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Violence in Contemporary Irish Drama:  
Martin McDonagh, Enda Walsh and Mark O'Rowe

Diplomová práce

Vedoucí práce: Mgr. David Livingstone, Ph.D.

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Prohlašuji, že jsem tuto diplomovou práci vypracovala samostatně pod odborným dohledem vedoucího práce a uvedla jsem všechny použité podklady a literaturu.

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## 1. Introduction

This master's thesis focuses on contemporary Irish theatre, specifically on three Irish playwrights – Martin McDonagh, Enda Walsh and Mark O'Rowe – and on violence in their plays. Martin McDonagh, Enda Walsh and Mark O'Rowe are all well-known not only in Ireland but they are also becoming increasingly famous outside their country, especially Martin McDonagh who has achieved great success all around the world, including the Czech Republic. McDonagh, Walsh and O'Rowe began to write their first plays in the 1990s and have continued to produce new pieces up to the present day. The reoccurring theme in almost all of them is violence, whether grotesque, exaggerated and explicit or serious, authentic and implicit. I will analyse several plays by each of the three writers, I will show in what way the concept of violence is used in them, what role it plays, how it is expressed and what the intended impact is.

Since the topic of this thesis is relatively new, there are not that many available secondary sources (except for Martin McDonagh who has attracted the critics' attention thanks to his international popularity), and the critical works tend to agree with one another instead of providing different points of view. However, the critical essays do offer interesting interpretations of the plays which I will refer to in my own analysis. Apart from several books on the development of Irish theatre and on contemporary Irish drama, I will mostly work with the only two so far published collections of essays about the work of Enda Walsh and Mark O'Rowe: *The Theatre of Enda Walsh* edited by Mary P. Caulfield and Ian R. Walsh, and *Sullied Magnificence: The Theatre of Mark O'Rowe* edited by Sarah Keating and Emma Creedon. As for Martin McDonagh, there have been published several collections of critical essays to which I can use as the secondary sources, the two most important ones being *The Theatre of Martin McDonagh: A World of Savage Stories* edited by Lilian Chambers and Eamonn Jordan, and *Martin McDonagh: A Casebook* edited by Richard R. Russell. The main source for the analysis of the concept of violence will be *Performing Violence in Contemporary Ireland* edited by Lisa Fitzpatrick, a collection of essays which offer interesting insights into the topic.

The first part of the thesis will provide the historical and cultural background for the main body of the work. Irish history has played a crucial role in Irish literature and its focus, and is tightly bound to the notion of Irish identity which has always been the central theme for Irish writers. The second chapter will deal with the development of Irish theatre and the most important Irish playwrights since the opening of the Abbey Theatre in Dublin in 1904. Irish theatre has undergone gradual development from being under the British influence to the attempts to establish an independent Irish national theatre, to the inevitable impact of multiculturalism and globalisation in the recent years. The next chapter will outline the concept of violence as it was used in drama since the beginning of theatre in Classical times. It will explain why it was included, how it was expressed and how it differs from the modern approach towards violence.

The main body of the thesis will start with a presentation of the three authors, McDonagh, Walsh and O'Rowe. I will introduce their short biographies and the list of their works. This will be followed by summaries of the analysed plays and the analysis itself with the focus on the concept of violence in them. I will mainly discuss the way the violence is expressed in the plays and what the final impact of it is. The last part of the thesis will summarize the results from the analysis, incorporating the historical and cultural facts from the first part of the work. It will also try to explain why McDonagh, Walsh and O'Rowe use violence in their plays and why it became so common for contemporary Irish drama.

## 2. Historical and Cultural Background

The rich Irish history and culture have had an immense influence on Irish literature which has frequently served as a reflection of the historical events of each era. Irish writers have very often occupied themselves with the historical, cultural and political issues of their lifetime or the Irish past functioning as some kind of reviewers. The following chapter will therefore provide brief insight into the historical and cultural background of the Irish island and its long-lasting struggle for independence.

Ireland had often been associated with the fight for freedom from British supremacy, the strong impact of the Church, political conflicts, poverty, unemployment and emigration. Yet, at the turn of the twenty-first century, Ireland was not only a free, modern country but even one of the most globalized ones in the world. One example of how radical the change was, is the fact that Ireland, which had always been considered a prudish nation, was the first country to legalize same-sex marriage by popular vote in the referendum in 2015. Although it might seem that the sea change happened within a few recent years, it was the result of a slow, gradual, long-term development reaching far back to the past, with one of the most important turning points being the Easter Rising which commemorated its centenary in 2016. Although Ireland managed to catch up with the rest of western Europe, the process of modernisation was neither easy nor trouble-free and Ireland's difficult and often bloody history still plays an essential part in the present.

The supremacy of Britain over Ireland dates back to the twelfth century when Ireland was conquered by the Normans. Since then, the Irish have been fighting for their freedom for long centuries and will bear a grudge against the British for the suffering of their ancestors. Their resistance suffered defeat, the British confiscated the fertile lands in the east of Ireland and forced the natives into the less fertile west. They also tried to eradicate Irish traditions and language but were unsuccessful, even though the number of Irish language speakers decreased radically. In addition to the struggle for land and power, the English and the Scottish settlers brought Protestantism to Catholic Ireland which created a long-lasting conflict that eventually resulted in the split of the country. Apart from the British invasion, Ireland faced several natural

disasters of which the most severe ones were the famine and the Black Death in the fourteenth century, the famine known as 'The Year of Slaughter' in 1740-1741 and the Great Famine between 1845-1849. Starvation and diseases caused heavy losses of life, mass emigration and weakening of the economy.

The English secured their position in Ireland with the Acts of Union 1800, which united the Kingdom of England and the Kingdom of Ireland, in reaction to the bloody Rebellion in 1798 and the tendencies of the Irish to establish Catholic emancipation. The first real change for the better only came in the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century. One of the first reforms was transferring the ownership of the land, a matter of life and death in Ireland, from the landlord to the tenant. Another important step was the Gaelic Revival which tried to restore Irish Gaelic culture and promote active use of the Irish language. Furthermore, these times were also very successful for many Irish writers who achieved international acclaim such as Oscar Wilde, George Bernard Shaw, W.B. Yeats, James Joyce or Samuel Beckett.

The opportunity for Ireland to finally gain its independence arrived in 1916 while the United Kingdom was engaged in the First World War. The famous Easter Rising organized by Irish Republicans in Dublin was supposed to end the British rule and establish the free Irish Republic. Although the rising was suppressed by the much greater number of better armed British soldiers, the event went down in history as the critical point of Irish independence. The civilian loss during the uprising, the imprisonment of the rebels and the execution of the rising leaders popularized the public support of free Ireland leading to the victory of the republican party Sinn Féin in 1918. The party declared independence of the Irish Republic which started the War of Independence (1919-1921) between the Irish Republican Army and the British. The war resulted in the Anglo-Irish Treaty which ended British rule and led to the partition of the Irish island into Northern Ireland, which remained with the United Kingdom, and to the self-governing Irish Free State.

Yet, despite the fact that the conflict between Ireland and England finally ceased, another conflict arising from the division of Ireland emerged. The Irish Civil War (1922-1923) between Irish republicans and Irish nationalists left Irish society divided for generations and eventually gave rise to the Troubles in the late 1960s, a



guerrilla conflict between Northern Protestants who wanted to stay with the United Kingdom and Southern Catholics who wanted Northern Ireland to join Ireland and create a united free state. The violent assaults by the both groups lasted for three long decades during which more than 3 500 people were killed, half of whom were civilians.<sup>1</sup>

The 1960s also saw, in contrast, a new social and economic policy based on free trade which attracted foreign investment and although the change was not revolutionary, it was very welcome after the ossified 1950s. Unfortunately, the 1970s and the 1980s, the years of McDonagh's, Walsh's and O'Rowe's childhood and early adulthood, brought back social and political instability and economic difficulties.

## **2.1. The 'Revolution' of the 1990s**

When comparing the first half of the 1980s and the end of the 1990s, a huge difference is apparent in the Irish political and economic state between the two periods. Michael Parker in his essay "Changing History" states that the 1980s, which were marked by a general downturn in western economies caused by the oil crisis in 1979, also affected Ireland and led to a high level of unemployment with at least a million people dependent on social benefits which gave rise to increasing levels of criminality and drug abuse mainly in large cities such as Dublin or Cork.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, at that time still continuing violence in Northern Ireland maintained the tension between the north and the south of the country. The crisis stimulated a social debate among authorities, writers and intellectuals, and the people's discontent with the situation led to a rapid overturning of the old traditional conservatism into new, modern Ireland.

One of the most important changes was the weakening of the Catholic Church and its lessened involvement with state affairs. The Church had been losing its influence for some time even before a series of scandals of child sexual abuse was brought to light during the 1990s. This affair shook the public view of the institution

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<sup>1</sup> Seán Duffy, *Atlas of Irish History* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan Ltd, 1997), 93.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Parker, "Changing History: The Republic and Northern Ireland since 1990," in *Irish Literature since 1990: Diverse Voices*, ed. Scott Brewster and Michael Parker (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009), 3-4.

and destabilised its authority for good. Another crucial event that helped modernize Ireland was the election of Mary Robinson to the Presidency in 1990. She strongly promoted women's and gay rights which eventually led to changes in social legislation such as legalisation of contraceptives, decriminalization of homosexual acts or permission of divorce which had been rejected only a few years earlier.<sup>3</sup> The years of the Presidency of Mary Robinson (1990-1997) and the first ten years of the Presidency of her successor, Mary McAleese (1997-2011), also brought a rapid expansion of the Irish economy known as the 'Celtic Tiger'. Emigration, which had been a part of Irish history for centuries, ceased and Ireland began to attract immigrants as well as numbers of tourists who brought money to the state budget and accelerated the modernisation of the services. It seemed that the only obstruction on Ireland's way to the new age was the ongoing conflict in Northern Ireland. Nevertheless, even the Troubles finally ended after lengthy political negotiations which resulted in the Good Friday Peace Agreement of 1998.

However, the turn of the century brought to light additional, new problems of the modern times. Apart from the revelation of the shocking practices within the Church, there were several cases of investigation of prominent politicians charged with corruption and criminality.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, the economic growth was beneficial mainly for big cities but it is stated that 20 per cent of the Irish population were still below the poverty line<sup>5</sup> which marks a significant inequality between the poor and the rich, typical for developed countries. In addition, the Irish had to cope with the arrival of foreign immigrants attracted by Ireland's new-found wealth and deal with the consequent multiculturalism. They had to adjust to a new way of life in the manner of modern western European states within a comparatively short period of time. Martine Pelletier in her essay "New Articulations of Irishness and Otherness on the Contemporary Irish Stage" explains that "the undeniable exhilaration felt by many as Ireland set itself free from former constraints and limitations [...] has nonetheless been counterpointed by a measure of anxiety."<sup>6</sup> The sudden globalisation, the great

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<sup>3</sup> Parker, "Changing History," 6-8.

<sup>4</sup> Parker, "Changing History," 8.

<sup>5</sup> Alex Davis, John Goodby, Andrew Hadfield and Eve Patten, *Irish Studies: The Essential Glossary* (London: Arnold, 2003), 72, quoted in Parker, "Changing History," 7.

<sup>6</sup> Martine Pelletier, "New Articulations of Irishness and Otherness on the Contemporary Irish Stage" in *Irish Literature since 1990: Diverse Voices*, ed. Scott Brewster and Michael Parker (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009), 98.

economic success and the new-found broad-mindedness resulted in a clash between the old and the new which the Irish had to face.

Scott Brewster in his essay “Flying High? Culture, Criticism, Theory since 1990” points out that while the beginning of the twentieth century was in the spirit of the Irish Revival which “fiercely rejected many aspects of the ‘filthy modern tide,’ the situation appeared to have been reversed by the end of the century [...] with the enthusiastic embrace of modernity.”<sup>7</sup> The Irish have not given up their national heritage, however, they are proud of it and their folk traditions and unspoilt landscape are one of the main attractions for the tourists but at the same time, most of them reject the stiff, prude regime of the past and the artificially forced promotion of Irishness. The question of finding a compromise between different generations, between the rich, modern urban areas and the poor, more traditional rural ones, and between the new dynamic society and the old idyllic view of Ireland became a new topic of social discussion in the twenty-first century. Brewster describes the situation as the search for “the ability to navigate but not be engulfed by an expanding world, to harness modernisation but to remain equivocal about its benefits”<sup>8</sup> which, according to him, is the main struggle of the Irish nation in the new millennium.

Contemporary Irish artists, including playwrights, have been reflecting on the impact of the changes within the modern Irish society not only from the present point of view but also in relation and comparison to the past. Looking back, the presumably idyllic era of romantic Ireland from Éamon de Valera’s<sup>9</sup> famous quote:

a land whose countryside would be bright with cosy homesteads, whose fields and villages would be joyous with the sounds of industry, with the romping of sturdy children, the contests of athletic youths, the laughter of comely maidens; whose firesides would be forums for the wisdom of old age,<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Scott Brewster, “Flying High? Culture, Criticism, Theory since 1990,” in *Irish Literature since 1990: Diverse Voices*, ed. Scott Brewster and Michael Parker (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009), 18.

<sup>8</sup> Brewster, “Flying High?,” 20.

<sup>9</sup> Eamon de Valera (1882-1975) was the president of Ireland between 1959-1973. Denis Rolleston Gwynn, “Eamon de Valera,” last modified April 12, 2016. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Eamon-de-Valera>.

<sup>10</sup> Martin Middeke and Paul Schnierer, introduction to *The Methuen Drama Guide to Contemporary Irish Playwrights* (London: Methuen Drama, 2010), xi.

retrospectively seemed to be an era of repression and stagnation. Scott Brewster describes that “the apparent triumph of modernisation has brought about economic, cultural and psychological transformation, illuminating the ‘dark age’ of insularity, conservatism and underdevelopment that marked the early years of the Republic.”<sup>11</sup> Yet, contemporary Irish artists (and playwrights in particular) repeatedly rely on this ‘dark age’ whether as a sentimental reminiscence, an inspiration or as the target for their critical mockery.

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<sup>11</sup> Brewster, “Flying High?,” 22.

### 3. The Development of Irish Theatre since The Abbey

Irish drama was neither prominent nor successful before the twentieth century and many Irish playwrights moved to London where they were offered better opportunities than in their poor homeland. However, the situation radically changed at the end of the nineteenth century with the Irish Literary Revival which asserted Ireland's artistic independence. In 1899, William Butler Yeats, Lady Gregory, Edward Martyn and George Moore founded the Irish Literary Theatre which intended to escape the English influence, forming a new experimental writing focused on Irish themes and an Irish audience. The theatre moved to Lower Abbey Street in Dublin in 1904 which gave it its new name, the Abbey Theatre. Since then the theatre has staged a number of great Irish plays and Ireland entered a successful era of talented, prolific playwrights. Thomas Connolly in *British Aisles* claims that "Irish dramatists are responsible for the most significant developments in modern British drama,"<sup>12</sup> referring to George Bernard Shaw and the playwrights of the Irish Renaissance – W.B. Yeats, John M. Synge and Sean O'Casey.<sup>13</sup> Thanks to these writers, Irish drama began to flourish and gained huge prominence not only in its homeland but also elsewhere in the world.

The first plays produced at the Abbey Theatre were symbolic works by W.B. Yeats based on Irish myths and legends, and peasant comedies and folk-history plays by Lady Gregory. The turning point of modern Irish drama came, however, with the discovery of John Millington Synge who is now recognized as the most important playwright of the Irish Renaissance. The rural western Irish speaking areas of the country that Synge visited, inspired him to create a unique variety of language unheard in English language drama before. Synge's masterpiece, *The Playboy of the Western World* (1907), and its innovative way of writing and performing, is praised as the play that "gave modern Irish drama its voice"<sup>14</sup> and remains a source of inspiration even for today's playwrights, for example, Martin McDonagh. Yet, at the time of the play's premiere critics and the public were outraged by its language, the contradiction

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<sup>12</sup> Thomas F. Connolly, *British Aisles: Studies in English and Irish Drama and Theatre from Medieval Through Modern Times* (Ostrava: Ostravská Univerzita, 1998), 135.

<sup>13</sup> Connolly, *British Aisles*, 135.

<sup>14</sup> Connolly, *British Aisles*, 136.

between the romantic view of the Irish countryside and the harsh reality, and above all, by the controversial story of Christy Mahon who claims that he committed patricide. The Dublin audience rioted, seeing the play as to insult of Irish peasant life.<sup>15</sup> Another prominent playwright of that time, Sean O'Casey, wrote plays which focused on Irish political conflicts of the early twentieth century, such as the Civil War in his play *Juno and the Paycock* (1924) or the 1916 Rising in *The Plough and the Stars* (1926). His plays also outraged the public because of the challenging view of patriotism versus the violent reality which was understood as a criticism of Irish nationalism.<sup>16</sup>

Neither of the two most famous playwrights of the twentieth century born in Ireland, George Bernard Shaw and Samuel Beckett, remained in their homeland. Shaw lived and worked in England, and Beckett moved to Paris. G.B. Shaw is considered the most important British playwright since William Shakespeare,<sup>17</sup> while Samuel Beckett was more influential regarding Irish drama. His absurd, tragicomic, grotesque and allegorical plays raising questions about human existence, such as *Waiting for Godot* (1954) or *Endgame* (1958), became internationally famous, and even though he was a rare example of the theatre of the absurd among Irish playwrights, the legacy of his work has remained a major inspiration for many writers including Martin McDonagh, Enda Walsh and Mark O'Rowe.

Other Irish playwrights of the mid-twentieth century continued in the tradition of drama focused primarily on Ireland and its inhabitants. One of the most popular playwrights of this period was Brendan Behan, a fluent speaker of the Irish language and a member of the IRA who earned a reputation as a stereotypical aggressive, drunken Irishman. Behan's most famous work, *The Hostage* (1958), which was first written in the Irish language (*An Giall*), returns to the topics of Irish history and politics in the manner of Synge or O'Casey, pointing out the violence which accompanies the political conflicts. Behan's contemporary, John B. Keane (1928-2002), focused more on issues of rural Ireland, as in his popular play *The Field* (1965) which concerns a dispute over fertile land that eventually leads to murder.

Coping with history remained a main theme for dramatists of the following two decades. In 1992, Thomas F. Kilroy researched his generation of Irish playwrights – such as Brian Friel, Hugh Leonard, Tom Murphy or Tom MacIntyre – who grew up in

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<sup>15</sup> Norman A. Jeffares, *A Pocket History of Irish Literature* (Dublin: The O'Brien Press Ltd, 1997), 74.

<sup>16</sup> Jeffares, *A Pocket History of Irish Literature*, 81.

<sup>17</sup> Connolly, *British Isles*, 137.

poor Ireland between the 1930s and the 1950s, and whose production of plays spans between the 1960s and the 1980s. He stated that the writers had problems with connecting the past and the present and characterized them as “agnostic believers and uneasy patriots, reluctant farmers and local cosmopolitans, incredulous parents and recalcitrant, elderly children, citizens of a country not always identical to the one of their imaginations.”<sup>18</sup> The quote makes apparent the playwrights’ search for national and individual Irish identity in the constantly changing environment of the developing country.

This generation was joined by a new one in the 1980s, including writers such as Sebastian Barry, Frank McGuinness, Christina Reid or Stewart Parker. These playwrights also return to topics of Irish history and Irish identity but are also amongst the first ones to employ new approaches to Irish theatre. The following generation of playwrights – including Conor McPherson, Marina Carr, Owen McCafferty, Martin McDonagh, Enda Walsh and Mark O’Rowe – established various branches of experimental drama free from traditional structures. Although the dramatists of the late twentieth century have drawn inspiration from their predecessors, the heterogeneity of their work makes it impossible to characterize contemporary Irish drama as a whole.

### **3.1. Themes and Tendencies in Contemporary Irish Drama**

The Abbey Theatre lost its dominance over Irish drama in the 1990s with many new companies and new styles emerging, and with the gap between Irish and British drama narrowing due to globalization and multiculturalism. The political and social issues of the first half of the twentieth century were replaced by new ones such as increasing crime rate, lawlessness and alienation which fractured Irish society.<sup>19</sup> In addition, due to the economic growth, Ireland resembled other countries in the West more than ever before, which led to uncertainty about Irish national identity in the new world. Parallel to this, there has been a clash between the memory of the troubled past dominated by failure and the apparently successful present and the question of whether the Irish can remember and remain who they are if they suppress the difficulty of their history.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Tom Kilroy, “A Generation of Playwrights,” in *Theatre Stuff: Critical Essays on Contemporary Irish Theatre*, ed. Eamonn Jordan (Dublin: Carysfort, 2000), 3.

<sup>19</sup> Middeke and Schnierer, *The Methuen Drama Guide*, viii.

<sup>20</sup> Middeke and Schnierer, *The Methuen Drama Guide*, ix.

Contemporary Irish drama cannot be perceived uniformly since the playwrights have employed various styles. Clare Wallace and Ondřej Pilný in their essay “Home Places: Irish Drama since 1990” suggest that these new writers can be “examined in terms of various stylistic and thematic tendencies” which do not “map out a fixed or comprehensive typology of contemporary Irish drama” but describe them as “currents that at times intermingle, at times diverge, and at other times cut across each other with turbulent effect.”<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, the question of Irish identity remains a central topic for Irish drama and connects the contemporary generation with the previous ones, although the approaches to the topic have differed over time. Christopher Murray in *Twentieth-Century Irish Drama* summarizes that

Irish drama is a long, energetic dispute with a changing audience over the same basic issues: where we come from, where we are now, and where we are headed. Alternatively, these questions comprise history, identity, home or a sense of place, and visionary imagination.<sup>22</sup>

All in all, with the wave of migration, multiculturalism, mass media, new technologies and globalization in the 1990s, Irish national identity calls for redefinition as it can no longer be based on race and place. This issue continues to be a collective theme for all Irish playwrights. Contemporary Irish drama must then be divided and defined in terms of individual ‘currents’ or theme focus, as Wallace and Pilný suggest.

The most common of the ‘currents’ among Irish playwrights, according to Wallace and Pilný, are the tragic-mythic in the manner of Greek tragedy which appears for example in works by Marina Carr (*Ariel*, *The Mai* or *Portia Coughlan*), the lyric-narrative which can be found in Brian Friel’s *Dancing at Lughnasa* (1990), Sebastian Barry’s *The Steward of Christendom* or Conor McPherson’s *The Weir* (1997), and melodramatic-comic plays such as Marie Jones’s *A Night in November* (1995), *Women on the Verge of HRT* (1999) and *Stone in His Pockets* (2000).<sup>23</sup> Peter Brooks in *The Melodramatic Imagination* argues that the popularity of melodrama indicates the audience’s need for catharsis resulting from latent social unease “brought by a frightening new world in which the traditional patterns of moral order no longer

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<sup>21</sup> Clare Wallace and Ondřej Pilný, “Home Places: Irish Drama since 1990,” in *Irish Literature since 1990: Diverse Voices*, ed. Scott Brewster and Michael Parker (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009), 46.

<sup>22</sup> Wallace and Pilný, “Home Places,” 44.

<sup>23</sup> Wallace and Pilný, “Home Places,” 46-48.



provide the necessary social glue.”<sup>24</sup> This brings us back to the uncertainty about individual and national identity in modern Ireland.

Elements of melodrama can also be found in Martin McDonagh’s work but his open and unhappy endings are hardly cathartic. He combines melodrama with the grotesque and the satire, employing exaggerated violence and offensive language. Such an experimentation with different styles and genres demonstrates the difficulty of a clear definition of contemporary Irish drama. The Irish writer Declan Hughes welcomes this progress, however. He rejects the nostalgia of Irish drama and claims that today’s playwrights should be “clear-eyed writers who will take the trouble to view the world as it is” and who will reflect “the collapse of cultural identity in the world [...], embrace it and see it as liberating.”<sup>25</sup> Thus far, Irish playwrights seem to fulfil his vision.

As concerns the thematic tendencies, contemporary Irish playwrights adhere to typical Irish topics which they explore in a new way. Among the most frequently explored ones are exile and emigration which have been part of Irish history for a long time and can be found in Brian Friel’s *Philadelphia, Here I Come!* (1964) as well as in Enda Walsh’s *The Walworth Farce* (2006) decades later. Another common theme is the relationship between the present and the past, more precisely ‘stuckness’ in the past and “an unstable equilibrium between remembering and forgetting,”<sup>26</sup> on both a national and personal level. This tendency is often related to a fascination with ghosts as in Conor McPherson’s *The Weir* or Marina Carr’s *By the Bog of Cats* (1998). The works of Tom Murphy, Martin McDonagh, Enda Walsh, Marina Carr and many others deal with the theme of a family that breaks up which is also very common among young writers. The modern age popularized feminist issues and for many authors, such as Anne Devlin, Marina Carr, Emma Donoghue and Marie Jones, gender is “a key aspect of human identity.”<sup>27</sup> The question of women’s position in society has also drawn the playwrights’ attention to male and female homosexuality and to masculinity

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<sup>24</sup> Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imaginations: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama and the Mode of Excess* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1976), 20, quoted in Wallace and Pilný, “Home Places,” 48.

<sup>25</sup> Declan Hughes, “Who The Hell Do We Think We Still Are? Reflections on Irish Theatre and Identity,” in *Theatre Stuff: Critical Essays on Contemporary Irish Theatre*, ed. Eamonn Jordan (Dublin: Carysfort, 2000), 14.

<sup>26</sup> Middeke and Schnierer, *The Methuen Drama Guide*, x.

<sup>27</sup> Middeke and Schnierer, *The Methuen Drama Guide*, xii.

in an increasingly fatherless society.<sup>28</sup> The last of the frequent themes is the political crisis in Northern Ireland and the Irish-British relationship in plays by Owen McCafferty, Gary Mitchell or Martin Lynch. The topic remains an unfinished business for Ireland and with Brexit, the question of the unity of the Irish island has begun to be a current issue once again.

Regarding formal and stylistic features, Irish playwrights have shown a strong inclination to storytelling which transforms action on stage into the world of imagination. Middeke and Schnierer explain the popularity of storytelling among new playwrights by “its implicit juxtaposition of present and past [which] turn[s] drama into an intricate time machine of memory, forgetting and imagination.”<sup>29</sup> Storytelling on stage becomes a useful instrument that enables playwrights to depict dreams, thoughts or simply things that would be impossible to perform by letting the audience imagine the action inside their heads. This approach is central for plays like Tom Murphy’s *Bailegangaire* (1986), Martin McDonagh’s *The Pillowman* (2003), Conor McPherson’s *The Weir* or Mark O’Rowe’s *Terminus* (2007). Another common formal feature of contemporary Irish drama is experimentation with chronology of the plot which can be found in Martin McDonagh’s *Leenane Trilogy* but also in works by Marina Carr, Christina Reid and Emma Donoghue.

All in all, contemporary Irish drama is divided into many various directions which can be categorized on the basis of the genre, themes, or formal and stylistic features but it would be difficult to typecast the writers into clearly defined groups as they often overlap. The characterization is further complicated by the fact that many playwrights with long careers have been developing their styles which have undergone change and thus, any generalizations are impossible even in terms of a single author. In conclusion, Irish drama is simply standing in a zone of transition along with Irish society.

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<sup>28</sup> Middeke and Schnierer, *The Methuen Drama Guide*, xiii.

<sup>29</sup> Middeke and Schnierer, *The Methuen Drama Guide*, xv.

## 4. A History of Violence in Drama

Violence is defined as “an act of physical force that causes or is intended to cause harm [which can be] physical, psychological, or both” and is usually divided into four main categories: homicide, assault, robbery and rape.<sup>30</sup> Danine Farquharson in her essay *Pity vs. Fear* summarizes the three main discourses of violence: Hannah Ardent according to whom violence is arbitrary, unexamined and power destructive: Giles Deleuze who argues that it is unfathomable, it is spoken about but does not speak itself: and Glenn Bowman who, based on the etymology of the word violence – to break, to treat harshly, to desecrate, to ravish, to corrupt, to break in upon – defines it as something which destroys the sacred and creates an imbalance and disorder. She then suggests that there are three approaches to understanding violence: the philosophical which tries to explain and comprehend the concept of violence as such: the ethical or judicial which focuses on the legitimacy and necessity of it: and the social and cultural aspects of violence which explain it in relation to gender, class, race, and nation.<sup>31</sup> Drama has been concerned with all three of these approaches.

The presence of violence on stage is neither new nor rare. Scenes of murder, torture and rape can be found throughout the history from ancient theatre to the present day. The ancient Greek tragedies are full of death and suicides, incest and rapes, cannibalism, pain and suffering. Medea kills her two children and then commits suicide, Phaedra kills herself because of unrequited love of her stepson, Agamemnon is murdered by his wife and her lover, and Oedipus blinds himself after he learns that he committed incest with his mother and that he killed his father. However, there was no bloodshed depicted on stage, all the violence took place behind the scene and the spectators were informed about it through narration which was not particularly explicit. The theorists suggest that Greek drama did not intend to attack audiences like

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<sup>30</sup> Kritsine M. Jacquin, “Violence,” last modified January 27, 2017. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/violence>.

<sup>31</sup> Danine Farquharson, “Pity vs. Fear: Performing Violence in Aeschylus’s *Oresteia* and Contemporary Irish Drama,” in *Performing Violence in Contemporary Ireland*, ed. By Lisa Fitzpatrick (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2009), 12-16.

some modern plays do, but it was meant to purge their bad feelings.<sup>32</sup> People went to the theatre to experience shock which had the therapeutic effect of catharsis. This is in contrast with violence in modern drama which is usually performed on stage in front of the audience and which is often explicit and bloody. Such an approach provokes fear, horror and disgust rather than pity, sympathy and wonder like the ancient tragedies.

In the Middle Ages, Greek tragedy yielded to depictions of scenes from the Bible with the Passion of Jesus Christ being one of the few cases of violence on stage. Thus, another wave in the popularity of theatre violence only came about during the Renaissance in Britain. Jacobean tragedy returned to the themes of murder, torture, cruelty and vengeance so eagerly that it was called ‘the tragedy of blood.’<sup>33</sup> Audiences who were used to public executions and animal fights on a daily basis enjoyed onstage violence in plays by Christopher Marlowe, John Webster, Thomas Kyd, John Heywood or William Shakespeare but it was important that the end of the play was in conformity with Christian morals.<sup>34</sup> This is another difference from contemporary drama which usually avoids any moral generalizations.

Violence disappeared from the stage in 1737 because the authorities were afraid it had a dangerous impact on the public, introducing censorship that was carefully controlled by the Lord Chamberlain. The restrictions included – apart from any violent or sexual implications – material showing nudity, representations of God, the Royal family or anyone living, homosexuality, profanity, political radicalism and swearwords.<sup>35</sup> The censorship lasted for more than two centuries and it caused troubles to many renowned authors. Among the most celebrated and also the most absurd cases of censorship were objections against the word ‘bloody’ uttered by the main protagonist, a woman, in G.B. Shaw’s *Pygmalion* and rejection of Samuel Beckett’s *Endgame* because of the exclamation ‘The bastard! He doesn’t exist!’ which referred to God.<sup>36</sup> In an attempt to avoid censorship, some theatres were formed into private clubs where the playwrights could examine any topics without being penalized because the clubs were open only for their members and thus, they could not offend the public. Synge’s *The Playboy of the Western World*, and plays by other Irish

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<sup>32</sup> Aleks Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre: British Drama Today* (London: Faber and Faber, 2001), 10.

<sup>33</sup> Andrea Hoffmannová, *Násilím proti Násilí: Divadlo In-Yer-Face* (Olomouc: Univerzita Palackého v Olomouci, 2015), 22.

<sup>34</sup> Hoffmannová, *Násilím proti Násilí*, 22.

<sup>35</sup> Hoffmannová, *Násilím proti Násilí*, 22-23.

<sup>36</sup> Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre*, 14.

playwrights like Sean O’Casey or Ian Murphy, were for a long period of time the most powerful examples of onstage violence in public British theatres.

The tradition of bloody theatre from the Elizabethan and Jacobean era appeared in Paris for a short time. Oscar Metenier established the Grand Guignol (‘great punch’) theatre in 1897 that presented short, amoral, horror plays full of violent and sexual scenes. However, the theatre was closed in 1962, partly because the plays’ content seemed inappropriate after experiencing the horrors of the World Wars.

In Britain, in contrast, drama continued to be more explicit, bolder and more violent. John Osborne’s *Look Back in Anger* (1956) shocked the public in the 1950s by its vulgarity and the psychological terror within a marriage. The play established a new genre of kitchen sink drama which focused on intimate stories of ordinary people in their homes (which can be currently found in many plays including those by McDonagh, Walsh and O’Rowe), and it was also an important inspiration for many playwrights of the 1960s such as David Rudkin, John Arden, Arnold Wesker, David Mercer, Joe Orton and Edward Bond. The early plays by these writers still had to be staged in private houses but the mood of the public had been changing and in 1968, theatre censorship was abolished. This meant that theatre became less restricted than any other media and violence became integral to contemporary drama. The new freedom of expression resulted in a wave of controversial plays and also encouraged authors to produce increasingly shocking works because the spectators were rapidly acclimatizing. Feminism, homosexuality and sexual violence became main themes on the commercial London stage when it was the last of the three that caused the most public controversy.<sup>37</sup>

The 1990s presented drama that was more violent, more aggressive and darker than ever before, drama that broke all taboos and explored every earlier avoided aspect of human nature with uncomfortable scrutiny. Among the most provocative and the most influential works of the decade were Anthony Neilson’s *Penetrator* (1993), Sarah Kane’s *Blasted* (1995), Jez Butterworth’s *Mojo* (1995) and Mark Ravenhill’s *Shopping and Fucking* (1996). Aleks Sierz in *In-Yer-Face Theatre* describes the 1990s drama as follows:

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<sup>37</sup> Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre*, 27.

If drama dealt with masculinity, it showed rape; if it got to grips with sex, it showed fellatio or anal intercourse; when nudity was involved, so was humiliation; if violence was wanted, torture was staged; when drugs were the issue, addiction was shown.<sup>38</sup>

Although cruelty has always been part of drama, it was never expressed so commonly. The plays were full of offensive language, sick jokes and despicable deeds performed both by male and female characters. This new experimental style was called in-yer-face theatre derived from the phrase ‘in-your-face’ meaning “aggressive and confrontational”<sup>39</sup> or “something shocking and annoying in a way that it is difficult to ignore.”<sup>40</sup> This aptly describes the writers’ usage of radical means to invade the audiences’ personal space with the intention to shock, to question morals and conventions, to smash taboos, to raise public awareness about the forbidden, to stir up debate and provoke a reaction. Sierz explains that in-yer-face theatre is unsettling because it challenges the binary oppositions by which we define who we are and the world around us such as good/evil, human/animal, normal/abnormal, true/untrue, real/unreal, right/wrong, just/unjust, art/life, clean/dirty, healthy/unhealthy, and it confronts us with the limits of our self-control and with the terrible things humans are capable of.<sup>41</sup> In-yer-face drama forces us to face unpleasant ideas and feelings we would normally try to avoid but it does so in the comparatively safe environment of the theatre.

The most commonly used means to provoke such a reaction is violence. Sierz argues that violent actions are impossible to ignore, they “break the rules of debate; they go beyond words and thus can get out of control,” they also disturb us “when we feel the emotion behind the acting or catch ourselves enjoying the violence vicariously.”<sup>42</sup> The reasons why violence is working so well on stage is the fact that it is live. The audiences know that the actions are not real but they are performed by real people, usually in real time. Moreover, the spectator is aware of other people’s reactions as well as of the fact that other people are aware of his or

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<sup>38</sup> Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre*, 30.

<sup>39</sup> “In-your-face,” *Collins Dictionary*, accessed March 10, 2018.  
<https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/in-your-face>.

<sup>40</sup> “In-your-face,” *Cambridge Dictionary*, accessed March 10, 2018.  
<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/in-your-face>.

<sup>41</sup> Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre*, 6.

<sup>42</sup> Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre*, 8-9.

her reactions. The unique nature of every performance conveys the suspense of the unexpected. The intimacy of the experience causes a sense of vulnerability of personal space on the one hand, and empathy with the actors and the characters they play on the other hand. In other words, the audiences are involved in what is happening on stage which in the case of violent content arouses strong emotions.

#### 4.1. Violence on the Irish Stage

As mentioned earlier, Irish drama has always been connected to English drama to some extent and was influenced by it especially in the late twentieth century when it began to imitate the new experimental, and often violent, styles of British playwrights. However, violence in Irish drama has had its own special meaning which was determined by Ireland's difficult history as well as the stereotype of the wild nature of the rural Irish. Violence has been a significant aspect of Irish cultural branding and the concept of the 'Fighting Irish' has become a stigma of Irish behaviour to the outside world. Kyna Hamill in *Branding Irish Violence* differentiates between two types of violence in Irish plays: "stylized depictions of violence pertaining to the struggle for independence, and mimetic or 'real' depictions of rough rural brawls."<sup>43</sup> Stylized urban violence can be found in the plays by Sean O'Casey (*The Shadow of a Gunman, Juno and the Paycock, The Plough and the Stars*), Brendan Behan's *The Hostage* or in more contemporary *Mojo Mickybo* (1998) by Owen McCafferty. The violent acts in these plays are politically motivated, they are concerned either with the struggle for independence or with the crisis in Northern Ireland and they are mostly committed with guns and bombs.

The naturalistic representations of rural violence began with John M. Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World*. The controversy of the play revolves around Christy's violence towards his father but the murder never takes place on the stage, the spectators only learn about it through Christy's narrative. What does happen on stage, however, is Pegeen's torturous burning of Christy's leg but,

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<sup>43</sup> Kyna Hamill, "Branding Irish Violence: The Spectacles of Rural and Urban 'Ireland'," in *Performing Violence in Contemporary Ireland*, ed. By Lisa Fitzpatrick (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2009), 30.

interestingly, this did not outrage the audience that much,<sup>44</sup> as if mere claims of a murder (moreover a patricide) were worse than physically demonstrated torture. Nevertheless, *The Playboy* is considered a landmark play in depiction of naturalistic violence. John B. Keane goes even further in the explicitness of rural violence in his play *The Field*. Here, the hunger for land eventually ends up with local McCabe and his son Tadhg beating William, a British capitalist, to death which not only takes place on the stage but it is also described very explicitly in the stage directions. The most well-known contemporary portrayals of Irish rural violence are *The Leenane Trilogy* and *The Aran Islands Trilogy* by Martin McDonagh who has pushed its borders beyond its limits and made rural violence grotesque.

The loosening of morals and globalization of Ireland at the end of the twentieth century led to a radical experimentation in drama as well as to more frequent use of vulgarisms, brutality and sex on stage. With the exception of the theme of the Troubles, contemporary Irish playwrights have developed directions similar to the British ones. The plays reflect on contemporary conditions of the country usually focusing on stories of individuals, exploring new modes of physical theatre and often employing various representations of violence. The most prominent contemporary Irish playwrights alongside Conor McPherson, Marina Carr, and the three authors who are the focus of this thesis – Martin McDonagh, Enda Walsh and Mark O’Rowe – bear a close affinity with the aesthetic of ‘in-yer-face’ drama but each grasp violence in a different way as well as they all add an amount of Irishness to the genre.

The variability with which the writers explore new approaches is infinite, yet, most contemporary Irish playwrights employ violence in their works in one way or another. The violent acts of Conor McPherson’s plays never take place on stage but are narrated, usually by a solo performer’s monologue. Marina Carr, on the other hand, focuses on domestic abuse which she expresses through graphic stage violence. Martin McDonagh uses the grotesque, the paradox, irony and exaggerated violence to satirize the stereotypes of Irishness. Enda Walsh explores concepts of family, community and identity through storytelling of dysfunctional, violent characters who often create their own language. Mark O’Rowe is known for

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<sup>44</sup> Kyna Hamill, “Branding Irish Violence,” 57.



his rhythmic first-person narratives of evil and violent outsiders in urban an environment.

The following chapter will analyse the concept of violence in selected plays by McDonagh, Walsh and O’Rowe as the prominent representatives of the contemporary generation of Irish dramatists. I have chosen these three writers for several reasons. Firstly, because of my personal preference of their work to the other authors. Secondly, because I saw several plays by these playwrights performed in Ireland and in the Czech Republic while I did not have chance to see performances of the plays by their contemporaries. Thirdly, because I believe that their innovative and unique styles have no parallel in contemporary Irish drama and that they, especially Enda Walsh and Mark O’Rowe, deserve more academic attention.

## 5. Martin McDonagh

Martin McDonagh is one of the most popular and at the same time one of the most controversial playwrights of contemporary Irish drama. His plays, which have been translated into many languages and performed all over the world, have been praised by some critics and rejected by others, and the audiences' reactions have ranged from standing ovation to outrage. The controversy over McDonagh's plays has been mostly related to the violence they depict. Some spectators thought McDonagh had gone too far while other sceptical critics asked the question as to whether his work has any genuine artistic merit at all.<sup>45</sup> Although McDonagh's works are disturbingly violent, they are also quite amusing and clever, and have gained McDonagh international popularity.

Martin McDonagh was born in London on 26 March 1970 to Irish parents. His father was from Connemara, his mother was from Sligo, and Martin spent almost every summer visiting his Irish family on the west coast of Ireland. This experience and the Irish community in south London where he grew up contributed to his distanced and anti-traditional view of Ireland visible in his early plays.<sup>46</sup> He went to Catholic school but left it at the age of sixteen, living on unemployment benefits and part-time jobs. At that time, the basis for his future writing begun to form. He spent a lot of time listening to music such as The Clash, Sex Pistols and The Pogues, watching television and films, and reading voraciously – notably short stories by Jorge Luis Borges. McDonagh rarely acknowledges being influenced by other playwrights, except for Harold Pinter and David Mamet, although his early plays are often compared to Synge's work. Instead, McDonagh often talks about filmmakers such as David Lynch, Martin Scorsese, John Woo, Terence Malick or Quentin Tarantino (McDonagh himself

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<sup>45</sup> Richard Rankin Russell, introduction to *Martin McDonagh: A Casebook* (London: Routledge, 2007), 2.

<sup>46</sup> Martin Middeke, "Martin McDonagh," in *The Methuen Drama Guide to Contemporary Irish Playwrights*, ed. Martin Middeke and Paul Schnierer (London: Methuen Drama, 2010), 214.

has been nicknamed “the Quentin Tarantino of the Emerald Isle”<sup>47</sup>), as the sources of his inspiration.

McDonagh’s parents moved back to Ireland in the early 1990s but he stayed in London with his older brother John, a novelist and a screen-writer. Martin also began to write but was not initially successful. His many Borges-inspired short stories, several radio plays and film scripts were all rejected, and McDonagh eventually “became a playwright by chance”<sup>48</sup> as according to his own words “it was the only art form left.”<sup>49</sup> The breakthrough came in 1995 when Garry Hynes, the artistic director of the Druid Theatre Company in Galway, read McDonagh’s scripts. She directed his *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* in 1996 which met with great success, bringing McDonagh several prestigious awards. In the following year, another two plays of the so-called *Leenane Trilogy*, *A Skull in Connemara* and *The Lonesome West*, premiered, and soon afterwards, the first play of *The Aran Island Trilogy*, *The Cripple of Inishmaan* (1997), followed. Suddenly, at the age of twenty-seven, McDonagh had four plays running in London’s West-End.<sup>50</sup> In 2001, he presented another play of his later trilogy, *The Lieutenant of Inishmore*, which had been first rejected by London theatres<sup>51</sup> because of its politically controversial content. The third play of the trilogy, *The Banshees of Inisher*, has never been published. McDonagh’s first non-Irish plays, *The Pillowman*, was staged in 2003 in Europe, America and also in Japan,<sup>52</sup> although it received its first public reading in the Druid Theatre as far back as 1997.

After gaining popularity with his plays, McDonagh wrote and directed two successful screenplays, the short film *Six Shooter* (2005) and the major film *In Bruges* (2008). Since then, he has been alternately writing both stage plays and screenplays. However, making a film takes far more time and money than writing a play, naturally, so even though it is film that is McDonagh’s true passion, he has written twice as many plays than he has written screenplays. *A Behanding in Spokane*, his first play set in the United States, premiered on Broadway in New York in 2010. Two years later, McDonagh wrote and directed another film, *Seven Psychopaths*, and in 2015 he

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<sup>47</sup> Joseph Feeney, “Martin McDonagh: Dramatist of the West,” *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review* Vol. 87, No. 345 (Spring, 1998): 29, accessed April 23, 2017, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30091859>.

<sup>48</sup> Feeney, “Dramatist of the West,” 25.

<sup>49</sup> Jane Edwrdes, “Into the West End,” *Time Out* (1996), quoted in Feeney, “Dramatist of the West,” 25.

<sup>50</sup> Feeney, “Dramatist of the West,” 24.

<sup>51</sup> Kyna Hamill, “Branding Irish Violence,” 48.

<sup>52</sup> Eamonn Jordan, “War on Narrative: Martin McDonagh’s *The Pillowman*,” in *The Theatre of Martin McDonagh: A World of Savage Stories*, ed. Eamonn Jordan (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2006), 175.

published his thus far newest play, *Hangmen*. His most recent work is the film *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri* (2017) which was nominated for an Academy Award. Little is known about McDonagh's private life and his view of his work since he rarely gives interviews, but the lack of his own insight into his plays is compensated for by the great number of critical essays.

McDonagh's name is most often associated with his early plays, their violent and grotesque content, and their setting in Ireland but I would like to focus on his later work for two reasons. Firstly, McDonagh's first trilogy has already been thoroughly analysed during the more than ten years since it was published and there is little space left for further discussion. The same applies to *The Lieutenant of Inishmore* which was for some time McDonagh's most analysed work because it was the most controversial and the most violent one (at the present, in my opinion and according to most critics, *The Pillowman* bears this title). Secondly, because his early plays are formally and thematically very similar to one another. They do not require attention individually and they can be simply studied together as 'the Irish plays.' In contrast, McDonagh's early plays do represent a major part of his work so I will briefly discuss them, but only as a unit. I will then focus on *The Pillowman* in greater detail since it has not been examined as much yet, and contains the most violence. I am not going to analyse *A Behanding in Spokane* as it includes only little violence in comparison to McDonagh's other plays. The same applies to *Hangmen*, which is, furthermore, relatively new and there would be no substantial secondary sources to support my analysis of this play.

## 5.1. The Irish Plays

The first three McDonagh plays are all set in the same small village, Leenane, in the county Galway in Ireland. They all take place at the same time, just before the Celtic Tiger, and also the characters from one of the plays tend to be referred to in the other ones. The first play of the trilogy, *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*, tells the story of sexually frustrated middle-aged Maureen who kills her old mother, Mag, because she thwarts her chance of free life with a young man in America. In *A Skull in Connemara* Mick O'Dowd faces accusations of killing his wife which almost leads him to an actual murder. *The Lonesome West* is about the failed attempt of an alcoholic parish

priest to reconcile two brothers, Coleman (who committed patricide earlier) and Valene, by taking his own life. The two plays from McDonagh's other trilogy also take place in Ireland but on the Aran Islands. *The Cripple of Inishmaan* tells the story of a handicapped orphan Cripple Billy who returns to his homeland after unsuccessful screen tests in Hollywood to learn that he is terminally ill. Unlike McDonagh's previous plays, *The Cripple* is set in 1934 but otherwise, formally and stylistically, it resembles *The Leenane Trilogy*. *The Lieutenant of Inishmore* is the first play in which McDonagh openly confronts political issues. Yet, he does so in the satirical manner of his previous works. The play focuses on Padraic, an insane INLA<sup>53</sup> gunman, who comes to Inishmore seeking revenge for the death of his beloved cat Wee Thomas.

All these plays can be characterized as what Ondřej Pilný calls "the grotesque entertainment" which according to him includes "the staging of graphic, often gratuitous violence, offensive language, ubiquitous black humour, [...] the lack of depth of character psychology, and [...] the mixing of disparate genre and thematic elements."<sup>54</sup> Violence and humour are McDonagh's two most important devices. All his plays depict brutality, yet, at the same time, they are also very funny. McDonagh uses deliberately exaggerated violence, not to trivialise it but because he believes that laughing at it will liberate us from its power over us. He explains that he "walk[s] the line between comedy and cruelty because [...] one illuminates the other" and that he tends to "push things as far as [he] can" because one "can see things more clearly through exaggeration than through reality."<sup>55</sup>

The combination of violence and entertainment also works as the trigger for provoking audience's response better. Aleks Sierz argues that McDonagh "uses humour to distract the audience while he prepares another morsel of cruelty to force down its throat."<sup>56</sup> Thus, the audiences laugh at the quarrelsome Mag and Maureen in *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* only to be abruptly shocked by the daughter burning her mother's hands with hot oil and murdering her with a poker; they are amused by the crashing down skulls of exhumed bodies only to later witness one of the characters

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<sup>53</sup> INLA, Irish National Liberation Army, was an Irish Republican socialist paramilitary group formed during The Troubles by former members of IRA who opposed to the ceasefire.

<sup>54</sup> Ondřej Pilný, "Grotesque Entertainment: *The Pillowman* as Puppet Theatre," in *The Theatre of Martin McDonagh: A World of Savage Stories*, ed. Eamonn Jordan (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2006), 220.

<sup>55</sup> Sean O'Hagan, "The Wild West," *Guardian*, 24 March, 2001, 24, quoted in Russell, *Martin McDonagh*, 3.

<sup>56</sup> Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre*, 224.

being smashed across the head with a mallet in *A Skull in Connemara*; they watch the at first entertaining squabble between Coleman and Valene which, however, leads to the bleak scene of Father Welsh's suicide in *The Lonesome West*, and so on. The sudden switches from entertainment to seriousness intensifies the shock from the cruelty. Such a switch, however, does not occur in *The Lieutenant of Inishmore*. Here the comic elements prevail even during explicitly violent scenes because the situations are too exaggerated to be taken seriously. In the final scene (which is usually the one when the comic turns into the tragic), "the blood-soaked living room strewn with the body parts" and the blood-soaked characters who "hack away [the corpses] at to sizeable chunks,"<sup>57</sup> all for one dead cat, cause laughter rather than horror because of its extremity. McDonagh uses what he calls "anti-violent violence,"<sup>58</sup> violence that is parodied to absurdity. According to Hoffmannová, with the exaggerated brutality McDonagh expresses his negative attitude to violent acts in society as well as he emphasizes their pointlessness.<sup>59</sup>

Yet, even though some violent scenes in McDonagh's plays are amusing, the spectators also feel guilty for laughing at them. Catherine Reese in her essay "Representing Acceptability" argues that McDonagh's work is associated with the term 'comic unsuitability' which she characterizes as "a use of comedy which seems designed to make the audience feel uncomfortable or uneasy" by forcing the audience "to conceive humour where there may logically be none."<sup>60</sup> One cannot help not laughing when reading or seeing McDonagh's plays but the feelings of amusement are simultaneously accompanied by feelings of guilt and shame as one realizes that he or she is laughing at patricide, torture or animal mutilation. *The Pillowman*, "the blackest of McDonagh's comedies,"<sup>61</sup> goes a step further aiming at the probably most taboo target: "some kid [that] gets fucked up."<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Martin McDonagh, *The Lieutenant of Inishmore* (London: Bloomsbury, 2001), 55.

<sup>58</sup> Hoffmannová, *Násilím Proti Násilí*, 17.

<sup>59</sup> Hoffmannová, *Násilím Proti Násilí*, 17.

<sup>60</sup> Catherine Rees, "Representing Acceptability: Power, Violence and Satire in Martin McDonagh's *The Lieutenant of Inishmore*," in *Performing Violence in Contemporary Ireland*, ed. By Lisa Fitzpatrick (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2009), 95.

<sup>61</sup> Ester Žantovská, "Shock, Gloom and Laughter: Contemporary Irish Black Comedy," in *The Politics of Irish Writing* (Prague: Charles University, 2010), 237.

<sup>62</sup> Martin McDonagh, *The Pillowman* (London: Faber and Faber, 2003), 15.

## 5.2. *The Pillowman*

*The Pillowman* was first presented at the National Theatre, London, on 13 November 2003, starring Jim Broadbent as Tupolski and David Tennant as Katurian. It is McDonagh's first play to be set somewhere else than in Ireland. It takes place in a police interrogation room in an unspecified totalitarian dictatorship<sup>63</sup> where two detectives, Tupolski and Ariel, interrogate a fiction writer Katurian and his mentally handicapped brother Michal. The two brothers are prime suspects in the murders of three children which resemble the children's murders described in Katurian's stories. Katurian believes that they are being framed by the unjust state but Michal unexpectedly confesses to the crime explaining that he followed what Katurian has written: "I just told you the man came in and said he'd torture me unless I said I killed those kids, so I said I killed those kids. That doesn't mean I didn't kill those kids. I did kill those kids. [...] Because you told me to."<sup>64</sup> In order to spare his brother torture and execution, Katurian suffocates Michal with a pillow. He then takes the blame for the children's deaths, Michal's and also his parents' – which he committed years ago because they had tortured Michal – in exchange for saving his stories. In the end, it turns out that the third child is alive and unharmed because Michael performed a different story than he told his brother, Katurian's only story that "wouldn't make anybody go out and murder anybody,"<sup>65</sup> but Katurian is executed anyway since he is still guilty of murdering his parents and Michal. His stories are, however, saved by Ariel who stores them in a box file.

## 5.3. Offstage Violence

Violence is pervasive in *The Pillowman*, there is not a single scene where it would not be present. However, the form of its representation differs throughout the play. There

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<sup>63</sup> Kamenice is mentioned several times in the book but the name is too common to be assigned to a specific country.

<sup>64</sup> McDonagh, *The Pillowman*, 48-49.

<sup>65</sup> McDonagh, *The Pillowman*, 62.

are three ways of expression of violence in *The Pillowman*: spoken violence, performed violence and violence which combines both narration and performance at the same time.

The first type of violence expression, the spoken violence, is represented by some of Katurian's stories. There are altogether nine of them described in the play, even though Katurian wrote much more, and two are narrated or read out. One of them is the most important story of the play, "The Pillowman", which is narrated by Katurian to Michal just before Michal confesses to the murders. The Pillowman is a nine feet tall creature made entirely from pillows whose job is to visit desperate adults just before they commit suicide. He takes them back in time to their childhood and persuades them to kill themselves while they are still children so that they would not have to go through the life of horror they were to lead. He makes the suicides look like accidents "because mummies and daddies always find it easier to come to terms with a five-year-old lost in a tragic accident than they do with a five-year-old who has seen how shitty life is and taken action to avoid it."<sup>66</sup> After some time, the Pillowman gets tired and sad from his job so he visits himself as a child and convinces the Pillowboy to burn himself to death. The Pillowman starts to fade away but the last thing he hears is "the screams of the hundred thousand children he'd helped to commit suicide coming back to life, and [...] the screams of their sad self-inflicted deaths, which this time [...] would be conducted entirely alone."<sup>67</sup>

The importance of this story is suggested with the fact that it is used in the title of the play. Both Katurian and Michal act as kind of Pillowmen themselves. It is not by chance that Katurian suffocates his parent and Michal with a pillow, and Michal, admiring the Pillowman, admits that it was largely this story that inspired him to murder the children. Here, McDonagh puts the viewer in front of the difficult question of whether it is morally better if "a little child would die horrifically" when the Pillowman is successful, or if "a little child would have a horrific life, grow into an adult who'd also have a horrific life, and *then* die horrifically"<sup>68</sup> when the Pillowman is not successful. At the same time, he strictly rejects an answer to that question

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<sup>66</sup> McDonagh, *The Pillowman*, 44-45.

<sup>67</sup> McDonagh, *The Pillowman*, 47.

<sup>68</sup> McDonagh, *The Pillowman*, 45.



leaving the conclusion up to each person alone, which is the stance he takes throughout the whole play (and his work generally) as we will see later.

Another story that represents the spoken violence in the play is “The Little Apple Men” which is read out by Tupolski during Katurian’s interrogation as the story that inspired the first child’s murder. The story is about a little girl who is treated badly by her father, “he slaps her around and that.”<sup>69</sup> One day, the little girl carves little men from apples and says to her father not to eat them, but the father swallows some of the apple men just to spite her. However, they have razor blades in them and the father dies in agony. That night, the girl wakes up with the apple men walking on her chest. They accuse her of killing their little brothers, they climb down her throat and the girl chokes to death on her own blood. Later, Ariel tells Katurian that the first girl that was murdered died with “two razor blades down her little fucking throat, both wrapped in apple, funnily enough.”<sup>70</sup> Although the spectators do not see the story performed onstage, the way in which both the father and the little girl die is extremely disturbing. Its impact is further intensified when the audience learn that the same cruelty was performed on a real girl by Michal.

“The Pillowman” would be difficult to perform onstage which is probably the reason McDonagh chose to use the spoken violence. “The Little Apple Men,” on the other hand, could be performed quite easily onstage but the images the audiences see in their minds when listening to the story are appalling and powerful enough even without being acted out. Aleks Sierz argues that “what happens in front of the spectators’ eyes is less important than what happens inside their minds.”<sup>71</sup> This undoubtedly applies to the narrated stories in *The Pillowman*. The torture and the murders of the children do not have to be physically presented onstage to achieve the intended effect. Kyna Hamill explains that it is because the theatrical performance of a violent act is obviously a mere mimetic representation while one can imagine much more realistic pictures in their own head based on the narration.<sup>72</sup> When Tupolski shoots Katurian to death, the spectators can see that the gun and the blood are fake. On the other hand, the audience does not get to see the children’s murders being ‘faked’

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<sup>69</sup> McDonagh, *The Pillowman*, 10.

<sup>70</sup> McDonagh, *The Pillowman*, 28.

<sup>71</sup> Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre*, 16.

<sup>72</sup> Kyna Hamill, “Branding Irish Violence,” 53.

onstage which paradoxically makes the images of them more real. Nevertheless, McDonagh decided to push the matter further by multiplying the impact of the brutal scenes combining both spoken and performed violence in *The Pillowman*.

#### 5.4. Multiplied Violence

There are two scenes in *The Pillowman* in which the brutal deeds are narrated while being performed onstage at the same time. These scenes are inserted between the three acts and therefore interrupt the main plot that takes place in the interrogation room. The first of the interruptions depicts a memory from Katurian's childhood and it is also the content of his semi-autobiographical story "The Writer and the Writer's Brother." It is narrated by Katurian sitting in a child's room and saying his own lines as a child while the characters of the father and the mother act out what he says. The scene shows Katurian and Michal's parents' artistic experiment in which they showered upon Katurian "nothing but love, kindness, warmth, and all that stuff"<sup>73</sup> while they were torturing Michal in the next room. Katurian could hear the horrible noises of child-torture, which was supposed to make him a good writer, but when he came to the room, there were only his parents smiling and doing the terrible noises. However, Katurian went to visit his childhood home years later and discovered "the horrific corpse of a fourteen-year-old child that had been left to rot there,"<sup>74</sup> the corpse of his brother. This is how Katurian's story "The Writer and the Writer's Brother" ends, but in reality, Michal survived even though he was "brain-damaged beyond repair,"<sup>75</sup> and fourteen-year-old Katurian suffocated his parents with a pillow to revenge his brother.

The second scene that interrupts the main plot follows the act in which Katurian murders Michal. In this scene, Katurian narrates his story "The Little Jesus" which is the story Michal told Katurian he had had performed on the mute girl. The story is about a little girl who believes that she is the second coming of the Lord Jesus Christ, she would "wear a little beard and would go around in sandals, blessing

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<sup>73</sup> McDonagh, *The Pillowman*, 31.

<sup>74</sup> McDonagh, *The Pillowman*, 33-34.

<sup>75</sup> McDonagh, *The Pillowman*, 34.

stuff.”<sup>76</sup> After her parents die in a horrific car accident, she lives with abusive foster-parents who torture, crucify and bury her alive arguing that if she is like Jesus, she will rise again in three days, but she does not. Her only hope to be saved fails because the blind man who walks into the forest where she is buried does not hear the “horrible scratching of bone upon wood.”<sup>77</sup>

These two scenes represent probably the most disturbing images of violence in *The Pillowman* and also in McDonagh’s work generally. Both “The Writer and the Writer’s Brother” and “The Little Jesus” are parallelly narrated and partly acted out onstage. Unlike the previous stories which were only narrated, here the physical performance of the horrific acts happens in front of the audience. In the first of the stories, we see Michal’s torture for a second with “a child of eight, strapped to the bed [...] tortured with drills and sparks,” as well as the result of his torture: the child’s corpse that “sits bolt upright in bed, breathing heavily.”<sup>78</sup> The audience is also shown Katurian suffocating his parents. This scene, however, provokes feelings of satisfaction rather than disturbance because of what the parents have done to Michal.

“The Little Jesus” story, on the other hand, leaves the viewer with nothing but terror and disgust, especially after the scene of the girl’s crucifixion that is specifically said to be acted out onstage with all its dreadful details:

The foster-mother embedded in her daughter’s head a crown of thorns made of barbed wire, [...] while her foster-father whipped her with a cat o’ nine tails, [...] they made her carry a heavy wooden cross [...] until her legs buckled and her shins broke, then they nailed her hands [...] and her feet to the cross, they stuck [a] spear in her side, [...] and they left her there to die, and they went to bed.<sup>79</sup>

However, in the morning, the girl was still alive so the parents “took her down off the cross and they buried her alive in a little coffin with just enough air to live for three days.”<sup>80</sup> The audience can not only see the horrors with their own eyes but they can also hear Katurian describing them, as if McDonagh wanted to shock the spectators

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<sup>76</sup> McDonagh, *The Pillowman*, 68.

<sup>77</sup> McDonagh, *The Pillowman*, 72.

<sup>78</sup> McDonagh, *The Pillowman*, 32, 34.

<sup>79</sup> McDonagh, *The Pillowman*, 70-71.

<sup>80</sup> McDonagh, *The Pillowman*, 71.

twice. Maria Doyle in her essay “Breaking Bodies” describes such a technique as “multiplying the frames through which the audience is forced to experience violence” when “the doubling of audible and visible images means that the audience has no escape from the traumatic elements of the scene.”<sup>81</sup> The fact that the mute girl eventually turns out to be unharmed provides little comfort to the spectators as they have already experienced the brutality of the story when they were earlier made to believe it was true.

## 5.5. Onstage Violence

The third type of violence representation is the violence that is performed onstage without being narrated. It includes the violence committed by the two detectives, and Katurian’s murder of his brother. Paradoxically, even though it is Katurian and Michal who are being interrogated as murderers, it is Ariel who is the most aggressive character in the play. He constantly wants to beat Katurian even for the most innocent remarks:

Katurian: We’re not friends, no. But by the same token, I hope we’re not enemies.

Ariel: I am going to hit you so hard in the fucking head.<sup>82</sup>

Ariel’s violent behaviour has its basis in his childhood when he was sexually abused by his father who “crawled into bed with [him] every week from the age of eight.”<sup>83</sup> Ariel later murdered his father and now, he takes it as his responsibility to punish “people who lay even the littlest finger on children.”<sup>84</sup> Although he admits that sometimes he uses “excessive force on an entirely innocent individual,” he believes that the end justifies the means because “if an entirely innocent individual leaves this room for the outside world, they’re not gonna contemplate even raising their *voice* to a

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<sup>81</sup> Maria Doyle, “Breaking Bodies: The Presence of Violence on Martin McDonagh’s Stage,” in *Martin McDonagh: A Casebook*, ed. Richard Rankin Russell (London: Routledge, 2007), 107.

<sup>82</sup> McDonagh, *The Pillowman*, 4.

<sup>83</sup> McDonagh, *The Pillowman*, 82.

<sup>84</sup> McDonagh, *The Pillowman*, 77-78.

little kid again, just in case *I* fucking hear ‘em and drag ‘em in here for *another* load of excessive fucking force.”<sup>85</sup>

Tupolski is just as cruel as Ariel but he does not perform the violence himself, leaving it up to Ariel whom he considers to be subordinated to him, and who enjoys hurting people physically. On the other hand, unlike Ariel who at least follows a code of his own, believing that one day he will be thanked by all the children he had helped to save from being abused, Tupolski is corrupt and immoral through and through. His dishonest nature is shown when he shoots Katurian to death before he counts down ten seconds he promised him earlier. Like Ariel, Tupolski also compensates for his bad childhood with his violent behaviour even though he denies it: “*My dad was a violent alcoholic. Am I a violent alcoholic? Yes I am, but that was my personal choice.*”<sup>86</sup> Both detectives take advantage of the power they have over Katurian and they both believe that the role they play in the name of justice is of the greatest importance:

Tupolski: We like executing writers. Dimwits we can execute any day. And we do. But, you execute a writer, it sends out a signal, y’know? [...] It sends out the signal ‘DON’T ... GO ... AROUND ... KILLING ... LITTLE ... FUCKING ... KIDS.’<sup>87</sup>

As a result, the spectator tends to sympathise with Katurian, despite all his disturbing stories, and with Michal (as well as with the Pillowman as a matter of fact) because he is unaware of the wrongs of his acts, instead of with Tupolski and Ariel whose job is to protect the innocent and punish the guilty. The fact that McDonagh makes the viewer favour a child murderer and not the police is one of the most confrontational impacts of the play.

The greatest controversy of *The Pillowman*, however, relates to the violence it depicts. As if the central acts of brutality – Katurian’s stories, the murders of his parents, Michal and the children, the torture inflicted by the detectives, and Katurian’s execution – were not enough, there are also the abusive childhoods of each of the main characters, reference to Tupolski’s drowned son,<sup>88</sup> or such a small detail like

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<sup>85</sup> McDonagh, *The Pillowman*, 77.

<sup>86</sup> McDonagh, *The Pillowman*, 80.

<sup>87</sup> McDonagh, *The Pillowman*, 30.

<sup>88</sup> McDonagh, *The Pillowman*, 93.

Katurian's job as a local abattoir.<sup>89</sup> The play is simply soaked with violence and it goes way beyond the strikingly exaggerated and grotesque representation of it in other McDonagh's plays. Nobody is laughing when they first learn about the torture and murders of children in *The Pillowman*. However, when it comes to talking about these deeds later, McDonagh manages to ridicule them anyway, making the audience laugh almost against their will and conscience:

Katurian: I murdered two people who tortured a child for seven years. You murdered three children who hadn't tortured anybody for any years. There's a difference.

Michal: As far as *you* know they hadn't tortured anybody. The razor-blade girl seemed like a right little shit. I bet she at least did ants.<sup>90</sup>

Michal's ludicrous justification shows that he is clearly not aware of doing something wrong. He even believes that if he and Katurian are executed, at least they will be "in Heaven, whatever happens. Hang out with God and that. Have races."<sup>91</sup> Once the audience has experienced the initial shock from learning about the murdered children, McDonagh does not hesitate to mock the horrific fact, repeatedly:

Michal: Of course I've been snooping round your room while you're at work. What the hell do you think I do while you're at work?

Katurian: Massacre infants, I though.

Michal: Uh-huh? Well, when I'm not massacring infants, I'm snooping around your room.<sup>92</sup>

It is a guilty laugh produced in these scenes, but it does not change the fact that they are amusing, no matter how cruel they are.

Another great source of the 'comic unsuitable' in the play are the lines of the two detectives. They show no mercy to Katurian and Michal and their indifferent stance towards the brothers' lives once again creates moments of irresistible humour. For instance when Katurian is asked to read one of his stories

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<sup>89</sup> McDonagh, *The Pillowman*, 9.

<sup>90</sup> McDonagh, *The Pillowman*, 55-56.

<sup>91</sup> McDonagh, *The Pillowman*, 57.

<sup>92</sup> McDonagh, *The Pillowman*, 59.

aloud, he remarks that “this feels like school, somehow,” to which Tupolski coldly replies: “Except at school they didn’t execute you at the end. Unless you went to a really fucking tough school.”<sup>93</sup> As in McDonagh’s other plays, it is the absurdity of the situation that turns the scenes, that would be otherwise serious, into comic ones: “Hurry up and torture the prisoner, please, Ariel. We’ve got to shoot him in half an hour.”<sup>94</sup> Here, I would like to repeat the fact mentioned in the previous chapter of this thesis that one of the reasons the audience is able to find violence funny is the fact that the theatre provides a safe space to remove oneself from what they are experiencing. In real life, nobody would laugh at such situations.

## 5.6. The First Duty of a Storyteller Is to Tell a Story

Many people thought that it was the setting and the mockery of stereotypes that was central for McDonagh’s plays, especially after his first five plays being set in Ireland. However, it has turned out that the place is merely illustrational, and the aim is far less specific. Patrick Lonergan argues that the purpose of McDonagh’s plays is not to “tell us something about Ireland or England or McDonagh himself” but to “show us something of ourselves.”<sup>95</sup> Martin McDonagh has always rejected the idea that his work is supposed to express his opinions. He said: “I’m not into any kind of definition, any kind of -ism, politically, socially, religiously, all that stuff” adding that “anything you believe politically or socially will come through even though I try to avoid it as much as I can.”<sup>96</sup> With this statement, McDonagh not only expresses his own stance but it is also the attitude Katurian takes.

Katurian defends himself with the claim that “the first duty of a storyteller is to tell a story” adjusting it later to “the *only* duty of a storyteller is to tell a story.”<sup>97</sup> He insists that his stories are neither trying to say anything nor are they trying to represent

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<sup>93</sup> McDonagh, *The Pillowman*, 20.

<sup>94</sup> McDonagh, *The Pillowman*, 81.

<sup>95</sup> Patrick Lonergan, *The Theatre and Films of Martin McDonagh* (London: Methuen Drama, 2012), 229.

<sup>96</sup> Fintan O’Toole, “Nowhere Man,” *Irish Times*, 26 April, 1997, quoted in José Laners, “The Identity Politics of Martin McDonagh,” in *Martin McDonagh: A Casebook*, ed. Richard Rankin Russell (London: Routledge, 2007), 11.

<sup>97</sup> McDonagh, *The Pillowman*, 7.

something. Although McDonagh usually resists the lines from his plays being taken as his own beliefs, we can assume that this case is an exception. McDonagh is not trying to convey a message with his plays. He merely confronts the spectators with challenging topics leaving the conclusions up to them. José Lanfers suggests that “meaning is not inherent in a text but is rather constructed by readers on the basis of what they bring to it by way of context.”<sup>98</sup> This is in accordance with Katurian’s claims that he just writes stories, his characters do not represent anything, and that he is not responsible for anybody’s interpretations of his stories. *The Pillowman* emphasizes the importance of treating literature as an artistic creation and not as literal truth.

McDonagh is not trying to judge violence in today’s world but at the same time, he shows “serious desire to resist the beautification of violence” which one can find in “the works of Wu, Tarantino, and others”<sup>99</sup> as Patrick Lonergan in his essay “Too Dangerous to Be Done?” argues. McDonagh uses violence as a means of shattering our conventions, putting us into an uncomfortable position by “showing us the lack of limits to our breathless fascination with violence and cruelty.”<sup>100</sup> From the popularity of McDonagh’s plays as well as from the reactions of the audiences, McDonagh points out that “we desire to watch others’ discomfort and even laugh at it.”<sup>101</sup> In one of his interviews he stated:

We’re all cruel, aren’t we? We are all extreme in one way or another at times and that’s what drama, since the Greeks, has dealt with. I hope the overall view isn’t just that though, or I’ve failed in my writing. There have to be moments when you glimpse something decent, something life-affirming even in the most twisted character. That’s where the real art lies.<sup>102</sup>

The use of the word ‘art’ is crucial here. McDonagh creates art, as well as Katurian does, and the purpose of art is not to make political statements according to both writers. In Katurian’s words: “if you’ve got a political axe to grind, if you’ve got a

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<sup>98</sup> Lanfers, “The Identity Politics of Martin McDonagh,” 11.

<sup>99</sup> Patrick Lonergan, “Too Dangerous to Be Done? Martin McDonagh’s *Lieutenant of Inishmore*,” *Irish Studies Review* Vol. 13, No. 1, 73.

<sup>100</sup> Russell, *Martin McDonagh*, 4.

<sup>101</sup> Russell, *Martin McDonagh*, 4.

<sup>102</sup> Sean O’Hagan, “The Wild West,” *Guardian*, 24 Mar, 2001, 24, quoted in Russell, *Martin McDonagh*, 3.



political what-do-ya-call-it, go write a fucking essay.”<sup>103</sup> McDonagh’s plays challenge our ethics and morals making us laugh at the most violent scenes but he neither moralizes nor draws any conclusions. He simply holds a mirror up to us, letting us think about the gap between how we behave in public and our internal feelings and thoughts. However, McDonagh’s work is above all about pleasure from the artistic experience of storytelling.

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<sup>103</sup> McDonagh, *The Pillowman*, 7.

## 6. Enda Walsh

Enda Walsh is a well-known name in contemporary Irish drama. Yet, Walsh's work has attracted little academic attention in comparison to his contemporaries – Martin McDonagh, Conor McPherson and Marina Carr – and unlike plays by these writers, Walsh's plays do not usually premiere at major Irish and London theatres such as the Abbey and the Gate in Dublin, or the National and the Royal Court in London. On the other hand, Walsh is extremely popular in the rest of Europe, being regularly staged for example in Germany.<sup>104</sup> Lisa Fitzpatrick in her chapter on Enda Walsh in *The Methuen Drama Guide to Contemporary Irish Playwrights* argues that it is because Walsh's work “does not easily fit within the contemporary Irish repertoire or the scholarly narratives of contemporary Irish theatre” since “it tends towards expressionism, rather than the broadly naturalistic performance style of most Irish theatre.”<sup>105</sup> Nevertheless, the success of Walsh's newer pieces has resulted in increased academic interest in his work, and his plays are frequently staged both in Dublin and London at present.

Enda Walsh was born in Dublin in 1967 as the youngest child of six. After finishing studying Communications at Rathmines College, he travelled around Europe working as a film director. After returning to Ireland, he did not stay in Dublin but moved to Cork where he got an acting job in Graffiti Theatre Company. He also met Patrick Kiernan, the artistic director of The Corcadorca Theatre Company, there, and he began to write his first plays for the theatre, working as a writer-in-residence for some time. Lisa Patrick describes Corcadorca as “one of the most consistently innovative companies currently working in Ireland” with an emphasis on “taking performance out of theatre spaces and into the streets or other sites, the development of new writing, and an openness to international forms and styles of performance.”<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> Jesse Weaver, “‘The Words Look After Themselves’: The Practice of Enda Walsh,” in *Irish Drama*, ed. Nicholas Grene, Patrick Lonergan and Chris Morash (Dublin: Carysford Press, 2012), 129.

<sup>105</sup> Lisa Fitzpatrick, “Enda Walsh,” in *The Methuen Drama Guide to Contemporary Irish Playwrights*, ed. Martin Middeke and Paul Schnierer (London: Methuen Drama, 2010), 451.

<sup>106</sup> Fitzpatrick, “Enda Walsh,” 439-440.

The first play Walsh wrote was *The Ginger Ale's Boy* (1995), a musical comedy about which Walsh said that he “had no idea what [he] was doing” and that the play was “a mess”<sup>107</sup> because every member of the company wanted to add some of their own ideas to the production. Walsh met with success in 1996 with his play *Disco Pigs* which was made into a film in 2001. His next play, *Misterman* (1999), was a one-man show in which Walsh himself played the main character. It was also the last piece of his cooperation with Kiernan as according to Walsh “Corcadorca went on to building huge shows and [...] I needed to make smaller-scale work.”<sup>108</sup> Going in his own direction, Walsh has been a very prolific playwright, having written over twenty plays. Among the most famous and the most successful ones are *Bedbound* (2000), *The Small Things* (2005), *Chatroom* (2005), which was like *Disco Pigs* made into a film in 2010, *The Walworth Farce* (2006), *The New Electric Ballroom* (2008), *Penelope* (2010), *Ballyturk* (2014) and *Arlington* (2016). In addition, he has written many short plays, for example *How These Desperate Men Talk* (2008), *Lynndie's Gotta Gun* (2008), or *My Friend Duplicity* (2010). Apart from adapting his own plays into films, he also co-worked on the screenplay of the film *Hunger* (2008) together with the director Steve McQueen. Walsh has lived with his family in London as of 2005.

Unlike Martin McDonagh, Walsh likes to talk about his work and openly admits that most of it is a parallel with his own life and experience: “I can see that I am all those characters. There's a bit of me in all of them.”<sup>109</sup> *Disco Pigs* is about “a failed relationship I had with a twin and my relationship with Cork dialect as a Dublin man,” *Bedbound* is “essentially about the relationship between me and my dad,” *The Small Things* is “about the relationship of my dead father with my still alive mother,” and *Chatroom* is written “from the perspective of my fifteen-year-old self.”<sup>110</sup> All in all, although there are considerably less academic sources on Walsh, he often provides comments on his work, explaining his motives and intentions as well as the meaning of the plays themselves.

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<sup>107</sup> Enda Walsh, foreword to *Plays: One* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2010), vii.

<sup>108</sup> Walsh, *Plays: One*, viii.

<sup>109</sup> Christopher Wallenberg, “Small Rooms Full of Words,” *American Theatre* Vol. 27 (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2010), 25.

<sup>110</sup> Walsh, *Plays: One*, viii-ix.

## 6.1. *Disco Pigs* and *The Walworth Farce*

In the following section, I am going to discuss in detail two of Walsh's plays, *Disco Pigs* and *The Walworth Farce*, as representatives of two different approaches towards violence in Walsh's work: the spoken violence and the performed violence. I am going to focus mainly on these two plays because they show a clear distinction between the two types of violence and because they also amount to Walsh's most famous and most significant works.

*Disco Pigs* was first performed at the Triskel Arts Centre in Cork at midnight in September 1996. Lisa Fitzpatrick explains that the unusual timing was chosen to match the atmosphere of the play which largely revolves around night life in bars and clubs.<sup>111</sup> The play casts only two actors: a young male, Darren, who calls himself Pig and a young female, Sinead, who calls herself Runt. These two protagonists narrate the entire story in their own dialect which is a combination of baby talk, teenage slang and animal noises.<sup>112</sup> The play opens with Pig and Runt explaining that they were born on the same day in 1979 in the same hospital in 'Pork Sity' as they call Cork, and that they grew up together, developing their private language:

Runt: [...] An da baby houses side by side la!... and birrday in birrday out... us togedder. [...] So we grow up a bit at a dime an all dat dime we silen when odders roun. No word or no-ting. An liddle tings we do like robbin and stealin is a good ol feelin, yes indeedy. [...] An Pig own has me... an Runt own have him. But we make a whirl dat no one can live sept us two.<sup>113</sup>

As they grew older, they begun to perform various violent rituals such as intimidating bus drivers or attacking a clerk in an off-licence to steal alcohol. In clubs and bars, Runt would often start dancing with a boy and she would kiss him which was a signal for Pig to appear and beat the boy up pretending to be Runt's jealous boyfriend. On the night when Pig and Runt have just turned seventeen, however, their game gets out of control. Runt starts seducing a boy whom she gets to like but Pig continues their game

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<sup>111</sup> Fitzpatrick, "Enda Walsh," 440.

<sup>112</sup> Fitzpatrick, "Enda Walsh," 440.

<sup>113</sup> Enda Walsh, *Disco Pigs*, in *Plays: One* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2010), 57-58.

and beats the boy to death. The shock from the incident makes Runt break away from her relationship with Pig and she leaves him.

*The Walworth Farce* was first staged by Druid Theatre Company in Galway in March 2006. The play's probably most famous production, however, was at the Olympia Theatre in Dublin in 2015 starring real-life father and sons Brendan Gleeson, Domhnall Gleeson and Brian Gleeson. *The Walworth Farce* is a play for only four actors but there are altogether ten characters appearing on the stage played by the four actors. The main protagonist of the play, Dinny, exiled from Cork to London because he murdered his brother Paddy and his sister-in-law Vera during a dispute over their inheritance after his mother's death. Dinny's wife, Maureen, has sent their two sons, Blake and Sean, to London to persuade Dinny to come back. However, Dinny, who was unable to cope with the guilt, isolated Blake and Sean in Paddy's council flat on the Walworth Road in London where he forces them to perform an absurd invented version of his emigration from Ireland. Blake plays all the female roles exchanging wigs, while Sean plays all the male roles. They also play themselves as children. Dinny plays only himself but in his story, he is a successful brain surgeon, Paddy and Vera are murdered with a poisoned chicken by somebody else, and he is in London to "build for [his wife and children] a castle to overlook the English scum."<sup>114</sup> Blake and Sean, now grown up, have been made to believe that the outside world is a dangerous place and they never leave the flat except for Sean's regular shopping for food in a nearby Tesco. One day, Hayley, a young black cashier who has developed a connection to Sean, comes to the flat because Sean accidentally took the wrong bag of shopping in the supermarket. She is forced to join the performance at first, but she manages to escape during the chaos when Blake kills Dinny and Sean kills Blake. Sean who was supposed to leave with Hayley and start a new life, realizes that he is not able to integrate into the real world, he stays in the flat and starts performing a new story of his own.

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<sup>114</sup> Enda Walsh, *The Walworth Farce*, in *Plays: Two* (London: Nick Hern Book, 2014), 32.

## 6.2. Brutal Words

In *Disco Pigs* violence is expressed strictly through language. Pig and Runt describe the cruelties they have committed or are committing, occasionally miming punching and kicking their physically absent victims. Fitzpatrick argues that “the raucous poetry and harsh accents of the two characters” as well as “the speed and energy of the performance” heighten the brutality of the acts they narrate.<sup>115</sup> For example, the scene of assaulting the off-licence clerk, Foxy, starts with Pig miming kicking Foxy around the place and continues as follows:

Pig: Free drink, pretty please.

Runt: No ney panic button Foxy he panic. He say ‘I can’t Darren.’ Pig he get da buzz in da ead he wanna fisty! [...]

Pig: A shut yer gob, shut yer gob, shut yer gob ya fuckidy-fuck!

Runt: Took Pig ten mins smash all buddels in dat drink shap. All but one yeah. [...] he kiss da buddel ...and off. Pig! [...] He stamp na Foxy face. Da nose like tomato itgo squish n’drip drop. Foxy cried, cried like his mam jus bin smack in da eah by da golf club... which she was... nex day.

Pig: Shmackkk!!!<sup>116</sup>

Pig’s phrase ‘pretty please,’ and the reference to the blood as to a tomato mock Foxy’s defencelessness and highlight the superiority Pig and Runt think they have over others. It also shows that violence is a game for Pig and Runt. According to Fitzpatrick, Runt’s repetition of the word ‘panic’ builds a sense of threat and “the pacing of the performance adds to the sense that things are out of control.”<sup>117</sup> The fast exchange of words between Pig and Runt, the particularity of their private speech as well as the use of vulgar words all intensify the brutality of the scene. Fitzpatrick argues that “the audience experiences the aural violence of Pig’s strange, harsh speech, and has time to fear what he will do before the actor performs the

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<sup>115</sup> Fitzpatrick, “Enda Walsh,” 441.

<sup>116</sup> Walsh, *Disco Pigs*, 51-52.

<sup>117</sup> Fitzpatrick, “Enda Walsh,” 442.

stamping on Foxy's imaginary face."<sup>118</sup> The language therefore builds the sense of threat in the spectators before they are confronted with the act of violence itself.

The violence in *Disco Pigs* is not only male oriented as it is not always Pig who initiates and performs it. Runt also gets into a fight with a girl in a crowded club:

I'll fuckin claim ya if ya don shift yer hole righ now! Says she. I stan up. I face dis ugly puss an holdin a fist full a scampi fry I mash it inta her gob! When SHLAP!! She pack a punch dis doll!! SSMACKKK!! Opens up da nose an blood all drip drip drop from da Runt!<sup>119</sup>

Pig is not there to help Runt because he is performing karaoke of 'Be My Baby' by The Ronettes to impress Runt. When he sees that Runt is bleeding, he stops singing and rushes to help her. He wants to "fuckin burn da fuck who did dis" but Runt replies "No figh no more!"<sup>120</sup> and she persuades Pig to leave the club. There is no previous reference in the play that Runt would be physically involved in any fight before, especially being the victim of it. This new experience makes her think about the wrongs of her and Pig's behaviour. She is no longer willing to participate in their violent games and she has fully realized the limiting nature of her relationship with Pig. Pig, on the other hand, has not noticed anything.

In the club they visit immediately after the incident, Runt tries to make genuine with another boy for the first time. However, Pig continues in their game: "Was dis! Oh yes! Jus like before, yeah! Good ol Runt! She play da girlfren an misty Pig he play da boyfren! But dis time I read da message purr real!"<sup>121</sup> In an attempt to make an impression on Runt, especially after his failure in the previous club, Pig gets carried away: "Move oudda da fuckin way! You dirty liddle fuck she my girlfren bollic! Smash! Kassshhh! Open da nose da yey! Blood blood blood! [...] Ashtray! Smash kaassshhh head smasshhh! Head crack op!"<sup>122</sup> Pig beats the boy to death and Runt runs away abandoning Pig. The end of their isolated relationship is symbolically expressed through Runt's switch from their invented

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<sup>118</sup> Fitzpatrick, "Enda Walsh," 442.

<sup>119</sup> Walsh, *Disco Pigs*, 65.

<sup>120</sup> Walsh, *Disco Pigs*, 65.

<sup>121</sup> Walsh, *Disco Pigs*, 71.

<sup>122</sup> Walsh, *Disco Pigs*, 71.

dialect to normal language: “an I watch... da liddle quack quacks... I look... at the ducks... as they swim in the morning sun... in the great big... watery shite... that is the river Lee.”<sup>123</sup>

Everything that happens in *Disco Pigs* is conveyed to the audience through Pig and Runt’s narrative. Fitzpatrick explains that “because the action is not presented in a naturalistic style the consequences of violence are never revealed, leaving the audience to the images in their own imaginations.”<sup>124</sup> The spectators do not see the violent acts with their own eyes, they only hear about them but that does not mean that their impact is less effective. On the contrary, many scholars agree that the pictures the audience make in their heads can be more powerful than anything that is performed onstage, as was already discussed earlier during the analysis of the narrated violence in *The Pillowman*. The fast speech, the use of the interjections and the abundance of swear words in *Disco Pigs* are sufficient to make the audience feel uncomfortable about the brutality of the scenes even without their visual representation.

### 6.3. Brutal Deeds

In *The Walworth Farce*, in contrast, the role of the spoken violence is to entertain the audience as well as to take their focus off the oncoming disastrous end. The spectators are lulled into a false sense of security by the grotesque, almost absurd elements of Dinny’s fictional story. He has put many cruel moments into his play within a play but they are too exaggerated to be taken seriously just as the violent scenes in McDonagh’s *Lieutenant of Inishmore*. The farcical mode of Dinny’s play is indicated from the very first moment even before the dialogue starts. The characters are wearing clothes that make them look “clownish”<sup>125</sup> and bad wigs that are in Dinny’s case kept on his head with “Velcro tape.”<sup>126</sup> The play then opens with a comic dialogue between Dinny and

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<sup>123</sup> Walsh, *Disco Pigs*, 72.

<sup>124</sup> Fitzpatrick, “Enda Walsh,” 442.

<sup>125</sup> Walsh, *The Walworth Farce*, 5.

<sup>126</sup> Walsh, *The Walworth Farce*, 6.



Sean who is wearing “a bad fake moustache”<sup>127</sup> pretending to be Dinny’s brother  
Paddy:

Dinny: She was our mother, Paddy, and she treated us well.

Sean as Paddy: It was a happy outcome, Dinny, even if it was her funeral.<sup>128</sup>

The audience learns that Dinny and Paddy’s mother was crashed by a “massive dead stallion” while she was “innocently picking gooseberries [...] for fermenting in a lethal vat of alcohol she called her ‘Preservative’.”<sup>129</sup> Every single detail of Dinny’s story is so far-fetched that even the violent elements of it become ridiculous. The spectators are told that Sean and Blake “set fire to a nun”<sup>130</sup> when they were children or that Dinny hit the gravedigger who was not able “to stick Mammy in the ground.”<sup>131</sup>

Even the occasional acts of violence that are performed onstage in act one, that is they are not part of Dinny’s story, maintain the farcical character. Sean is supposed to buy a cooked chicken, sliced pan and spreadable cheese every day as necessary props for Dinny’s play. However, after Dinny finds out that he brought home a huge salami sausage and Ryvita crackers instead, he “grabs a large frying pan [...] and swings [it] across the back of Sean’s head.”<sup>132</sup> Hitting somebody with a frying pan stands for one of the most common cartoon jokes and it has the same effect here as well.

Nevertheless, as in *Disco Pigs*, there are hints that build a sense of threat in *The Walworth Farce* much earlier before Hayley rings the doorbell of the flat. Blake confides to Sean with his frustration from their empty lives: “I say his words and all I can see is the word. A lot of words piled on top of other words. There’s no sense to my day ‘cause the sense isn’t important any more. No pictures. No dreams. Words only.”<sup>133</sup> He is “ready to finish it,”<sup>134</sup> he takes out a large kitchen knife with which he plans to kill Dinny and leave their prison together with Sean. However, he gets overwhelmed by the fear of Dinny’s presentation of the outside world: “A million tiny

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<sup>127</sup> Walsh, *The Walworth Farce*, 7.

<sup>128</sup> Walsh, *The Walworth Farce*, 7.

<sup>129</sup> Walsh, *The Walworth Farce*, 8, 17.

<sup>130</sup> Walsh, *The Walworth Farce*, 12.

<sup>131</sup> Walsh, *The Walworth Farce*, 15.

<sup>132</sup> Walsh, *The Walworth Farce*, 20.

<sup>133</sup> Walsh, *The Walworth Farce*, 22.

<sup>134</sup> Walsh, *The Walworth Farce*, 33.

bedsits there are. Large carbuncles sprouting out from the ground. Massive flats. Deadly, pitiful places that even rats have abandoned, the cockroaches have done cockroaches and all that's left is London people,"<sup>135</sup> and he continues with the performance.

The atmosphere of act two suddenly gets much darker with the arrival of Hayley who could not fit among the residents of the flat less, being a woman, black and non-Irish. Dinny forces Hayley to join their play because unlike the men, she can cook. Hayley thinks it is a joke at first, and she plays along but the situation soon becomes serious. Dinny whitens Hayley's face with his moisturiser to make her look more like his wife Maureen who was white, and he "*pounces on her and grabs her by the throat, pinning her to the door*"<sup>136</sup> when she attempts to leave. The mood gets even more tense when Blake and Sean's fight, which initially started as part of their performance, escalates to a real fight between them. Sean is trying to tell his brother the truth about their father's departure from Ireland but Blake does not want to accept it because it would mean the end of the world he has been living in and he has believed in since he was a child:

*Blake slaps him hard across the face. He climbs off Sean and stands over him.*

Blake: You break what I know and I give you my word, little brother, I'll have to kill you.

Sean: Then you'll live with what he lives with...

Blake: It's not true.

Sean: I saw him, Blake. I saw the blood that day! It's all lies!<sup>137</sup>

Sean reveals that all that time he has remembered the tragic event from his childhood: "I see Uncle Paddy and Aunty Vera on the ground and I see you [Dinny] standing in the corner with blood all over your hands. There's blood on your hands and a kitchen knife. I'm sure of it."<sup>138</sup> Dinny's story that has been the main source of harmless amusement in the play so far, suddenly become the source of serious violence.

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<sup>135</sup> Walsh, *The Walworth Farce*, 16.

<sup>136</sup> Walsh, *The Walworth Farce*, 51.

<sup>137</sup> Walsh, *The Walworth Farce*, 57.

<sup>138</sup> Walsh, *The Walworth Farce*, 59.

Dinny who is angry that his invented story is being spoilt, is determined to stab Hayley to death because she keeps refusing to participate in the performance and he even threatens Sean with the knife because he is trying to save Hayley: “*he takes the large kitchen knife from the table, [...] grabs Sean by the hair and drags him to the armchair, making him sit. Standing behind him he holds the knife hard against Sean’s throat.*”<sup>139</sup> The threat that has been building up from the moment Blake brought the knife from the kitchen seems inevitable and imminent at this moment. First, however, Dinny’s farce must finish. Both Sean and Blake perform several deaths from poisoning of the characters they play, collapsing dead as one character and standing up immediately to perform death of another one. Unlike the previous scenes of Dinny’s play, however, this scene is no longer funny under the tense circumstances and it is shortly followed by the final catastrophe.

Blake who lacks Sean’s experience of the real world, believing Dinny’s apocalyptic presentation of it, knows that he can never leave the flat. Thus, he decides to trick his brother and give him a chance to start a new life with Hayley. He shuts Sean in a wardrobe with a latch and while his father is immersed in his memories of Ireland, he “*fires the knife into Dinny’s back, he pulls out the knife, turns Dinny towards him quickly and stabs him in the stomach hard.*”<sup>140</sup> Blake then makes Hayley scream, Sean runs from the wardrobe and stabs his brother to death believing that he has hurt Hayley before. The roughness of the patricide and the fratricide, the misunderstanding of the situation and the final unpredictable outcome as well as the hopelessness of the situation are in stark contrast to the farcical representation of violence at the beginning, and it draws a clear distinction between the harmless spoken violence and the serious performed one in the play.

#### **6.4. For What Are We if We Are Not Our Stories?**

All Walsh’s plays share the same feature of entrapment of the characters which strongly influences their behaviour. They are stuck in their past, endlessly repeating

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<sup>139</sup> Walsh, *The Walworth Farce*, 68.

<sup>140</sup> Walsh, *The Walworth Farce*, 83.

and replaying bygone wrongs, events that have irreversibly changed their lives or new invented stories with which they replaced the truth. Sara Keating in her article “Stories That Define, Stories That Consume” explains that the re-enactment of the past works as a ceremonial confirmation of the characters’ identities in Walsh’s plays.<sup>141</sup> This is exactly Dinny’s case who is desperately trying to re-establish his new identity and forget the old true one by repeatedly re-enacting the ideal vision of his life.

The idea of a private isolated world in which the characters are trapped is often represented with the claustrophobic setting whether it is a flat as in *The Walworth Farce*, a room in *Ballyturk*, a swimming pool drained of water in *Penelope*, or a single child’s bed in *Bedbound*. Keating argues that “the hermetic worlds of the characters shrink the auditorium to a place of appalling intensity.”<sup>142</sup> The characters are unable to leave these limited worlds for either physical or psychological reasons and their feelings of frustration are transmitted to the audience. When there is a violent scene presented in such a claustrophobic environment, its impact on the audience significantly intensifies.

Another major representation of the characters’ small obsessive worlds is their language and storytelling whether it has a form of a private invented speech in *Disco Pigs*, the “frantic pace of unceasing talk”<sup>143</sup> in *Bedbound*, the endless re-enactment of repetitive lines in *The Walworth Farce*, or the meaningless, almost Beckettian dialogues in *Penelope*:

Quinn: What are we here?

Burns: 11.30 a.m.

Quinn: More importantly!

Burns: Thirty-three degrees Celsius.

Fitz: That’s hot.

Dunne: That’s hot and early.

Burns: It’s always hot.

Dunne: And invariably early... when it isn’t late...<sup>144</sup>

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<sup>141</sup> Sara Keating, “Stories That Define, Stories That Consume,” *The Irish Times*, June 2008, 7.

<sup>142</sup> Keating, “Stories That Define,” 7.

<sup>143</sup> Fitzpatrick, “Enda Walsh,” 442.

<sup>144</sup> Enda Walsh, *Penelope*, in *Plays: Two* (London: Nick Hern Book, 2014), 141.

Walsh stated: “My characters talk and talk and talk and sometimes talk shit. But it’s not what they’re talking about that matters. It’s what they avoid talking about. That’s where the real drama is.”<sup>145</sup> Walsh’s characters often immerse themselves in endless talk but they blather so that there is no space and time left for real communication because they are incapable of it. Lisa Fitzpartick explains that “Walsh’s characters often opt to avoid the rest of the world, burying themselves in fictions to hide from the grief and pain of life, which is expressed through the metaphors of words as methods of social control and limitation, and of stories as rigid expressions of identity and barriers to possibility.”<sup>146</sup> In *Disco Pigs* it is Runt and Pig’s private language that separates them from the rest of the world. Their bond is so tight that it Runt had to witness the murder to wake up to reality and liberate herself from the limiting relationship.

Sean in *The Walworth Farce*, on the other hand, is not strong enough. In the course of the play, he shows desire to leave the flat and go living with Hailey. In the end, however, he is left alone struck by the shock from having witnessed the patricide committed by his brother and the subsequent fratricide committed by himself. He is not able to become part of the real world on his own without Hayley who has run away. Thus, he returns to the only thing he knows and he starts performing a new play in which he will play all the roles since there is nobody else there left. Instead of facing reality, Sean chooses to live in illusion, just like Dinny chose before him, because it is the easier way for him to achieve peace. Ian R. Walsh in his essay “Entertainment and Dystopia” argues that “the performance or routine repeatedly offers salvation but delivers self-destruction”<sup>147</sup> to Walsh’s characters which is exactly Sean’s case. He becomes his father whom he hated so much just like Maureen takes her mother’s place after she murdered her in McDonagh’s *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*. Both Sean and Maureen have become too absorbed in the routine of their lives and there is no hope for them to change it.

The feeling of entrapment puts the characters under a great amount of stress which eventually results in aggression and violence. In *Disco Pigs*, the world Pig and Runt have created for themselves is enough at first but as they are coming of age, they

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<sup>145</sup> Wallenberg, “Small Rooms Full of Words,” 24.

<sup>146</sup> Fitzpatrick, “Enda Walsh,” 443.

<sup>147</sup> Ian R. Walsh, “Entertainment and Dystopia: Enda Walsh’s *The Ginger Ale Boy*,” in *The Theatre of Enda Walsh*, ed. Mary P. Caulfield and Ian R. Walsh (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2015), 30.

start to be aware of their sexuality and Runt realizes she wants to meet other men. Runt expresses her wish to escape from the limited relationship much earlier than Pig commits the murder: “I wanna walk inta da sea an neva come back. I wan ta tide to take me outa me an give me someone differen...maybe jus fur a half hour or so!”<sup>148</sup> But she is trapped in their small private world for which she compensates with inflicting violence to other people. Pig, on the other hand, is happy being just with Runt but he is sexually frustrated. He is probably in love with Runt and he fantasizes about her as of the object of his sexual desire:

Why I kiss da honey lips a Runt? An now all dat I put my gob to is Runt I take an tase. I close da eyes an see da inhide a Runt legs. Da silk a da tighs an da liddle heaven a panties dat sit above. Dat liddle furry tuff dat wid ma paws I cup an knead. Runt she get all sof an moise an she gendle press inta my han which seem to call her in...she come in. [...] I feel dis da time. Pig nee to be a man. I all cought up in da pants an zip zip Runt fold her han about me. She take me oud an me all shiny an hard I open her real sof. Open. She wed an moan. Liddle moan. I poosh an touch da way in. An now Pig an Runt are da one. [...] We man an woman now. [...]

Runt does not requite his feeling, though: “*Pig grabs at Runt and kisses her. She struggles and pulls away.*”<sup>150</sup> Runt’s rejection and the sexual frustration of a teenage boy provoke Pig’s aggression which eventually leads to murder.

In both *Disco Pigs* and *The Walworth Farce*, the violence results from the characters’ feeling of paralysis and their inability to escape it. Ondřej Pilný explains that the “sudden, shocking outbursts of violence” that appear in Walsh’s plays “are expressive of the frustrated desire of the characters to step outside the oppressive patterns.”<sup>151</sup> Aleks Sierz adds that violence is the result of inarticulacy: “when words fail, the language of physical brutality takes over.”<sup>152</sup> Walsh’s characters are not able to express their true feelings and they are incapable of solving their problems with words, ineffectively repeating empty phrases, so they resort to brutality.

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<sup>148</sup> Walsh, *Disco Pigs*, 60.

<sup>149</sup> Walsh, *Disco Pigs*, 63.

<sup>150</sup> Walsh, *Disco Pigs*, 57.

<sup>151</sup> Ondřej Pilný, “The Grotesque in the Plays of Enda Walsh,” *Irish Studies Review* Vol. 21, No.2 (2013), 219.

<sup>152</sup> Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre*, 208.

Walsh admits that he deliberately chooses characters on the edge of mental breakdown: “It excites me to think about character that live their lives in physical or mental extremes and that have developed into these near-monsters. I do believe in the human spirit. But we’re all accidents away from falling apart.”<sup>153</sup> All his characters are psychologically and emotionally disturbed but what Walsh is trying to emphasize is that “most people – himself included – aren’t that far from the cliff’s edge of madness.”<sup>154</sup> The story of his characters could be the story of any of us “given a chemical imbalance and the right series of circumstances.”<sup>155</sup>

Walsh’s plays are much more personal than McDonagh’s plays as was mentioned before. They reflect his experience of growing up during “recession-mired Irish economy”<sup>156</sup> of the 1980s watching his father under great financial stress<sup>157</sup> as well as the later period of the economic growth during the Celtic Tiger and the following years, and the search for identity in the fast-changing world. Once again, in his work Walsh holds the view that out identity is established by storytelling. “For what am I if I’m not words?”<sup>158</sup> asks Daughter in the *Bedbound* while Dinny similarly asks: “For what are we if we’re not our stories?”<sup>159</sup> Pilný explains that “identity is based on narrative” or in other words “what makes you who you are is your story” because “should an individual not be able to order the events of his/her existence into a coherent narrative, he/she is likely to succumb to utter disorientation and consequently not be able to make sense of his/her live.”<sup>160</sup> Therefore the desperate effort of Walsh’s characters to put their lives into stories.

Another recurring theme in Walsh’s plays is the fragmentation of the family or the concept of home which often appears as “veritable death-in-life situations of paralysis, los chances and psychological entrapment”<sup>161</sup> resulting in emotional, psychological and physical violence. Middeke and Schnierer argue that the violence is presented as “an effect of Celtic Tiger (self)-alienation, [...] the revolt against neo-

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<sup>153</sup> Wallenberg, “Small Rooms Full of Words,” 22.

<sup>154</sup> Wallenberg, “Small Rooms Full of Words,” 22.

<sup>155</sup> Wallenberg, “Small Rooms Full of Words,” 22.

<sup>156</sup> Wallenberg, “Small Rooms Full of Words,” 24.

<sup>157</sup> Wallenberg, “Small Rooms Full of Words,” 24.

<sup>158</sup> Enda Walsh, *Bedbound*, in *Plays: One* (London: Nick Hern Book, 2010), 125.

<sup>159</sup> Walsh, *The Walworth Farce*, 83.

<sup>160</sup> Pilný, “The Grotesque in the Plays of Enda Walsh,” 221.

<sup>161</sup> Middeke and Schnierer, *The Methuen Drama Guide*, xii.

liberal society [...] and fragmentated social mores.”<sup>162</sup> Walsh does not openly link these influences with the motifs of his characters but they do have a great impact on their behaviour. Mary P. Caulfield in the introduction to *The Theatre of Enda Walsh* argues that Walsh explores “human vulnerability and responses to that vulnerability, and he challenges us to re-evaluate our assumptions of what we understand as identity, memory and history.”<sup>163</sup> This is undoubtedly true but he does so in far less confrontational way than McDonagh. While McDonagh chooses a shocking way to confront the audience with a controversial topic leaving the conclusion to everybody alone, Walsh’s plays are more descriptive. In other words, McDonagh holds a mirror up to us with his disturbing pictures but Walsh rather mirrors today’s world as such depicting extreme stories of individuals on the edge of society emphasizing that their story could be our story too.

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<sup>162</sup> Middeke and Schnierer, *The Methuen Drama Guide*, xii.

<sup>163</sup> Mary P. Caulfield, introduction to *The Theatre of Enda Walsh*, ed. Mary P. Caulfield and Ian R. Walsh (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2015), 6-11.



## 7. Mark O’Rowe

Mark O’Rowe was born in Tallaght, Dublin in 1970. The urban environment in which he grew up has been a great influence on his writing, with his plays traditionally depicting urban life in the Irish capital. Like McDonagh, O’Rowe’s begun to write just “for something to do”<sup>164</sup> and like his contemporary, O’Rowe initially wanted to write screenplays since films have been his great passion: “I wanted to write one [screenplay] myself. But I sort of knew that if I wrote a play, it would be easier to find somebody to put it on.”<sup>165</sup> Moreover, O’Rowe admitted – just as McDonagh did – that he “knew nothing about theatre” and that he had “only seen about two plays in [his] life”<sup>166</sup> at the time he began to write. He wrote his first play, *The Aspidistra Code* (1995), for a young playwrights’ competition and it was an immediate success. O’Rowe was one of the five winners whose texts received a rehearsal reading at the Peacock Theatre, the Abbey’s smaller auditorium. Paradoxically, *The Aspidistra Code* remains O’Rowe’s only play that has not been fully produced yet.<sup>167</sup>

The success of O’Rowe’s first play led to a commission to write several youth theatre plays. The most famous one of them was *Anna’s Ankle* (1997) which caused much controversy because of its violent content concerning a film-maker who cuts off Anna’s feet and makes her walk on her stumps while photographing her.<sup>168</sup> Yet, despite the criticism, O’Rowe was satisfied with the audiences’ response since he meant to arouse strong feelings even if they should be negative. In one of his later interviews he stated: “I love violence in its literary form, it’s cinematic form. It’s what entertains me.”<sup>169</sup> The only critic who did not reject the play was Fintan O’Toole who

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<sup>164</sup> Fiachra Gibbons, “The Dark Stuff,” *Guardian*, 24 November, 2003, quoted in Michael Raab, “Mark O’Rowe,” in *The Methuen Drama Guide to Contemporary Irish Playwrights*, ed. Martin Middeke and Paul Schnierer (London: Methuen Drama, 2010), 345.

<sup>165</sup> Ciaran Carty, “From Stage to Screen,” *Sunday Tribune*, 1 December, 2002, quoted in Raab, “Mark O’Rowe,” 345.

<sup>166</sup> Carty, “From Stage to Screen,” quoted in Raab, “Mark O’Rowe,” 345.

<sup>167</sup> Michael Raab, “Mark O’Rowe,” in *The Methuen Drama Guide to Contemporary Irish Playwrights*, ed. Martin Middeke and Paul Schnierer (London: Methuen Drama, 2010), 346.

<sup>168</sup> Jimmy Fay, “A Sense of Place, A Place of Dread,” in *The Sullied Magnificence: The Theatre of Mark O’Rowe*, ed. Sara Keating and Emma Creedon (Dublin: Carysford Press, 2015), 9.

<sup>169</sup> Raab, “Mark O’Rowe,” 358.

believed that “he’d witnessed a new and disturbing voice enter the Irish theatre landscape.”<sup>170</sup> The focus on violence has remained central for all O’Rowe work.

He wrote his full-length professional debut *From Both Hips* in 1997. It was *Howie the Rookie*, however, a play he wrote in the same year, which brought about his breakthrough in both Ireland and abroad. In the play, O’Rowe incorporates the long rhythmic monologue with almost no action happening onstage – a technique he used in several of his later plays and which is usually connected with his name. Michael Raab in his essay on Mark O’Rowe in *The Methuen Drama Guide to Contemporary Irish Playwrights* argues that “with this play O’Rowe found a voice of his own. The language has immense speed, rhythm that would not be amiss in a rap musician, but also a strange poetry, and does not contain a single unnecessary word.”<sup>171</sup> *Howie the Rookie* consists of two separate monologues by Howie and Rookie Lee describing the turbulent and often violent nightlife in Dublin. O’Rowe’s next play, *Made in China* (2001), depicts violence as well but it is formally very different, including lot of action in comparison to the previous work.

O’Rowe returned to the monologue in his next play, *Crestfall*, which was published in 2003. The play consists of three separate monologues of three women in “society so calcified by violence that people are reduced to the most basic activities: having sex, killing and shooting up.”<sup>172</sup> The play is, however, much darker than other O’Rowe’s works lacking the usual amount of humour which met with rather negative answers from the audience. O’Rowe said in one of his interviews that when he started writing the play, he was thinking: “this is going to be the coldest, darkest, most violent play I can come up with; it’ll be devoid of humour and humanity and that’s going to be the point of it.”<sup>173</sup> Nevertheless, he decided to rewrite the play years later and delete some of the most violent scenes.<sup>174</sup> The next play took O’Rowe four years to publish. *Terminus* (2007) again contains three monologues of three characters but this time the language rhymes and there are elements of magic realism and the supernatural

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<sup>170</sup> Fay, “A Sense of Place, A Place of Dread,” 9-10.

<sup>171</sup> Raab, “Mark O’Rowe,” 351.

<sup>172</sup> Raab, “Mark O’Rowe,” 355.

<sup>173</sup> Cormac O’Brien, “A Tallaght of the Mind: In Conversation with Mark O’Rowe,” in *The Sullied Magnificence: The Theatre of Mark O’Rowe*, ed. Sara Keating and Emma Creedon (Dublin: Carysford Press, 2015), 151.

<sup>174</sup> O’Brien, “A Tallaght of the Mind,” 151.

included. O’Rowe’s newest play is *Our Few and Evil Days* (2014), family tragedy in suburban Dublin.

Apart from drama, O’Rowe also wrote several screenplays for successful films such as *Intermission* (2003) starring Colin Farrell, Cillian Murphy and Colm Meaney; *Boy A* (2007); and *Perrier’s Bounty* starring Brendan Gleeson, Cillian Murphy, Jim Broadbent and Liam Cunningham.

O’Rowe claims that his biggest ambition is “to push Irish theatre on to the next level, [...] to be part of the thing that, in twenty years’ time, made Irish theatre”<sup>175</sup> but at the same time he says that “the whole Irish literary tradition [...] means nothing to [him].”<sup>176</sup> He respects David Mamet and Harold Pinter – as McDonagh and Walsh do – and he admires Irish playwrights such as Brian Friel and Tom Murphy but he refuses the idea of Irishness being in one’s DNA and the writers’ obligation to be part of the national culture.<sup>177</sup> This stance is in contrast to that of Enda Walsh who openly expresses his pride of being part of the long line of Irish playwrights.<sup>178</sup> Both Walsh and O’Rowe, however, share the ambition to develop Irish theatre and push it on to a new, more experimental level.

### **7.1. *Made in China and Terminus***

In the following section I will briefly summarize and then analyse O’Rowe’s *Made in China* and *Terminus*. I have chosen these two plays because they are probably the playwright’s most famous works and because each of them expresses violence differently, representing thus two approaches O’Rowe uses when depicting it.

*Made in China* was first performed at the Peacock Theatre, Dublin, on 10 April 2001. Like *Howie the Rookie*, the play depicts an imaginary Dublin underworld but unlike the former play which consists of two separated monologues, *Made in China* is written as the dialogue between three characters: Hughie, Paddy and Kilby. Hughie and Kilby, two senior members of an Echelon gang fight over the loyalty of a new,

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<sup>175</sup> Carty, “From Stage to Screen,” quoted in Raab, “Mark O’Rowe,” 361.

<sup>176</sup> Carty, “From Stage to Screen,” quoted in Raab, “Mark O’Rowe,” 359.

<sup>177</sup> O’Brien, “A Tallaght of the Mind,” 147.

<sup>178</sup> Weaver, “The Words Look After Themselves,” 136.

young member, Paddy. Hughie's mother has been killed in a car accident and Kilby and the offstage gang boss Puppacat plot a punishment beating for the other driver. However, Hughie refuses to participate in the torture thinking that the circle of violence is going too far, for which he is expelled from the gang. Kilby then wants to punish Hughie for disobeying the orders which leads to a brutal fight. In the end, Hughie flees and injured Kilby and Paddy are left lying on the floor awaiting almost certain death at Puppacat's hands.

*Terminus* premiered at the Abbey Theatre on the Peacock stage in June 2007. The play also focuses on violence in urban Ireland but it is formally very different from *Made in China*. *Terminus* follows three nameless characters: A, a woman in her forties; B, a woman in her twenties; and C, a man in his thirties, during a single night in Dublin. They take turns narrating their rhymed stories which are always interrupted by one sentence divided up between them. A is trying to save one of her former students, Helen, from getting an unprofessional abortion in the eighth month of her pregnancy performed by Helen's violent lesbian lover. B's lonely mundane life abruptly ends when she falls from the crane during a drinking night out with friends. She is, however, caught mid-flight by a demon made up entirely of worms with whom she falls in love, relieving her suppressed sexual frustration. C is a shy psychopath who has sold his soul in return for "a voice the world would rejoice or even shed a tear to hear"<sup>179</sup> so as to be able to woo women. Nevertheless, his gift is useless because his shyness prevents him from performing in public for which he compensates by murdering people, especially young women. The stories interlink in the end: Helen gets run over by C who is speeding off in a stolen lorry from the police; B turns out to be A's long-alienated daughter who stopped seeing her mother because she had an affair with her boyfriend; and the demon is that part of C's soul which he sold to the devil. A wants to make up with her daughter but it is too late as B is being taken to heaven by angels. C then gets brutally executed by the demon he himself created.

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<sup>179</sup> Mark O'Rowe, *Terminus* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2011), 17.

## 7.2. Cruelty as a Reaction to Masculinity in Crisis

*Made in China* concerns Dublin underworld characters with a great capacity for violence which is the topic that can be found also in O’Rowe’s other plays. However, Eamonn Jordan in his essay “Project Mayhem” argues that “*Made in China* offers a far darker vision of the perverted, retributive justice of street gangs with their rule of law, punishment beatings, and twisted codes of honour.”<sup>180</sup> Michal Raab adds that while the audience maintains empathy with the characters in *Howie the Rookie* even in the most extreme situations, “in *Made in China* the odds are weighed too strongly against the characters.”<sup>181</sup> Nevertheless, O’Rowe explains that “the author or the director should [n]ever tell the audience to judge these people” and that he has an empathy with them despite the fact that “they’re horrible people.”<sup>182</sup>

All three characters in the play are men of substandard intelligence with their only concern being their membership in the gang. Their attachment to it and their devotion to Puppacat is most strongly expressed through Kilby who remains loyal to the gang even after being raped by a pool cue at the hands of Puppacat. The audience learns about this from the conversation between Hughie, who helped hold Kilby, and Paddy:

Hughie: I had to... bend him over the table six... I was ordered, man [...]

Puppacat goes up behind him, fuckin’ pool cue in his paw, there, hefts, holds it, gives the end an oul’ chalkin’ an’...

Paddy: Up his dirty road?!!!

Hughie: ‘Bout two fuckin’ foot up his dirty road.

Paddy: Ah, *fuck!*

Hughie: *Three* foot, maybe. [...] *Your boss-to-be*, man. Welters of gore, there was, fuckin’ *geysers* of blood spurin’, *sprayin’* out of both ends of him, hole *an’* mouth. [...] Gurglin’ like a blocked drain.<sup>183</sup>

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<sup>180</sup> Jordan Eamonn, “Project Mayhem: Mark O’Rowe’s *Howie the Rookie*,” *The Irish Review* No.35 (2007), 125, accessed April 21, 2017, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/29736325>.

<sup>181</sup> Raab, “Mark O’Rowe,” 354.

<sup>182</sup> Raab, “Mark O’Rowe,” 354.

<sup>183</sup> Mark O’Rowe, *Made in China*, in *Mark O’Rowe Plays: One* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2011), 298-299.

On the one hand, Kilby describes the experience as being “cue stick’s whore,”<sup>184</sup> but on the other hand, he sees it as the sign of his “martyrdom”<sup>185</sup> which has elevated his position in the gang. He neither hates his boss for causing him chronic pains and incontinence, nor he leaves the gang. Instead he perceives the experience as proof of his masculinity: “Attained a knowin’ state that day, I did, day I was impaled. Somethin’ youse cunts’ll never understand. [...] I am alpha male of youse fucks ‘cos I can take it an’ have *took* it to the fuckin’ hilt, man.”<sup>186</sup> Nevertheless, this turns out to be only pretence when Kilby tries to make Paddy rape Hughie with an umbrella while he holds him. According to what Kilby says, the rape would make Hughie alpha male which is hardly something he wishes to happen, especially after Hughie stopped being part of the gang. The rape is clearly meant to hurt and humiliate one and to destroy one’s masculinity, not to enforce it. Emma Creedon in her essay “From ‘Up-Yer-Hole’ Theatre to the Shakesqueer” argues that the male characters in the play “are represented as hypermasculine yet a distinct homoeroticism is evident in the text, as evinced by Kilby and Paddy’s illicit ‘sucking’ of Hughie’s ‘salty’ knix-knax and the fact that Paddy’s penis habitually escapes from his underwear.”<sup>187</sup> Kilby repeatedly assaults others verbally with homophobic remarks which only further indicates his own insecurity about his masculinity for which he compensates by brutality.

Most violence in *Made in China* takes place onstage with the exception of Kilby’s rape and the death of Hughie’s mother. Throughout the play the three characters are practising their fighting skills on one another as part of an innocent friendly game. This is, however, only a poor imitation of what is to come in the end. In the final scene, the audience witnesses the long fight in which not only fists are used but also a baseball bat and, more comically, an umbrella and a prostatic leg. The choice of the weapons provokes laughter but it is shortly replaced with fear as the threat Hughie’s rape becomes imminent:

Kilby: (*To Hughie.*) Take your trousers off.

Hughie: Me hole!

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<sup>184</sup> O’Rowe, *Made in China*, 305.

<sup>185</sup> O’Rowe, *Made in China*, 303.

<sup>186</sup> O’Rowe, *Made in China*, 307-308.

<sup>187</sup> Emma Creedon, “From ‘Up-Yer-Hole’ Theatre to Shakesqueer: *Made in China* (2001) and *Henry IV Part I* (2002),” in *The Sullied Magnificence: The Theatre of Mark O’Rowe*, ed. Sara Keating and Emma Creedon (Dublin: Carysford Press, 2015), 83.

Kilby: That's what I'm tyrin' to get to, man. Take them off, save me boxin' your head to get them off. [...] C'mon, man. Bit of impalin'. [...] It's popular with faggot rapists an' berserk sodomites. (*Slaps Hughie's arse.*)<sup>188</sup>

The umbrella which seemed ridiculous as a weapon against a baseball bat suddenly became a dangerous tool. The rape attempt is eventually thwarted by Paddy who “whacks Kilby over the head with the baseball bat”<sup>189</sup> after which the three men continue to fight until only Hughie is capable of movement and leaves. He does not help Paddy who saved him because he is no longer a member of the gang and he considers all ties severed. Creedon argues that there is “the suggestion of redemption and the termination of cyclical systems of aggressive masculinity”<sup>190</sup> not only in Hughie's abandonment of the gang but also in Paddy's refusal of violence. First, he is unwilling to participate in or watch Hughie's rape, and then he is unable to kill unconscious Kilby despite the fact that Kilby broke his legs and attempted to beat him to death: “*He [Paddy] crawls over to Kilby, [...] picks up the baseball. He starts crying, stops abruptly, composes himself, looks at Kilby. He raises the bat. Hold. Brings it down to his lap, begins weeping again as the lights fade down to darkness...*”<sup>191</sup>

### 7.3. Cruelty inside Our Minds

Since there is no action happening onstage in *Terminus*, all the violence is narrated by the characters in the present tense as in Walsh's *Disco Pigs*. Like in Walsh's work, the rhythm of the language and the choice of words play an important role in achieving the intended impact in *Terminus*. O'Rowe, moreover, put the whole play in rhymes, in a “combination of urban rap and stream-of-consciousness”<sup>192</sup> as Marie Kelly in her essay “At the Terminus in the Brain” put it. O'Rowe explains that he did not intend to

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<sup>188</sup> O'Rowe, *Made in China*, 305.

<sup>189</sup> O'Rowe, *Made in China*, 306.

<sup>190</sup> Creedon, “From ‘Up-Yer-Hole’ Theatre to Shakesqueer,” 87.

<sup>191</sup> O'Rowe, *Made in China*, 313.

<sup>192</sup> Marie Kelly, “At The Terminus in the Brain: Illusions of Consciousness in Mark O'Rowe's *Terminus*,” in *The Sullied Magnificence: The Theatre of Mark O'Rowe*, ed. Sara Keating and Emma Creedon (Dublin: Carysford Press, 2015), 93.

rhyme the play initially, he “rhymed a couple of lines by mistake” and then he tried to continue as an experiment until he had “done too much and gone too far to back down.”<sup>193</sup> One cannot therefore speak about O’Rowe deliberately using rhymes to intensify the rough atmosphere of the play but it works nevertheless as we can see in the scene in which C murders local thugs who tried to steal his car:

C: [...] my adrenalin soars and I roar, ‘Come on, you fucking whores!’ Then, as they begin to move in, I spin and dip and spin again and whip my blade from my trousers, cut a swathe through these losers. Number one, I split from crown to chin. He screams and, relishing the din, I hew number two across the throat and gloat as he gouts arterial spray and flays and, Jaysus, pirouettes as jets of blood are round him, like some kind of fountain. [...] Two fellas there, one dead, one dying, whose head I go flying over as I drive away – a bump, a spray of gore on the door and the head’s a head no more.<sup>194</sup>

The assonance helps keep the fast tempo of the scene and it also underlines the urban environment resembling almost rap. The simile of the bleeding victim to a fountain resembles Runt’s simile of blood to a tomato in *Disco Pigs* and it has the same mocking effect here as well as it heightens C’s feeling of superiority and his lack of conscience.

O’Rowe’s early plays focused on violence committed by male characters but *Terminus* includes also many scenes of violence among women, namely between A and Helen’s lesbian lover Celine O’Brien. Celine is determined to rid her “pregnant concubine” of the unwanted baby “with a broom, its handle pruned to a taper with which they’ll rape her and puncture in the process, the unborn fucking fetus.”<sup>195</sup> A is persistent in saving Helen because she compensates for her failure as a mother years ago which leads to the fight between the two women just before Celine is about to perform the abortion:

A: [...] her mouth is shut by a smack from my stick, and the shock on her face as she turns is erased by my second blow, much worse than the first, which

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<sup>193</sup> O’Brien, “A Tallaght of the Mind,” 152.

<sup>194</sup> O’Rowe, *Terminus*, 16-17.

<sup>195</sup> O’Rowe, *Terminus*, 20.



bursts her lip and rips a rupture in her face. Her response is she launches a counter-attack of punches – seven, or even eight, my hunch is – the last of which is the one that pinches me onto my back, then the bitch’s hands are around my neck, [...] my thumbs find their way to her eyes and I dig them in and they begin to collapse into her skull [...] and then a ‘Pop!’ as my fingernail penetrates [...] I lunge for the stick I dropped and pick it up and bring it down on her face as many times as it takes.<sup>196</sup>

The fight eventually escalates to the murder of Celine but as in the case of McDonagh’s *The Pillowman*, the audience tends to sympathise with the murderer because the victim’s death seems morally justifiable. The violence performed by the women is no less brutal than the violence performed by men in the play which shows the contemporary playwrights’ tendency to shatter social stereotypes and taboos. Furthermore, this scene aptly demonstrates the power of interjections in narrated violence. The way O’Rowe expressed the penetration of Celine’s eye with the single word ‘pop’ is more effective than if he described it with complicated sentences because it contains the moment of surprise, it speeds up the action and the imitation of the sound evokes the situation better.

The final scene of the play arouses contradictory feelings in the spectator. On the one hand, it brings the audience the satisfaction of C being punished for all his crimes: for butchering a girl while having sex with her, killing a hitchhiker in a car accident, slitting the throat of an innocent man who he encountered, and “mowing down”<sup>197</sup> pregnant Helen. On the other hand, the extremity of the way C is killed by the demon provokes the feelings of discomfort and disgust. The demon takes C on the crane where B died and there he rapes and disembowels him in front of a gathered crowd:

C: [...] something slips into my rectum, from thence to my colon, cajoling its way into my intestine, [...] until I moan and unleash a hot regurgitation of all I ate [...] making way for the entrance into my mouth of his tail upon which I’m now impaled. [...] he lifts me above his head and, as I scream, arms and legs flaying, he tosses me off the crane and, [...] the tail, still in

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<sup>196</sup> O’Rowe, *Terminus*, 36-37.

<sup>197</sup> O’Rowe, *Terminus*, 47.

my throat, grabs tight and my weight pulls my innards inside out till I'm suspended, swinging about on a length of my intestine.<sup>198</sup>

This scene is undoubtedly the violent climax of the play and it is a good example of how spoken violence can be more powerful than the performed one. The previous fights, the murders and even Helen's death could be all done on stage but they are too complicated to be acted out realistically which would weaken their impact. Being narrated, on the other hand, with the right words, the swear words and rhymes which keep up the pace of the speech, they are much more effective.

In one of his interviews, O'Rowe explains that the monologue enables him to include in the play "scape, pace, variety of location, fantastical elements which simply can't be created on stage except with language. And so," he adds, "if I want to have a demon made out of worms flying around, I don't have to show it. I can just tell it."<sup>199</sup> O'Rowe makes the audience create their own images which can be sometimes even more powerful than any action performed onstage. O'Rowe recalls that some audience members at the performance of *Terminus* "were covering their eyes. But from what? There was nothing to see."<sup>200</sup> Miriam Haughton in her essay "Performing Power" observes that "the place of the play is inside the heads of the characters" which due to the characters' narration became "a threatening an incredibly violent place."<sup>201</sup> O'Rowe thus relocates the violence from the stage into the spectators' heads. The monologue then forces the audience to become involved in the story more than the traditional dialogue plays. The playwright explains: "The drama in traditional theatre occurs between the characters on stage, the drama in the monologue play occurs between the performer and the audience, and so the audience needs to commit to being the second character, the listener. If they don't, it's not going to work."<sup>202</sup> Thus, the audience is compelled to become part of the story and in the case of such a violent story as *Terminus*, the reactions tend to be strong.

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<sup>198</sup> O'Rowe, *Terminus*, 49.

<sup>199</sup> O'Brien, "A Tallaght of the Mind," 150.

<sup>200</sup> O'Brien, "A Tallaght of the Mind," 151.

<sup>201</sup> Miriam Haughton, "Performing Power: Violence as Fantasy and Spectacle in Mark O'Rowe's *Made in China* and *Terminus*," *New Theatre Quarterly* 27, No. 2 (2011), 159.

<sup>202</sup> O'Brien, "A Tallaght of the Mind," 151.

## 7.4. Allusions to Globalized Ireland

Like his contemporaries McDonagh and Walsh, O’Rowe refuses the idea that his plays should express his opinion: “I’ve never consciously commented on anything in my stuff. I felt it simply isn’t my job.”<sup>203</sup> Yet, all his plays are set in contemporary Dublin even if it is “somewhere between a real city and a more surreal version of Dublin.”<sup>204</sup> I suggest that O’Rowe does reflect Irish society in his plays although he may do so unintentionally. Ireland he depicts corresponds to the picture of today’s urban Ireland as described in Cathy Leeney’s essay “Men in No-Man’s Land”: “Ghettos develop around cities and towns, where the rule of the law is replaced by male gang control. While many Irish people never had it so good, others are alienated, displaced and disempowered. [...] As Ireland becomes more and more materialistic, identity revolves increasingly around wealth, possession and consumer power.”<sup>205</sup> This description matches the setting of O’Rowe’s plays.

His characters are then people influenced by such environment: the characters in *Made in China* represent those gang members who control the city’s underworld, A in *Terminus* has to face the gang of Helen’s lover, the most exciting experience of B’s alienated life is paradoxically her death, and C depicts an outsider whose lack of success with women impelled him to the very edge of society. Sara Keating and Emma Creedon in their introduction to *Sullied Magnificence: The Theatre of Mark O’Rowe* argue that O’Rowe’s “characters are outsiders, alienated from family, friends and often society at large.”<sup>206</sup> Such characters often become attached to any group that accepts them, usually a gang, as in *Made in China* or O’Rowe’s early plays. Keating and Creedon describe these characters as “heroes in their own world, with their own ethical codes and journeys of revenge and honour.”<sup>207</sup> The hit-man in *The Aspidistra Code*

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<sup>203</sup> O’Brien, “A Tallaght of the Mind,” 147.

<sup>204</sup> O’Brien, “A Tallaght of the Mind,” 146.

<sup>205</sup> Cathy Leeney, “Men in No-Man’s Land: Performing Urban Liminal Spaces in Two Plays by Mark O’Rowe,” *The Irish Review* No.35 (2007), 108-109, accessed April 21, 2017, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/29736324>.

<sup>206</sup> Sara Keating and Emma Creedon, introduction to *The Sullied Magnificence: The Theatre of Mark O’Rowe*, ed. Sara Keating and Emma Creedon (Dublin: Carysford Press, 2015), 2.

<sup>207</sup> Keating and Creedon, *The Sullied Magnificence*, 2.

asks: “If I don’t stick to my rules, then what am I?”<sup>208</sup> which echoes the questions in Walsh’s plays: “For what am I if I’m not words?”<sup>209</sup> and “For what are we if we’re not our stories?”<sup>210</sup> Unlike Walsh’s characters, O’Rowe’s characters do not define themselves with their words and stories but with the rules they have established for themselves within a group that provides them sense of belonging which they are lacking in society.

All in all, O’Rowe’s plays may not deliberately comment on contemporary urban Ireland but it is reflected in them nevertheless. Haughton argues that the violence in O’Rowe’s plays “alludes to a contemporary Irish urban culture characterized by crisis and fragmentation,” and she adds that “while it becomes apparent that the focus and content of these plays concern more the psychological interior of the characters than their geographical surroundings, the politics of place and personhood in his drama are intertwined.”<sup>211</sup> Thus, the characters may not be literal representatives of today’s Irish society but the setting of the plays shapes their identity and it suggests that they are part of it.

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<sup>208</sup> Mark O’Rowe, *The Aspidistra Code*, in *Mark O’Rowe Plays: One* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2011), 40.

<sup>209</sup> Walsh, *Bedbound*, 125.

<sup>210</sup> Walsh, *The Walworth Farce*, 83.

<sup>211</sup> Haughton, “Performing Power,” 154.

## 8. Conclusion

The focus of this master's thesis has been the concept of violence in plays by three contemporary Irish playwrights: Martin McDonagh, Enda Walsh and Mark O'Rowe. Each of the writers has been introduced together with the characteristics of their work. The thesis then analysed several plays by the three playwrights focusing on the way violence is used in them, what role it plays, how it is expressed and what the intended impact is.

The first chapter of the thesis provided the historical and cultural background for the main body of the work. Ireland has undergone radical political and social changes, especially in the 1990s, that have shaped Irish identity which has always been an important topic in Irish literature. The second chapter introduced the development of Irish theatre since the establishment of The Abbey theatre and the main themes and tendencies in contemporary Irish drama. It was stated that Irish theatre has developed from being under the strong influence of British theatre to the Irish literary revival which asserted Ireland's artistic independence at the beginning of the twentieth century, to the emergence of new experimental approaches influenced by globalization at the end of the twentieth century. The following chapter summarized the history of violence in drama from classical theatre to the present day and violence on the Irish stage.

The first part of the main body of the thesis focused on Martin McDonagh whose plays are well-known for grotesque violence. First his biography and the list of work were introduced together with a short chapter on his early Irish plays which account for a substantial part of his work. A detailed analysis of his play *The Pillowman* followed. It was shown that *The Pillowman* includes three ways of depicting violence: spoken violence, performed violence and violence combining these two. McDonagh uses brutality as a means of shattering the spectators' conventions by confronting his audiences with challenging topics but at the same time, not moralizing or drawing conclusions. His main intention is to produce pleasure from the artistic experience of storytelling. The second part of the main body introduced Enda Walsh and discussed his two plays *Disco Pigs* and *The Walworth Farce*. Each of the plays

represents a different approach to the depiction of violence. *Disco Pigs* includes strictly spoken violence while *The Walworth Farce* combines both spoken and performed violence in a farcical manner. It was demonstrated that the violence in Walsh's plays results from the characters' feeling of entrapment, frustration, and their inability to face reality which they have replaced with their invented stories. The last part of the main body of the thesis dealt with Mark O'Rowe and his plays *Made in China* and *Terminus*. The two plays differ formally with the former one incorporating the dialogue and the latter one a monologue, but they both depict violence inflicted by alienated outsiders in contemporary urban Irish culture characterized by crisis and fragmentation.

All McDonagh, Walsh and O'Rowe reject the idea of their plays being a commentary on today's Irish society. This is in contradiction to the stance of the playwrights of the preceding generations who expressed their opinions on Irish society in their times or evaluated the past. The thesis argued that McDonagh, Walsh and O'Rowe may not moralize or draw conclusions but they do reflect contemporary Ireland nevertheless. Their plays are very often set in Ireland (whether in the rural west or urban areas of Cork and Dublin) in the 1990s or later. Their characters are strictly Irish, with the exception of the characters in *The Pillowman*, and also the themes correspond with the concerns of today's Ireland such as the search for national and individual identity, exile, feelings of 'stuckness' in the past, masculinity in crisis and the fragmentation of family and home. McDonagh, Walsh and O'Rowe do mirror the post-Celtic Tiger society in their works although they may not intend to comment on it deliberately. On the contrary, the fact that the playwrights did not try to make a political statement could speak for the greater authenticity of their plays.

As for the frequent use of violence in the plays, the thesis demonstrated that there are several reasons for it. First, violence has always been rooted in Irish drama, usually as a political protest. The second reason is the influence of British in-yer-face theatre which has gained predominance in contemporary drama generally in recent years. Furthermore, Ireland experienced sudden freedom of expression together with loosened morals in the 1990s after centuries of relative conservatism controlled by the Catholic Church. The radical social, political and economic changes at the turn of the century triggered the experimental tendencies in the Irish artistic world, and theatre, freed from any censorship, did not hesitate to express the darkest and most taboo

topics. The last reason are the individual motives of the analysed playwrights which span from admiration for violent films to a fascination with psychologically unstable characters on the edge of mental breakdown.

The thesis also proved the theory false that “the saturation of violent images from the media has sullied our ability to listen without seeing.”<sup>212</sup> It has demonstrated that spoken violence, which is used quite often in contemporary Irish drama, can achieve the intended effect on the audience and there are plays which are based strictly on the speech with no action such as O’Rowe’s *Terminus* or Walsh’s *Disco Pigs*.

Cruelty in the plays of McDonagh, Walsh and O’Rowe makes up an essential part of the story. Sometimes it is ridiculed, sometimes it is serious but it always has a strong impact on the audience. It is difficult to imagine the next level of violence depiction in Irish drama as it seems that it has reached its limits. The brutality is most likely, however, going to remain the central focus in Irish drama, as well as international drama generally, because it is a part of our world. We currently have access to all the news, hear about wars, murders and rapes on a daily basis and have grown used to violence to such an extent that playwrights have to invent new ways of presenting it so that it would still have an impact. On the other hand, experiencing the horrors in the safe environment of the theatre has a cathartic impact on the audience so it can be argued that the violence depicted in drama helps us deal with the violence in the real world.

This master’s thesis has explored only a fragment of contemporary Irish dramatic work and it would be interesting to compare the results of this thesis with works by other contemporary Irish playwrights such as Marina Carr and Conor McPherson but also with less renowned writers. Moreover, I had an opportunity to see only a few plays by the discussed playwrights performed so my research has been mostly based on the texts themselves and the reviews. Experiencing the performances with the reactions from the audiences would provide better insight into the works but this is problematic as most of the plays are not being staged at this time and there are only a few professional records of the performances available. Nevertheless, the thesis provided a detailed analysis of the concept of violence in the plays by three renowned representatives of the contemporary generation of Irish playwrights. It is a topic which

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<sup>212</sup> Kyna Hamill, “Branding Irish Violence,” 51.

has not been examined in much detail by academic scholars as yet and this thesis could serve as a source for further research not only within contemporary Irish drama but also within the generations of Irish playwrights to come.



## 9. Resumé

Tato diplomová práce se zabývá pojetím násilí v současném irském divadle, konkrétně se zaměřuje na tvorbu tří dramatiků: Martina McDonagha, Enda Walshe a Marka O'Rowea. Hlavní část práce rozebírá několik vybraných her těchto autorů, v nichž zkoumá užití násilí jak z pohledu formálního, tak obsahového. Cílem práce pak je zjistit, jaký účel násilí plní v dílech těchto autorů, a jak hry spadají do kontextu současného irského dramatu jako takového.

První kapitola čtenáře seznamuje s historicko-kulturním pozadím současné irské literatury. Irská historie byla odjakživa nedílnou součástí irské literatury a často se stávala tématem tvorby autorů. Irsko se dlouhodobě potýkalo s bojem za nezávislost, často čelilo hladomoru, což bylo doprovázeno úbytkem obyvatel a zvýšenou emigrací a až donedávna bylo pod silným vlivem katolické církve. Všechny tyto prvky byly reflektovány v irské literatuře. V devadesátých letech minulého století Irsko zaznamenalo vlnu ekonomického růstu, globalizace a multikulturalizmu a rázem se stalo jednou z nejvíce prosperujících evropských zemí. Tato poměrně rychlá změna vedla k uvolnění morálky a modernizaci Irska, ale také destabilizovala irskou identitu, jak na národní, tak na individuální úrovni, a přispěla k dalším negativním jevům, například rozšířenému užívání drog, zvýšené kriminalitě, korupci či prohloubení rozdílu mezi chudými a bohatými. Na druhou stranu tato doba umožnila rozmach různých experimentálních směrů v literatuře, což se projevilo i v divadle.

Druhá kapitola mapuje vývoj irského divadla od založení Abbey Theatre, irského národního divadla, v roce 1904 až po současnost. Na počátku dvacátého století bylo hlavním cílem irského divadla pozdvihnout irské hodnoty v protikladu s těmi britskými a vybudovat divadlo, které by bylo čistě národní. Tato tendence probíhala v rámci Irského národního literárního obrození, ze kterého vyšlo mnoho slavných autorů jako například William Butler Yeats, Lady Gregory, John Millington Synge nebo Sean O'Casey. V průběhu dvacátého století se objevovalo mnoho dalších úspěšných irských autorů. Někteří z nich, jako například George Bernard Shaw a Samuel Beckett, upustili od sklonu k irsky zaměřené tvorbě a soustředili se spíše na tvorbu světovou, jiní pokračovali v odkazu zakladatelů irského národního divadla,

například Brendan Behan nebo John B. Keane. Kapitola dále představuje různé literární tendence současných irských dramatiků z hlediska formálního, tematického i stylistického a uvádí nejznámější zástupce těchto směrů.

Další část práce nastiňuje historii násilí v divadle od dob Antiky až po současnost, kdy se hlavním směrem v tomto ohledu stalo takzvané in-yer-face divadlo, které významně ovlivnilo tvorbu mladých irských autorů. Prostor je také věnován samostatné podkapitole o násilí v irském divadle. Práce stručně uvádí dva různé přístupy k divadelnímu násilí, a to násilí politické, které se vyskytuje například v dílech Seana O'Caseyho nebo Brendana Behana, a násilí venkovské, které lze najít v hrách Johna M. Synge nebo Johna B. Keanea. Kapitola dále vysvětluje, jak společenské, politické a ekonomické změny na přelomu minulého století přispěly k experimentálnímu přístupu v literární tvorbě a také k častějšímu užití násilí v irském divadle všeobecně.

Hlavní část diplomové práce je rozdělena do tří kapitol, z nichž každá se věnuje jednomu ze tří rozebíraných autorů. V každé kapitole je nejprve představen daný autor společně s krátkou charakteristikou jeho tvorby a bibliografií. Následuje analýza jednotlivých her se zaměřením na pojetí násilí v nich. První z kapitol je zaměřena na Martina McDonagha, který se proslavil svým groteskním zobrazením zveličeného násilí především ve svých irských hrách. Tyto hry ovšem byly detailně rozebrány v mnoha předchozích akademických esejích, tudíž je jim věnováno jen krátké shrnutí. Pozornost je věnována hlavně McDonaghově hře *The Pillowman*, kterážto je vůbec nejnásilnější McDonaghovým dílem. Kapitola podrobně zkoumá tři různá vyobrazení násilí v díle: násilí mluvené, násilí hrané a násilí, které kombinuje prvky obou. Závěr kapitoly přednáší tvrzení, že ačkoli se může zdát, že hlavním cílem McDonaghových her je satira irského venkova, jeho hry spíše nastavují zrcadlo samotným divákům. McDonagh nutí publikum čelit kontroverzním tématům spojeným s násilím, ale závěr nechává na každém z nás.

Druhá kapitola hlavní části práce zkoumá dílo Endy Walshe, konkrétně jeho dvě hry *Disco Pigs* a *The Walworth Farce*. Podobně jako u McDonagha, i zde je násilí rozděleno podle způsobu jeho vyjádření: první z her obsahuje striktně mluvené násilí, zatímco druhá z her obsahuje i násilí hrané. Klíčovým prvkem všech Walshových her je vyprávění příběhů a mluvené slovo jako takové. Walsh se úmyslně zaměřuje na

postavy na okraji společnosti a na pokraji nervového zhroucení. Jeho hry zobrazují osoby, které jsou omezeny jak fyzicky, tak psychicky, osoby, jež nahradily realitu smyšlenými příběhy, a které hledají svou ztracenou identitu. Pocity frustrace z neschopnosti pohnout se z místa potom vedou k násilnému chování těchto postav.

Třetí a poslední kapitola této části práce se věnuje hrám Marka O'Rowea. Analýza rozebírá dvě z jeho her, *Made in China* a *Terminus*. Pozornost je opět věnována formě her. *Made in China* je psána jako dialog tří postav, zatímco *Terminus* obsahuje tři nezávislé monology postav, které spolu nekomunikují. Rozbor těchto her ukázal, že násilí v první z her je vyvoláno krizí mužnosti v prostředí gangsterského podsvětí Dublinu, zatímco druhá z her zobrazuje násilí podnícené rozpolcenými osobnostmi, které nezapadají do okolní společnosti. Hra *Terminus* také demonstrovala, že mluvené násilí může být mnohdy působivější než násilí hrané, jelikož dovoluje autorovi začlenit do příběhu i prvky, které by nebylo možné zahrát na jevišti fyzicky. Monolog navíc nutí diváka stát se součástí představení, které se odehrává mezi herci-vypravěči a diváky-posluchači, na rozdíl od dialogu, kde hra probíhá mezi herci samotnými.

Závěr práce stručně shrnuje obsah jednotlivých kapitol a nejdůležitější body analýzy her. Je zde obsaženo také tvrzení, že ačkoli všichni tři zmiňovaní autoři odmítají myšlenku, že by jejich dílo mělo komentovat současnou irskou společnost, určitou reflexi současného Irska z nich lze vyčíst. Díla těchto tří autorů se soustředí na irské postavy v současné irské společnosti i když nejsou politickým výrokem ani nemoralizují. Bylo ovšem nadneseno, že přestože se současní irští spisovatelé distancují od pozice komentátorů současného irského dění (na rozdíl od svých předchůdců, kteří tuto roli zastávali úmyslně), jejich díla zrcadlí soudobé problémy irské společnosti.

Tématu současného irského divadla se zatím nedostalo tolik pozornosti, kolik by si zasloužilo. Martin McDonagh se těší velkému zájmu akademiků, ale v případě Endy Walshové a Marka O'Rowa, výzkum poněkud zaostává. Na druhou stranu, toto téma je poměrně nové, valná část her těchto autorů byla publikována relativně nedávno a lze očekávat, že se tato díla teprve dočkají zasloužené pozornosti.

Zkoumání této práce bylo poněkud omezeno skutečností, že autorka neměla možnost shlédnout všechny divadelní hry v jejich hrané podobě. Výzkum byl tudíž

omezen na knižní formu her, na odborné publikace a dostupné recenze těchto představení. Osobní zkušenost s představeními by pomohla rozšířit chápání jednotlivých her, a především umožnila lépe posoudit reakce diváků. Nicméně, tato diplomová práce i přesto poskytuje detailní náhled na danou problematiku a může sloužit jako výchozí zdroj pro další výzkum. Bylo by zajímavé porovnat výsledky této práce s díly dalších současných irských dramatiků, například Mariny Carr nebo Conora McPhersona, ale také s díly méně známých a mladších autorů, a zjistit, jakým směrem se irské divadlo bude ubírat dál.

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## **Anotace**

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**Název bakalářské práce:** Násilí v současném irském divadle: Martin McDonagh, Enda Walsh and Mark O'Rowe

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**Klíčová slova:** Martin McDonagh, Enda Walsh, Mark O'Rowe, současné irské divadlo, násilí, *The Pillowman*, *Disco Pigs*, *The Walworth Farce*, *Made in China*, *Terminus*

Tato diplomová práce se zaměřuje na pojetí násilí v dílech tří současných irských dramatiků: Martina McDonagha, Endy Walshe a Marka O'Rowea. Každý z autorů je nejprve představen společně se stručnou charakteristikou jeho díla. Práce potom rozebírá několik vybraných her těchto tří autorů se zaměřením na způsob, jakým je násilí v nich použito, jaká je jeho role, jakými prostředky je vyjádřeno a jaký je jeho dopad na diváky. V závěru práce jsou nadneseny důvody, které autory vedly k použití konceptu násilí v jejich díle v širším kontextu současného irského divadla a současné irské společnosti jako takové.

## **Annotation**

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**Title of the Bachelor Thesis:** Violence in Contemporary Irish Drama: Martin McDonagh, Enda Walsh and Mark O'Rowe

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The master's thesis focuses on the concept of violence in the plays by three contemporary Irish playwrights: Martin McDonagh, Enda Walsh and Mark O'Rowe. Firstly, each of the writers is introduced together with the brief characteristics of his work. The thesis then analyses several plays by the three playwrights focusing on the way violence is used in them, what role it plays, how it is expressed and what the intended impact is. At the end of the thesis, the reasons for the playwrights' use of violence in their plays are suggested in the context of contemporary Irish drama as well as of contemporary Ireland as such.