irish populace. Since Carr is the only female playwright under discussion (with the brief exception of Lady Augusta Gregory’s collaboration with Yeats), it is disappointing that

women's voices remain so silent in a study otherwise so deeply concerned with social plurality.

Though I wonder if Carr is the best choice for his critique, Merriman does raise important questions about the site of her play's production: the Abbey, Ireland's National Theatre. The arc of Merriman's project—beginning with the nascent Abbey Theatre in the anti-colonial hands of Gregory, Synge, and Yeats and ending with the 1998 production of Carr—raises vital questions about the relationship between theatre and state, particularly since “almost all Irish theatre is subsidized by public money” (6). In the late twentieth century, Merriman finds that the Abbey “accommodates ... confirmation of the worldview of the indigenous bourgeoisie” that “the past is best forgotten” (209, 201). Here, Merriman's argument can be usefully contrasted with Patrick Lonergan's landmark *Theatre and Globalization*. As Lonergan examines how globalization changed Irish drama, his focus on staged stereotypes of Irishness is largely viewed through tourism: if there is a disjuncture between the stage Irish and the urban Celtic Tiger audience, it is due to the economic value of branding Irishness for international audiences. Merriman sees the same gulf between the stage and the populace, yet he reads this divide more politically by arguing that the stage and the state both refuse to recognize the actual conditions Ireland's social and economic “others” endure.

Merriman's book is an ambitious project and a rigorous read. Arguing that the Celtic Tiger saw “a bifurcation of drama ... into a theatre of social critique, and a theatre of diversionary spectacle,” Merriman is equally committed to developing his belief that “understanding actual worlds is as vital ... as understanding fictional worlds” (209, 3). Although I wished for cleaner and more elegant prose as some minor proofreading errors and awkward sentences distract from his ideas, this complaint pales in comparison to the level of scholarship and passion at play in Merriman's book. For these reasons, *'Because We Are Poor'* should be on the reading lists of all those interested in Irish literature, theatre studies, and postcolonial theory.

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