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Irish Rioters, Latin American Dictators, and Desperate Optimists' *Play-boy*

The narrative process is inherently selective and consequently open to distortion and falsification. J. M. Synge humorously illustrated this in *The Playboy of the Western World*, in which his central character, Christy Mahon, reinvents himself through the telling and retelling of his own story. *Play-boy*, a much more recent performance work created by Desperate Optimists, takes as its opening gambit the riots that accompanied the first performances of this controversial Irish classic and adds a bewildering variety of other narrative materials to the mix – providing, as it does so, a tongue-in-cheek commentary on this story about stories. A detailed account of the show in performance and the manner in which the company construct their own tall tales initiates an investigation into how fact becomes fiction in the creation of new narrative accounts, narrative being considered as a participatory event that is both a psychological imperative and a ludic pleasure. Neal Swettenham lectures in drama at Loughborough University. His research into the role and status of narrative in contemporary theatre has led him to fresh examinations of both traditional story-based drama and avant-garde performance work. In particular, he has written about the plays of American dramatist Richard Foreman and is currently exploring the challenges presented to both actor and director by these texts.

NARRATIVE, as Roland Barthes succinctly put it, 'is simply there, like life itself'.¹ We are constantly engaged in remembering, organizing, and recounting our lives through the medium of story.² But narrative is necessarily selective. We note the details that seem important to us (or that show us in the best light, perhaps). We structure the elements of the story in hierarchies of information that appear, to our way of thinking, obvious and logical. And as we select and organize, so too do we – consciously or unconsciously – re-imagine and reinvent those stories.

Storytelling, and its inherent potential for distortion and falsification, is a central theme of J. M. Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World* (1907). As Christy Mahon recounts the tale of his patricide on various successive occasions during the play, he elaborates and develops his narrative with ever-increasing levels of enthusiasm and colourful detail. When he first admits to the murder, speaking to Michael Flaherty and his attentive customers, his account is blunt and sparing: 'I just riz the loy and let fall the edge of it on the ridge of his skull, and he went down at my feet like an empty sack, and never let a grunt

or groan from him at all.'³ However, alone with Pegeen Mike, he begins to exaggerate the detail slightly, making the event sound just that little bit more dramatic: 'It was a bitter life he led me till I did up a Tuesday and halve his skull.'⁴

The next morning, telling the story again to an adoring quartet of local girls, he has worked it up into a battle of near-epic quality: 'He gave a drive with the scythe, and I gave a lep to the east. Then I turned around with my back to the north, and I hit a blow on the ridge of his skull, laid him stretched out, and he split to the knob of his gullet.'⁵

On this occasion, Synge pointedly draws our attention to Christy's storytelling bravado by having the girls comment: 'That's a grand story. . . . He tells it lovely.'⁶ And by the close of the second act, as Christy is about to re-encounter his 'dead' father, the simple blow to the head has become a mighty swing that 'cleft his father with one blow to the breeches belt'.⁷ Thus do stories grow in the telling, like the legendary fisherman's catch.

When Joe Lawlor and Christine Molloy (desperate optimists)⁸ decided to create a piece of new work based on Synge's classic

text, they set about their task with a keen sense of the exaggerative possibilities inherent within narrative. *Play-boy* (1998–99), their sixth and to date their last touring production, bears the company's customary hallmarks of whimsical humour, dry wit, and bizarre narrative meanderings. Though it takes Synge's play as its central motif, it is far from being a simple retelling, or even an interpretation of that original text.

The Starting Point of *Play-boy* (1998–99)

Joe and Christine take as their own starting point the violent riots that disturbed the first performances of *The Playboy of the Western World* at the Abbey Theatre, Dublin, in 1907, and via a characteristically bizarre series of connections they move us swiftly through an eclectic variety of different time periods and imaginative locations including, most persistently, a small town in Mexico. This they achieve not through the use of a rapidly changing set, or even (despite the presence of video monitors onstage) through any kind of visual imagery. In fact the staging is austere simple: a low, green catwalk running from left to right across the front of the stage, two stools, a microphone stand from which hang three mikes, and the two large video monitors form the only stage furniture, behind all of which hangs a pale green backcloth. It is almost exclusively through the use of words and descriptive narration that the action is conveyed to us – descriptions that are underscored by a single looped piece of Latin American music, varying in volume and therefore prominence at different points in the performance, but remaining a constant auditory presence throughout.

From the very beginning, then, a simple narrative tension is established between the opening account of a significant moment in Irish theatre history and the Latin dance rhythms running beneath it. The process of reading narrative is essentially one of searching for causal links: how could two such disparate elements ever be resolved into a coherent whole?⁹ As the performance develops, these narrative puzzles are repeated and multiplied with dizzying rapidity until any

kind of coherence seems an utterly impossible goal.

And yet, at the very beginning of the piece, an explicitly narrative contract is established with the audience. Joe begins the show by offering up a tiny but fundamental personal narrative. The two of them (Joe and Christine) have, he tells us, been wrestling for some months now with a single question, and that question is (he spells it out very slowly for us): 'What – do – we – need – to – know?' The answer, he then informs us, is 'The facts.'

Already there is a humorous ambiguity about this opening gambit, with its plausibly authoritative, mock-documentary tone. What do we need to know about *what*? The precise object of enquiry has not yet been defined, so the 'facts', whatever they may turn out to be, must also remain undefinable. The facts about what? The facts about the first performance of *The Playboy of the Western World*? The facts about any one of the apparently unconnected subjects that are going to be introduced during the course of this presentation? Nevertheless, with great solemnity and seriousness it is 'the facts, plain and unadorned, the facts unencumbered by opinion' that we are explicitly promised in this opening declaration to the audience.

There are a number of other important, subliminal signals that we are about to engage with a narrative enterprise. Direct address to the audience, an intimate, reflective form of speech via the microphone, a hint of the exploratory – all help to establish Joe as a benign storyteller, who will buttonhole us for the evening, entertain us, narrate to us. From the start, then, this deconstruction of narrative is positioned explicitly within the conventions of narrative, and we are invited to sit back and enjoy an entertaining story – about the *unreliability* of story.

Joe moves us swiftly on from this personal mini-narrative to a concentrated account of the first performance of Synge's play, on Saturday 26 January 1907, and the rapid descent from audience attentiveness into riotous violence. He tells us of the audience's growing restlessness, the catcalls and stamping that began to interrupt the second act, and an outburst of actual violence that, in Joe's



Christine looks on as Joe assumes the role of unreliable narrator.

account, actually prevented the performance of the third act.

On the following day, a Sunday, the company held a meeting to determine how to respond to this extreme audience reaction. One conclusion, Joe informs us, was that the auditorium should be lined with felt to deaden the noise of stamping feet (Joe gives us a demonstration of stamping, to show us how you can quickly become ‘whipped up into a frenzy’ in such a situation). The other decision taken at the meeting was that on its second performance the play would be presented without the one element which seemed to have caused all the trouble: the words. The play would be acted in total silence, with only movements and sound effects left to indicate what was happening.

Cracks in the Narrative Façade

Already, tiny cracks have begun to appear in the narrative façade. We have been promised ‘facts’, yet the account, though presented with a due degree of *gravitas*, is already moving into territory that sounds distinctly unreli-

able. This gentle (and almost imperceptible because so smooth) transition into what sounds like fiction signals the first move in a deliberate and frequently repeated game of narrative teasing.

As Joe has been speaking, the video monitors behind him have flickered into life and begun to display images: first a simple title, ‘Act One’, then different shots on each monitor of various individuals seen in close-up, obviously listening and responding to instructions, although the volume at this stage is very low, too low to make out anything that is being said.

Suddenly and without warning the narrative focus shifts abruptly. We are now, Joe tells us, in eighteenth-century Chile. These are dangerous times, moreover, in which strong leadership is called for – leadership that will be supplied by . . . Don Bernardo O’Higgins, ‘Irish father, Spanish mother’. This rapid transition from a detailed and almost credible, if rather odd, account of the opening night of *The Playboy of the Western World* to a weird and patently fictional (or is it?) story of an Irishman abroad takes its charge

from the swiftness of the motion. Our uncertainty about the possible truth of the events now being recounted to us is maintained partly by this rapidity of narrative momentum and partly by Joe's previously established 'authority' as narrator. His sincere, dry delivery, commands our belief, or at least a continued suspension of our disbelief.

The narrative continues: O'Higgins manages to bring order and stability to his beloved Chile, but although he rules with benign authority and is held in great affection by the people, there is a problem . . .

At this moment, the two video screens present for the first (and only) time a double, synchronized image: a man in a blue denim shirt looks into the camera, slowly raises a gun and fires directly at the lens. The noise is sudden and shocking. We are pulled away from the spoken narrative for an instant and the interruption is accompanied by a sudden increase in the level at which the music is playing. Joe moves abruptly to pick up a pair of white cowboy boots; placing his arms inside, he proceeds to execute a bizarre and rather comical dance with them. Soon he is using not just the boots on his arms but an identical pair which he is wearing on his feet, and the two-boot dance becomes a still more anarchic four-boot performance.

The explosion of onstage energy which this dance represents is one of the few moments of 'action' during the piece. A very small number of other events are physicalized for us, but largely the action is reported, and the energy is provided by the mental and imaginative momentum of the descriptions. With a few exceptions, then, virtually the entire performance depends upon narration, and hence narrative techniques – another important irony within a piece which reveals the attractive unreliability of story.

As the dance (performed with deadpan expression and completed without comment) comes to an end, Joe takes up the story once more. The 'problem', it seems, is that 'you can't have a Latin American dictator with the surname O'Higgins'. And so O'Higgins retires to Peru, a lonely and broken man.

Now, it has occurred to Joe and Christine that we may not all be equally familiar with

Synge's play (we have returned, without comment or explanation, to the original narrative line); but no matter, because they have managed to rope in a few of their friends and family to talk about it for us. Some of them have read the play, others have seen it performed, and while a couple of them have done neither, 'being Irish, they're willing to give it a go anyway'.

Roping in Family and Friends

And so, right on cue, one of the monitors switches to 'Helen', who is going to give us her account of the plot of *The Playboy of the Western World*.¹⁰ Helen is a chatty, silver-haired woman in her late fifties or early sixties. She is clearly not an actress – none of those speaking on the videos are professional performers – but she provides an engaging and amusingly idiosyncratic account of the play's central narrative.

While this is going on, the purpose of some white strips, visible from the start of the show on the trouser legs of both performers, becomes apparent. Joe is taking advantage of this pause in his own narration to use the strips (of sticky tape) to strap blood-pouches to his upper body, under his shirt. This done, he carefully begins to pierce the pouches with a needle, so that the blood stains slowly onto the white cloth, creating an impression that he has been wounded in some way.

As Helen's account comes to a conclusion, Joe now picks up a *third* narrative strand, directing our attention to HUAC: the House Un-American Activities Committee. A brief account of the committee's purposes ensues, in particular their attempts to get Hollywood writers, directors, and actors to 'name names'. No sooner have we begun to engage with this new element than the volume of the music rises once again and a second dance begins, performed this time with carefully mirrored movements by both Joe and Christine.

The dance over, yet another new character is introduced: Leon Trotsky. We are told of a seminal encounter he had as a small boy with another boy of a similar age, seen begging at the roadside. A comically compressed account of 'organizing lots of revolutions,

most notably, of course, the October Revolution' brings us swiftly to Trotsky's flight from Russia to Mexico. Meanwhile, behind Joe, Christine is carefully loading the hand gun.

Our attention is then drawn back to the video monitors, as more friends and family discuss first the role of the men in *The Playboy of the Western World*, and then the familiar theme of the outsider who enters the community and in so doing reveals its petty narrow-mindedness. These observations, like all those that will be spoken from the monitors, are both reflections upon a central narrative, the plot of the original play, yet also contain their own narrative fragments: a core 'objective' story refocused through the lens of subjective experience.

Joe takes up the Latin American strand again. José Miguel O'Higgins, great-great-grandson of Don Bernardo, is feeling trapped. In a desperate attempt to escape his ancestral history, he simply leaves home one day and heads north. He walks and walks, until he reaches a small town in Mexico, where he settles and decides that he will establish a night club, by the name of *Casa Amore*, the House of Love, designed for him by the architect Juan O'Gorman (curiously, also the offspring of an Irish-Spanish mixed marriage).

The *Casa Amore* is a huge success: couples come and feel themselves enfolded in an atmosphere of love and happiness. There are wonderful cabaret performances, including the famous Mexican boot-dance (one narrative puzzle, at least, has been solved: this was the reason for Joe's previously unexplained rendition) and extraordinary live animal acts. Joe abruptly interrupts his own account. He has the distinct impression that when he mentioned live animal acts there were at least two people in the audience who had immediately imagined acts of a sexual nature. A brief, but detailed, account of what we *might* have been imagining is provided and then interrupted by another gunshot from the video monitor. 'Whatever you were thinking,' he stresses, 'can we get one thing straight? This was a family establishment.'

By this point in the performance, we are being asked to hold on to a bewildering

variety of narrative threads and, somehow, to attempt to bring them together. What precisely is being asked of us, the audience? How can these disparate narrative elements be connected? How much of it are we intended to believe? What appears to be outrageous fiction is being presented as an apparently historical account, and yet we have been told at the outset that we are to be given only 'the facts'. Serious political issues are positioned next to absurdly deadpan comedy without any clear signals as to how we are intended to read them. Surely there are moments when we are being 'spun a yarn', but at which precise points and how much of it *might* be true?

Nature of the Narrative Contract

The narrative contract has been established, so an expectation of finding some level of meaning and connection seems justified, but, so far, each time narrative coherence seems to be emerging, the process has been violently disrupted. Can these fragments possibly connect? And meanwhile, what actually hooks us in and what keeps us hooked is the most basic narrative question of all: what is coming next?

After a brief account from another family member/friend about the role of Christy Mahon, the 'good guy' in the play, Joe introduces yet another character and yet another narrative line: the story of Elia Kazan. Starting with his birth in Istanbul in 1909 (by coincidence, the same year that Synge died) and his parents' emigration to New York, where they opened a haberdashery business, he tells us that Kazan wanted a different career for himself. He began to work first in theatre, then the movies, creating such films as *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *On the Waterfront*, and one particular 1952 work, set in Mexico and starring Marlon Brando and Anthony Quinn, *Viva Zapata!*

As Joe describes an early, crucial scene in the film in which Zapata (Brando) sees, like Trotsky, the poverty all around him and decides that this must not be allowed to continue, his voice rises in volume and the emotional level increases. 'Take out the words,

take them right out,' Joe exclaims, 'violence is the only thing these people understand.' He jumps to another scene, where Brando confronts his friend, played by Quinn, with the accusation that he has betrayed the revolution, and the friend says in return that he is sick of all the violence and asks, 'Can a good thing come from a bad act?'

Joe rounds on the audience: 'Does anyone here know the answer to that simple question? Can a good thing come from a bad act?' When (predictably) no one responds to the challenge, Joe is deflated. He has lost confidence, he tells us, in the whole process. He thought we were getting somewhere, but now he's not so sure. Christine steps forward and 'shoots' him with the handgun. Of course, his shirt is already stained with blood, and, rather than falling to the floor, Joe merely looks back at her. The video monitors announce that we are now entering 'Act Two'.

Whereas previously the questions to the audience were merely implicit, arising out of the structure of the performance, they have now been brought to the surface. Joe's reaction, when there is no response from the audience, throws doubt on the previously established narrative contract. Were we really getting anywhere at all? Can we not agree upon an answer to this one, simple question? Christine's 'shooting', without cause or consequence, serves to confuse things further.

And yet, just when we, the audience, are similarly losing faith in our ability to connect the apparently random sequences presented to us by the play, we are thrown this crumb of encouragement. We are reminded, by the simple announcement of a second act, that there is a structure, there is an ordering principle to the material: it is not going to fall easily into a classic narrative model, but there is, nevertheless, forward movement through a pre-constructed arrangement of events.

The Interruptions Increase

'Geraldine', speaking on the video monitor, is shocked: 'He killed his own father!' For this second leg of the story-sequence, Christine takes over the role of narrator. She would like to stick to the facts, she insists. So what

was Joe offering us, then? For example, the 'fact' that *gringo*, a word we customarily associate with Mexican cowboy films, actually originated in Spain as a negative description of Irishmen. (Again we are faced with the question, are we being enlightened or teased? Is this a revelation of previously unsuspected information or just another gameplay?) And, she continues, it was a word that got Synge into trouble: the word 'shift' provoked such strong reactions at that first performance, that Chris speculates aloud whether it might even have been a contemporary euphemism for 'cunt'.

But she doesn't think it was that word in particular that caused the trouble. It was *all* the words, taken cumulatively, that Synge used to describe the Irish. They didn't like being pictured in such negative terms, and it got so difficult for Synge, Christine tells us, that eventually, dying of Hodgkin's disease, he was forced to flee the country with his lover Olga. Rather like José Miguel O'Higgins, he just had to get up and walk away.

While 'Stephen' on the video monitor now reflects upon the question of whether Christy Mahon ever actually explains *why* he killed his father (he does, as it happens: it is because Old Mahon has attempted to force his son into an arranged and highly unsuitable marriage with his former wet-nurse) and the more personal issue of whether there are situations in one's own life when one would be prepared to use violence, Christine goes through the same operation of taping and piercing blood-pouches under her shirt. Joe reloads the gun.

Then, after Stephen's intervention is complete, Chris takes up the narrative (or one of them) again. Elia Kazan was one of those Hollywood directors called before the House Un-American Activities Committee. And he was someone who named names. He gave the names of many writers who, like himself, were card-carrying Communists. The effect was that from that moment those writers were (rather like the actors performing *Playboy of the Western World*) silenced, deprived of the right to speak.

The friends on video begin to interrupt the live action more frequently. They muse

on the attraction of violence, the desire that people have to see something happen, to see 'blood'. Helen, clearly very unhappy at the prospect, is required to fire the handgun towards the camera, and finds the experience draining. When Christine begins to speak about loneliness and asks whether anyone in the audience would like to say something about the subject, it is an on-screen friend who responds: 'Muiris' talks about the loneliness of the Widow Quin and how this affects her motives in the play. Christine then embarks on the most extraordinary digression yet, concerning how plagues of leprosy were dealt with in medieval Europe by isolating the individual concerned. There are yet more reflections on the nature of loneliness, both in Synge's play and from personal experience.

Then we are returned to the story of *Viva Zapata!* and a scene between Brando and his screen-wife on their wedding night. The wife questions the need for an armed struggle and Brando explains with rising passion why the violence is necessary and must continue. Just as Joe's voice began to show excitement, when describing other scenes from the film, Christine's vocal delivery intensifies the emotion. She invites us to picture the climax of the scene – a moment, significantly, of wordless silence – and this time the brief, but tense interval of stillness thus created is broken not by a gunshot, but by a voice from the video monitor: 'Hello? Hello?'

'It's all right, Muiris,' says Christine, 'we're still here.'

This establishment of a more direct interplay between the live performers and the pre-recorded video, first through Muiris's 'response' to Christine's question and then in the reassurance offered to Muiris by Chris, further complicates our perceptions of what is real and what is fictional. Where does story end and reality begin? What kind of relationship exists between the artificiality of the present theatrical moment and the apparent authenticity of the video material?

Another pre-recorded musing ensues, now from 'Stephen', on the subject of loneliness and the strong desire to communicate with someone you miss very much – a desire which

can sometimes be frustrated, just as Christy Mahon and Pegeen fail to communicate at the end of *The Playboy of the Western World*.

When Elia Kazan was filming *Viva Zapata!*, Christine continues, he liked to 'hang out' in Mexico to get the feel of the place. One particular house he liked to visit was that which had been occupied by Leon Trotsky: a house which was riddled with hundreds of bullet-holes, put there, she tells us, by a group of drunken surrealist painters who had tried, on one occasion, to assassinate Trotsky. But Stalin had his own plans. Discovering where Trotsky had retreated to, he dispatched a hired killer . . .

As Chris tells us the details of the murder, Joe is slowly lifting his arms to shoot her with the gun. The suspense is palpable: we are getting used to the fact that gunshots are a feature of the production, but we haven't yet accustomed ourselves to the noise and the shock when it happens. However, when it does come, the shot is fired not by Joe, but by another of the friends on video. Joe simply lowers his arms and Christine continues her narrative of Trotsky's death. As the murderer approached the exiled revolutionary, ice-pick in hand, Trotsky was apparently writing these words: 'Is there another way to live?'

Act Three

'Act Three' appears on the screens. Now Joe does fire, three times, at Chris and, like Joe's before her, her shirt is already blood-stained. She does not move. While we are waiting for her response, we are startled again as another woman on screen fires at the camera and is clearly shocked herself at the physical impact of the explosion. More video reflections on Synge's play, this time on the violence that can be provoked by an outburst of temper and the madness that can come over men when they try to outdo each other in boasting of their exploits.

Joe takes up the microphone again, and with it the explicit role of storyteller, returning us once more to the second performance of *The Playboy of the Western World*. The rioters had turned out again, and so too had

seventy policemen. As the play unfolded before them in total silence, their violent intentions turned first to bewilderment and eventually to disinterest, as they drifted away during the third act. So on the first occasion that they were ever performed to an audience, the closing moments of the drama were presented in absolute silence. In silence, Christy Mahon turned his back on the community he had briefly entered, and stepped through the open shebeen door towards the carefully painted backcloth of Irish hills behind. In silence, the audience were required to 'fill in the gaps, join up the dots' and make sense both of the scene and of the entire, highly controversial play.

'Jimmy' (another friend on the video) fires at the camera. Joe, now slumped to one side, as if in long-delayed response to the earlier shooting, begins to describe for us a final, climactic scene, one night in the *Casa Amore*. Everyone is there: Zapata, Kazan, Brando, Anthony Quinn 'showing off his Mexican accent', Leon Trotsky, twenty surrealist painters sharing one drink between them, Juan O'Gorman, José O'Higgins. After a stunning performance by Pablo and his Dancing Chihuahuas, John Millington Synge and his lover Olga turn up to perform their favourite extracts from *Playboy of the Western World*.

As Synge and Olga enact the moment from Act Three where Christy declares to Pegeen that he wants to share his life with her, Pegeen/Olga pulls out a gun and, with the drunken spectators looking on in bewilderment, shoots him at point-blank range. In the silence that follows, Brando and Quinn, Kazan, Trotsky, and all the others present are also required to fill in the gaps, join up the dots and make sense of what they have just witnessed. The fictional scenes from the play have turned into a 'real' moment of death as the blood spreads slowly across Synge's shirt. (And yet, of course, this is within the most obviously fictionalized moment in the entire piece.)

While Joe has been painting this truly bizarre scene for the audience, Christine has danced gently to the Latin American music. Now she begins to sink to the floor – a gracefully artificial stage 'death' – and lies there,

microphone in hand: 'I think we are drawn to violence, that there's a dark side in all of us.'

Joe is now lying on the floor as well. Using his microphone, he questions Chris about the truthfulness of her account. When she said that Trotsky had died writing, 'Is there another way to live?' was that true?

'No, it's not true.'

'So, you just . . . made that bit up?'

'Yes.'

'Why? Why did you make that bit up?'

A final gunshot from the video. 'Muiris' is the last person to shoot directly at the camera. He holds the pose.

'I don't know.'


'Helen', on video, reflects upon the ending of Synge's play (and by implication the conclusion of this performance also): 'The ending . . . it just seemed to end. . . . I was quite disappointed. I was expecting a bit more action at the end of it. But it ended all very calm, you know?' Christine and Joe are 'dead' in front of us. The video screens display a final message: 'Curtain.'

Narrative Transgressions

The full complexity of *Play-boy's* construction is revealed in these closing moments. Bizarrely messy at first sight, they ultimately reveal a hidden structure which is every bit as ingenious as that of a traditional well-made plot. The assorted narrative lines, each with its own internal logic, are cleverly made to converge upon each other during the final moments of the performance, while never making claims to coherence or closure. We are certainly no closer to knowing the 'facts' of anything under discussion than we were at the beginning, and this is a deliberate, consciously ironic strategy. Yet, although we can find no plot or story in any traditional sense, we see strands of narrative criss-crossing and overlapping, certainly *plotted* – in the way that intersecting lines are plotted on a piece of graph paper – through an eclectic range of material, both historical, fictional, and fantastical, that can be revealed and *re-plotted* by an engaged audience member. The piece draws us repeatedly into a project of reconstruction, on the clear assumption

against a background of latin dance rhythms
and the occasional outburst of stray gunfire, Play-boy
attempts to charm
and disarm with tales of
great deeds and conquests
or....
against a background of latin dance rhythms and
the occasional outburst of stray gunfire,
Play-boy attempts to engage with
serious moral and social issues
or....
against a background of latin
dance
rhythms
and the occasional outburst of
stray gunfire, Play-boy airs the
dirty laundry
of a couple in a long-standing relationship
or....against a background of latin
dance rhythms and the occasional outburst of
stray gunfire, Play-boy rejects reality and opts
for the fantasy world of wondering what
our lives would have been like
if - and it's a big if -
we had made a different set of decisions
or....

Since 1992 desperate optimists have picked at the boundaries of performance convention to create some of the most distinctive and refreshing performances to have emerged in the 90s. An Irish company based in the UK, they have made award winning theatre work that has toured extensively. For Play-boy desperate optimists have collaborated with photographer Chris Dorley-Brown in the making of a video that will form an integral part of the performance. So, for all intents and purposes alone on stage desperate optimists will be joined, through video, by various characters who will constantly attempt to interrupt, disrupt, derail and complicate matters.



that there are stories here to be examined, compared, and reassembled.

Thus *Play-boy*, in common with the kinds of work produced by New York-based The Wooster Group, demands that those watching complete the work, 'requires an audience to realize the multitude of possibilities on which it opens'.¹¹ The interpretive challenge is playfully set out within the language of the piece itself: how will we, the audience witnessing this performance, choose to 'fill in the gaps, join up the dots'? This narrative puzzle is framed almost entirely within a context of ludic enjoyment. How do we choose between competing narrative strands? Which route through the work shall we take? How shall we separate fact from fiction? Is such separation possible, or even desirable?

In publicity material for the show, the multiple possibilities of narrative progression are made explicit, as in the flyer reproduced above. The dizzying multiplication of possibilities inherent in its account is echoed

repeatedly within the performance itself. Multiple narrative pathways are opened up and we are drawn first down one route, then abruptly switched to another: an account of the first performance of *Playboy of the Western World* is interrupted by the story of Don Bernardo O'Higgins; descriptions of the proceedings of the House Un-American Activities Committee are suddenly displaced by a scene from the early life of Leon Trotsky.

The competences demanded of an audience member, however, are demonstrably and repeatedly those of narrative. In effect, the work exploits a wide range of narrative conventions, although these do not combine to produce anything even faintly resembling a linear narrative. Or, to express it another way, the structure of the performance is in no way constrained within conventional narrative limits, despite the fact that it is shot through with numerous narrative strands.

For desperate optimists, although they are working within what is sometimes called

New Theatre – frequently characterized by its eschewal of story – narrative continues to play an ‘absolutely crucial’ role.¹³ Joe Lawlor insists that any kind of performance work designed for an audience must continue, in one way or another, to take narrative principles and narrative structures into account. Though there may frequently be no narrative in the traditional sense in New Theatre, it is very often the case, according to Joe, that a work will ‘play with and around’ the elements of classical narrative. Some engagement with the basic operations of narrative will and must occur, even where these operations are in no way taken as normative models or patterns.

Lawlor’s view is that, in practice, it is very difficult indeed for a maker of theatre even to *think* outside the boundaries of narrative structure. The new models are thus defined precisely by their relationship with and responses to the old. The *act* of transgression must have an *object* of transgression, in order to make any sense: non-narrative theatre, or at least that which is prepared with an audience in mind, is dependent upon the pre-existence and continuing vitality of narrative work.

The Invisible Narrative

That object may, however, be ‘invisible’. In this respect, it is interesting to note that, while *Play-boy* is ostensibly all about Synge’s play, not a single word of Synge’s text is actually spoken during the performance. This ‘disappearance’ of the primary text is of fundamental importance, since it mirrors the process whereby a canonical work such as *The Playboy of the Western World* is assimilated into people’s cultural awareness to the point that it is familiar by its ‘trace’ rather than in its original textual form. As a result, the reconstructed text formed from the recollections of the various friends and family members is both incomplete and often inaccurate, whilst at the same time revealing what are, *for them*, the most significant and memorable aspects of the Synge play.

By reading *into* the text, they both re-form existing material and add their own, self-

generated fragments, thus bringing aspects of their personalities and experiences into the frame. Helen is able to provide a reasonably coherent account of the narrative up to a certain point, but then she falters and cannot supply a conclusion: later on, she describes the ending as disappointing. While Stephen is puzzling over whether Christy Mahon provides any kind of reason for killing his father, Geraldine is simply appalled by the violence of Christy Mahon’s original act, viewing the patricide in Synge’s play almost in terms of an accomplished reality rather than the story it so patently is.

Each of the speakers on video, in fact, remembers different things, gives a significantly different account of the play, comments on different aspects, and thus reveals, in the process, his or her own specific cultural expectations and preoccupations. And this process of what might be called ‘prejudicial memory’ takes place, of course, in response to *Play-boy* also. For the CD-ROM *Stalking Memory*, published as part of the *On Memory* edition of *Performance Research* (November 2000), desperate optimists probed this very question, asking a number of academics and practitioners to record what details they could remember of the company’s various productions. These are some of Alex Johnston’s recollections of *Play-boy*:

What I remember best about *Play-boy*: the stuff about guns, the carefully framed panic, always soothed by the lulling salsa music, the noise and the blood and the sound and fury. Which is unfair, because an elderly man with a potatoey sort of face spoke at length on video about the meaning and significance of Synge’s *The Playboy of the Western World*, and I can’t remember anything he said. . . . The central narrative, such as there was one, was blatantly simple, a cobbled-together series of revolutionary clichés.¹⁴

This impressionistic collage is interesting both in terms of what it includes and what it leaves out, and could well prove to be typical of the way in which most of us tend to recollect performances we have seen, whether narrative or non-narrative: a series of images, a sense of tone, an awareness of the core subject matter, and a more or less tenuous grasp of the (reconstructed) narrative sweep.

Fact or Fiction?

Another essential quality of the piece is to be located in the precise relationship between fact and fiction, and the deliberate uncertainties created over this highly questionable distinction. In a very explicit way, this is physically embodied by the deft use of video, with the incorporation of real-time 'interactions' between Joe and Christine and characters seen on the monitors. But it is also embedded at a deeper level in the way that historical elements in the piece are handled.

To get some idea of how this effect is achieved, it is instructive to compare the narrative Joe Lawlor provides of the first production of *The Playboy of the Western World* with contemporary accounts of the *Playboy* riots. There is no doubt that Synge's play was embroiled in controversy from its opening performance. However, the situation on that first night does not appear to have been quite as Joe paints it:

The first act was applauded, and though there were protests in the second act, 'Faint calls and ejaculations like "Oh, no! Take it off!" came from various parts of the house.' . . . Lady Gregory was confident enough to send a telegram to Yeats, lecturing in Scotland, 'Play great success.' W. G. Fay [playing the role of Christy Mahon] says he felt hostility grow in the third act from the entrance of the Widow Quin; Padraic Colum blames Old Mahon's entry, 'That scene was too representational. There stood a man with horribly bloodied bandage upon his head, making a figure that took the whole thing out of the atmosphere of high comedy.' There were hisses and cat-calls at the word 'bloody' and loud howls greeted Christy's words about a drift of chosen females standing in their shifts (an image made more real and shocking, according to [Joseph] Holloway, by Fay's substitution of 'Mayo girls' for 'chosen females'). The noise increased and 'by the time the curtain fell on the last act, the crowd was arguing and fighting with itself. People in front leaned over the backs of the seats and demanded quiet – a lot of people seemed to be doing this – and those at the back responded by shouting and hissing loudly. The crowd which eventually emerged into the streets was in an ugly mood.' Lady Gregory sent Yeats a second telegram, 'Audience broke up in disorder at the word shift.'¹⁵

Joe's definitive assertion that the third act remained unperformed on the opening night can thus be seen to be the first of a number of

fictionalizations of these historical events and characters. Still more intriguing, however, is the discovery that this particular piece of fictionalizing was not necessarily a deliberate strategy on the part of Joe and Christine, but appears to have arisen from their reading of W. G. Fay's account of events. Fay, who played Christy Mahon in those first performances, does make it clear that the play was performed in its entirety that first evening. However, he adds confusingly that he was trying to 'get them to let us finish . . . but it was of no use'.¹⁶ Talking about researching the facts behind the account, Joe expresses genuine uncertainty on this point:

I'm trying to remember now. I think the show was stopped, but I think when they performed it again, completely, they did it in silence. They literally just mimed everything, they went through the entire actions, but they were allowed to get through to the very end that time, those actors. So the very *first* time they attempted to perform it, which would, I guess, have been its premiere, I suppose, they never got through it, they actually – it *was* stopped. And so the actual – the very first time they got through it from beginning to end, successfully, they didn't talk. It *was* actually done in complete silence.¹⁷

This being the case, not only the piece itself but also the process of *making the piece* can be seen to be 'about' the unconscious slippage between events and their various retellings in narrative form.

Though the underlying conflict and violence were real enough, and corroborated in various eye-witness accounts, the compression and re-shaping of significant elements is typical of the kind of narrative distortion that takes place whenever an event is recalled and is then re-formed for the purpose (explicit or implicit) of creating a 'good story'. Improbable as it sounds, the theatre auditorium really was lined with felt during the course of the week, in order to stifle the noise of stamping feet.¹⁸ And there was a meeting on the Sunday immediately following the opening night at which cuts were made to the text. However, the suggestion that the entire verbal text was removed is another exaggeration of actual events. Lady Gregory, one of the founder members of the

Abbey Theatre, gives her own account of the situation thus:

I remember his bringing the play to us in Dublin. . . . We were almost bewildered by its abundance and fantasy, but we felt – and Mr Yeats said very plainly – that there was far too much ‘bad language’, there were too many violent oaths, and the play itself was marred by this. I did not think it was fit to be put on the stage without cutting. It was agreed that it should be cut in rehearsal. A fortnight before its production Mr Yeats, thinking I had seen a rehearsal, writes: ‘I should like to know how you thought *The Playboy* acted. . . . Have they cleared many of the objectionable sentences out of it?’

I did not, however, see a rehearsal and did not hear the play again until the night of its production, and then I told Synge that the cuts were not enough, that many more should be made. He gave me leave to do this, and in consultation with the players I took out many phrases which, though in the printed book, have never since that production been spoken on our stage. I am sorry that they were not taken out before it had been played at all, but that is just what happened.¹⁹

Whilst her description of the meeting merely speaks of removing ‘many phrases’, it should be noted that W. G. Fay states that he did make an arrangement with the cast to play the scene without speaking any of the words aloud.²⁰ Lady Gregory, however, remembers it differently:

On the Monday night *Riders to the Sea*, which was the first piece, went very well indeed. But in the interval after it, I noticed on one side of the pit a large group of men sitting together, not a woman among them. I told Synge I thought it a sign of some organized disturbance and he telephoned to have the police at hand. The first part of the first act went undisturbed. Then suddenly an uproar began. The group of men I had noticed boomed, hooted, blew tin trumpets. The editor of one of the Dublin weekly papers was sitting next to me, and I asked him to count them. He did so and said there were forty making the disturbance. *It was impossible to hear a word of the play.* The curtain came down for a minute, but *I went round and told the actors to go on playing to the end, even if not a word could be heard.* The police, hearing the uproar, began to file in, but I thought the disturbers might tire themselves out if left alone, or be satisfied with having made their protest, and I asked them to go outside but stay within call in case of any attempt being made to injure the players or the stage. There were very few people in the stalls, but

among them was Lord Walter Fitzgerald, grand-nephew of the patriot, the adored Lord Edward. He stood up and asked that he and others in the audience might be allowed to hear the play, but this leave was refused. The disturbance lasted to the end of the evening, *not one word had been heard after the first ten minutes.*²¹

So, whatever the final truth of the matter, a virtually wordless second performance is what the audience actually *experienced* on the evening of 28 January 1907; and thereafter, during the whole of that first week, anyone applying for tickets to see Synge’s new play was presented with the following letter, along with a voucher:

Dear Sir,

In response to your application, we enclose Voucher to be exchanged at Booking Office at Theatre, or at Messrs Cramer’s, Westmoreland Street for Numbered Ticket. Should it be impossible to hear the play the night you select we will send you another Voucher on receiving your application.

Yours faithfully,

W. A. Henderson,
*Secretary.*²²

Joe’s assertion that those first audiences were required to fill in the gaps and join up the dots for themselves, working purely on the evidence of what they could see, is clearly also accurate. As a poem written shortly after the controversy amusingly put it:

Our own opinion, we admit,
Is rather – well – uncertain,
Because we couldn’t hear one bit
From rise to fall of curtain . . .²³

A letter written to the Editor of the *Evening Mail* on 31 January 1907, making the following suggestion, adds the final humorous twist:

SIR – If Mr Synge wishes to turn the ‘Sinn Fein’ howlers into an applauding claque, he need only write a play portraying the Irish peasant as a flawless demi-god, using language as reticent as that of a Bishop when denouncing an editor who dares to think. It might, perhaps, be safer to leave out words altogether, and give a play in pantomime like *L’Enfant Prodigue* (the artistes thinking carefully pruned thoughts in Gaelic).²⁴

Fact into Fiction

As we have noted, the means by which fact becomes fiction and real-life narratives are transformed into fictional ones lie at the heart of Synge's play. He shows us with relish how easily the simple, plain knock to the edge of the skull becomes a mighty blow that splits the father to the waist, and Christy himself grows from a frightened runaway into a 'gallant orphan'.

Joe and Christine's own narratives are propelled along a similarly dizzying path of exaggeration, where fact and fantasy become interwoven and self-sustaining. A vital clue to this aspect of the performance is supplied by the hyphenation of the title, *Play-boy*, which draws our attention to the subtle interplay of significations involved. According to Maurice Bourgeois, an early commentator on Synge's play, the word is redolent with meaning:

The word 'playboy' (Irish *búachaill barra*, literally 'boy of the game'), a term used in the Irish game of 'hurling' (*camánaidheacht*) is Hibernian slang. Its exact meaning (not to be found in Wright's *English Dialect Dictionary* (iv. 543, s.v. 'play-boy'), which gives only the older acceptations of the word: 1. the devil; 2. a playful woman) is 'hoaxer, humbugger, mystifier (not impostor), one who does sham things.' . . . In Synge's use of it, it seems to have three implicit by-meanings: (a) one who is played with; (b) one who plays like a player (*i.e.* a comedian and also an athlete or champion: witness the sports in the play); (c) one who is full of the play-spirit: 'a wild dare-devil is called a play-boy [as in Synge's well-known comedy]'. ('The Irish Dialect of English,' by Mary Hayden and Marcus Hartog, *Fortnightly Review*, April 1909, p. 779 and n. 1). The word, which is half-humorous and half-poetical is a very rich one, and (like 'philanderer', which, Mr Bernard Shaw tells me, has its exact equivalent only in Swedish) is exceedingly difficult to translate.²⁵

These descriptions perfectly capture desperate optimists' own spirit of play, as they create a multiplicity of fantastic narratives out of the extraordinary events of history and gently tease the audience's narrative credulity. For the fact is that the first Supreme Leader of Chile genuinely *was* the offspring of an Irish-Spanish marriage by the name of Bernardo O'Higgins; and in the early

twentieth century there really was a Mexican architect called Juan O'Gorman, unlikely though both of these characters sound.

On the other hand, it is certainly clear, as we reach the climax of the narrative, in which Juan O'Gorman, José O'Higgins, Zapata, Elia Kazan, Brando, Anthony Quinn, Leon Trotsky, and twenty surrealist painters are joined by the terminally ill Synge and Olga,²⁶ for their re-enactment of a section of dialogue from his controversial drama, that we are firmly in the realms of fantasy. This makes the impact of Joe and Christine's final exchange, where he ignores the blatantly fictional quality of this entire scene and merely asks why she 'made up' a tiny detail to do with Trotsky's death, all the more bathetic, and thus effective, in its understatement.

It is apparent that Joe and Christine are seeking to engage the audience fully in the meaning-making process by means of such narrative games. It is interesting to note that both J. L. Styan and T. R. Whitaker discern similar forces at work in Synge's original.²⁷ Whitaker brings this aspect into sharp relief when he notes that:

The Playboy locates itself in a much-disputed territory: the 'educational' function of role-playing in 'life' and in 'art'. The play's very ambivalences, I think, are clues to its meaning. Its grotesque style elicits from us an unusually sustained combination of spontaneous sympathy and detached irony. We share in Christy's passionate improvisation and in the formal patterns of Synge's precise comic control. . . . We share Synge's marvellously balanced awareness of the wry fictiveness of the seeming actual and the potent actuality of our most profound fictions. But these effects all point to the central mysteries of drama itself. For drama is that art of co-operative role-playing which submits passionate improvisation *and its spontaneously doubled response in the spectator* to formal control, locates us both 'inside' and 'outside' the action, and so brings to immediate awareness much that otherwise remains hidden in the more compulsively histrionic texture of our lives.²⁸

Later in the same essay, Styan states the audience's role in this process even more succinctly when he adds, 'The full meaning of *The Playboy's* text begins to appear, I think, only when we try to read it as a "score" for a participatory event.'

Narrative as Participatory Event

It is evident that this performance makes deliberate use of narrative expectations to raise playful but significant questions about the role of the spectator in the reconstruction of narrative, as well as its wider role, both fictional (and plausible) and non-fictional (and implausible), in human experience. Audience engagement with theatrical presentations of any kind naturally involves a complex set of responses, at many different levels – physical, emotional, aesthetic and phenomenological, as well as cognitive. But the continuing relevance of narrative processes, albeit channelled in these novel and ‘impossible’ ways, is demonstrated by a piece such as this.

We might also observe that audiences are becoming increasingly sophisticated in their reading of narrative, more able to cope with the games and puzzles presented by such work, and more willing to discard the more conventional expectations of reading merely for a pre-formed plot, designed and ‘closed’ in advance by an all-seeing, all-knowing writer, in favour of the pleasures conferred by puzzlement, delay, and contradiction. They are increasingly capable of bringing their own personal narratives to bear upon the narratives they encounter – or construct for themselves – within the theatrical experience.

The reconstruction of narrative by an audience is both a psychological imperative – looking for pattern, repetition, development, interaction – and a ludic pleasure that involves, among other things, identifying the fluid boundaries which separate art from life and fiction from non-fiction.

Notes and References

1. Roland Barthes and Stephen Heath, *Image, Music, Text* (London: Fontana, 1977), p. 79.
2. For a fascinating account of the ways in which reality is organized around the principles of narrative, see Jerome Bruner, ‘The Narrative Construction of Reality’, *Critical Inquiry*, XVIII, No. 1 (1991), p. 1–21.
3. William A. Armstrong et al., *The Playboy of the Western World and Two Other Irish Plays* (London; New York: Penguin, 1987), p. 84.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 89.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 98.
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Ibid.*, p. 106.
8. UK-based Irish performance artists. The uncapitalized typography represents the company’s preferred format.
9. Jerome S. Bruner, *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds* (Cambridge, MA; London: Harvard University Press, 1986), p. 201. Also cites research undertaken by Baron Michotte which demonstrates that causality is a basic or ‘primitive’ perceptual category, p. 17.
10. As individual faces appear on the screens, names are also displayed, in uncapitalized typography.
11. David Savran, *Breaking the Rules: the Wooster Group* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1988), p. 55.
12. From a publicity flyer for *Play-boy*.
13. This quote and the observations that follow are taken from an unpublished interview with the author, given on 21 November 2001.
14. Alex Johnston, ‘Play-boy’, *Stalking Memory*, CD-ROM, distributed with *Performance Research*, V, No. 3 (Winter 2000).
15. See Maurice Harmon, *J. M. Synge: Centenary Papers, 1971* (Dublin: Dolmen Press, 1972), p. 76 (italics mine).
16. W. G. Fay, in Ronald Ayling, *J. M. Synge, Four Plays: a Casebook* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992), p. 143.
17. Unpublished interview with the author, 21 November 2001.
18. Berrow in Harmon, *op. cit.*, p. 82.
19. Lady Gregory, *Our Irish Theatre: a Chapter of Autobiography* (Gerrards Cross: Smythe, 1972), p. 80–1.
20. Fay states that he ‘arranged with the cast that we should simply walk through the play, not speaking a word aloud, but changing positions and going through all the motions, so to speak’. See Ayling, *J.M. Synge, Four Plays: a Casebook*, p. 144.
21. Gregory, *Our Irish Theatre*, p. 67–8 (italics mine).
22. In Hugh Hunt, *The Abbey: Ireland’s National Theatre, 1904–1978* (Dublin; New York: Gill and Macmillan, 1979), p. 72.
23. Berrow in Harmon, *op. cit.*, p. 81.
24. In James Kilroy, *The ‘Playboy’ Riots* (Dublin: Dolmen Press, 1971), p. 54.
25. Maurice Bourgeois, *John Millington Synge and the Irish Theatre* (London: Constable, 1913), p. 193–4, note 1.
26. Synge did, in fact, die of Hodgkin’s disease, although he himself was probably unaware of the true nature of his final illness (cf. Greene, in Harmon, *op. cit.*, p. 183), and his final days were spent, not in Mexico, but in a Dublin nursing home. The strongest romantic attachment he formed seems to have been with the actress Molly Allgood, whose surname presumably inspired the similarly assonant ‘Olga’, and who did, indeed, play Pegeen Mike in the original production, under her stage-name, Maire O’Neill.
27. Styan in Thomas R. Whitaker, ‘J. M. Synge and *Playboy of the Western World*’, *Twentieth Century Interpretations of ‘The Playboy of the Western World’: a Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1969), p. 111–16.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 6 (italics mine).