JOHN SYNGE IN CONTEXT; OR, RE-POSITIONING SYNGE: THE POINT OF BALANCE

Ann Saddlemyer

Let me begin with a story from my own country, the story of the inukshuk or inuksuit. Piles of stones, some seven to twelve feet high and so common across the Arctic that they have become a distinctive feature of the region, the inuksuit are traditional landmarks created in a land much like the barren surface of the moon, where there are no trees and few distinguishing features to use for reference when travelling. Other parts of the world also have their powerful structures; what appears to be unique about the inuksuit of the Arctic north is their meaning: for inukshuk were and still are used by the Inuit as indicators showing where others have been and where it is safe to go. The word means, as described by an ancient Inuit elder, "that which acts in the capacity of a human," because they are guides (Hallendy 22). As such, they were a tool for survival and remain a tangible symbol of communication. They were also the product of co-operation, for the efforts of an entire group were required to build the more massive stone sculptures. Like fingerprints upon the land, no two inuksuit are the same. Some are man-shaped, but others range from cairns made from boulders or flat stones to single rocks standing on end or carefully displaced. They are a form of language between the land and the people, serving as a compass for a safe journey. Some have been there for as long as community memory recalls; others are recent offerings of thanksgiving or acknowledgement of who has come before.

All are reference points. Some were built so they could be seen from far away, standing tall like welcoming figures. Some are grouped in a straight line: by looking through a hole in the base to the next inukshuk, the best route might be seen for the next part of the journey, or as an astronomical sight-line, lining up the viewer to the North Star or the mid-winter moon. Thus there might be large numbers of intercepting lines of inuksuit, similar to 'ley lines' of energy and power found in other parts of the world. Sometimes they are warnings, indicating where the frozen sea ends and the frozen land begins. Some – and these may be frightening both to humans and animals – are mixed media 'sound-makers' that include fractured stone and bone. Some may even have been made to pass the time, while waiting, and these are often the most beautiful. No matter their specific purpose, for travellers in Canada's North, one of the world's harshest environments, an inukshuk is a welcome sight. It says, "I've been here before; you're on the right path."

When I set out to reconsider the meaning of Synge to the Abbey Theatre, especially in the chiselled quality of Yeats's later pronouncements about him, the image and role of the inukshuk kept coming to mind. Indeed, this 'haunting man' even in life

seemed to be a foreigner in his own country, his place "outside the circle, gravely watching, gravely summing up [...] the fools and wise ones inside" (Masefield 181-82). Neither of his fellow directors was ever certain of what he thought of them or their work; this doubt and Synge's self-containment tantalised Yeats throughout his life. Lady Gregory appreciated his craftsmanship but distrusted his behaviour – although a gentleman, he tolerated those who were not. Extreme nationalists thought him "an evil Spirit" (*An Claidheamh Soluis*) with "a morbid unhealthy mind" (Holloway 81); his own actors frequently misunderstood his instructions and motives; even his mother confessed astonishment and bewilderment at her youngest son. While he was alive Yeats had readily folded Synge's work into his own ideals and political agenda. There were fierce objections to *The Shadow of the Glen*, its first production confirming the worst fears about the self-styled Irish National Theatre and its new playwright. Arthur Griffith informed readers of *The United Irishman* that the play was no more Irish than the *Decamerone*, "a staging of a corrupt version of that old world libel on womankind – the 'Widow of Ephesus'," further drawing up the battle-lines by adding, "It is not by staging a Lie we can serve Ireland or exalt Art" (Griffith 1). No matter that Synge had sent him the original story as he had heard it on Aran; Griffith was fully aware that the ending (where the disillusioned housewife goes off with a sweet-talking Tramp) was an invention of the playwright. Then Griffith and his friend Maud Gonne, accompanied by one of the outraged players, ostentatiously walked out of the first performance.

Yeats could not have been more delighted at the fuss over his new discovery, now denounced as "an evil compound of Ibsen and Boucicault" (*Leader*) – doubtless a yoking startling to Synge, who admired Boucicault's humour as much as he disparaged Ibsen's "joyless and pallid words" (Synge, *Prose* 398; *Plays* II 53). "One cannot fight a battle in whispers," Yeats informed the editor of *The United Irishman*, who obligingly replied by once more angrily declaiming, "we all of us know – that Irishwomen are the most virtuous women in the world" (*Letters* III 446). Later, eagerly pouncing on the example of the English reaction to Ibsen's *Ghosts* a decade earlier, Yeats wrote to an American friend,

> We will have a hard fight in Ireland before we get the right for every man to see the world in his own way admitted. Synge is invaluable to us because he has that kind of intense narrow personality which necessarily raises the whole issue [...] It will be a fight like that over the first realistic plays of Ibsen. (*Letters* 447-48)

Although London audiences enthusiastically endorsed Yeats's valuation of Synge, those in Ireland remained hostile, and distrust of Synge continued, and indeed never disappeared in his lifetime and beyond. Synge insisted that his plays demanded an intellectual effort to be understood, and cavalierly dismissed objections to *The Shadow of the Glen* by stressing his own originality: "On the French stage the sex-element of life is given without the other balancing elements; on the Irish stage the people you agree with want the other elements without sex. I restored the sex-element to its natural place, and the people were so surprised they saw the sex only"

(Synge, *Letters* I 81, 74). However, the theatre barely covered its costs on his next play, *The Well of the Saints* (producer Willie Fay fretted that all the characters were bad-tempered), and we all know of the riots over *The Playboy of the Western World*; only the dramatist's early death and sympathy for his bereaved fiancée Molly Allgood stilled complaints over the posthumously produced *Deirdre of the Sorrows*, which Yeats feared "would seem mere disjointed monotony" (*The Death of Synge* 31). Yet he continued to assert that Synge was the movement's true signifier, believing that it was "the very elements" which made him "a man of genius" that repelled the enemy. "They shrink from Synge's harsh, independent, heroical, clean, wind-swept view of things" (Yeats, *Letters* 495).

As early as 1904, Yeats and Lady Gregory's memorandum in support of the Abbey's theatre patent had claimed that "we have done a great deal for the intellect of this country in discovering and training into articulateness J.M. Synge, whom I believe to be a great writer, the beginning it may be of a European figure" (Yeats, *Letters* III 625-26). This on the strength of but two short plays! However, his was the first work to be translated and produced in Europe, and within three months of his death in 1909, four of his plays were in repertory in London. Two years later Yeats and Gregory's first public request for funding highlighted their desire to keep Synge's plays in constant performance. By 1915 Yeats would confidently declare to Joseph Holloway, that officious recorder of theatre gossip, that he had worked to make the Abbey a Synge theatre, and a Synge theatre it would remain (Holloway 172).

Even if we allow for Yeats's penchant for biographical revisionism, there is no doubt that he was shattered by Synge's early death; the description of his wandering disconsolately among the tombstones after his friend's funeral rings true. He had lost, if not a close confidant (which he still had in Lady Gregory), certainly a comrade-in-arms; the term is suggestive of both collusion and distancing, indicating the friendly alienation that marked their relationship. For unlike George Russell (AE), who always feared the magnetism of Yeats's personality and who could all too easily be soothed by his charm, Synge stood sufficiently apart. Yeats defended Synge's disinterested passivity to Gregory, disagreeing with her interpretation of their co-director as "selfish" and "egotistical"; soon, however, there would be nothing left but Synge's *work*, and with that Yeats could feel more comfortable. He never ceased to believe that Synge's path had been the right one for the new Irish drama, and when the theatre took a different direction, he too said farewell. It is not only the exigencies of rhythm but also the realisation of Synge's importance that put his long-dead comrade first in the famous sonorous lines from "The Municipal Gallery Revisited":

> John Synge, I and Augusta Gregory, thought
> All that we did, all that we said or sang
> Must come from contact with the soil, from that
> Contact everything Antaeus-like grew strong. (Yeats, *Poems* 369)

Which leads us back to the inukshuk. In these silent persistent northern guardians, each stone is a separate entity, each supports, and is supported by the one above and the one below it, held in place only by the force of gravity. The strength lies in its unity, secured through balance. No rock is more important than another, and all were found in the immediate area, reflecting the characteristics of the surrounding land forms; all were chosen for how well they fit together. Their meaning however lies in the whole; remove one and the entire figure would weaken and collapse.

This could not better describe the method Synge employed in writing his plays (and Yeats himself in his persistent stitching and re-stitching of his work). When pressed by his colleagues to say when *The Playboy of the Western World* would be ready for rehearsal, Synge fretted,

> My play, though in its last agony, is not finished and I cannot promise it for any definite day. It is more than likely that when I read it to you and Fay ... there will be little things to alter that have escaped me. And with my stuff it takes time to get even half a page of new dialogue fully into key with what goes before it.

Then somewhat ominously he added, "The play, I think, will be one of the longest we have done, and in places extremely difficult" (*Letters* I 211).

As I have described elsewhere, it is clear from his notebooks and worksheets that Synge's original concepts and the incessant revising and meticulous polishing of each passage took place in the study, not during rehearsal (Saddlemyer, "Introduction" x). He rewrote each scene over and over again, polishing the phrasing, balancing the dialogue, clarifying the action, until he had achieved the strong stage play he required. His worksheets (more than a thousand pages over two years for *The Playboy* alone) carefully plot the 'currents' and 'crescendos' for each individual scene, expanding here, cutting back there, always with an eye to character and mood. Some entire scenes are jettisoned in order to maintain the careful balancing of opposing effects, including a favourite of mine: the raunchy action between the Widow Quin and Old Mahon. The final complexity of plot and character can be seen in the various titles he contemplated, beginning with "The Murderer (a Farce)," "Murder Will Out," "The Fool of the Family," until he achieved the ironic implications of his final title. Although he did most of his work at the typewriter, lettering the various drafts as he went along, he frequently jotted down phrases and related ideas, sometimes even entire scenes, in one of the small notebooks he always carried with him; these fragments would then be reworked into the fabric of the play. As he had warned, when he finally read the finished work to his colleagues, no revision beyond minor verbal alterations was possible; even the suggested alteration of a single passage would have upset the delicate balance of the whole. Even then he was rarely satisfied: Act III of *The Playboy* went as far as draft 'L' and he still thought it needed "pulling together."

This careful control extended to performance: whenever possible he directed his own plays. He insisted also on rehearsing whenever a new actor took over a role. (His courtship of Molly Allgood began when she took over the role of Nora Burke in *The*

Shadow of the Glen, giving rise to his signature in his letters to her, "Your old Tramp"). Despite later disagreements, actor and stage manager Willie Fay recalls with admiration Synge's directorial sense, claiming that "His power of visualisation was perfect [...] above all he knew what he wanted, and when he got it said so" (Fay & Carswell 138-39). Similarly, *Riders to the Sea* was produced with as much authenticity as possible, Synge going so far as to order thick flannel and pampooties, the traditional Aran footgear, from the west. What became known as "the Abbey method" (or "P.Q.": "Peasant Quality") owed much to the fidelity and simplicity of design developed for the most part in Synge's two shorter plays and leading to the familiar style of acting insisted upon by the company for many years to come, often to the despair of later directors and designers.

Even though he wrote with specific performers in mind, something in Synge distrusted actors. Perhaps even more than Yeats he tended to treat them as puppets, and as he grew more confident in his staging and choreography his stage directions increased, matching action to word, requiring facial response and tone of voice to immediately reflect the characters' thoughts and reactions. Thus, Pegeen Mike is told when to lick a stamp and empty the slop pail, on which phrase to raise the broom, when to alter the inflection in her voice; Christy Mahon counts all the cups and glasses in the shebeen and examines himself in the mirror which will later serve as tray for the choric overlaying of gifts from the village girls; all the characters are instructed to respond immediately, without any time for reflection. No Stanislavski or method acting here. The cumulative effect of Christy's – and later his father's – delighted "Is it me?" owes much to Synge's careful placing of movement as well as word. Given this relationship between action, reaction, and speech, it is no wonder that Christy Mahon is "transformed by overhearing himself" (Bloom 1). In later productions, when a series of handsome actors replaced diminutive Willie Fay – already familiar to audiences as the sly manipulative Tramp in the Yeats-Gregory early farce *The Pot of Broth* – as the cringing dirty Christy Mahon, much of this bold (almost flaunting) shock quality disappeared from the play as Synge had visualised it.

It is hardly surprising that, under judicial cross-examination over that first production, Yeats took refuge in asserting that his colleague's play was "an example of the exaggeration of art" (Hogan & Kilroy 133). For Synge's play was as artificial as *The Well of the Saints*, which had preceded it. Yet *The Freeman's Journal*, doubtless quoting the theatre's own press release, had announced before opening night,

> No one is better qualified than Mr Synge to portray truthfully the Irish peasant living away in Western Ireland. He has lived with them for months at a stretch, in the Arran Islands and Mayo. He has noted their speech their humours, their vices, and virtues. He is one of the best Irish speakers in the country, and is thus brought into the closest contact with people. 'The Playboy' is founded on an incident that actually occurred. (26 Jan 1907)

Synge himself then compounded confusion by insisting in his programme notes that

> [n]early always when some friendly or angry critic tells me that such or such a phrase could not have been spoken by a peasant, he singles out some expression that I have heard, word for word, from some old woman or child, and the same is true also, to some extent, of the actions and incidents I work with. The central incident of the Playboy was suggested by an actual occurrence in the west. (Programme Notes)

In fact the twin stories or "actual events" were fairly recent and well known throughout Ireland (Robinson xxxiv-v). It was only when cornered by a persistent reporter after the first audience's angry outburst that Synge himself disputed the claim to realism, "It is a comedy, an extravaganza, made to amuse" (*Evening Mail*).

Much depends upon that word 'extravaganza' – traditionally defined by Webster as "a literary fantasy that is freely imaginative in subject, structure, and development and that often includes elements of burlesque or parody" (Webster I 807). If *The Playboy* was a burlesque in the tradition of the Queen's Theatre (Dublin's home of melodrama), then what of the Irish Literary Theatre's promise to rescue Irish drama from the stage Irishman, to mirror instead "the deeper thoughts and emotions of Ireland" (Yeats, *Letters* II 124)? If a fantasy, why the emphasis on detail and naturalistic stage decor and setting? If a parody, what and who were being travestied? By the end of the play the audiences (both onstage and in the auditorium) would claim they themselves were the target and by extension Ireland; the public forum convened by Yeats elicited comments ranging from enraged dismissal to consideration of the local marriage market. Under pressure Synge himself admitted that although his work was "not a play with 'a purpose' in the modern sense of the word, [… and] although parts of it are, or are meant to be extravagant comedy, still a great deal that is in it, and a great deal more that is behind it, is perfectly serious, when looked at in a certain light." He ended by citing Shylock and Alceste as examples and inviting even further controversy with the suggestion that "[t]here are, it may be hinted, several sides to 'The Playboy'" (*Letters* I 286).

In claiming the term 'extravaganza' and, in the heat of the moment insisting that "I never bother whether my plots are typical Irish or not; [...] my methods are typical" (*Evening Mail*), Synge was also drawing on his own experience as a trained musician with European experience and a keen sense of methodology, for the musical extravaganza depends on familiarity with the forms it caricatures – burlesque, melodrama, opera bouffe – which Synge would have known in Paris. Jack Yeats recalls accompanying him to a melodrama at Dublin's Queen's Theatre where "he delighted to see how members of the company could by the vehemence of their movements and the resources of their voices hold your attention where everything was commonplace" (Jack Yeats 41-42). A revealing self-direction in a late draft of *The Playboy* aims for the "prodigiously fantastic" (Synge, *Collected Works* IV 304).

No wonder the first players were confused; misinterpreting Synge's careful directions as instructions to emphasise the reality of what they played out, and with Lady Gregory (Yeats was out of town) pleading to have the language softened. Gentle George Russell (AE) was shocked by the first appearance of Old Mahon "with his head ban-

daged and he looked so realistic and so like a poor battered old man that the audience got a chill and felt that they were really making a jest of parricide and father-beating." Even George Moore, no stranger to the creation of shocking effects himself (his collaboration with Yeats over *Diarmuid and Grania* had raised a storm of protest), condemned the brutality of Pegeen Mike's callous burning of Christy's leg as intolerable and unacceptable. No wonder that an overworked Willie Fay fluffed his lines on that first performance, providing – as is well known – even more realism with the alteration of "a drift of Mayo girls" (instead of "chosen females") parading in their shifts. Nor is it surprising that in Philadelphia four years later, when the actors were hauled into court, the objections were to what must have taken place *between* the acts and "not while the curtain was up." Indeed, the place of reality (including both of Christy's 'murders') *is* offstage while we watch the growth of the playboy onstage miming his deeds first with a loy and then with a chicken bone. Even as practised an actor as Cyril Cusack (noted also for his playing of Boucicault), who played Christy over a span of twenty years, spoke of the exigencies of an acting style compounding "two apparently conflicting elements," "the purely theatrical with a form of naturalism perilously near to being simply representation" (Hirsch 115-16).

The playwright remained unrepentant throughout all the confusion of attacks, insisting that his play was a serious-sided comedy. Nor did the dramatist ever deny the truth of his play, claiming that "the story – in its ESSENCE – is probable, given the psychic state of the locality" (Synge, *Letters* I 333). That element of place was always important to Synge. Just a few years earlier he had walked the Congested Districts with Jack Yeats, reporting to *Manchester Guardian* readers in searing detail the degrading misery and poverty he saw in the west. When an actor objected to a speech in *The Well of the Saints*, he vehemently replied, "what I write of Irish country life I know to be true and I most emphatically will not change a syllable of it because A. B. or C. may think they know better than I do [...] I am *quite ready* to avoid hurting people's feelings needlessly, but I will *not* falsify what I believe to be true for anybody" (*Letters* I 91). Later, defending his style, he famously insisted that "the romantic note and a Rabelaisian note [in *The Playboy*] are working to a climax through a great part of the play, and [...] the Rabelaisian note, the 'gross' note, if you will, must have its climax no matter who may be shocked" (*Letters* II 47). He was still harping back to this duality a year later when preparing the even more famous preface to his *Poems and Translations:* "it is the timber of poetry that wears most surely, and there is no timber that has not strong roots among the clay and worms. [...] It may almost be said that before verse can be human again it must learn to be brutal" (*Poems* xxxvi).

The first objections to the *Playboy* had been to that Rabelaisian note, but the romantic note – so evident in his previous plays and later to overwhelm the mood of his unfinished *Deirdre of the Sorrows* – did not achieve the climax in production that he desired. In part, as I have indicated, this was his own fault for concentrating both in public pronouncements and direction on the details of place and character, by emphasising that "shock of new material," a phrase Yeats was fond of quoting, and leaving the

"poetry of exaltation" to fend for itself. But the published text reveals that while very much aware of place and character on stage, Synge was also celebrating the use of language and narrative in the natural world. Since boyhood he had travelled the roads of County Wicklow, relishing the idiosyncratic speech of the tramps and people of the glens and listening sympathetically to their stories; the language he invented for his plays (four of them set in one Wicklow valley) accurately echoes the rhythm and speech order of country speakers. Out of appreciation of their heightened sensitivity to the changing moods of nature and the harsh conditions they endured, Synge developed his own aesthetic, a blending of romantic pantheism and ironic realism. The mingling of what he described in his diary as "humanity and this mysterious external world" (*Prose* 351) accounts for much of the individuality of his writing. It accounts also for his insistence that all the notes must be played between tragedy and humour, for him the two poles of art and the mark of their sanity; another notebook comment reads simply, "Contrast gives wonder of life" (Saddlemyer, "A Share" 211). However, both must be delicately balanced; while a young student of musical composition he had won prizes in harmony *and* counterpoint.

In the first two acts of *The Playboy* Christy and Pegeen strike the romantic note: the young stranger's songs to nature are reminiscent of the Tramp's in *The Shadow of the Glen*, while Pegeen's rough humour and wistful ambitions resemble Nora Burke's. By the third act the desperate actions of both have been elevated to extremes far beyond the seductive pre-lapsarian innocence of their love speeches, with Christy 'proving' his worth as giant-killer, and Pegeen shocked into brutally attacking her poet-hero for leaping the gap between 'gallous story' and 'dirty deed.' Meanwhile the chorus of mocking Mayoites provides a Rabelaisian framework to the narrative, which begins with a grotesque Dionysian parody of a wake and ends with a resurrection and the Playboy's celebratory death of the 'fool of the family.' Nothing remains for Pegeen but the wailing lament of loss, and even this is accompanied by a box on the ear.

It is left to the witty, worldly, thirty-year-old Widow Quin to serve as the point of balance in the play, much as the inukshuk is deliberately constructed. She too is carved of heroic violent stuff, but the deed itself, too close to home, won "small glory with the boys itself," an early warning of Christy's fate. Being a widow (and therefore suspect for her sexual knowledge and rumoured to observe unnatural practices) she like the whimpering young stranger is set apart, "looking on the schooners, hookers, trawlers is sailing the sea." Like Christy yet unlike, isolation has created in her a breadth of sympathy and realistic appraisal not granted her fellow villagers. Like Shawn Keogh, she is summoned out of the dark by Father Reilly. Like Pegeen, she longs for a life beyond her little houseen on the hill. Serving as an arch in the balance of tension between the Rabelaisian and the romantic, she acts as foil to both Christy and Old Mahon in her lusty humour and materialism, as counterbalance to the village girls in her experience and longings. Through her sympathetic, affectionately scornful eye, we are invited to take note not only of the making of the playboy but of our own eager

contribution to the imaginative joy Synge celebrated as peculiar to the locality and the richness of the nature he observed in the west. Fittingly, it is she who tags Christy "the walking playboy of the western world," with all the ironies that complex title – hoaxer, humbug, mystifier, role-player, strolling performer, storyteller – implies. Indeed, Synge was so enamoured of his creation that she threatened to destroy the delicate balance he was constructing between Christy and Pegeen, Christy and his father, the Mahons and the Mayoites, the Mayoites and the big world beyond. And so, by the last scene, the Widow (like the Fool in *Lear*), had disappeared from the stage.

Was Synge indeed deliberately mocking his audience in a parody of 'Cuchulainoid' ambitions? Certainly the audience on stage, that circle of conspirators who first honour Christy then reject him. Those in the auditorium? I think not. Synge delighted in violence, the unexpected danger, the *life* of energy. But apart from a fastidiousness in manners and personal behaviour, Synge the man was remarkably non-judgmental, describing himself as an "imaginative sceptic" and insisting that there was a place in society for both "the law-maker" and the "law-breaker" (*Letters* I 76). I am not so sure therefore that Synge set out in *The Playboy* to upset his audience, despite Willie Fay's claim and public suspicions. His private assessment of the opening night was, "I feel like old Maura today 'its four fine plays I have though it was a hard birth I had to everyone of them and they coming to the world'." But then he added, "It is better any day to have the row we had last night, than to have your play fizzling out in half-hearted applause. Now we'll be talked about. We're an event in the history of the Irish stage" (*Letters* I 285).

Instead, he reserved the anger at his opponents for his notebooks and private letters. It was about that time that the playwright wrote to his close friend Stephen MacKenna of his experiences in the Congested Districts:

> Unluckily my commission was to write on the 'Distress' so I couldn't do any thing like what I would have wished to do as an interpretation of the whole life [...] There are sides of all that western life the groggy-patriot-publican-general shop-man who is married to the priest's half sister and is second cousin once-removed of the dispensary doctor, that are horrible and awful. [...] I sometimes wish to God I hadn't a soul and then I could give myself up to putting those lads on the stage. God, wouldn't they hop! (Synge, *Letters* I 116-17)

Obviously, despite Yeats's characterisation, Synge was indeed a man of strong opinions.

But those very opinions were always countered by his insistence that in a work of art "all the notes" must be played. It has not usually been noticed that the various stories within the *The Playboy* often do not have closure, and are in fact full of contradictions. Christy 'kills' his father but also 'accepts' him; he is terrified of violence but perpetrates it; a 'loser' in Kerry, he wins all the races in Mayo. Michael James is the free-wheeling drunken anti-clerical, anti-polis admirer of Christy as potential son-in-law, but also the man (like Dan Burke in *The Shadow of the Glen)* who wants peace for

his drinks and a well-ordered home. Pegeen may – or may not – marry Shawn Keogh after all. Always we are given opposing possibilities, not 'either/or' but 'on the one hand' and 'on the other hand,' both 'a gallous story' *and* 'a dirty deed.' If we think back to the blind beggars of *The Well of the Saints*, their departure for the south may lead to death or to liberation. Deirdre's keening recalls "the choice of lives" she and Naisi had "in the clear woods," culminating in her own triumph over death. In all the plays Synge emphasises the possibility of choice between resignation and defiant revolt; the phrases "I've/you've a right" echo throughout the canon. With choice comes discovery – of self and others in relation to self. All the plays also end with at least one character seeing the world and her/himself without illusion.

Synge claimed that a work of art "must have been possible to only one man at one period and in one place" (*Prose* 349). How then, does one assess someone as unique as Synge a hundred years later? What is lost? What is gained? For a while his romantic note overwhelmed the Rabelaisian, with two musicals based on *The Playboy* enjoying predictable results. Yeats predicted that "in the long run, his grotesque plays with their lyric beauty, their violent laughter, *The Playboy of the Western World* most of all, will be loved for holding so much of the mind of Ireland," the "mischievous extravagance" of the Irish genius ("Synge and the Ireland of his Time" 32).

The director who in most recent years has been most energetic in restoring Synge to the stage has been Garry Hynes, director of Druid Theatre in Galway. She has produced *The Playboy* regularly since 1975, taking it to the Aran Islands as well as several other continents, adding a number of his other plays to the repertoire in the intervening years. She and her company then embarked on a production of the complete plays in 2005, which toured from Galway to Dublin and finally the Edinburgh Festival. Accompanying the justly acclaimed cycle was a generous website (www.druidsynge.com) and a volume of essays celebrating the playwright (Tóibín). (Also, a DVD entitled *DruidSynge: The Plays of John Millington Synge* [Wildfire Films and RTÉ] is to be launched in October 2007.)

Hynes's own discovery of Synge as a writer was, she admitted, "an epiphany, one of the shock things. It completely influenced everything I've done since, and continues to do so [...] Synge has been a constant companion." Not surprisingly, her belief in theatre is very similar to his, "an intensification of what we believe living to be. Passion is very much a given [...] all theatre is artifice." And, pointing out that although Synge, "a marvellous writer, a colossus of world theatre," wrote only eight hours of drama, she believes "he's still the dominant figure of twentieth century Irish dramatic literature, and a dominant figure in world dramatic literature [...] He influenced, effectively, everybody." She sees "Boucicault as a grandfather of the modern Irish drama movement," in a clear line to Synge and then Beckett. Synge would especially have appreciated her recognition of Boucicault. But again and again, she returns to Synge (Hynes 199-202).

Certainly in a manner similar to huge intercepting lines of the inuksuit stretching across the tundra, it is possible to see some of this influence radiate out from the playwright like the spokes of a wheel. First, there was George Fitzmaurice, who had the misfortune to follow Synge too closely in time. His grotesque characters and fantastic plots were overshadowed for many years, but were reclaimed by Druid (1993) and the Abbey Theatre during its centennial year celebrations (2004). Sean O'Casey, who insisted that he was "not Synge," "not even [...] a reincarnation" (O'Casey, *Letters* I 166), learned from him, his plays swinging shatteringly between comedy and tragedy. Although rooted not in the countryside but in the realism of tenement life, there is more than a whiff of Synge's Maurya and Christy Mahon in *Juno and the Paycock.* Denis Johnston added further irony to the mix, even using some of Synge's characters in his cataclysmic mélange, *The Old Lady Says No!*. Eugene O'Neill's first glimpse of the Irish players performing *Riders to the Sea* spurred on his own desire to create. Samuel Beckett also denied a comforting closure for his tramps and in a rare public statement praised *The Well of the Saints*. And finally, the older Yeats himself, echoing Old Mahon in "Why should not old men be mad?," in the harshness of *Purgatory* and the audacity of Crazy Jane, would also acknowledge that poetry must have its roots in the "foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart" ("The Circus Animals' Desertion," *Poems* 392).

After the original founders had died, the Abbey Theatre with few exceptions paid little attention to the playwright who led them into the theatre of the future. Although an Irish translation of *Riders to the Sea* was produced at the Queen's Theatre in 1960 and *The Playboy* and *Shadow of the Glen* were twice revived, few playwrights during this fifteen-year interregnum showed any influence, popular Michael J. Molloy and John B. Keane being the most obvious exceptions. *The Enemy Within* was produced in 1962, but then Brian Friel too disappeared from the stage of Ireland's national theatre for many years, although throughout his work we continue to find intriguing suggestions of Synge.

The bridge between Druid Theatre and the Abbey began with Tom Murphy, whose first plays were produced in Galway. At the Abbey in 1979, Murphy directed *The Well of the Saints*, which bears many similarities in use of silence and stillness to his own plays. The same year he wrote and directed *Epitaph under Ether,* a compilation of Synge's life and works. "Yeats as a playwright doesn't mean anything to me," he has admitted. "Synge [...] I admire greatly, I admire him, not because of his Irishness, but because of the outrageous premises that he uses whether it's *The Well of the Saints* or whether it's *The Playboy*" (Murphy 357-58). Dealing with "a neglected, forgotten peasantry," finally himself turning back to the rural kitchen setting, Murphy has come to terms with Synge (Lanters 206-7). Observing the parallels with, and actual borrowings from, *The Playboy of the Western World*, Nicholas Grene has pointed out that Murphy's *A Thief of a Christmas* is "a re-working and extending [of] Synge's peculiar version of carnival, his sort of black rite of comedy" (Grene 232). It is possible also to compare the storied Mommo in Murphy's magnificently black comedy *Bailegangaire*

to determined old Maurya of *Riders to the Sea,* both driving their granddaughters/ daughters to the same weary impatience – although rightly Murphy, having duly observed Synge as reference point, has like Friel taken his own road.

Playwright Vincent Woods might also be considered in the tradition of Synge. *At the Black Pig's Dyke*, produced and toured by Druid in 1994, bears the same harsh marks of fantasy-realism Hynes so admires, works "teetering on the verge of the abyss" (*Theatre Talk* 205). But just as copying the inukshuk for other situations and times diminishes its meaning (we now see it on corporate logos, clothing, even children's games – "build your own inukshuk"), so it is difficult to recognise Synge in many of his acclaimed 'successors.' Which brings us, inevitably, to Martin McDonagh.

It is the director Hynes herself who has drawn most attention to similarities between McDonagh and Synge. I am inclined to believe that her close collaboration with McDonagh has emphasised a kinship between the two playwrights. *The Cripple of Inishmaan*, the Leenane Trilogy [*The Beauty Queen of Leenane, A Skull in Connemara, The Lonesome West*], and *The Lieutenant of Inishmore* all had their first productions under Hynes's careful tutelage. This is not new in the history of Irish theatre – you will recall how another brilliantly innovative director, Joan Littlewood, encouraged Brendan Behan to 'update' and 'revise' *The Hostage.* But I must confess that, much as I respect Hynes, I find little of the genuine Synge spirit in his so-called successor. I suspect that the artifice of the playwright in Synge becomes the artifice of director-cum-dramatist in Hynes/McDonagh. The younger playwright may be more familiar with theatre than he claims, but the driving commitment may well be Druid's director. A production of *The Lieutenant of Inishmore* has recently opened in Istanbul, translated by the director as a satire on terrorism.

That Synge hovers behind McDonagh's plot lines is obvious – to cite only a few examples, the two murders in *Playboy* are paralleled in *A Skull in Connemara* (the title from Beckett, who took it from Synge); the title *The Lonesome West* comes from Michael James's "sainted glory this day in the lonesome west" (Synge, *Plays* II 65); the trilogy's sad Father Welsh bemoans that "God has no jurisdiction in this town" (McDonagh, *The Lonesome West* 175), and in fact the priest is banished in the opening scene of *Playboy*. Maureen, titular Beauty Queen of Leenane, scalds her mother's hand even more brutally than Pegeen scalds Christy with the burning sod; and so on. There is a recognisable 'Synge-song' in the dialogue, and the characters voice similar longings for adventure and otherness. But with few exceptions (notably Girleen, Father Walsh/Welsh and Crippled Billy, all losers), the characters are surface only, with none of the richness of nature, wildness interwoven with poetry, that Synge discovered in the west. Despite a similar swing between horror and laughter, the audience reaction to these later plays is more hysterical, Bergsonian, than the word-play we find in Synge; one is reminded of his condemnation of Baudelaire's "satanic laughter." Synge insisted that the Dionysian elements be balanced by the Apollonian; in McDonagh's western world there is no beauty, and only occasional rifts of

helpless compassion – rather we are overwhelmed by the darkness of brutal, senseless violence and a grotesquerie without the light. Yet while audiences leave the theatre after McDonagh's plays drained by their gusts of laughter, objections to the violence in Synge's are still frequently voiced by critics, as are objections to the degeneracy of the peasants he depicts (Harris 74-82).

Why not the same confused response to McDonagh? Has the sensibility of the audience changed? McDonagh himself has admitted to the influence of film and television, which has led to his 'postmodernist' label, though he declines to participate in the 'ism' game (O'Toole). That term itself is troubling in its catch-all tendency, often too loosely used to identify the rejection of boundaries and rigidity of distinctions, discontinuity, fragmentation, and dehumanisation. This vague use of the term 'postmodernism' fractures the very topic of this collection of essays, denying responsibility in representation and representation in responsibility. Even Synge can be drawn into this whirlpool of manners, for he too celebrated the Dionysian, mocked the desperation of violence (political, Oedipal, social), and mingled extravaganza with heroics. But the desperation in his characters, not frequently noticeable in McDonagh, is real. Perhaps the greatest difference lies in the amount of work required of the audience. McDonagh has claimed that stage plays are "the easiest art forms. Just get the dialect, a bit of a story and a couple of nice characters, and you're away" (Feeney 24-25) – a far cry from Synge's laborious re-stitching. In order to grasp the hollow shallowness of McDonagh's characters, we have to recognise the incongruity of the clichés and the lack of moral distinction between what is humanly significant and what is not: a quarrel over Taytos is just as likely to cause murder as the withholding of evidence. No, although I admit the originality of Martin McDonagh and his innate ability to fetch a good story, I cannot see the Synge spirit in his works, even though in true postmodern pastiche he has cannibalised his predecessor's plays.

If I were to identify Synge's most obvious descendant I would choose Marina Carr. The Mai's hundred-year-old grandmother has much in common with the thirty-year old Widow Quin, who also had relations with a "foxy skipper" from beyond the seas, but even more striking is the language they speak, like Synge's grounded in character and landscape, summoned out of their own dark. Finding their own true voice, Carr's Hester Swane, Portia Coughlan, the Mai, like Synge's characters, live in a dual world (aptly called the "Midlands") that holds both promise of dreams and an "incredible darkness" (Hynes, *Theatre Talk* 205). Carr too reveals the dysfunction and damage of a society the world would rather ignore. Yet, again like Synge, as Christopher Murray has noted, "Myth rather than politics shapes her narrative" (Murray 237). "In a way you could define literature as one endless conversation with the dead," Carr has acknowledged of her own work (Carr 191), and although she reaches back further than Synge's Alceste, Shylock and Quixote, both build on a firm substructure of the past and the bedrock of personal experience. Like Synge she celebrates a balance between theatricality (the grotesque and the carnival – extravaganza) and the world of fancy, straddled by the perpetual outsider. Like Synge too she admits

that “the best lines I’ve ever written are things I’ve heard and I’ve just written them down” (Ni Anluain 48). However, she is no parodist or mimic; Marina Carr’s work is, as Synge felt all art should be, possible to only one person at one period and in one place. Her most recent play, *Ariel*, digs deeply into psychic darkness, moving far beyond Synge in her exploration of the passion of destruction.

Despite my fondness for *The Well of the Saints*, I have dwelt on *The Playboy of the Western World*, because it has served as an indicator, like the inukshuk, not only for Yeats and the early Abbey Theatre, but for later directors and playwrights seeking direction. The other play by Synge forever anthologised is, of course, *Riders to the Sea,* which leads us back to Marina Carr. As powerful as it is brief, at first sight the play seems the odd one out in Synge’s eight hours of theatre – in fact, Yeats considered *The Shadow of the Glen* better. However, even this play distressed the first audience, some of whom left because they could not bear to see a corpse on stage.

Certainly in *Riders to the Sea* there is no joy, nor the obvious contrapuntal effects of Rabelaisian versus rhapsody, light versus dark. Yet the play has its basis in the few months he spent on Aran, where he observed the hearth-wrenching eviction of an old woman and her family, the despair and wildness of a mother’s grief over yet one more drowned son, and the shock of recognition in the dangerous gusts of beauty he experienced on the cliffs of Aranmor. One of his early notebooks begins with the lines: “I cannot say it too often, the supreme interest of the island lies in the strange concord that exists between the people and the impersonal limited but powerful impulses of the nature that is round them.” Quickly moving on to the middle island, he settles “in a small cottage with a continual drone of Gaelic coming from the kitchen that opens into [his] room” and walks the cliff paths listening to “the endless change and struggle of the sea” (Synge, *Prose* 75n1, 57). That drone would echo throughout his first finished play, translated into the moaning of an old woman who grieves over the loss of all her men, while the wind and sea control rhythm, action, and mood. The play is the most formally musical of all his works, a tone poem in its sustained mood. The only counterpoint to the sea (the word appears on practically every page) is the insistent voice and presence of Maurya; in this world where past is imposed on present, pagan on Christian, there is no room to identify with daughters and son, no matter how deftly though minimally their characters are drawn. Inevitably the ritual renews itself, eroding past and future. As each past loss is relived in the present, Maurya becomes, like the island, a rock herself, beaten against by the relentless sea. No wonder the figure of the mother would rarely surface again in Synge’s plays, and when she does is celebrated as an outsider (raucous, vivid Mary Byrne in *The Tinker’s Wedding*; the frightful hag threatening Christy Mahon’s future before *The Playboy* begins).

All of Synge’s plays were written within a few short years. What would he have done had he lived beyond 1909, eventually married Molly Allgood, been around for the first

world war, 1916, the troubles? There were already signs of his restlessness – dissatisfied with the unfinished *Deirdre of the Sorrows*, he pleaded with Yeats to add a stronger element in the character of the grotesque Owen. Although Gregory, who directed the first production, may have imposed some of her own trademark on the language of Synge's Deirdre (especially suspect is the line "I have put away sorrow like an old shoe that is worn out and muddy"), finally it was left in the form they found it. There were also signs that Synge was becoming impatient with the restrictions of the Abbey Theatre and its folk tradition. Among his notebooks there are drafts of unfinished scenarios, including one dialogue between Rabelais and Thomas à Kempis and another between Lucifer and a Lost Soul from Maynooth, two "Scenarios for Thieves," and a comic Ossianic exchange between seven sly kings (arranged round the stage in a semi-circle of beds) and a monk, with a hawker, horseman, houndman, boatman, harper, storyteller, and gravedigger as mocking chorus (*Plays* I 220-31).

What of the Abbey itself a hundred years on? Recently Desmond Cave, one of the theatre's senior actors, acknowledged in an interview in the *Irish Times* that Ireland still has a love-hate relationship with the Abbey ("Fanning the Abbey Flame"). Perhaps, as Synge discovered, teetering on the edge of public opinion is not all bad. For comedy, with its essential attribute laughter, is always subversive; the truth lies in its perception. As Tankred Dorst said in his international message on World Theatre Day,

> Theatre is an impure art and therein lies its vital power. Unscrupulously, it uses everything that stands in its way. It is forever betraying its own principles. It is, of course, not immune to the fashions of the times, it avails itself of images from other media [...] It stammers and falls silent. It is extravagant and banal, evasive, destroys stories while creating new ones ... [T]he theatre will always be able to fill itself with life – as long as we feel the need to show each other what we are and what we are not and what we should be. (Dorst)

Therein lies the theatre's responsibility, reflecting the present and pointing, as does the inukshuk, to the path of the future, while making use of those materials on the ground on which we stand.

Works Cited

An Claidheamh Soluis 9 Feb 1907: 7.

Bloom, Harold. "Introduction." *John Millington Synge's "The Playboy of the Western World."* Ed. Harold Bloom. New York: Chelsea House, 1988. 1-5.

Carr, Marina. "Dealing with the Dead." *Irish University Review* 28.1 (1998): 190-196.

Dorst, Tankred. "World Theatre Day International Message 2003." <http://iti-worldwide.org/pages/wtd/03wtdmes.htm>.

Evening Mail (Dublin) 29 Jan 1907: 2.

"Fanning the Abbey Flame." *Irish Times* 17 Nov 2003.

Fay, W.G., and Catherine Carswell. *The Fays of the Abbey Theatre.* London: Rich and Cowan, 1935.

Feeney, Joseph, SJ. "Martin McDonagh: Dramatist of the West." *Studies* 87.345 (1998): 24-32.

Freeman's Journal 26 Jan 1907.

[Hynes, Garry.] "Garry Hynes in Conversation with Cathy Leeney." *Theatre Talk: Voices of Irish Theatre Practitioners.* Ed. Lillian Chambers, Ger FitzGibbon, and Eamonn Jordan. Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2001. 195-212.

Grene, Nicholas. *The Politics of Irish Drama.* Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999.

Griffith, Arthur. "All Ireland." *United Irishman* 17 Oct 1903: 1.

Hallendy, Norman. *Inuksuit: Silent Messengers of the Arctic.* Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 2000.

Harris, Susan Cannon. "More Than a Morbid, Unhealthy Mind: Public Health and the *Playboy* Riots." *A Century of Irish Drama*: *Widening the Stage.* Ed. Stephen Watt, Eileen Morgan, and Shakir Mustafa. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2000. 72-94.

Hirsch, Edward. "The Gallous Story and the Dirty Deed: The Two Playboys." *John Millington Synge's "The Playboy of the Western World.*" Ed. Harold Bloom. New York: Chelsea House, 1988. 101-116.

Hogan, Robert, and James Kilroy. *The Abbey Theatre: The Years of Synge 1905-1909*. Dublin: Dolmen, 1978.

Holloway, Joseph. *Joseph Holloway's Abbey Theatre: A Selection from his Unpublished Journal "Impressions of a Dublin Playgoer."* Ed. Robert Hogan and Michael J. O'Neill. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1967.

Lanters, José. "Playwrights of the Western World: Synge, Murphy, McDonagh." *A Century of Irish Drama: Widening the Stage.* Ed. Stephen Watt, Eileen Morgan, and Shakir Mustafa. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2000. 204-222.

The Leader 17 Oct 1903.

McDonagh, Martin. *The Beauty Queen of Leenane and Other Plays*. New York: Vintage, 1998.

Masefield, John. "John M. Synge." *Recent Prose by John Masefield.* London: Heinemann, 1924. 181-207.

[Murphy, Tom.] "Tom Murphy in Conversation with Anne Fogarty." *Theatre Talk: Voices of Irish Theatre Practitioners*. Ed. Lillian Chambers, Ger FitzGibbon, and Eamonn Jordan. Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2001. 355-364.

Murray, Christopher. *Twentieth-Century Irish Drama: Mirror up to Nation*. Manchester and New York: Manchester UP, 1997.

Ni Anluain, Cliodhna, ed. *Reading the Future: Irish Writers in Conversation with Mike Murphy*. Dublin: Lilliput Press, 2000.

O'Casey, Sean. *The Letters of Sean O'Casey, 1910-1941. Volume I.* Ed. David Krause. New York: Macmillan, 1975.

O'Toole, Fintan. "Nowhere Man." *Irish Times* 26 July 1997.

Robinson, Tim. "Introduction." J.M. Synge, *The Aran Islands.* London: Penguin, 1992. i-liii.

Saddlemyer, Ann. "'A Share in the Dignity of the World': J.M. Synge's Aesthetic Theory." *The World of W.B. Yeats.* Ed. Robin Skelton and Ann Saddlemyer. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1965. 207-219.

-----. "Introduction." J.M. Synge, *The Playboy of the Western World and Other Plays.* Oxford: Oxford UP, 1995. vii-xxi.

Synge, J.M. *The Collected Letters of John Millington Synge, Volumes I and II*. Ed. Ann Saddlemyer. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1983-1984.

-----. *Collected Works, Volume I: Poems.* Ed Robin Skelton. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1961.

-----. *Collected Works, Volume II: Prose.* Ed. Alan Price. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1966.

-----. *Collected Works, Volumes III and IV: Plays, Books One and Two*. Ed. Ann Saddlemyer. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1968.

-----. Programme Notes to First Production of *The Playboy of the Western World*, 26 Jan 1907.

Tóibín, Colum, ed. *Synge: A Celebration*. Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2005.

Webster's Third New International Dictionary of the English Language. 3 Vols. Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1981.

Yeats, Jack B. "With Synge in Connemara." *Synge and the Ireland of his Time by William Butler Yeats with a Note Concerning a Walk through Connemara with him by Jack Butler Yeats*. Dundrum: Cuala Press, 1911. 39-43.

Yeats, W.B. *The Collected Letters of W.B. Yeats, Volume II: 1896-1900.* Ed. Warwick Gould, John Kelly, and Deirdre Toomey. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997.

-----. *The Collected Letters of W.B. Yeats, Volume III: 1901-1904.* Ed. John Kelly and Ronald Schuchard. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994.

-----. *Collected Poems*. London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1977.

-----. *The Death of Synge, and Other Passages from an Old Diary*. Dublin: Cuala Press, 1928.

-----. *The Letters of W.B. Yeats.* Ed. Allan Wade. London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1954.

-----. "J.M. Synge and the Ireland of his Time." *Synge and the Ireland of his Time by William Butler Yeats with a Note Concerning a Walk through Connemara with him by Jack Butler Yeats*. Dundrum: Cuala Press, 1911. 1-38.