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Martin McDonagh

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Martin McDonagh was born in 1970, the younger son of a mother from County Sligo and a father from County Galway. He grew up in Elephant and Castle and then in Camberwell, South London, in a strongly Irish community. His parents, who had emigrated to find work, were employed as cleaner and construction worker. His father was an Irish speaker, so Martin was surrounded by the sounds of Gaelic and Hiberno-English accents, as well as Irish music. He attended a Catholic school and spent summers in his parents' native West of Ireland. Consequently, he grew up imbued with Irish culture, albeit overlaid with the usual diet of comics, television programmes and films popular with any London schoolboy. He left school at sixteen and, according to himself, began to write as a way of avoiding getting a conventional job.

Garry Hynes of the prestigious Druid Theatre Company is credited with giving the writer his first big break: Druid performed *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* in Galway in 1996, and it was an immediate success, subsequently appearing in London's West End and on Broadway. Having written six plays in one year – 1994 – McDonagh had a body of work ready for the demand which ensued. *A Skull in Connemara* and *The Lonesome West* completed the Leenane trilogy, and he followed them with *The Cripple of Inishmaan*, *The Lieutenant of Inishmore* and *The Banshees of Inisherin*. (This final play has been neither produced nor published and its author says it's not very good.)

McDonagh has amassed awards as frequently as his Valene Connor in *The Lonesome West* acquires figurines. He won the Critics' Circle Theatre Award for Most Promising Playwright, Drama Desk Award for Outstanding Play, Laurence Olivier Awards for both Best New Comedy and Best New Play, and a Tony Award for Best Play. The playwright's peers might be forgiven for quoting Valene's brother Coleman: 'How many more do ya fecking need?' That's not to say that praise has been universal. There are to date half-a-dozen book-length analyses of his work, alongside sheaves of chapters,

journal essays, and newspaper articles. Reading through them lends McDonagh's work the quality of an optical illusion, of the kind that at one glance is a rabbit and then morphs into a duck. In McDonagh's plays, the illusion is both aural and optical, as critics are divided about whether he exploits Irish stereotypes in a calculating way in order to make money, whether he has a tin ear for Hiberno-English, or whether he really is the most exciting young playwright of recent years.

All commentators find the writer's dual English-Irish heritage of significance in his drama, referring to the work's palimpsestic qualities, like an over-painted painting or a superimposed photograph, simultaneously containing references to rural Ireland of the past, alongside postmodern, Tarantinoesque villainy and violence. It's ironic that an author who has had much commentary on his hyphenated heritage has now given rise to a similarly bifurcated critical reception. Given the many antagonistic two-handers in his plays – Mag v. Maureen Folan in *Beauty Queen*, Mick v. Mairtin in *A Skull in Connemara*, and the Connor brothers in *The Lonesome West* – it's tempting to imagine a McDonagh-ish duologue of two critics arguing opposite sides, For and Agin the writer: [Professor] Coleman: 'Okay, it's my go. I'm winning'.

When quizzed on the matter of identity, McDonagh is equivocal: 'I don't feel I have to defend myself for being English or for being Irish, because, in a way, I don't feel either. And, in another way, of course, I'm both'. Garry Hynes, his first champion, dismisses the accusations that his dramatic work is neither 'realistic' nor 'authentic' (odd expectations in themselves to apply to theatre, given that pretence and suspension of disbelief are requirements of the genre). She states firmly: 'It's an artifice. It's not authentic. It's not meant to be. It's a complete creation'. McDonagh's fondness for references to brand-names - Kimberley biscuits and Scalectrix – are seen as an attempt on his part to be 'real', and any person of Irish heritage will use similar markers to recall an Irish childhood, calling up memories by the very word 'Tayto', just as any adult born in the 60s and 70s will share Ray's recollection of Swingball. It might seem pretentious to refer to such objects as Proustian, but they serve the same purpose as Marcel's beloved madeleines ('me favourite biscuits out of any biscuits'). They're a dramatic shorthand which allows the audience to access our memories, which the playwright then tramples

all over, deconstructs and demolishes, entirely refusing the Yeatsian dictum: 'Tread softly because you tread on my dreams'.

The question of morality in McDonagh's work is much debated, as killers are seldom convicted or punished, though one could say that being trapped in the ghoulish world he creates is retribution enough. As in Flann O'Brien's *The Third Policeman*, or Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, there is no escape for McDonagh's protagonists. Neither is there anyone to help them. The over-riding sense of McDonagh-world is that authority is not to be trusted: priests are either having 'a babby with a Yank,' beating up youths, or steeped in alcoholism, while the law holds ineffectual inquests and is represented by buffoonish Guard Thomas Hanlon who 'Thinks he's Starsky and Hutch' but falsifies evidence. When Valene tackles Welsh about a 'higher authority than the courts and the fecking polis', the priest admits sadly: 'It seems like God has no jurisdiction in this town. No jurisdiction at all'. By the end of the trilogy, both priest and Guard have been disposed of.

McDonagh does not completely abstain from moral judgement in his plays. He nails his political colours to the mast in *The Lieutenant of Inishmore*, saying that he wrote it out of 'pacifist rage'. It was slow to get staged as companies found it too violent, but one suspects some may have been wary of its savagely satirical depiction of paramilitaries. It utilises the same macabre humour and grotesque caricature which have become McDonagh's USP, but there is no doubting the lack of sympathy in the script for the posturing of the Republican dissident, Padraic.

The 2003 play *Pillowman* broke with tradition in having a non-Irish, non-specific setting, and *A Behanding in Spokane* (2010) is set in the United States. McDonagh says he has now given up writing plays, and is concentrating on his first love, film. His movies have won yet more 'figurines' for his dresser: *Six Shooter* (2004) won an Oscar for best Live Action Short Film. BAFTA-winning *In Bruges* (2008) was followed by another crime comedy, *Seven Psychopaths* (2012). In these as in his playscripts, McDonagh could be seen as depicting violence for entertainment, but as he says: 'We're all extreme . . . that's what drama, since the Greeks, has dealt with'.