

***Irische Dramatiker der Gegenwart*, hrsg. von Jochen Achilles und Rüdiger Imhof, Darmstadt: Wiss. Buchges., 1996, ix + 175 pp., DM 39.80. ***

The student, scholar or critic looking for book-length surveys of contemporary Irish drama is hard put despite the plethora of Irish Lit. Crit. otherwise. The treatment afforded this subject in D.E.S. Maxell's *A Critical History of Irish Drama, 1891-1980* (1984), Michael Etherton's *Contemporary Irish Dramatists* (1989), and Anthony Roches's *Contemporary Irish Drama: From Beckett to McGuinness* (1994) is less than comprehensive. Since the time the collection under review here was first conceived, Christopher Murray's *Twentieth-Century Irish Drama: Mirror up to Nation* (1997) has been published constituting a considerable improvement. As regards the German academic scene, one would still have to fall back on Heinz Kosok's *Geschichte der anglo-irischen Literatur* (1990) or the collection of essays entitled *The State of Play: Irish Theatre in the 'Nineties* (1996) edited by Eberhard 'Paddy' Bort and celebrating the redoubtable Anglo-Irish Theatre Group at the University of Tübingen now in its 17th year. Full marks therefore, to the editors, Jochen Achilles and Rüdiger Imhof, for providing an over-due introduction to major playwrights on the contemporary scene in Ireland.

From the perspective of *mentalités* the editors define the contemporary scene as beginning in the 1960s, they see it as a distinct break with tradition, a re-orientation, a re-fashioning of the national image, which could be described as the discarding of stereotypical notions about the literature of a predominately rural society marked by religious conflict, hard drinking, and the melancholy beauty of its landscape. The editors deplore the slowness with which this new image of Ireland was received on the continent of Europe. But, as the examples of John McGahern and Edna O'Brien and the banning of their books would suggest, Irish society in the 1960s and beyond was still very much in the grip of conservative social forces. One wonders how the change would have to be defined that set in in the 1980s and '90s with the internationalization of Irish society as evidenced, for example, by Mary Robinson's Presidency and her definition of Irishness as diasporic and non-territorial.

Be that as it may, here we have a collection of eight articles surveying the work of eight 'major' contemporary playwrights—a few having their beginnings in the 1960s, most of them not fully flourishing until the 1980s. In addition, we find two complementary essays of a more general description on 'Northern' and 'Southern' voices in contemporary Irish theatre.

The authors of the pieces on individual writers apparently had the brief to survey their respective writer's oeuvre according to major themes and forms or related criteria of distinction and subdivision. **Heinz Kosok** writing on Hugh Leonard, the most prolific dramatist in this group, orders Leonard's oeuvre according to forms and functions, he distinguishes between the early adaptations, memory plays, and the typical Leonard play which combines elements of farce, political satire, and the comedy of manners. **Walter T. Rix** takes a largely biographical approach situating the work of John B. Keane in the oral tradition and relating it to the 'submerged population groups' of rural Ireland as the true 'Hidden Ireland'. **Ruth Niel**, handling no easy task in surveying Brian Friel's dramatic output, skilfully manages to isolate the encompassing theme of 'truth vs. illusion' and demonstrates how this is interwoven with such subsidiary themes as 'emigration and exile', 'memory', 'history', and 'language'. Thomas Kilroy's relatively small oeuvre is surveyed by **Rüdiger Imhof**, who stresses the interrelation in Kilroy's work between social criticism, i.e. a response to the problems of modern Ireland, and experimentalism as the search for new dramatic forms. **Jochen Achilles** presents Tom Murphy as the one dramatist who is most vehemently concerned with the questioning of traditional values and structures in Irish society and retraces the psychological mechanisms in Murphy's plays that produce their cathartic effect via the (liberating) return of the repressed (in individual and collective memories). Writing also on J. Graham Reid **Jochen Achilles** names as a major theme the vicious circles of violence in Northern Ireland, he perceives Reid's perspective as gradually shifting towards a smashing of those circles through the cultivation of tolerance and the elimination of racial prejudice. **Elmer Andrews** shows how Stewart Parker puts history to creative use by means of pastiche and collage; again, as elsewhere in the work of contemporary dramatists, the wider social and political implications point to a need to demythologize the past and deconstruct traditional stereotypes. Frank McGuinness is the last in this series, and **Rüdiger Imhof** structures his essay around three major themes and motifs—'bonding', 'the sectarian divide in Ulster', and 'art and the artist'—which he finds recurring in varying constellations.

The two generalizing articles on 'Northern Voices' by **Lynda Henderson** and **William Wylie** and on 'Southern Voices' by **Ger Fitzgibbon** simultaneously go over a lot of ground already covered in the essays on individual writers (i.e. plays by Friel, McGuinness, Murphy, and the theme of history as a nightmare). Henderson and Wylie and, much more so, Fitzgibbon fail to achieve the degrees of succinctness and precision that distinguish the other eight essays on individual writers; their original contributions are limited to the introduction of new names and the discussion of plays like *This Is It* by Andy Tyrrie, Sam Duddy, and Michael Hall, *The Hillsborough Script* by Tom Paulin, and *The Saxon Shore* by David Rudkin (in the case of Henderson and Wylie) or summary reports on the work of Sebastian Barry and Billy Roche (Fitzgibbon).

The editors would probably be the first to admit that their selection, their canon, as it were, is open to debate. There are many candidates waiting in the wings who would perhaps have deserved extensive treatment as more strictly 'contemporary' dramatists—the names of Sebastian Barry and Marina Carr [and, most recently, Martin McDonagh] being the hottest favourites to get a look in. That is the eternal problem of anthologies. In the present case, however, there is one writer who sticks out like a red cow in a green field: John B. Keane. With all due respect—his is hardly the type of theatre to revolutionize the image and internal structures of Irish society which, as the editors suggest, would distinguish the latest phase in the tradition of Irish drama from earlier ones. Besides, most of Keane's plays date from the 1960s, a fact which clearly relegates him to an earlier generation when compared with the more truly contemporary dramatists discussed here. Walter T. Rix seems to have anticipated such criticisms. His over-assertiveness is telling and makes things even worse. He tries to present Keane as the truly authentic voice of Ireland thereby glossing over the more problematic aspects of his work. Keane, the publican-cum-playwright from Listowel, Co. Kerry, may well have his fingers on Ireland's pulse (34), but all modern Ireland is not a pub, where, in the words of Hugh Leonard's fantasy play *Madigan's Lock* (1958), there is „free stout for life, free stout till God called 'Time' an' gently led them upstairs to His own lounge bar above“ (4; as quoted by Kosok). There is simply no denying the 'soap' dimension in Keane, and, despite all euphemistic periphrasis, his plays, especially when put alongside those of the younger generation, appear as unmistakably 'racy and of the soil'. Furthermore, an artist who, in 1995, seriously believes that he is more concerned with „reality as it is rather than life as it is seen“ (23) puts himself automatically in a different class from dramatists like Friel, Murphy, Kilroy etc. Against Keane's dictum (in *Self-Portrait*, 1964) that „a man without a country is as confused as a dog without tail“ (20) one is tempted to invoke Samuel Beckett's definition of habit as the 'dog returning to his vomit'. It is exactly against this type of mental habit that the recent debate about Irishness as initiated by the Field Day Movement has been directed: the deconstruction of myths and stereotypes about the land.

After all this, it comes as a surprise as well as a kind of consolation and a sign of hope to read that in *This Is It* (1984), a play about the Belfast Loyalist 'Day of Action', the three co-authors all associated in some way with the Ulster Defence Association intended to „set in motion a community-wide debate on what the people of Ulster want their future to contain, and get away from the obsessions with the past“ (147). Here is an astonishing parallel to what had been formulated in a different sectarian corner as Field Day's mission to provide the basis for a „more ecumenical and eirenic approach to the deep and apparently implacable problems which confront the island today“ (*Ireland's Field Day* [London: Hutchinson, 1985]), viii).

In short, despite the discrepancies generated by the inclusion of John B. Keane and some looseness in the two survey articles this is a very valuable collection exploring a strangely untilled field.

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