Review of


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Mary Trotter’s wide-ranging history of Irish Theatre from the 1890s to the present (2007) has much to recommend it, but it also invites some caveats. It is a book that will be useful to undergraduates from outside Ireland, because of the ways it maps and introduces a broad field of Irish theatrical endeavour, attempts to ground it in modern Irish history, and in theatre practice. Irish theatre in the modern period emerges as a very vibrant and contested forum for discussion of matters of national import, and more often than not anti-hegemonic and pluralist in orientation. Quite justifiable claims are made about its indirect impact on subsequent historical events, and shifts in cultural sensibility. It is an admittedly ambitious project and it does some of what it attempts with more grace and vigour than others.

What it does well is to integrate a wide range of studies of Irish theatre. It arrives at a moment when there is a wealth of generalist histories to draw on—of particular periods of Irish theatre, studies of theatre movements (especially the Abbey and Ulster theatre), and studies of particular works and writers. It tends to draw heavily these. Much of this text recapitulates what is in the public domain already. What I admire about it, though, and will find useful is its recovery of lost or forgotten plays (giving due weight to such critical forebears as Hogan), its attempts to document Northern Irish theatre (drawing on Lyons, Bell, DiCenzo and Maguire, but not Pelan), and its refusal to shut out the amateurs and to give their doings weight in contributing to the mainstream, especially during the long reign of de Valera. It ventures into the provinces and does not see the Abbey as the touchstone, though of course much of the story revolves around that *omphalos*. It acknowledges London theatre’s Irish roots in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and Irish theatre’s contributions to a wider world from the 1920s onwards. There are also many passing attempts both to document what foreign plays audiences and actors were exposed to, and how continental and other influences were brought to bear, especially Brecht, and the Irish expatriates. The history does not close its eyes to the workings of theatre in the Irish language, but these tend to be passing references only.

For me, its most original manoeuvre, done tenaciously and with verve, is its focus on theatrical practice and the conditions of performance. Mary Trotter is strong on the communal roots of theatre. It’s a methodology too little attempted in theatrical histories, and I value it in this text: it is useful to point to how practical theatre intersects with political realities, and for instance how much an audience is likely to be influenced by actors playing roles they played in real life, and the extent to which such identifications carry affect. The anecdote (p.78) about actual civil war soldiers on duty teaching actors how to carry guns for *The Shadow of a Gunman*, and then slipping in to see a show, and leaving their rifles at the box office, is revealing of how closely the Irish theatre movement was recording history. Likewise, the racy costuming of *Salome* (semi-naked in black, silver and ‘viperish’ green, with Salome herself sporting only a ‘sparkling sash around her breasts’) at the Gate in 1928, only 10 years after the Billings Pemberton trial of 1917-8 in London, tells an astonishing and unexpected story: clearly the Irish
censors, both Church and State, so quick to pounce on the politically and religiously unorthodox, were not as bothered by Wilde as the English conspiracy theorists during the WWI. It seems rather an understatement though to put this down Dublin audiences ‘unafraid of seeing controversial performances onstage’ (p.95). Perhaps it was Ireland’s revenge on the trauma enacted 30 years earlier at the Old Bailey. Mary Trotter also usefully documents tensions within theatre companies, and with sponsors, especially the government funders. This author has hidden away a wealth of detail about theatre practice in the footnotes, and I suggest this is the direction her next work might take. Such matter is by its nature ephemeral and worth recording.

The work is organised in four chronological sections (Performing the Nation, 1891-1916; War and After, 1916-1948; Rewriting the Tradition, 1948-1980 and Re-Imagining Ireland, 1980-2007) and each section is prefaced with a potted summary of historical events. These are un-problematised and simplistic, and rarely documented adequately; likewise, her theatrical discussions are under-theorised. I’m also alarmed that the synopses of plays which stud the narrative, which, while useful for the beginner or the amateur play-selector, are singularly lacking in analysis and work almost exclusively descriptively. Any suggestion that there might be debates about what the plays mean and how they are read is tucked away in footnotes, if present at all. This is not the kind of writing one wants undergraduates to emulate. These are the weakest sections of an otherwise useful text.

The editing of this book leaves a lot to be desired. One could be forgiven for thinking that the editor frequently had naps, as some sections read much better than others, but spelling errors (Hughey for Haughey, p.155; premiere theatre community where one expects premier, p.14; furore where force or vehemence would make more sense, p.63; flouted instead of vaunted, p.203, etc.) and gaucheries of expression (e.g., chasing and compromising funding, p.73; can identity be accrued? p.68) abound. These really do detract from one’s sense that the work is reliable and carefully composed. If it ever goes into a second edition, and it should, it deserves a better editor. It is clear to me that this writer needed a bigger canvas: indeed, too much important matter is in the footnotes that should be in the body of the work. One wonders if, as so often occurs in scholarly publishing these days, the publisher has gone out of its way to patronise a general reader who is assumed not to want to be bothered by detail and debate, and to seek certainty where it is not to be had.

So, while there is a wealth of information to be gleaned from this text, it is quite flawed in its execution.