

“DID YOU LIKE HOW I MADE THAT TURN, OFFICER?”
MARTIN McDONAGH’S *HANGMEN* AND CAPITAL PUNISHMENT

Ondřej Pilný

Hangmen, a new dark comedy by Martin McDonagh set in the North of England in the early 1960s, premièred at the Royal Court Theatre on 10 September 2015. It marked the return of the playwright to the London stage after twelve years, and was almost universally hailed as a fabulous success. Following its sell-out initial run at the Royal Court, the play transferred to Wyndham’s Theatre in the West End, and eventually was broadcast internationally as part of the NT Live scheme. It won both a Critics’ Circle Theatre Award and a Lawrence Olivier Award for Best New Play, a South Bank Sky Arts Theatre Award, and a further Critics’ Circle Theatre Award, a Lawrence Olivier Award and an Evening Standard Theatre Award went to Anna Fleischle for her accomplished period design. The plentiful reviews applauded all aspects of the production, including the work of the director, Matthew Dunster, and the amazing performance delivered by the cast, particularly David Morrissey as Britain’s second-best hangman Harry Wade, the uncannily insouciant Johnny Flynn as the “menacing” (McDonagh 47, 63, 68-70, 88) stranger Mooney, and Bronwyn James in her superb professional stage debut as Wade’s teenage daughter Shirley.

This essay argues that despite the essential continuities between *Hangmen* and McDonagh’s earlier work, his latest play represents something of a turn in his career in that some of its principal characters are recognisably based on reality and, even more importantly, it seems to maintain its concern with a grave issue until the very end. However, the serious note clashes with the nature of the humour proffered by the play in a way that presents a major challenge for its directors. Following an outline of some of McDonagh’s source material and its use, the essay discusses the nature of the playwright’s engagement with capital punishment, comparing it with the position of ethical and political themes in his previous work for the stage, in order to ultimately focus on the effect of the play’s subject in the UK, long after the last significant debates about the reintroduction of the sentence to death by hanging have taken place there.

Hangmen is unmistakably a McDonagh play: funny, meticulously plotted and built on numerous unexpected twists that make it unremittingly captivating. It features a dose of brutal violence, but it is at the same time farcical. Moreover, as in his ‘Irish’ plays, McDonagh demonstrates his talent for work with dialects: instead of the unabashed synthetic Hiberno-English of his earlier drama, however, the vernacular of *Hangmen* is that of Northern England, which is contrasted with the speech of a London “spiv” (Craven); similarly to *The Cripple of Inishmaan* (1997), McDonagh throws in a dose of anachronisms (see Evans), mostly for comic effect. These aside, McDonagh’s per-

fect ear for language helps him to faithfully convey the atmosphere of the time and place, despite his lack of familiarity with the part of England that provides the play's setting: as Matthew Dunster has testified with admiration, McDonagh "has an ability to summon up this incredible sense of place purely out of his imagination. I'm actually from Oldham and he's never been there, yet Oldham is there" (qtd. in O'Hagan). McDonagh's dialogue has maintained the natural theatricality of his earlier works; in David Morrisey's words, it again has an "incredible rhythm, like you're batting words back and forth" (qtd. in O'Hagan). Finally, another trademark feature of the playwright's work has been the ingenious and often comic recurrence of individual words or remarkable turns of phrase. The extent of such repetitions is significantly increased in *Hangmen*, and creates a fascinating texture within what already is an extremely well-crafted play. In this respect, *Hangmen* represents the perfection of the customary McDonagh formula and is a truly mature play.

However, *Hangmen* involves also an important departure for McDonagh, as the executioners in the play are based on real-life models. Harry Wade's name is an amalgam of those of Harry Bernard Allen, who served as Assistant Executioner in 1940-1941 and 1945-1955, and as Chief Executioner from 1955 until the passing of the Murder (Abolition of Death Penalty) Act on 8 November 1965 (see Fielding 217, 260, 281-91), and Stephen Wade, Assistant Executioner from 1940-1945 and Chief Executioner between 1946 and 1955 (Fielding 208, 281-89). Similarly to Harry Wade who is chastised for this in McDonagh's play, Allen performed no hangings from 1942 until 1945 for an unclear reason (Fielding 211-12). It is also from Allen that McDonagh's hangman takes the peculiar habit of wearing bow ties (Allen wore these as a sign of respect for the dignity of the occasion, but also claimed that they helped him to get inside a prison any time there was a demonstration held against the execution, since people then tended to mistake him for a doctor or a lawyer; Fielding 215). Allen was the executioner of James Hanratty, the notorious A6 murderer and rapist, whose contentious conviction resulted in a campaign to exonerate him which lasted long after he was hanged on 4 April 1962; his guilt was finally proved by DNA evidence as late as in 2001 (Fielding 224). Hanratty's case is clearly referenced by McDonagh in his naming of the sentenced man in Scene One, James Hennessy, and indicating that he is to hang for sexual assault and murder (even if the details are different, as is the year of the execution, 1963). The way Hennessy pleads his innocence seems in turn to be informed by stories pertaining to other similar occasions, such as the execution of murderer John Ellwood by Henry Pierrepoint (Fielding 94-96) and that of William Palmer, convicted of murder and putting up a fight with hangman John Ellis and his party, who somewhat ironically told him – like Harry Wade in the play – that by resisting, he is only making things harder for himself (McDonagh 12; Fielding 148-50).

Harry Wade's former assistant, Syd Armfield, is based on the Assistant Executioner (1949-1952) Sydney Dernley; like Armfield, Dernley was severely chided by his Chief Executioner for making a tasteless remark concerning the physiognomy of an executed man, and his name was removed from the list of executioners following a con-

viction and brief prison sentence for being involved in trading pornography. However, Dernley never assisted the bow tie-sporting Harry Allen. His superiors on the job included Stephen Wade, and most frequently the best known twentieth-century Chief Executioner, Albert Pierrepoint (Fielding 233, 286-88), who makes a crucial prolonged appearance in McDonagh's *Hangmen*. Last but not least, although it may seem extraordinary that both Harry Wade and Albert Pierrepoint run a pub in the play, McDonagh only reflects the reality here, since many of the actual hangmen were working-class men from the North of England who earned their living as publicans or barmen at some stage of their life, including Harry Allen and Pierrepoint.

All the executioners who provided inspiration for the play's characters drew a degree of macabre public attention in their day, and were often interviewed in the press and/or on television, particularly after the abolition of the death penalty when they presumably did not feel bound as much by the required commitment to secrecy about the details of their 'profession' any more. Harry Allen made several notable public appearances in which he argued for the reinstatement of capital punishment, and became the last hangman to model for Madame Tussaud's, where his wax figure then stood for many years next to some of his victims, including Hanratty; he apparently maintained until his death that he never officially retired as hangman, which is what Harry Wade's wife suspects may become true of her husband (Fielding 227-28; McDonagh 42). Syd Dernley likewise appeared on television and at lectures following the publication of his memoirs in 1989, while Allen became the subject of a 2008 biography.¹ Nonetheless, it was Albert Pierrepoint who enjoyed true celebrity status, triggered by his service as the executioner of a multitude of prominent Nazi criminals at Nuremberg. During his long career, he consistently refused to be put in the spotlight, regarding the details of his job and his views on it as something that is "sacred" to him and must remain secret (in McDonagh's play, the word "sacrosanct" is used; Berlins; McDonagh 56, 60, 96). Pierrepoint resigned in 1956 but his name reappeared in public discourse with vigour following the publication of his memoirs in 1974.² More recently, he has become the subject of a frequently screened TV documentary, *Executioner Pierrepoint* (2006), and a notable feature film released the same year and entitled simply *Pierrepoint*, with Timothy Spall and Juliet Stevenson delivering marvellous performances as the hangman and his wife.

McDonagh has taken considerable liberties with the life stories of these historical figures but his play clearly taps into the lurid fascination that has been steadily engendered by men hired to dispatch those sentenced to death, and McDonagh was able to confidently bank on the British audiences' familiarity with Pierrepoint at least; as he

1 Dernley with Newman, *The Hangman's Tale*; McLaughlin, *Harry Allen*. Shortly after the publication of Allen's biography, his diaries and other belongings went up for sale in an auction which was covered in several newspaper articles that printed samples from the diaries pertaining to technical details of some of the executions that he was in charge of.

2 Pierrepoint, *Executioner*; the book has reappeared in multiple editions since.

stated in an interview, *Hangmen* “is as much about celebrity as it is about hanging” (qtd. in Lukowski). The scrupulous nature of the author’s research for the play is further evidenced by the uncanny accuracy with which the opening scene replicates the reality of executions in the UK: instead of the hangman’s knot that has dominated popular imagery, Harry Wade uses the halter-style noose that was traditionally used in Britain, and the gallows features a trap door with a deep pit into which the convict swiftly disappears after the hangman has pulled the lever (see Fielding 10-15). Moreover, the frame of reference importantly involves some of the most controversial executions of the 1950s and early 1960s (see McDonagh 39-40) that have included two miscarriages of justice and have significantly contributed to the eventual abolition of the death penalty in the UK: Derek Bentley, hanged for his part in the shooting of a police officer (and exonerated in the 1990s); Timothy Evans, falsely accused of murdering his wife and infant daughter (and posthumously pardoned in 1966); Ruth Ellis, executed for the killing of a violent lover; and the case of James Hennessy/Hanratty discussed above.

The exploration of historical sources required for *Hangmen* and the consideration of how to use the material may have contributed to the length of time that it took McDonagh to finish the play. Begun back in 2001, the playwright stated that, apart from getting “sidetracked by other projects”, this drama was long in gestation because it was “about a big subject – capital punishment and miscarriages of justice – and [he] didn’t want it to be a message play. As always, [he] had to find the story and then let the issues just bubble up underneath” (qtd. in O’Hagan). A number of commentators have recently argued that while McDonagh’s work does not necessarily engage with politics or society in a direct sense, it has a moral and often also political foundation. For example, Patrick Lonergan asserts in his accomplished book-length study that “[f]rom *The Beauty Queen* onwards”, McDonagh “has not sought to communicate a message from author to audience, but instead to reveal to the audience the strangeness of their own presuppositions and assumptions” (113-14). This implies that the creation of meaning becomes the responsibility of the spectators, who are encouraged “to question the values that are assumed” in what is presented to them (113-14). Similarly, Eamonn Jordan claims in his detailed treatment of McDonagh’s plays and films that the breaking of social norms by their characters involves a testing of “moral sense or cultural values” (175), and that the defective morality of these characters “is dangled before an audience, where it becomes their responsibility” (212). In contrast, I have argued about McDonagh’s ‘Irish’ plays that the general distancing of the characters from the spectators which results from the overwhelming use of hyperbole on the one hand and the characters’ alienation in terms of social milieu and IQ on the other prevents any ethical concerns from being taken seriously; as regards *The Pillowman* (2003), a comparable effect arises from the unscrupulous manipulation of the audience that is achieved by the multiple use of framing devices. I agree with Lonergan and many others that McDonagh’s plays “force us to laugh at things that shouldn’t be funny” (Lonergan 224) which, together with the confusing and

contradictory genre signals discussed by Jordan (13), makes them fundamentally grotesque; nevertheless, McDonagh’s brand of the grotesque aims only to entertain rather than engage the audience in a deliberation of moral or political issues.³

José Lanter’s discussion of morality in relation to McDonagh’s work strikes me as the most pertinent of the recent commentaries. Lanter’s claims that “McDonagh evokes traditional religious and legal concepts and systems of morality only to treat them ironically even as he approaches them nostalgically, and simultaneously makes us question whether what seemed like nostalgia was really meant to be taken as irony or what seemed to be ironic was really meant to be taken seriously.” (178) This she describes as the playwright’s “postmodern ethical stance” (178). A similar view was in fact outlined in a poignant early article on McDonagh by Werner Huber. Huber – probably the first critic to have engaged with the concept of the grotesque in relation to McDonagh’s work (see Huber 20) – has argued that the value system in McDonagh’s dramas “appears in constant flux and in a state of destabilization”, as a result of which any “satire loses sight of its targets” (22). Nevertheless, Huber opposed the idea that the playwright depicts “a world of postmodern instability, loss of values and general validity”, preferring to suggest instead that “McDonagh is restoring an original dimension to the meaning of drama as ‘action’” (23-24).⁴

While the notion of drama as action is as central to *Hangmen* as it had been to McDonagh’s previous work, the new play represents a departure in the playwright’s career in that it sustains the concern with the serious issue of capital punishment and justice until the final curtain. The problem that must be tackled by any director of *Hangmen*, however, is how to reconcile the sombre note with the rather daft humour that characterizes many of the conversations in Harry Wade’s pub, including McDonagh’s typical politically incorrect quips that are, frankly, not much more than gratuitous in this play.

Dunster’s production at the Royal Court was not particularly successful in resolving this problem. The opening scene in which the condemned Hennessy is fighting with prison guards and hangmen and pleading his innocence was rather surprisingly enacted in a stylised manner and was very clearly being played for laughs. At the end of the scene, the set was lifted towards the ceiling and as the action has moved to Harry Wade’s pub, the style of the production gave way to meticulous naturalism; however, much of the events in the pub prominently feature a chorus of regulars aptly described by Matt Trueman as “imbeciles” (Trueman), who proffer or incite the

3 For details of my argument concerning *The Lieutenant of Inishmore* (2001) and *The Pillowman*, see Pilný 15-17 and my earlier work on McDonagh.

4 In fact, the apparent discord between Lanter’s and Huber’s view may pertain merely to the respective use of the term “postmodern” in the context, since Lanter also foregrounds McDonagh’s ultimate concern with theatricality in *The Pillowman* when she argues that “‘doing the right thing’ [is] a function of plot rather than character motivation” (171).

kind of humour that is perhaps the most difficult to harmonize with any potential note of seriousness. An almost cinematic realism dominated the opening scene of Act Two, depicting the conversation of the enigmatic intruder Mooney with Syd Armfield in a local diner and being enacted in a set suspended from the above, where it disappeared again following the completion of the scene. The dark farce that develops from the naturalist action in the pub in the second scene of Act Two had a perfect pitch, flawlessly conveying the grotesque combination of brutal violence and the moral undoing of the 'hero' with exuberant accidental comedy. But the concluding part of the scene that is the play's finale was again slightly disappointing: as the only passage in the production, it seemed to lack clear directorial vision, coming across as a mere fumbling with the corpse, while the touch of nostalgia for the old times with which it was endowed failed to emphasize the obvious irony of such a sentiment in the circumstances. Arguably, the scene calls rather for a mechanistic, matter-of-fact rendering, in which the hangman and his assistant would slide back into their old routine, treating the body of the deceased as an object to be disposed of; this might then intensify the shock caused by the preceding events.

As the reviews of the production amply testify, the London audiences were roaring with laughter every night, with those who saw the play in the West End being perhaps encouraged to do so by the fact that the show was marketed as a comedy (see Letts). Apart from viewing *Hangmen* as exquisitely funny, reviewers highlighted a disparate variety of aspects in the play. Some viewed it as a realistic depiction of early 1960s Britain that critically revised the notion of the Swinging Sixties (Coveney; Clapp; Lawrence; Calhoun). Others regarded it as a satire aimed against the practice of capital punishment (Taylor; Culture Whisper; Evans) or, more specifically, a portrayal of the impact of capital punishment on the executioners (Mountford; Letts; Lawrence). The reviewer for *The New York Times* in turn made a solitary argument concerning McDonagh's apparent demonstration that regardless of the sanctioning of the death penalty by the state or otherwise, violence will always be inherent in humans (Wolf). Significantly, only a single reviewer seems to have related McDonagh's play to contemporary Britain in more than an abstract sense, discussing the display of blatant sexism, racism, homophobia and an absolute faith in a corrupt system as having alarmingly returned in recent days (Trueman); however, in my view (and implicitly also that of the other reviewers), there is little in McDonagh's comedy to substantiate such an interpretation.

Indeed, Lloyd Evans's review in *The Spectator* documents the danger inherent in suppressing the serious note that I would argue is there in *Hangmen*: Evans concluded that the play came across as a "macabre slice of knockabout" and ultimately dismissed it as "good fun, a bit disturbing and ultimately forgettable" (Evans). In this context, the response of Aleks Sierz is similarly indicative. As it is well known, Sierz was an early champion of McDonagh's work, and has expressed admiration also for his later dramas, *The Lieutenant of Inishmore* and *The Pillowman*. However, he became the only critic to have decisively panned *Hangmen*. Sierz can hardly be re-

garded as an uptight theatre-goer but in his review, he complained at some length about McDonagh’s “senselessly provocative” jokes and criticised the “puerile self-indulgence” of the work. The fact that Sierz described *Hangmen* as a “comedy about 1960s Britain” in the title of his review implies that like the present author, he sensed a serious concern in the play. In his view, this was in part obscured and in part botched not only by gratuitous schoolboy humour but also by a lack of insight into character psychology, which Sierz regarded as the greatest problem of the piece (see Sierz). I have already noted that McDonagh exploits in this play the morbid fascination engendered by hangmen; yet, Sierz is right in that we don’t actually learn much as regards Harry Wade’s thoughts and emotions, apart from him being worried for the life of his daughter. Despite Wade’s central role, McDonagh’s “characterisation is so thin” (Sierz): what were Wade’s reasons for becoming an executioner, for instance, and what does he really think about capital punishment? And does he really feel displaced, now that hanging has been abolished, as McDonagh seems to indicate by a single nonverbal gesture at the end of Scene Two?⁵

Another matter that must be broached pertains to the nature of the issue that the play is concerned with, or rather its timing. To put it simply, one may wonder why write a play about capital punishment now, long after the reintroduction of the death penalty was last seriously discussed in Britain. A point of contrast in terms of British theatre history may be Joan Littlewood’s production of Brendan Behan’s *The Quare Fellow* in 1956, a play that McDonagh actually alludes to a few times.⁶ Vastly different as *The Quare Fellow* is as regards both genre and its focus on prisoners and warders rather than executioners, like McDonagh’s *Hangmen* it is hardly a “message play”, and particularly in Littlewood’s production, it was extremely entertaining and at times hilarious. At the same time, it was perceived as an intervention in the contemporaneous debate concerning the abolition of capital punishment.⁷ The question is whether in 2015 the subject can provide even an approximation of the kind of edge that Behan’s play was seen as having in the late 1950s and the 1960s.

Such concerns may certainly be at variance with what Martin McDonagh set out to achieve in the play. For one, he has described *Hangmen* in his interview with Sean

5 The scene ends as follows: “Harry: I won’t know what to do with meself! / They all laugh, but in the slight pause afterwards, Harry really does wonder what he’ll do with himself. / Blackout.” (35)

6 The Chief Warder in *The Quare Fellow* repeatedly voices his exasperation at the incompetence of his subordinates as follows: “Warders! You’d/I’d get better in Woolworths.” (Behan 88, 123) This is echoed in the opening scene of *Hangmen*, where Harry complains about the Guards: “Where’d they get you two? Window as fucking Debenhams?!” (McDonagh 15). Prisoner D’s view that “hanging’s too good for ‘em” (Behan 94) is what Billy emphatically asserts in *Hangmen* (McDonagh 20-21, 55) and Harry subsequently refuses (McDonagh 36).

7 An abolition Bill came before Parliament in November 1955, was approved by the Commons but ultimately rejected by the Lords in 1956. No executions were performed while the Bill was being debated, with the next one taking place only in July 1957.

O'Hagan as his take on a "traditional comedy thriller", and regarded solely on these terms, the play works well enough indeed. Moreover, the author attended virtually all rehearsals for the Royal Court production (see O'Hagan), and presumably endorsed the directorial decisions made by Matthew Dunster. What is as significant is that in the same interview, McDonagh once again voiced the reservations that he has had about theatre as an art form. More specifically, he stated that it is "the snobby, intellectual, political side of theatre that bugs [him]", and indicated that he finds the work of political playwrights such as David Hare revolting. These remarks make it apparent that McDonagh detests what he sees as the elitism of theatre going, together with the hypocrisy involved in the idea that in the theatre, spectators should get to ponder vital ethical and political issues, since they happily fail to translate the experience into their real lives in consequence. If we relate McDonagh's critique to his own work, it provides fitting justification to the way in which the numerous grave issues are foregrounded only to be swiftly dismissed in *The Pillowman*, ultimately to reveal the playwright to be merely entertaining the audience by shunting them to and fro at will. However, I would argue that in *Hangmen*, the concern with capital punishment is not sufficiently undermined in order for McDonagh to communicate the reservations that he has about the "political side" of theatre.

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