

## 'To tell stories of Holy Ireland' : Symbol, structure and the truthful macrocosm of the Dublin Riots, 1907-2006.

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*On the stage one must have reality, and one must have joy.<sup>1</sup>*

These words, taken from John Millington Synge's preface to his play *The Playboy of the Western World*, speak of staunch defiance against an oncoming, and wholly expected, critical backlash. Synge's reputation as a 'constant irritant to his nationalist critics', aligned with the Abbey Theatre's dubious subsidisation by Annie Horniman – an Englishwoman 'known to be hostile to Irish nationalism' – made opposition to the play a near inevitability.<sup>2</sup> The play's premiere on 26 January 1907 emerged as lightning from a perfect storm; an Anglo-Irish playwright already known for troubling works examining the western Irish and 'the folk-imagination of these fine people';<sup>3</sup> a theatre whose official name – the National Theatre Society Limited – had connotations of exhibiting work that spoke for a nation; and in *Playboy* itself, a play rumoured throughout Dublin to be 'peculiar and incendiary'.<sup>4</sup> The stage was set for conflict, and conflict ensued.

To the question of can we know what really happened on that opening night, the answer is yes and no. There can be no doubt that there was a riot – or, more, specifically, that there was 'hissing, stamping and yelling'.<sup>5</sup> This much is universally reported and confirmed. Thus, in the most general sense, what 'really' happened was that a performance of *The Playboy of the Western World* was, at some point, the subject of disturbance from the audience.

Our evaluation becomes problematic, however, when we begin to consider individual instances that may or may not have 'begun' the riot. Was it, as Lady Gregory made out, the use of the word 'shift'? If so, was it Pegeen's use of the word or Christy's in the play's climactic scene? Was it, according to C.P. Curran, 'the unrelenting realism of the production in its last scene',<sup>6</sup> or, as recorded by Padraic Colum, the image of 'a man with horribly-bloodied bandage about his head...a figure that took the whole thing out of the atmosphere of high comedy'?<sup>7</sup> What, for that matter, constitutes the beginning of a riot? 'Uncomfortable murmurs'?<sup>8</sup> Shouts and cries above a certain designated volume? Some ethereal sense of unease? In what Kershaw calls an 'increasingly mediatised and globalised world',<sup>9</sup> we often strive for a way of simplifying essentially complicated circumstances through images, sounds, and in the case of Lady Gregory, words. This indeed is the basis for Kershaw's 'dramaturgy of protest as performance', a concept inextricably linked with overt signs and

<sup>1</sup> John Millington Synge, *The Playboy of the Western World* (London: Nick Hern Books, 1997), p.3

<sup>2</sup> Hugh Hunt, *The Abbey: Ireland's National Theatre 1904-1978* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1979), pp.72-3

<sup>3</sup> Synge, p.2

<sup>4</sup> Paige Reynolds, *Modernism, Drama and the Audience for Irish Spectacle* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p.38

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p.39

<sup>6</sup> C.P. Curran, *Under the Receding Wave* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1970), pp.107-8

<sup>7</sup> Padraic Colum, *The Road Round Ireland* (New York: Macmillan, 1926), p.368

<sup>8</sup> Reynolds, p.39

<sup>9</sup> Baz Kershaw, *The Radical in Performance: Between Brecht and Baudrillard* (London: Routledge, 1999), p.92

symbols which give us easy shortcuts as to the whys and wherefores of protest events.<sup>10</sup> It is my hope that by the end of this essay – and by also examining the Dublin riots of February 2006 - we will have surmised that such happenings are never ‘easy’ – that what *really* happened is not in the limited microcosm, but rather in the multi-faceted and fluid macrocosm.

In a recent publication, Postlewait writes of event and context as the ‘basic categories that guide our historical assumptions’.<sup>11</sup> Usefully, he provides us with the model of ‘EVENT=CONTEXT’, belying ‘the idea of structural enclosure’ and an ‘embodied’ relationship between event and context.<sup>12</sup> However, and as Postlewait remarks, this model is altogether too restrictive. To begin with, let us apply such a structure to the *Playboy* disturbances. The event is the riot itself – some general sense of conflict and disturbance that occurred within the Abbey Theatre on 26 January 1907. The context consists of a number of factors – Synge’s authorship, Irish nationalism, the ownership of the theatre – but in any case it remains an immovable amalgamation; a stone-clad enclosure surrounding the ethereal ‘event’. The same can be said of the 2006 riots in central Dublin – the event is the generalised sense of conflict that occurred on 25 February; the context is what we might reductively call the post-‘Troubles’ period.

In both cases the shortcomings of this model are plain to see; the ‘idea of a determining context makes the event a mere effect of whatever external factors the historian identifies’.<sup>13</sup> As Postlewait also writes, ‘Human motives, intentions, and acts become negligible’, a fact which results in critics such as Kershaw searching for ‘performance in the political’ – finding, in other words, individual representations, signs and symbols that provide a universal link between event and context.<sup>14</sup> In the case of the *Playboy* riots this symbol is generally considered to be Christy Mahon’s use of the word ‘shift’, as reported by Lady Gregory to W.B. Yeats. Meanwhile in 2006, the ‘human act’ that perpetuated the violence in Dublin appears to have been the attempted dispersal of a republican ‘counter-march’ by members of An Garda Síochána – the Irish police force.<sup>15</sup> Thus with both events we have somewhat convenient, tangible actions which not only signal their ‘beginnings’, but which also provide symbolic overviews of their contexts. The audience breaking into disorder on the word ‘shift’ is indicative of a context which includes Synge’s authorship, his supposed Anglo-Irish misunderstanding of Irish femininity and peasantry, and thus also the wider background of Anglo-Irish relations. In 2006, an attempt by the Irish police to remove a republican protest against a loyalist march has clear connotations of the basic conflict of ‘the Troubles’, and also of the dubious position the state of Ireland has in negotiating between the two ‘sides’.

Clearly such reductions are both over-simplifying and self-defeating. To begin with, these triggering actions, supposedly factually concrete, are simply not so – a fact that we will come to in due course. Secondly, the ‘basic binary’ they allude to – that of event and context – is essentially insufficient if we are indeed examining what ‘really happened’.<sup>16</sup> Theoretical writing such as that of Kershaw certainly has its usefulness, and I am by no means dismissing the value of a performative view of protest in assessing universal norms. Nor, even, do I rule out the validity of hard-line theorists such as Gustave LeBon:

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p.91

<sup>11</sup> Thomas Postlewait, *The Cambridge Introduction to Theatre Historiography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p.9

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p.10

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p.11

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.; Kershaw, p.91

<sup>15</sup> [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/northern\\_ireland/4750576.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/northern_ireland/4750576.stm)

<sup>16</sup> Postlewait, p.11

When studying the formal characteristics of a crowd we stated that it is guided almost exclusively by unconscious motives. Its acts are far more under the influence of the spinal cord than of the brain. In this respect a crowd is closely akin to quite primitive beings.<sup>17</sup>

Certainly LeBon’s work is applicable in tackling the grander scope of protest in humanity – his writing indeed has an almost anthropological approach – but with a view to examining the minutiae of riotous events, it is rather too broad. The *Playboy* riots, and those of central Dublin in 2006, were simply not the work of ‘primitive beings’.

In his introduction to theatre historiography, Postlewait attempts to provide the antidote for the EVENT=CONTEXT simplification in the form of a four-part heuristic model. In this he links the event to four other conceptual entities, namely World, Agents, Reception and Artistic Heritage. The event, we are told, is ‘in tension’ with these contributing factors, ‘a series of dialogues and exchanges that the historian may chart’.<sup>18</sup> Thus, in the case of the *Playboy* premiere, the event interacts with an Irish ‘world’ that provides it with ‘a basis and meanings’; ‘agents’, including figures such as Synge, Yeats and Horniman; ‘reception’ in the form of reviews; and ‘artistic traditions, conventions, norms and codes’ that came before it – the ‘artistic heritage’, in other words.<sup>19</sup>

For the sake of simplicity I have been rather reductive in my applying Postlewait’s model to the particular events of 1907. One should note, for example, that in discussing the EVENT-RECEPTION paradigm, Postlewait writes that ‘reviews tell us what the event meant for a handful of influential people, but they are only one part of the contextual meanings’, and that ‘reception engages a range of possible responses from spectators’.<sup>20</sup> It is here that this model becomes problematic.

Certainly in reviews of the first performance there are varying opinions – although one might more accurately describe these as varying shades of an almost universal negativity as far as the play was concerned. *The Freeman’s Journal*, for example, supplies the vitriol in its labelling of *Playboy* as a ‘squalid, offensive production’, stating also that ‘no denunciation could be sufficiently strong’.<sup>21</sup> Meanwhile *The Leader* takes a more focussed approach in singling out Willie Fay, the actor playing Christy Mahon, as ‘a broken down evil-looking tramp’.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, and satisfying Postlewait’s need for a reception from ‘various spectators’, we also have a letter from the somewhat dubiously pseudonymous ‘A Western Girl’, deploreding the play as ‘stilted, impossible, uninteresting and un-Irish’, albeit hastening to forgive Fay and ‘the other capable members of this excellent company’.<sup>23</sup> However, what of the numerous other individuals that saw the *Playboy* premiere? Are we to assume that every single audience member considered the play to be an ‘affront’?<sup>24</sup> How can we account for subsequent ‘well-received’ productions in Oxford and London, or a 1909 Abbey revival in which ‘except for a few hisses on the first night, it was applauded by the audience’?<sup>25</sup>

The problem here is in the *quantifiable* – its presence or lack thereof. Postlewait’s model, though admirable in its attempt to provide both structure and fluidity to contextual study, is, at its heart, concerned with garnering material data aligned with its various conceptual factors – something which is quite impossible in any valuable examination of what ‘really happened’. It is simply not in the realms of possibility to quantify the reception

<sup>17</sup> Gustave LeBon, *The Crowd* (London: Transaction, 1995), p.56

<sup>18</sup> Postlewait, p.15

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, pp.12-14

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p.14

<sup>21</sup> James Kilroy (ed.), *The Playboy Riots* (Dublin: Dolmen, 1971), pp.7-9

<sup>22</sup> Hunt, p. 7

<sup>23</sup> Postlewait, p.13; Kilroy, p.10

<sup>24</sup> Reynolds, p.39

<sup>25</sup> Hunt, p.76

to any given performance accurately; the data is essentially unavailable. Moreover, one might have noticed my earlier reference to the *Playboy* ‘premiere’, rather than the *Playboy* ‘riots’. The reason for this was to fit the disturbances at the Abbey Theatre against Postlewait’s model, but we must remember that Postlewait is writing consciously from the point of view of theatre historiography, and it would be wrong to characterise the performance and the riots as the same thing.

A theatrical performance is basically composed of a range of supposedly ‘fixed’ and quantifiable factors – the play text, the actors, the theatre building, and so on. Such an event is suitably rigid in its material elements for a theorist such as Postlewait to design a model around it, even if subsequent factors in this model – Reception, as we have seen – are impossible to quantify and thus cannot reliably support (or oppose) the theatrical performance. Thus Postlewait’s model is rather unworkable when it comes to the *Playboy* riots, and even less so if we attempt to apply it to the 2006 conflicts in Dublin. These, after all, are fundamentally disordered events, with no set time, place or personnel. The disturbances at the *Playboy* performance were, as is well documented, repeated on subsequent nights in places as far afield as the United States in 1911, and as later on as 1917 at the Birmingham Repertory Theatre. Meanwhile the Dublin riots of 2006 occurred in sporadic intervals and places throughout the city, and there is considerable difficulty in assessing the people involved. In any case, it would appear that Postlewait’s model – indeed any theoretical model – is insufficient in evaluating what ‘really happened’ when it comes to protest events; simply put, it is of limited value trying to attach the structural to things fundamentally without structure.

Even what we might consider the ‘fixed’ elements of these riots are, on closer inspection, not so. For example, whilst the play text of *The Playboy of the Western World* is an immovable literary ornament on paper, in performance it becomes as fluid as any other cultural element:

It’s Pegeen I’m seeking only, and what’d I care if you brought me a drift of chosen females, standing in their shifts itself, maybe, from this place to the eastern world?<sup>26</sup>

It’s Pegeen I’m seeking only, and what’d I care if you brought me a drift of Mayo girls, standing in their shifts itself, maybe, from this place to the eastern world?<sup>27</sup>

These are two versions of the same line – the line which, in the literature, is taken to be symbolic of the start of the *Playboy* riots. It may seem excessive to include both versions of the line in their entirety, but I do it only to demonstrate the ease with which the play text can be manipulated, and the effect such manipulation can have. The first excerpt is the line as written in Synge’s text, whilst the second is the line as it was spoken by Willie Fay on the play’s opening night. Interestingly, it is the word ‘shifts’, immortalised by Lady Gregory’s telegram to Yeats, that is supposed to have caused the audience to erupt – but what of Fay’s use of ‘Mayo girls’ rather than ‘chosen females’? Is it not credible that this error may have been seen as a more direct and personal reference to the western Irish, and therefore a more pointed ‘slur upon national identity and morality’?<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, and as previously mentioned, even the word ‘shifts’ is problematic. Its use in this line is most often referred to in analyses of the riots, but one also notes its use by Pegeen in the play’s second act:

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<sup>26</sup> Synge, p.71

<sup>27</sup> Reynolds, p.39

<sup>28</sup> Introduction to *The Playboy of the Western World*, Margaret Llewellyn-Jones, p.ix

And you without a white shift or a shirt in your whole family since the drying of the flood.<sup>29</sup>

In the letter from ‘A Western Girl’, this utterance is cited as one of the play’s principle outrages; the author bemoaning the actress’s use of ‘a word indicating an essential item of female attire...the lady would probably never utter in ordinary circumstances, even to herself’.<sup>30</sup> Thus we cannot be sure which line, if any, precipitated the riot, and once more what ‘really happened’ is called into question.

We might also examine the basic ‘facts’ of the 2006 riots in Dublin. From supposedly non-partisan news networks such as the BBC we are informed of a ‘republican riot’ and a ‘loyalist rally’ – the reporter focussing on the traditional conflict between the two factions and treating the violence as indicative of ‘the Troubles’ as a historical whole.<sup>31</sup> Meanwhile, however, the report from RTÉ – Ireland’s public service broadcaster – never specifies the protestors as republicans, merely mentioning the Love Ulster march as commemorating the victims of ‘republican violence’; whilst Indymedia – a democratic media network with an open publishing policy – states that ‘no political organisations who were capable of causing trouble were mobilising to oppose the loyalist march’, and that the rioters were ‘largely drawn from the urban poor...not members of any political organisation’.<sup>32</sup> Thus a supposedly concrete element of the Dublin riots – that it comprised republicans inciting violence against unionists – might be the subject of debate, and once more we are forced to question our basic assumptions about protest events.

At this stage it should be clear that any examination of what actually occurred in the course of riotous events is essentially impossible, at least in the traditional sense. We have seen that pointing to symbolic gestures and actions, whilst offering simplified routes into what may have triggered such disturbances, is tenuous, at best – and that structured approaches, like that of Postlewait, are inherently flawed in their attempts to measure the immeasurable. In any case, these theories and models are far better suited to contextual study – they can provide us with broad and sweeping views on the past with varying degrees of detail, and such views certainly have their uses in literary scholarship.

The key here, however, is in the word *past*. I propose that what ‘really happened’ is in *what we have today* – a fluid and ever-evolving cultural macrocosm that riotous events have helped to shape. In his book *Dissident Dramaturgies*, Eamonn Jordan outlines several dramaturgical models that have become institutions in contemporary Irish theatre – including Gender, Colonial Derivatives, Innocence and the Pastoral. His work, although largely concerned with 20<sup>th</sup> Century playwrights, cites the infamy of Synge’s *Playboy* as the root of the ‘authenticity, representation, mis-representation’ debate that characterises Irish theatre and its dramaturgies today.<sup>33</sup> Just as ‘Irish playwrights have relied on dismal social situations in order to energize their realities’, the *Playboy* riots ‘energized’ Irish and literary culture to such an extent that its ‘dark carnivalesque’ power still reverberates in the present.<sup>34</sup>

Meanwhile Reynolds places Synge and the *Playboy* disturbances firmly within the modernist movement, citing the playwright as ‘a masterful and manipulative showman’ who used shock as ‘an uncannily successful promotional tool’.<sup>35</sup> Modernism, arguably the defining literary movement of the past hundred years, is an ever-present force in the writing

<sup>29</sup> Synge, p.35

<sup>30</sup> Kilroy, p.10

<sup>31</sup> [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/northern\\_ireland/4750576.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/northern_ireland/4750576.stm)

<sup>32</sup> <http://www.rte.ie/news/2006/0225/loyalist2.html> ; <http://www.indymedia.ie/article/74528>

<sup>33</sup> Eamonn Jordan, *Dissident Dramaturgies: Contemporary Irish Theatre* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2010), p.44

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

of today – and it is clear to see how the controversy of the *Playboy* riots shaped this cultural reality. Along with the Dublin riots of 2006, the disturbances at performances of *The Playboy of the Western World* are impossible to evaluate in terms of what has been lost to the past. What we are left with are the political and cultural landscapes shaped by these events, and these are the realities – these are what have really happened.

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