

Women in Irish Theatre: the Charabanc Theatre Company and Marie Jones¹

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Abstract: *If women appear to have contributed relatively little to the theatrical scene in Ireland in the first half of the twentieth century, the same cannot be said about women in the Irish theatre after 1950. Increasing modernization, liberalization and decentralization of Irish society, and of the theatre industry, provided the opportunities for women's voices to be included, not only in writing but also in producing and directing plays – that is to say, to play a role in Irish theatre's social history. This paper focuses mainly on the work of the Charabanc Theatre Company, an all-female group founded in Belfast in 1983, and on the work of its former leading figure and writer, Marie Jones. Their work made a remarkable contribution to revitalizing the energy of Irish theatre in the closing decades of the twentieth century, leaving a significant legacy for national and international drama in the twenty-first century.*

The founding of the Charabanc Theatre Company, in Belfast, in 1983, was a landmark in the history of female contribution to theatre in Ireland after 1950, considering that the first half of the twentieth century can be regarded as a period when there was a relative lack of contribution by women to the Irish theatrical scene. The obvious exception is the presence of Lady Gregory as a strong, business-minded force in the conception of the idea of a national theatre, the direction of the Abbey Theatre, and the selection of its repertoire, apart from the writing and production of plays for that theatre. Yet, Lady Gregory “enjoys a literary afterlife more as a symbolic icon than as an author in her own right”, as Anne Fogarty has put it in the Introduction to the special issue of the Irish University Review dedicated to the playwright in the year that celebrated the centenary of the Abbey Theatre. Indeed her somewhat anomalous figure has most often inspired criticism focusing precisely on her theatrical activity, rather than on her work as a playwright. An earlier periodical, *Irish Literary Studies* 13 – *Lady Gregory: Fifty Years After*, edited by Ann Saddlemeier and Colin Smythe, also paid tribute to her career in theatre and drama. In Brazil, Marluce Dantas wrote a PhD thesis, at the University of São Paulo, in 1998, entitled *Lady Gregory: Uma Dramaturgia de Confluências Teóricas e Práticas* (*Lady Gregory: A Dramaturgy of Theoretical and Practical Confluence*).

The work of other women in the first half of the twentieth century has often been neglected by critics, and only recently reassessed. Among other names one should perhaps remember Shelagh Richards and Ria Monney, for their somewhat experimental work derived from their activity with the Dublin Drama League and the Gate Theatre. Ria organized the interesting “Experimental Theatre”, in 1937, with the support of the Abbey, on lines similar to those that guided the work of the League and the Gate, while Shelagh directed O’Casey’s world première of *Red Roses for Me* at The Olympia Theatre, in 1943.

More thorough female participation in the history of Irish theatre, however, came about only with the process of modernization and liberalization of Irish society, which is usually seen as having begun or gained strength in the 1950s and 1960s. Among other factors, the end of the so-called De Valera age in the Republic, the advent of television in Northern Ireland and in the Republic, and the changes in the church promoted by the Second Vatican Council contributed to the process, which now not only included but also demanded a space for female activity in society, and in the theatre industry. Thus, in the second half of the twentieth century, one sees the role of women in theatre changing, from almost invisible, to daring, and, perhaps, almost to dominant. In this period, as well as modernization, there was increasing decentralization and regionalization of cultural and theatrical activity in Ireland. Thus, modern Irish theatre, which originated in Dublin, developed from the Abbey in the opening decades, and later the Gate in the 1930s – with their nationalist and cosmopolitan ideologies, respectively – into the foundation of several companies out of Dublin and Belfast, after the 1950s, with alternative voices that interrogated and represented that changing society, with an ever-increasing female contribution.

In 1951, Mary O’Malley co-founded the Lyric Players Group, in Belfast, later the Lyric Players Theatre, which for a long time was one of only three subsidized theatres on the island – the other two being the Abbey and the Gate. The group was influenced by Austin Clarke’s Dublin-based Lyric Theatre and by the socialist-oriented New Theatre Group in Dublin, and modeled on the early National Theatre Society in Dublin and the Ulster Literary Theatre in Belfast, becoming known as a Poet’s Theatre. According to Lionel Pilkington, “this combination of influences was reflected in the Lyric’s formalist commitment to the autonomy of the aesthetic *and* in its view that the theatre might also provide the impetus for an all-Ireland (32-county) cultural movement” (185-6). Most criticism dedicated to the activity of the group recognizes Mary O’Malley as a leading artistic figure, both as director and designer. The poet John Hewitt paid tribute to her on the occasion of the foundation of the Lyric Players’ new theatre in Belfast, in 1965, with these verses:

For Mary O’Malley and The Lyric Players

With all to thank, I name in gratitude
and set beside the best, with them aligned,

the little band upon their little stage,
tempered to shew, by that dark woman's mood,
O'Casey's humours, Lorca's sultry rage,
Theban monarch's terror, gouged and blind.
(In Bell, Sam Hanna, *The Theatre in Ulster*, 123).

The Lyric survived the 1970s in Belfast, when to perform plays, especially politically informed ones, in those bleak nights, must have been an act of courage. The company ceased to operate in 1981, having shared its somewhat daring history with other enterprises equally courageously led by women.

The Pike Theatre, co-founded in Dublin, in 1953, by Carolyn Swift and her husband, enjoyed a much shorter life – nine years – staging, however, the Irish premières of Brenda Behan's *The Quare Fellow* and Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, no less. In the recently published *Cambridge History of Irish Literature*, Anthony Roche draws attention to the significance of the Pike's production, considering the sometimes difficult to grasp, or often neglected, Irishness in Beckett's play: "In the Pike interpretation the two tramps were played as markedly Irish, whereas Pozzo became an Anglo-Irish dominating one native (Lucky) and objecting to the presence of two others (Vladimir and Estragon) on his lands" (489). According to Roche, the Irish première, in 1955, had important consequences for the "decolonization" of theatre in Ireland. In a slightly opposite view, although equally full of praise of the Pike, Chris Morash, in his *History of Irish Theatre, 1601-2000*, points out another side – perhaps the best-known side – of the legacy of Beckett's first *Godot* in Ireland: "In a sense, the Pike theatre production of *Waiting for Godot* heralded the arrival in Ireland of that oxymoronic beast, a mainstream *avant-garde*" (208).

If decolonization and experimentation remained as the legacy of previous theatrical enterprises led by women, regionalization is recognized as having singularized the Druid Theatre, co-founded by Garry Hynes, in Galway, in 1975. The activity of the Druid, rescuing the Irish dramatic tradition through memorable revivals and launching the work of new Irish playwrights, though still relatively unmapped, has contributed remarkably to shaping the face of theatrical activity in contemporary Ireland, with Garry Hynes as the company's long standing central figure.

The 1980s definitely evoke terms such as plurality and diversity in the cultural and political agendas of the island, particularly in the Republic. The ground prepared by former generations now flourished in the revitalization of theatrical activity and productivity. The iconic event of the decade is the foundation of Field Day, in Derry, 1980, by Brian Friel and Stephen Rea, later joined by Seamus Heaney, Seamus Deane and Tom Paulin.

In the realm of female participation, Lynne Parker became the key figure of Rough Magic, founded in 1984, in Dublin – now, one of the most successful companies

in contemporary Ireland. Charabanc was founded in Belfast one year before by five actresses – Marie Jones, Eleanor Methven, Maureen McAuley, Carol Scanlan and Brenda Winter, “disillusioned by their own lack of professional employment opportunities and by their evaluation of the traditional theatre roles that existed for women - in their words ‘wives, mothers or the background for some guy on stage’. (Imelda Foley, *The Girls in The Big Picture*, 36). Since Field Day and Charabanc coexisted, the comparison, most often gender-based, has become inevitable in the criticism of the girls’ company. “Almost binary opposition”, Imelda Foley argued, “in terms of gendered founding membership is matched by opposing ideologies and methodologies. The hierarchical and intellectual base of one is challenged by the collaborative and intuitive operation of the other” (39). According to Eleanor Methven, speaking on behalf of Charabanc, “Field Day was formed ... on a very different basis, on an academic basis, on an aspiration of making a statement ... We came along from the other end of the spectrum. They had academic and literary heavyweights on their board, and we had trade-union leaders and anybody who had been nice to us along the way ... But we were always praised for the rawness and energy.” (in Bort, Eberhard, Ed., *The State of Play: Irish Theatre in the Nineties*, 114).

Although often labeled as feminists, they continuously denied a politically feminist perspective as the ideology of the group. “We didn’t think of it in any feminist terms - it was an unconscious feminist - if you like”, explained Methven. Most of their plays, however, depicted the lives of women as characters, either in Belfast or in rural settings, who invariably occupied the centre of the stage. Interwoven with this somehow feminist perspective, critics often pointed out a certain note of non-sectarian socialism – another label, however, which was constantly denied. The label probably reflects the company’s initial link with Martin Lynch, a working-class Belfast playwright who, at that time was writer-in-residence at the Lyric. When asked to create a play for the newly-founded company, he “surprised the Charabanc women by saying he would help them write their own plays” – according to Claudia Harris (in Bort, Eberhard, *The State of Play: Irish Theatre in the Nineties*, 106), who has for a long time researched Charabanc’s work, and has just published four of their plays. In fact, writing their own plays became their major strength. From 1983 to 1995, when they ceased to operate, Charabanc produced and performed eighteen new works and three extant works.

Their first play, in spite of the denials about ideologies, already embodied both of the points of view with which Charabanc has traditionally been labeled: feminist and socialist. *Lay up Your Ends*, premiered at the Belfast Arts Theatre in 1983, portrayed women in the Belfast linen mills as protagonists of history. While the plays were initially written on a collaborative basis, soon Marie Jones became the dominant figure in writing, and also, perhaps, in providing and maintaining the company’s repertoire and identity. Indeed, the play that best expresses the spirit of the company was Marie Jones’s *The Girls in the Big Picture*, beginning with the significant title, which allegorizes the whole of Charabanc as a movement, examining theatre in Northern Ireland in the 1980s and the theatrical interrelations between Ireland and the world.

Marie Jones was writer-in-residence till 1990, and remained as the most prominent figure to have emerged from Charabanc. She left the company to start a new venture with Pam Brighton – Double Joint Productions, founded in 1991, which expressed the initial desire in the name chosen for the company: an enterprise that would bring together theatrical initiatives in Belfast and Dublin. Jones’s mature work and most successful play, both nationally and internationally, *Stones in his Pockets*, was written for the new company. With *Stones*, her name definitely became international in terms of recognition. Looking back, then Marie Jones’s career moves from a relatively local perspective, represented by Charabanc in Belfast in the 1980s, to a national one, with the Double Joint initiative, and finally international success with *Stones in His Pockets*. The play was translated into Portuguese by Domingos Nunez as *Pedras nos Bolsos*, and has now enjoyed two seasons of successful performances in São Paulo, Brazil. The staging of Jones’s play in Brazil points to a new dimension in the development of Irish theatre, and also invites further research in this field of its potential for internationalization – surpassing questions of nation and genre, perhaps, and expanding into wider vistas, of geography and language.

Note

- 1 This paper was presented to the First Symposium of Irish Studies in South America, São Paulo, from Sep 28 to 30, 2006, as part of the Round Table “Travelling Drama: from Ireland to São Paulo”. The ideas conveyed here derive partly from Post-Doctoral research at Santa Catarina Federal University and a period as Visiting Scholar at Trinity College, Dublin.

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