Capital and Class in Irish Theatre: A Twenty-First Century Critical Snapshot

by Eamonn Jordan*

In this article I offer, as a critic and commentator, some reflections on how in writing predominantly about class and capital, I endeavour to articulate how I apply, locate, differentiate and express myself analytically, argumentatively, theoretically, and methodologically within an intellectual tradition of writing about modern and contemporary Irish theatre, where there is now an abundance of scholarship, presented from multiple viewpoints.As an individual subject with a past, in a particular cultural and socio/ political timeframe, there is no singular consciousness, but deliberative, contradictory and rival consciousnesses, and an array of or a palimpsest of different identities/subjectivities. Rather than categorising my critical perspective as singular, uniform and coherent, I see it as a palimpsest-like process, shaped by multi-locationality, multi-perspectiveness and polyvocality – following Brah's discussions in relation to a diasporic consciousness. Effectively this viewpoint is the consequence, and condition of me taking up consensually, passively, unconsciously, assertively and coercively, several subject positions, marked by the innumerable transactions, intersections and vectorisations of different types of capital – economic, cultural, social and educational.

Keywords: modern and contemporary Irish Theatre, class, capital.

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to publish essays on class, gender, suburbia and historiography have obligated me not only to reconsider and repurpose my critical standpoints and reflective practices, but also have enticed me to give more deliberation on what might be characteristic and distinctive about my work to date.

While I have always written with a strong awareness of class differentials, hierarchies, struggles, segregations and conflicts, lately this approach has become more deliberate, pointed, precise, more self-aware, but also confident about foregrounding analysis around the complex manifestations of inter and intra-class dynamics and the circulation and intersections of various forms of capital (cultural, social, economic and educational) in modern and contemporary Irish dramaturgy, as triggered and differentiated by Mike Savage's work on British social class (2015).

My current critical thinking is shaped by the work I have done previously and the various methodological approaches taken, is clearly influenced, marked by and is a response to the scholarly practices of many others in the field. It is additionally informed by more recent critical readings I have completed, especially about intersectionality (Hill Collins: 2019, and Bilge and Hill Collins: 2020), global capital, neo-liberalism and the tyranny of merit (Harvey: 2005, Rancière: 2009, Sandel: 2012 & 2020). Blended together, my past practices, scholarly precedents, and new readings have incited fresh thinking, additional questions and alternative thought processes in relation to Irish dramaturgical practices, as cultural expression and ideological infiltration.

This scholarly orientated knowledge is sculpted and localised by my own life and social events, interactions with friendship groups and acquaintances, cultural habits and tastes, recreational and leisure practices. How these encounters are responded to, memorised, and embodied, by ongoing reflections on such experiences are informed by the values, beliefs, biases and prejudices I currently hold or previously possessed. In addition, these experiences are sometimes distinguishable and sometimes not from the observations I make about my external reality and the ideologies that underpin it. In my everyday life, I witness reforms, rights, freedoms, opportunities and life chances alongside structural limitations, inequalities and the substantial impacts and grievances associated with inequities, the multiple circulation of micro aggressions but also the potential for micro grievances, as well as the various forms of manipulation and distortion that even

the most obvious of facts and evidence seemingly undergo as they are exchanged across various platforms.

Fundamentally, in part, this essay is about how impossible it is to erase one's presence, values and experiences from any act of criticism, and is also in part, a response to Barthes's caution, as cited by Belsey: "Better the illusions of subjectivity than the impostures of objectivity." (Belsey 2013: 117: citing Barthes 2001: 3) However, Belsey notes: "As Barthes poses it, the choice between the illusions of subjectivity and the impostures of objectivity is not a happy one. Interpretation always involves an interpreter, however unprejudiced or clear-minded." (Belsey 2013: 117) How can a critic substantiate an argumentative viewpoint, when there are doubts about who poses the questions, and who licences and legitimises those questions and tentative or assured responses? Belsey concurs, reminding the reader that: "We think," Jean-François Lyotard notes, 'in the already-thought, in the inscribed,' and it is difficult to hold an idea in abeyance, 'so that what hasn't been thought yet'." (Belsey 2013: 124, citing Lyotard 1991: 20)

The Debt of the Critic

The reputable media like to remind their viewers/readers about the importance of truth, transparency, impartiality, integrity, objectivity, and the requirement of full disclosure from practising journalists. Such a viewpoint can sound not just naïve but manipulative, in many instances; yet these serve as the markers of distinction of many media organisations that are trusted worldwide. Yet should scholarly criticism be evaluated, in terms of disclosure, objectivity, and integrity? In general, the function of theatre criticism is to analyse, identify, explicate, cross-relate, articulate, convince and contextualise work, to observe major and obscure patterns, tropes viewpoints, sleights-of-hand, and the interconnections and interactions of various ideologies. Metaphorical, symbolic, analogical, intertextual, extratextual, and co-textual indicators can be drawn upon as part of the critical explication.

Communities of criticism are like communities of peoples who have strengths and flaws, awarenesses, intuitions and blind spots, beliefs often riven with contradictions, and practises that have evolved through custom and tradition that may be no longer fit for purpose. Such scholarly practices can be generous, supportive, encouraging to early career scholars, mean-spirited, intimidating, competitive,

or display evidence of a pack mentality, driven by inclusive and exclusionary actions, while benefitting from systemic mutual regard and citation and can be overly informed by critical methodologies that overdetermine a field of research. It is a practice that exists within a network/framework of other ideological procedures and influences.

As a commentator, social agent and observer, as one writes there always remains an apprehension that one is too close or too distant from a particular subject matter, or that it becomes apparent that one is perhaps uncomfortable discussing some things or over-eager to flag others. Likewise, one's analysis can be seen as a form of oversharing or something that risks unintentional disclosures about oneself. As a generalisation, some commentators marshal evidence very broadly and some selectively in order to sustain an argument and influence his/her readers. Some scholars rightly and cogently challenge peers, others are careful not to question or contradict the major players in the field, while some others like a battle, sometimes over matters that are less essential, or that register for many as trivialities or irrelevancies. Then again, some critics try to be exceptionally clear in their writing, others remain elusive to the point of disingenuity, others obfuscate to the point of futility – you should never have to ask what someone is really saying, follow crumb-like clues, read between the lines for the unsaid, see the wriggle rooming for what it is, a hedging of bets.

Many others fail to declare openly an ideological standpoint or endeavour to hide a political position in plain sight. Thinking through the implications of Barthes' earlier cited comment, criticism reveals but also conceals, is beset by subjective positions, and critical methodologies afford nothing like the objectivity and impartiality to which they often lay claim. Of the multiple variables that shape scholarship, including title, research funding, the monetisation of labour, publication track record, reputational prestige of a publisher, citation scores, peer acknowledgement, and university ranking, I want to isolate two variables and offer some short reflections on both, namely, privilege and virtue.

As a critic, an alertness to privilege is never to be discounted. Scholarly criticism is hitched to advantages and employment security (tenure/permanency) in many instances, that is not to ignore the increasing prevalence of short term contracts and casual adjunct arrangements within academia, and all the precarity it entails. Equally, at times academia can be obsessed with rank and hierarchy, and

not equality, a fact that some critical practices carefully marginalise Additionally, critical ideas can be expressed in ways that are exclusionary and destined only for a limited readership. When an all-encompassing remark about critical privilege is flagged, I want it to be supplemented with other considerations; in most instances academic successes are hard earned, sacrifices are made, and costs are incurred, also many critics face multiple barriers, objections, and overcome difficulties and deficits to achieve career objectives. For most, progression towards a position of critical privilege is not simply a tariff-free journey, facilitated by benevolent, conducive mentors and advocates. On the one hand, criticism when governed, informed or enabled by academia is never as independent as it might like to claim, and, on the other, academia is more diverse and inclusive than stereotypical representations would suggest.

Critically, there is an ever-increasing need to signal virtue by way of expressions of revulsion and outrage at contemporary and historic abuses and trauma, and unrelenting oppositionality to conservatism, cisheteropatriarchy, neo-liberalism, and inequitable global practices, more broadly. This obligation to signal amply one's critical reprimand, connects with a pressure to declare or associate one's critical viewpoint with some non-hegemonic position. Some scholars caution this standpoint of virtue in two different ways. Firstly, they point towards the virtue signalling associated with a neo-liberal reward structure (entrepreneurial and marketplace success equals a reward for risk, innovation, hard work and serves as a testament for moral virtue), and how a view on rigour, diligence, discipline, and virtue might be consistent with a puritanical, intellectual, elitism, that is forged out of an entitlement of sorts.

Secondly, it is also argued that certain types of virtue aligning sometimes seems very far removed from the positionings of the compromised, manipulated masses, who are mainly uninterested in ecosuicide, global impacts of fast fashion, sustainability and resource management, and whose default position is to challenge regularly those more vulnerable and precarious than themselves for their compromises, indifferences, xenophobia and racism, rather than an orientation of their questioning towards a ruling elite. The tendency of some critics to connect with abuses and malpractices a long way from their own experiences is given approval on the basis that if it is happening to anyone it is happening to everyone.

For other critics again, the trauma of others is nearly always off limits, and if one does broach the subject, one can be accused of writing

out of or exploiting distresses and grievances of others. My standpoint would be that it is possible to reply compassionately to injustices of others, and to insist that it is possible to respond empathetically and ethically to those that are different or less or more fortunate than oneself in some aspects of their lives. Support for diversity, equality and inclusion in part prompts the need for academia to broaden its reach and access. Intercultural or transcultural engagements are not necessarily exploitative and hierarchical. Marking differences, engagement with work outside of one's race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, ability or age can be a way of forging awarenesses, allegiances and solidarities, without exploiting or benefiting from the traumas or victories of others. Of course, the off-limits viewpoint has merit not just in terms of signalling potential exploitation, but also in terms of how a critic might materially and professionally profit from such works, but I am intuitively cautious about demarcating what one can and cannot write about, and am reluctant to inhibit, invalidate or cancel curiosity, compassion and empathy for diversity and difference.

One might not have the background, lived reality or familiarity that marks work by an authenticity of experience, by writing about such work you somehow are denying another the opportunity to do the same thing, reinforcing their marginalisation, or that privilege's competitive advantage allows you to forge ahead with and complete such work in advance of another. To think through the argument to such an extent, can mean that the precarity of privilege is self-serving and self-legitimising. Given the scarcity of full-time permanent positions, academia is never an entirely meritocratic system where effort, brilliance, and originality ensure successful outcomes, effectively many scholars are left with valid grievances, who have not the luxury of hanging tough and must re-orientate their careers. (In academia's ruthlessly competitive workplace one's employment successes are always at the expense of others.)

If creative writers should be free to write about characters and situations outside of their own lived experience, critics might be cautious, but should not be discouraged from doing so. What should matter is whether or not such critical outputs are informed, impressive and substantial. Further, when research-inspired, engaged scholarly convictions are also expressed through various forms of activism and socio/cultural endeavours, such engagements mean that questions about privilege and virtue become lower order considerations. This is an argument not about naval gazing, under-acknowledging privilege, over-declaring credentials or legitimising engagements, but how

critical labour, advocacy, commitment and generosity may trump privilege and virtue.

Such an awareness unleashes an array of self-reflective questions, but it is not necessary to allow such contemplations to make the writing unhelpfully self-conscious, tentative, apologetic, or at least not in a way that hinders convictions and critical instincts. It is also important to be alert to the fact that writing might need to be aware of how an argument might be partial, marginal or flawed, open to dispute, and above all, that critical analysis is likely to age not like good wine, particularly as cultures and ideologies change over time. I find perplexing criticism that is flush with its own certainty. It seems arrogant when criticism is entirely dismissive of other viewpoints or when revelling in the limited critical methodologies of others. The critic should wonder about the source of the thoughts he/she thinks with or the origins of the questions they ask. As Thomas Postelwait (2009: 22) observes: '*What* we know is also constrained by *how* we know'.

With scholarly writing there seems to be less of a concern about the death of the critic in the ways that the notion of the death of the author once troubled and challenged analytical approaches. Although cautioned by Barthes's awarenesses around the illusions of subjectivity, for me the essence of criticism is about how theatre resonates with one's embedded and embodied knowledge, how one negotiates with that which is familiar and unfamiliar, elusive and estranged. The critic relies on how peculiar and unique his/her values and life experiences happen to be.

Irish Theatre Historiography

In Irish theatre historiography, there has been substantial critical interventions that offer largescale analysis, reviewing decades and centuries of work, writing on the outputs of specific theatre companies, playwrights, and tangential, thematically related or paradigm-clustered projects – interculturalism, globalisation, ageing, performance studies, sexualities, violence, trauma, sexual violations, masculinities, femininities, psychoanalytic, devised work, rehearsal practices and non-traditional theatre-making.

There are distinctive critical strands and approaches, none of which I will unpack here sufficiently, as I have previously attempted to do so more extensively. (See Jordan 2016: 673-695) Nevertheless, distinctions can be made between cultural materialist (Pilkington

2001), post-colonial (Kiberd 1995), and neo-colonial (Merriman 2011) strands. For a long time, a disposition that could be loosely described as liberal or social-democratic in orientation was the dominant mode of Irish theatre criticism (See works by Murray 1997, Grene 1999 and Roche 2013.) Intuitively, I tend to question but also appreciate the reliance on a liberal humanist critical framework to champion progress, based on reform and the evolution of rights and the corrections of wrongs; how it lauds diversity and incremental change, applauds an openness to social mobility or holds a generous and benign disposition towards the marginalised.

Currently, feminist approaches to gender and sexualities are the dominant critical mode of reflection. (See Fitzpatrick 2013 & 2018, Hill 2019, Kurdi 2010 & 2018, Leeney 2010 and Sihra 2007, as examples, amongst many others). Heteropatriarchy is its target, more from a justice and rights-based, gender inequality analytical approach, rather than from a dispositionality that originated in a materialist feminist viewpoint.

While there has never been a taboo on class-based thinking, evidence of class-styled exclusionary analysis, and little that could be regarded as entirely class-blind criticism, many critics have broached the subject of class, often in terms of colonial practices and outcomes of imperial rule, outlining that when a degree of political independence was achieved, resources and privileges were exchanged between one elite to another, and ranked relationships were maintained.

Kiberd's point is well made: "According to the old joke, the English have a class system and are so obsessed by it that most of their novels and all of their plays derive from it. The Americans have a class system but, being democrats in theory, must pretend it doesn't exist. The Irish, however, are the worst of all, for they have a class system but will not tell anyone what it is." (Kiberd 2018: xiii) Paul Murphy and Michael Pierse have consistently foregrounded class dynamics from very substantial theoretical perspectives and expose but also whistle-blow on the Irish class system.

Pierse's approach is neo-Marxian, in terms of addressing capital/labour relationships, structural inequalities, and class prejudices, segregations, conflicts, exclusions and protests. Pierse observes: "Class is at the heart of Irish society, its apparatuses, privileges and anxieties, whatever the failures of academic scrutiny in this regard." (Pierse 2018: 20-21) In earlier comments Pierse notes how "Class's invocation in contemporary academic discussions is thus hedged with apprehensions surrounding its rationality." (Pierse 2011: 3) For

Pierse, class is "an indispensable tool in attempting to delineate the exploitative social relations and polarised cultural positions which characterise, spatially and socially, the contours of modern Irish society." (ivi, p. 4)

Building on the work of Jacque Lacan, Antonio Gramsci and Slavoj Žižek, Paul Murphy argues that there is a "consistent link between political hegemony and its ideological legitimation through the essentialisation of subordinate or, to use Antonio Gramsci's term "'subaltern' class and gender groups" and how these function as "fantasy objects." (Murphy, 2008: 2 and 12) The status of the classed and gendered subaltern is "socially subordinate but symbolically central" in the work of many early Abbey Theatre playwrights and this leads to a disruption to "the prevailing ideologies in which they are situated," (ivi, p. 2) even as they are differently constructed. As Murphy notes, if Gramsci highlights in *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (1971) that ideological dominance is achieved by way of manufacturing "popular consent," (ivi, p. 5) I argue that there is also a case to be made for popular dissent, in terms of the counterhegemonic.

Both Murphy and Pierse offer a comprehensive set of class markers that include reflections on status, wealth, income, ownership, health, education, life chances and opportunities. Their class-based analysis has been hugely influential on my work, whereas I am less comfortable with the type of scholarly writing that attests to class struggles by privileging working class decency or ordinariness, or delights in stressing that the working classes are the necessary and only force of substantial political change.

If I signal either a general critical reluctance to deal with how class and capital intersect with gender, sexuality and race in Irish theatre historiography, or how feminism interconnected gender and sexualities as a priority, whereas class has been relegated or treated as a lower order consideration in many instances, it is not about trying to expose critical limitations, a signalling of untrustworthiness, nor is it about laying claim to some paradigm-shifting disposition in my own analysis. It is more to suggest the awareness that all scholarship is by its nature invariably tentative, self-selected, incomplete and faces a considerable challenge to interlock comprehensively so many variables and components that are worthy of analysis.

Additionally, a single play or production could incite a lengthy monograph, so any summative position, any account of a play, however ingenious or discerning it is in unpacking the significant

aspects of any work, cannot but be insubstantial. In these awarenesses there is an admission that consolidating any argument about a play in a paragraph or a few pages of discussion is scant, and that I did not do as well as I now might have done in dealing with class, in my own previous writings, so this viewpoint is much more a personal reprimand of sorts.

Accordingly, how dramaturgical/theatre practices tell and un-tell, account for and distort class traumas, hierarchies, dilemmas and privileges are of particular interest to me. Historically, class dynamics in Ireland were seldom consistent with the international practices of heavily industrialised and urbanised European nations and were further complicated by the lengthy period of British conquest and colonisation, especially the suppression of political and property rights. Today, transnational similarities around poverty, low income, precarity and workplace insecurity, education, rights, discriminations, prejudices and injustices can be easily articulated and identified. But the diversity and differences of contemporary local and globalised intra- and inter-class relations and their power relationships with and dependency on global capital disavow a simple articulation of interconnections, commonalities and solidarities of experiences across nations, communities and cultures. Neither class nor poverty can be treated as being ahistorical or continuous.

Additionally, as the current culture wars progress, class is now being seen as an increasingly diluted if nefarious concept – an empty signifier of sorts – even as it has become for many an essential categorisation more than ever before. It is ideologically beneficial for populist and neo-liberal thought to neither envision nor address class-based differences and inequities and to offset the benefits of common cause and purpose through awarenesses, mutual recognition and expressions of solidarities.

Currently, in Ireland there are nine categories under which one can be held legally accountable for discrimination, including gender, sexual orientation, and race, but class is not one of them. Yet class discrimination is and has always been widespread in Ireland. Ireland's history of colonisation and lack of sovereignty, and the fact that it did not directly partake in imperialist practices as a nation-state, its island location on the edge of Europe, its temperate climate, and most of all poor economic conditions throughout most of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, meant that the island was marked more by patterns of external than internal migration. If Paris was a multicultural city in the 1920s, Dublin was only beginning to be so in the 1990s.

This is not to dismiss the role of the Irish in the slave trade, owning and running plantations, or the particular hostilities of certain Irish migrants shown to people of colour in places like America or Britain, even when depravation, exclusions, prejudice and social status gave many marginalised groups multiple commonalities, shared grievances and visible and invisible oppressors. While there is some need to historicise Ireland's class traditions and practices, I cannot engage here with a labour/capital history, or Ireland's governance and industrial changes over a 100-year plus period.

Working Class-Writing Versus Writings about Class

In thinking about this Irish theatre tradition, it is sometimes important to stress but do not unduly emphasise the class backgrounds/ allegiances, race, genders or sexual orientations of the playwrights in order to engage in some form of grounding a play in biographical specificities and experiences – in ways that one would not necessarily do with critics. There is nothing definitive or entirely accurate about information offered by a playwright concerning his/her life circumstances in a biographical note, in revelations made during a media interview, newspaper feature, or on whatever platforms offering him/her the space for personal reflections or narrative expressions that reveal class and real, imagined or front-facing values. Because of an intricate combination of wealth, cultural, educational and social capital, writers, like many others, can have skewed and complex class/ gender/race/ sexualities viewpoints, perspectives and positionings.

Much has been made of their class affiliations and identifiers by some writers and by supportive scholars who give prominence and substance to their class backgrounds, as if such positionality confers on the work a greater degree of legitimacy, or some broad-stroke authenticity. Some writers decline or are reluctant to or feel no obligation to declare their class backgrounds in a public arena. Sometimes writers want to be indulged because of their class or minority status, can be seen as opportunist and exploitative in terms of their class affiliations and values, can be accused of culturally performing class realities, can be reprimanded for writing about a class to which they no longer belong or to which they have over or under-sold their sense of underprivilege and grievance.

For instance, working-class background writers that become very successful and wealthy can sometimes be more easily accused of selling out to commercialism and those that seem inimical to the class to

which they once belonged can face very serious accusations. Clearly, understanding someone's background can be informative to a point, without relying on it to construct a substantial argument. If a writer's background is given excessive focus, it becomes difficult to integrate that with the fact that there are likely to be multiple-class, genders, sexualities, and race backgrounds and affiliations of the many others involved in the administrating, commissioning, subsidising, producing and performing of theatre. (And that is before there is any consideration of the class, gender and age constitutions of an audience.) Class of course is received and perceived of differently in different eras. If a play has a long production history internationally class representations and nuance can be invisible. A play can be seen as typically Irish, and its class structures not given importance.

Again, rather than trying to account for, establish, and articulate endless qualifiers about the multiple social identifiers as they input into any piece of theatre, my focus is predominantly but not always, and for the sake of simplicity, on the specificities of Irish dramaturgical practices and what they seem to propose about the interconnections between class, gender, race and capital. How are ranked relationships imagined, configured and substantiated in various dramaturgical practices, which in performance would include everything from costume, accent, deportment to status signalling through gesture, movement and stage positioning? How such works circulate ideas about class, wealth and capital predominantly, that are compatible but also incompatible with the ideology that is dominant, emergent or residual at any one time? (Williams 1977: 121-27) What role does writing have to question, substantiate, diffuse, dispute and reinforce fears, values and ideas about a system that is ranked, inequitable, and rigged, without clinging to the notion that there is a single moral overview that is to be substantiated?

Some reflection could be given to the funding of the theatre that premiered the work or consideration given to the costs of mounting a production – an established theatre versus a fringe or community venue. But apart from reports into the economic impact of the cultural sector, investigations into the earnings of actors and other theatre makers, and apart from reports on the gender practices of Irish theatre, to date, little has been done to focus on the financial aspect of theatre itself in critical scholarship. Reflections on funding, sponsorship, box office receipts, who gets paid and how much, opens up another type of analysis, that I am not so inclined to facilitate.

While there is nothing necessarily distinctive, innovative or unique about Irish playwriting, I am saying that there are quirks, abnormalities, peculiarities and non-conventional dramaturgical dispositions worthy of consideration. In addition, there are approaches to genre that have absorbed multiple influences, local and international, for which there needs to be some accounting. There are many Irish plays that have had their own international successes, some across decades. Why these works would have such impacts is part of my own fascination with this tradition, especially in regard to how they deal with class and capital.

For some, theatre fulfils the needs of those who subsidise and attend, yet simultaneously that theatre is afforded a degree of artistic licence; in the theatre's calls on rights, equalities and justice it is indulged to a point, only. There is also the view that theatre self-censors, internalises or works with predetermined allowances, indulgences, and restrictions, in ways that ultimately foster an alliance with privilege, entitlement and elite thought. However, others propose an oppositionality and resistance, a no surrender/subservience to power.

Piketty opens his book, *Capital and Ideology* with the comment "Every human society must justify its inequalities: unless reasons for them are found, the whole political and social edifice stands in danger of collapse." (Piketty 2020: 1) He continues: "Every epoch therefore develops a range of contradictory discourses and ideologies for the purpose of legitimizing the inequality that already exists or that people believe should exist." (ivi, p. 1) Consequently, "Out of the clash of the contradictory discourses – a clash that is at once economic, social and political – comes a dominant narrative or narratives, which bolster the existing inequality regime." (ivi, p. 1) For Piketty, such hypercapitalist narratives are based on "property, entrepreneurship and meritocracy." (ivi, p. 1)

Inequitable regimes, redefine and reinvent themselves, are anticipative more than passive, utilise or threaten to deploy considerable violence, and rely on a "set of discourse and institutional arrangements intended to justify and structure the economic, social and political inequalities of a given society." (ivi, p. 2) Piketty proposes a rival narrative to the one of hyper-inegalitarianism, by means of a new "universalistic egalitarian narrative," based on a new ideology of equality, social ownership, education, knowledge and power sharing," that determines a new form of "participatory socialism." (ivi, p. 3)

Now if one pursues Piketty's line of thinking in relation to Irish dramaturgy, and the significance of mésalliance, what sort of observations might be made? What if the dialectic between the various "contradictory discourses," amplifies the contradictions, and declines to bolster, facilitate or settle for a remit that conforms to the singular dominant or prevailing ideology? What if narrative or dramaturgical attempts to justify inequalities fall short? What if there are insubstantial or excessive reasons flaunted for holding the ideological line? What if the case is over-made towards the avoidance of political collapse? What if the narrative accommodates multiple viewpoints, and none serves to cohere into a whole?

What might be made of a theatre tradition that was sometimes ambivalent, irresponsible, and divisive, neither blatantly hostile nor demonstratively supportive of a regime? What of a theatre practice that was out of step with a regime's view on poverty and property, and if its views on class discommode by accommodating prejudices, but also saying something about agency or social mobility, upward and downward, that was inimical to prevailing viewpoints? These are some of the anomalous positionings that Irish theatre takes up at its best, and sometimes augments, magnifies or erases the contradictions as an act of dissent.

Poverty and Lack

In the instance of this article, two pertinent examples around wealth and poverty demonstrate some of that dramaturgical eccentricity and misalignment. Firstly, both 'lack' and 'plenty' models of writing, either where characters have very little or more than enough material goods, where they are insecure or secure in their environments, serve as cautions and threats, motivators and discouragements. Such dramaturgical dispositions are further complicated by, the already mentioned, uncanny mingling of genres.

A class-situated poverty is a persistent trope of Irish playwriting, yet it must be seen alongside anomalous attitudes towards wealth, property, ownership, inheritance and succession in plays set in bourgeois or elite environments. (See Jordan 2021: 233-246). In the first instance, many Irish plays are not only marked by subsistence living but also by appalling depravations, injustices, addictions (drink, drugs, gambling) and traumas, sometimes caused by unemployment, sometimes political violence, sometimes because of the reach of criminality into communities – there is no social safety net.

This traditional early twentieth century writing preference or predilection for a 'lack' rather than a 'plenty' dramaturgical model, is understandable, as widespread poverty, is not only part of Ireland's history, but as Conor McPherson has noted that poverty gives busyness, urgency and restlessness to Sean O'Casey's plays. McPherson remarks: "If the characters were all rich they would not have anything like the energy they have. They have nothing and they are just looking to get something. People lie and argue and beg and fight and cajole in order to escape the misery of not having anything … People who are uncomfortable and need something have to keep moving." (McPherson in Jordan, 2019: 158-159)

Poverty correlates to small, confined spaces, and in O'Casey's work no tenement space ever serves as a sanctuary, and the spaces are owned by landlords, intent on maximising profits and usage, by housing multiple families in spaces incompatible with basic needs and services. Tellingly, in *The Plough and the Stars* (1926) the tenement home of the working-class Clitheroes is described as being furnished "towards a finer expression of domestic life." However, the original marble fireplace has been stripped out by landlords and the building itself is "struggling for its life against the assaults of time and the more savage assaults of the tenants." (*Plough*: 135) Landlord negligence is matched if not trumped by many of the occupants contributing to the decline of their own environments, a viewpoint inconsistent with those who like to see the poor as passive victims of elites.

In work as varied as Mark O'Rowe's *Howie the Rookie* (1999), Conor McPherson's *The Night Alive* (2013), Paula Meehan's *Mrs Sweeney* (1997) or Dermot Bolger's *The Lament for Arthur Cleary* (1989), characters that are poor can be belligerent, disdainful, vengeful, defiant, hostile, supportive of neighbours, humorous, self-express and act from multiple, contradictory positions. Class antagonisms are often signalled, but are sometimes hindered in expression by some notion of respect for the better off, something Hugh Leonard's *Da* (1973) confronts head on. Even if characters are written to be lacking considerable appreciation of their circumstances, it does not mean that the work itself lacks awareness, indeed the limitations of a character's thought and self-reflective processes can prompt audiences to fill in the gaps and do the critical lifting. Further, in some instances characters do not directly articulate objections to socio/economic inequities. O'Rowe's *Howie the Rookie* is a devastating critique of poverty, without any character articulating oppositionality to social inequalities.

In more instances, it is the case that characters that are poor all too clearly see the horrors that surround them and they are more than capable of articulating responses to such situations, of which O'Casey's *Juno and the Paycock* (1924) is a considerable example, as are the plays by Bolger and Meehan mentioned above. In Meehan's work, Lil Sweeney wonders if the wealthy would like to gas and exterminate the poor in neighbourhoods like hers, as had been done in concentration camps during World War II.

For some commentators, this is seen as the poor being given access to or resourced by different registers of language as a means of offsetting, diverting or mis-channelling dissent, affirming marginalisation or as a substitution for truly speaking back to power. The poor do not speak with one voice, as there is a diversity of thought, a range of inconsistent, provisional viewpoints that does not cohere as a class consciousness. (Indeed, the oftentimes scholarly rejection, even intolerance of the resistance of the poor to their circumstances, is a telling critical practice and signals an inclination of some towards a perverse reverence of the poor.)

Pilkington has raised an interesting point about how poverty might be invalidated or subordinated by the degree to which a figure like O'Casey endows his impoverished characters is ways that allows them to be viewed as "innately histrionic," thereby "making light of its economic circumstances and of its political demands." (Pilkington 2010, 6) Although I have a degree of alignment with such a line of questioning, I am more inclined to suggest, when social capital serves as a compensation for economic want, it is not simply about disguising or disavowing harrowing realities, not simply a rebalancing, but more about making circumstances tolerable in one sense, especially if such articulations have a vein of humour and irony.

The facilitation of articulacy, the polyvocality and multiple perspectives on offer, the affording of characters an ability to articulate their circumstances, nor the inclusion of a performative sensibility, amount to a negligible form of compensation nor to a class passivity or fatalism, but it allows adjustments and accommodations that often make the most of given circumstances, however limited. Poverty as represented becomes intolerable by way of various articulacies, rival points of dissent from "common sense" and cultural capital knowhow. As Harvey notes:

> What Gramsci calls 'common sense' (defined as 'the sense held in common') typically grounds consent. Common sense is constructed out of longstanding

practices of cultural socialization often rooted deep in regional or national traditions. It is not the same as the 'good sense' that can be constructed out of critical engagement with the issues of the day. Common sense can, therefore, be profoundly misleading, obfuscating or disguising real problems under cultural prejudices. Cultural and traditional values (such as belief in God and country or views on the position of women in society) and fears (of communists, immigrants, strangers, or 'others') can be mobilized to mask other realities. (Harvey 2005: 39).

O'Casey's characters in *Juno* and *Plough* disavow the master narratives of religious beliefs and political notions of insurgency as inevitable response to imperialism, and dispute values of solidarity associated with trade union activism, by way of their de-realisation, partly because of self-interest and partly because of the monolithic nature of power in the realities of the plays.

Deirdre Kinahan's *The Unmanageable Sisters* (2018), a new version of Michel Tremblay's *Les Belles-Soeurs* (1968), is set in the Ballymun Towers in the early 1970s. The Towers were a solution to tenement living in Dublin, but over time these high story flats would become inhospitable living spaces and later serve as an emblem of ill-thought-out social interventions, where communities are not just buildings but all of the cultural, economic, transport and social services needed for them to thrive. Kinahan's adaptation foregrounds the precarity of her characters; sexual repression, poor economic prospects, gender inequalities, contraception and abortion are discussed by women characters that are linked by social connections and family bonds, but divided by differences, self-interests, intergenerational tensions and a lack of common purpose.

A traditional dramaturgical reliance on situations of poverty, historic or contemporary, seemed particularly anomalous in plays written just before and during the Celtic Tiger period (1993-2006), which witnessed improved living standards, higher educational attainments, better employment and working conditions, increases in private home ownership, significant increases in government spending across most sectors of society, greater purchasing power for many, that coexisted alongside forms of conspicuous consumption and excessive private borrowing that some found offensive.

Piketty's term "neo-proprietarian ideology" is a useful way to think about the linkage between the neo-liberal capital project and property investment in Ireland that came to an abrupt end with the recession of 2008 (Piketty 2020: 20), that was tied to American subprime lending in the first instance, and then to the exposure of

international banks to bad investments. As many Irish citizens had overextended themselves financially during the boom, many had debts that they could not cover, especially as unemployment levels reached close to 18% of the workforce. Ireland needed the intervention of the European Commission, European Central Bank and the International Monetary Fund, who imposed a period of financial supports and an austerity package that led to the short-term loss of Ireland's economic sovereignty.

While McPherson's *The Veil* (2011) is set in the 1820s at a time of economic crisis, where tenants cannot afford rents and some landlords have not the liquidity to pay their own staff, it is also a play that is suggestive about the economic forces that brought the demise of the Celtic Tiger era. And in McPherson's post-boom play, *The Night Alive* (2013) Tommy's entrepreneurial idea was to import a live rig from Belarus, but it attracted lightning, so it was a health and safety hazard. Business loans given to the likes of Tommy were all too easily approved without the appropriate checks and balances by commercial banks. In McPherson's play these banks are now burst, as many were post-boom. Class and gender violence are also central to the work. Tommy rescues Aimee from a brawl with her boyfriend and pimp, Kenneth, that leaves her bloodied. Aimee ends up staying with Tommy, exchanging sexual services for rent. Following Aimee's killing of Kenneth to save Tommy from an assault, plans for Aimee and Tommy to flee to Finland do not materialise. If the play seems to signal a bleak outcome for Aimee through Doc's second-hand account that she is again addicted to drugs, the play ends decisively with the opposite sentiment. Tommy and Aimee co-exist in a reality of renewal and invigoration, outside of time and space. In this alternative consciousness, Tommy has patched up his relationship with his daughter, who is pregnant and no longer drug dependent, and Aimee and Tommy are dressed and behaving in ways that suggest they are flourishing. It is one of the few plays that goes from lack to plenty, or from a fall-fall model to a fall and rise pattern.

Wealth and Plenty

In this Irish writing tradition, poverty invariably begets greater poverty, seldom progress or social mobility. If that is understandable in some ways from a tragic or a tragi-comic sensibility, as to why wealth more surprisingly begets financial decimation is an outlier practice. As a generalisation, what surprises in Irish playwriting is that precarity,

urgency, over-presentness, the heavy discounting of the future, the attritions associated with poverty, almost find their mirror images in the experiences of the majority of elite or bourgeois characters. For such characters, change and the passing of time does not bring success or rewards, greater abundance, new opportunities, additional freedoms or rights and this needs further explanation.

In Irish plays set in ruling class/ elite/ bourgeois settings their characters do not tend to be inordinately greedy, venial, self-obsessed, over-confident, and comfortably wealthy like you have in other traditions. Expectations of agency in middle-class surroundings are seldom met.

If working class characters are seen as exploited, the middle-class characters on stage are seldom collectively the exploiter. Brian Friel's *Aristocrats* (1979) praxis of intergenerational fall, demise and resilience echoes Lennox Robinson's *The Big House* (1926).

In Irish writing, wealth is almost never hard earned or celebrated, and those who have wealth have invariably done so by illegitimate, illegal means, for example in Hugh Leonard's *The Patrick Pearse Motel* (1971) whereby wealth is achieved by corrupt practices. Many bourgeois characters in Irish plays tend to be losing their resources and advantages, of which Tom Murphy's *The Gigli Concert* (1983) is a good example, where the unnamed Irishman cyclically finds himself increasingly challenged to hold things together. Neither is there any virtue bestowed on material gain that a capitalist or neo-liberal mindset affords, or a view on material gain that amounts to saying that plenty matters. Indeed, the opposite is often proposed; material wants and benefits are curiously disparaged, questioned, unnecessary, even vulgar and offensive. In Tom Murphy's *Conversations on a Homecoming* (1985), Tom chides Liam, exclaiming: "... You're only a fuckin' bunch of keys." (Murphy 1988: 109)

Such a dramaturgical disposition could be categorised either as a perverse form of wealth-shaming or of serving an ideology viewpoint that is consistent with frugality that is essentialised in the much-quoted President Éamon de Valera's 1943 St Patrick's Day radio address. In it de Valera lauded: "people who valued material wealth only as the basis of right living, of people who were satisfied with frugal comfort and devoted their leisure to the things of the spirit," while applauding the "cosy homesteads" that were "joyous with the sounds of industry, with the romping of sturdy children, the contests of athletic youths and the laughter of comely maidens." (Moynihan 1980: qtd.in Murphy 2018, 285) What is there not to dislike in that viewpoint? If an Irish

state's ruling class was happy to circulate a fantasy of frugality, and while there may well be a convenient disparagement of wealth in Irish plays that seems to chime with that perspective, the reality was that the wealthy were more than content to get along with doing things their way, accumulating resources in plain sight, unencumbered by such rhetorical delusions.

Additionally, why is it the case that in so many Irish plays the offspring of the wealthy are nearly always low ambition, poorly motivated, ineffective, incompetent, and/or peculiar for instance Casimir in *Aristocrats*? Additionally, their circumstances extend to an inability or unwillingness to extend the family line. As inheritances and succession are theatricalised negatively, with some exceptions, decline comes in various forms, by way of characters squandering their wealth, living beyond their means, being out of step with their economic/material realities, passing it on to the wrong character, or when a big house is burned to the ground because of what is happening within the wider political sphere, as in Robinson's already mentioned play.

A decisive example of this mésalliance is J.M. Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World* (1907), a work that proffers, but withdraws the threat of plenty, with the potential marriage between Pegeen and Christy and the conjoining of the assets of the farmer and publican. Marriage brings few material benefits and freedoms to the eponymous heroine of Teresa Deevy's *Katie Roche* (1937), where her marriage to Stanislaus re-affirms her unequal class and gender status. The gendered implications of Bunreacht na hÉireann, the Irish Constitution (1937), which stressed that a woman's place was in the home, has rightly faced major challenges: "The State shall, therefore, endeavour to ensure that mothers shall not be obliged by economic necessity to engage in labour to the neglect of their duties in the home." (Article 41.2 1937)

W.B. Yeats' *Purgatory* (1938) rails against inter-class relationships and asset transfer and a father kills his son to stop the extension of the family line. The ironic disposition of Lennox Robinson's *The Whiteheaded Boy* (2016) does not take away from the capital transfer that occurs between generations, where there are winners and losers, especially amongst the lower order characters. In Frank McGuinness's *Dolly West's Kitchen* (1999) wealth is shifted easily, successfully and with little hindrance intergenerationally, and exemplifies one of the few plays that is positive and unambiguous about asset maintenance and transfer. One could argue that it is an admonitory gesture to suggest that wealth transfer is temporary.

But because these negative dramatizations of inheritance bear little relation to the transfer and maintenance of capital that exists in the real world between generations, something beyond such thoughts about caution and vigilance needs signalling. At the start of the twentieth century, for some, the decline of the Ascendancy class was a bitter reality for those associated with that class, but for others it could not have happened soon enough, and there is a degree of spite in seeing a class on its last legs, down on its luck, so to speak, a class that symbolised British imperialism, the denial of indigenous ownership of lands, the class in part blamed for the Great Famine (1845-49), many members of which evicted tenants for rents they could not pay, exploited the produce of land itself because of short termism, and exported goods from a country as millions starved and died. For others, in such demises there is an opportunity to displace and replace, an impulse that needs to be seen alongside the general cultural disdain towards the embourgeoisement of Irish society more broadly. As Piketty remarks an "inequality regime," encompasses "both the political regime and the property regime," and relies on educational, fiscal and legal systems to maintain inequalities and the privileges of the ruling classes (Piketty 2020: 6).

If cultural practices were questioning, sometimes hostile towards such embourgeoisement, social practices were not so negative, as evident in the rise of the numbers of big farmers, the strength of professional services, and the growth in business enterprises that resulted in greater wealth acquisition for some. Such profitability and capital accumulation must be seen alongside the realities of widespread subsistence living, the large-scale emigration trends, mainly comprising citizens from working-class communities in the period after the Second World War, and throughout the 1960s.

Other writing traditions have been far more secure in enunciating class structures and distinctions, seem to be more comfortable with wealth, and have little by way of middle-class pain or trauma shaming (alongside wealth shaming) found in Irish theatre. Indeed, the wholesale discounting of middle-class existential dilemmas, and the disparagement of its life challenges is one of the dominant hallmarks of contemporary Irish playwriting. If money fails adequately to serve as a motivation or reward, there is seldom guilt by way of status or privilege. There is also a writing failure to include the awareness that class categories evolve, readjust and are inclined to self-perpetuate, that middle, ruling and elite classes have more motivation, resolve, stability and successes than theatre writing would seem to suggest.

Instead of a critical perspective that centralises itself around class struggles, oppression, hierarchies and commonalities, around binaries of hegemonic or non-hegemonic, exploiter and exploited, capital and labour, over- or under-privilege, an alternative might be to balance thinking about class in terms of conflicts, segregations, rivalries, biases and differences, while also stressing class blending, commonalities, dependencies and reciprocations. That way it might be easier to address how inter- and intra-class relationships are dynamised and dramatised in Irish playwriting, in ways that embrace and expose the rigged nature of hierarchical, social organisations and unequal distributions of different types of capital, particularly in relation to money and property and less so in relation to cultural and social capital.

Consequently, the critical challenge is how to address and articulate the ambiguities, elusiveness, precarity, and the contradictions of a writing tradition in terms of its disguising, mixed-signalling and blurring of class, gender and race-based relationships in relation to consensual and dissensual views on the inequitable distribution of capital. It is because of such contradictions and ambivalences, the dramaturgy maintains inconsistencies in viewpoints and aptitudes, seems to be never simply overwhelmingly beholden to the dominant ideology that was in circulation when work was first written/performed.

By Way of a Precarious Conclusion

In terms of Irish theatre, in both its written and performance expressions, I engage with it as a scholar/spectator, but also as someone who wants to be challenged, engaged, excited and entertained – that is to be surprised, encouraged to anticipate what and how something is happening, to suspend my disbelief, to take both comfort and re-assurance, but also to embrace the moments that antagonise, rile, cause offence, the occasions when one recoils, takes cover or feels exposed. I do not necessarily wish to have my own values and viewpoints reflected back to me, nor do I want to find multiple reasons to take offence. Plays are not there to allow me to espouse a political viewpoint. I do not engage with older plays simply to unravel their conservative values, misogyny, xenophobia, racism, homophobia, or blatant class biases. I do not see theatre as a singular cultural expression evidenced by the dominant practices of well-funded, established and commercial theatre, nor do I regard the theatre sector as either a conservative or innately progressive

environment. It is not always necessary for theatre to be the space that attests to injustices and champions the need to address inequalities. Theatre can sometimes simplify and sentimentalise issues of rights, equality and injustice in ways that I am inclined to resist.

I tend to distrust most expressions of feel good, social transformation or victory over the odds found in some theatrical texts, as much as I am unreceptive to the manipulative coercion and fatalism that drive a different type of dramaturgical imperative. Audiences can be radical in their cultural tastes and respond positively to such progressive expressions, while in reality they can be conservative in other aspects of their everyday lives, or more accurately, simultaneously and variably radical and conservative, depending on the issue.

Accordingly, I do not regard theatre as a cultural practice that either uniquely challenges or mimics, reinforces and serves uncritically hegemonic ideology, at the behest of sinister neo-liberal agents. When a piece of theatre's intent is not to represent, I am slow to take offence at that which can be conceived of as misrepresentation. Reading plays realistically, while disowning theatrical conventions or genre framing is a substantial failing of some criticism, as is the view that Irish theatre is a conventionally realist-orientated tradition. Indeed, to my mind, the complexities of very good plays undo many theoretical positions and propositions; if plays are comfortable with ambiguity, much of theory's need for declarative certainty excludes, erases, brushes over, and edits out many ambivalences and contradictions.

As a critic and spectator, I think along the lines of Paige Reynolds, who suggests, responding to David Llyod's work, that she cannot accept "the individuals who compose popular social bodies as merely transparent objects of manipulation, estranged from themselves as a consequence of the abuses proffered by the state and other structures of power." (Reynolds 2007: 18) She continues that "according to Lloyd, mainstream culture offers no legitimate subject position, let alone relief or pleasure, for its participants, because 'one principal and consistent dynamic of identity formation has been the negation of recalcitrant or unassimilable elements in Irish society'." (Reynolds 2007: 18-9, citing Lloyd 1993, 6)

As a critic/spectator I possess a legitimate subject position of sorts, and I am an active presence, when engaged and focused, less so when dozy, tired, bored or disengaged. This viewpoint is reinforced by Rancière's view on emancipative spectatorship more broadly, which "begins when we understand that viewing is also an action that confirms or transforms this distribution of positions. The spectator

also acts, like the pupil or scholar. She observes, selects, compares, interprets. She links what she sees to a host of other things that she has seen on other stages, in other kinds of place. She composes her own poem with the elements of the poem before her." (Rancière 2009: 13) Rancière adds: "The collective power shared by spectators does not stem from the fact that they are members of a collective or elite body or from some specific form of interactivity. It is the power each of them has to translate what she perceives in her own way, to link it to the unique intellectual adventure that makes her dissimilar to all the rest in as much as this adventure is not like any other." (ivi, p. 13)

As an individual subject with a past, in a particular cultural and socio/political timeframe, there is no singular consciousness, but deliberative, contradictory and rival consciousnesses, and an array of or a palimpsest of different identities/subjectivities. Rather than categorising my critical perspective as singular, uniform and coherent, I see it as a palimpsest-like process, shaped by multi-locationality, multi-perspectiveness and polyvocality – following Brah's discussions in relation to a diasporic consciousness. (Brah 1996: 181-196). Effectively this viewpoint is the consequence, and condition of me taking up consensually, passively, unconsciously, assertively and coercively, several subject positions, marked by the innumerable transactions, intersections and vectorisations of different types of capital – economic, cultural, social and educational – all governed by "inegalitarian ideologies," (Piketty 2020: ix) that can be resisted, rejected, observed, but also operate on a level of consciousness to which one only has limited awareness. Ideology openly declares itself, but also by sleight-of-hand it deceives; ideology encourages value alignments but also affords dissent to a point; ideology embraces change as it punishes those that are truly aberrant.

These ideological realities operate intersectionally and concurrently, not unifocally, across categories of gender, class, race, and sexualities. It is that awareness that must be considered in relation to any reflections on class and capital in Irish theatre, a body of work, canonical, counter-canonical, and otherwise, that is to be gauged against work of the highest standards. Irish dramaturgical practices are sometimes strange, comforting and challenging, amplifying and muffling the 'common sense' and regular, but also peculiar and irregular ideological beats and rhythms.

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