

# "Celebrating Confusion"



"Celebrating Confusion":  
The Theatre of Frank McGuinness

By

Kenneth Nally

**CAMBRIDGE  
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P U B L I S H I N G

"Celebrating Confusion": The Theatre of Frank McGuinness, by Kenneth Nally

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FOR LAURA AND MY PARENTS



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Kenneth Nally,  
December 2008

# INTRODUCTION

## OF MUTABILITY

### NARRATIVES OF DIFFERENCE

What man that sees the ever-whirling wheel  
Of Change, that which all mortal things doth sway,  
But that thereby doth find, and plainly feel,  
How Mutability in them doth play  
—*The Faerie Queen*

Frank McGuinness is a famously prolific playwright. In 1982 an invitation to a drama workshop on the strength of a sketched outline for a play entitled *The Factory Girls* saw him write his first play in less than a week. Following that workshop in Galway, the play was produced at Dublin's Peacock Theatre, upon which McGuinness's rate of production would slow but slightly. Since then this he has compiled a body of work that includes over thirty full-length dramatic texts, two collections of poetry and numerous other general writings. If the size of this oeuvre is remarkable then so too is the diversity of subject matter, for the settings of his works range from ancient Greece to modern Beirut via Renaissance Italy and Derry during the Troubles. Though such scope suggests a body of work that rejects any single defining reduction the concerns of his plays always explore aspects of contemporary Ireland, in particular those aspects which modern Irish society has sought to ignore. His plays probe the margins of society illuminating such varied social and cultural issues as homosexuality, the coercive restraints of the Irish family, the Ulster Protestant identity, homelessness, the role of the artist within society, imprisonment and international terrorism. Each time these concerns are examined with a carefully sculpted dramatic style that consistently focuses on individual states of consciousness.

One of McGuinness's casual writings, a television review that characteristically paired *The South Bank Show* with *The Simpson*, offers a useful insight into McGuinness's early ideas regarding the make-up of a playwright. Written before his second production it speaks of how a

dramatist could be 'torn by the conflict of articulacy that results from the divisions of belonging and not belonging.'<sup>1</sup> In a sense McGuinness was speaking personally for not only has the experience of geographical and political partition influenced his work, it has provided him with a key metaphor. Being 'born in the North, which is politically classified as the South' gives him, he suggests elsewhere, a 'lovely confusion'<sup>2</sup>. Statements such as this have contributed to an occasionally reductive tendency to read McGuinness in terms of colonialism and nationalist politics but such approaches misses the more fundamental imperatives of McGuinness's theatre. The phrase 'a lovely confusion' is an unusual concept but one that is typical of McGuinness's contrary theatre in that as well as suggesting the turmoil of the individual mind it celebrates ambiguity and denigrates the simplicity of essentialist order. His plays both develop this confusion through stagecraft and structure and personify it in characters so as to challenge the monolithic notions of gender, sexuality, and culture which he has railed so consistently against. If one thing unites his body of work it is the repeated assertion that confusion is paradoxically a necessary precursor to understanding, with confusion being positioned as critical in the broadest meaning of the word.

This study is concerned with the strategies through which McGuinness seeks to represent the relations of the individual with the world in general and with Ireland in particular. Its argument is that his collection of plays is in fact highly unified, that in its range of setting, of styles and genres it examines a multiplicity of perspectives which serve only to further illuminate one central concern: the individual consciousness, and the construction of individual identity through memory, fiction, history and art.

McGuinness was born in Buncrana, Co. Donegal on 3<sup>rd</sup> July 1953, which makes him a northern writer even though he is not a writer from Northern Ireland. The situation in Northern Ireland and the issues of Ireland's past are always close to the surface in his work. McGuinness was a student in UCD, on Bloody Sunday, 31 January 1972, the day on which he has since said he 'ceased to be a child.'<sup>3</sup> Unlike other northern writers such as Brian Friel, whose work generally addresses his belief that the

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<sup>1</sup> McGuinness, 'Stupid the Simpsons aren't,' *Sunday Tribune*: 'Television and Video' 16 June 1985.

<sup>2</sup> Frank McGuinness, 'An Ulster Son Observed: Interview with Frank McGuinness,' interview with Carolyn Pollard, *Quarto*, (Winter 1987/88): 12-13.

<sup>3</sup> Frank McGuinness, 'Personal Concerns,' interview with Colm O' Briain, dir. Louise Lentin (Dublin: Cresendo/ RTE, 1991) videocassette.

future of Irish drama 'must depend on the slow process of development of the Irish mind, and it will shape and be shaped by political events,'<sup>4</sup> McGuinness avoids tackling politics directly, though his work has often used the Troubles<sup>5</sup> as a background and his plays are political in the broader sense of the word. He has been outspoken regarding his disgust at violence; for instance, following the killing of eleven people awaiting the Remembrance Sunday ceremony in Enniskillen in November 1987 he acknowledged that he 'felt this rage at the Irish Republican Army for inflicting on another generation the burden of grief for a place'<sup>6</sup> while he has also said: 'I'm angry at our own history – a history that has allowed blood to become a common language. I'm angry at my own part in it, even to have allowed my own tacit agreement to the spilling of that blood. I don't know how I can stop it, other than to stand up and say that it is happening.'<sup>7</sup> Though he once was, in his own words a 'Catholic Republican', the violence in Northern Ireland led him 'to abandon [his] ...personal dream for a united Ireland', and in work which has been interrogative of all encompassing narratives, he has been critical of nationalism in particular. Distinctively, his drama has focused on the microcosmic inheritance of the Troubles, the individual disturbances that result. For example, *Carthaginians*, the play in which McGuinness engaged the event of Bloody Sunday, is representative of his approach in that it did not deal the question of what happened on that terrible day, but looked at the aftermath, and the individual and collective trauma that resulted.

McGuinness's experience of geographical and political partition has influenced his work. He has used the border allegorically to explore constructs of national identity, human polarisation and essentialising notions of gender, sexuality, and culture. Alienation is a major theme of McGuinness's early drama where it is often linked with sexuality and the questioning of sexuality. He notes: 'I'm not one of those Irish writers who seems obsessed with their childhood. I was more influenced by puberty,

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<sup>4</sup> Brian Friel, 'Plays peasant and unpleasant,' *Times Literary Supplement* 17 March 1972: 306.

<sup>5</sup> 'The Troubles' refers to the period of violent conflict in Northern Ireland beginning with the Civil Rights marches in the late 1960s to the political resolution enshrined in the 1998 Good Friday Agreement.

<sup>6</sup> McGuinness, 'Personal Concerns.'

<sup>7</sup> Frank McGuinness, 'On Fire,' interview with Deirdre Purcell, *The Sunday Tribune* 15 May 1988:17.

because that is the time Derry exploded.’<sup>8</sup> He explains the conflation of sexuality and politics in many of his plays by acknowledging: ‘I was 15, 16, when my sexuality was developing and there was a war going on all around me. That’s the time that really shaped me. There was also a sexual struggle going on inside me. So that was bound to influence the plays.’<sup>9</sup> Thus homosexuality has often been a disruptive force in his plays, probing public and national discourse, reflecting McGuinness’s personal situation as a gay man in Ireland where the state did not decriminalise homosexual acts until he was thirty years old. His best work draws on the contradictions and disharmonies that result and develops the specific to explore individual and communal states of consciousness.

A number of theoretical frameworks are utilised in this study. Of these the most significant are Queer theory, Reception theory, Intertextuality, and in particular Hermeneutics. Overall, my approaches have sought to recognise theatre as a public art form, one in which the audience is implicit in the process of making meaning. To acknowledge the subjectivity of the reader/audience I have thus drawn on reception theory to account for the interpretational process within the theatre. A number of theorists in diverse fields have taken approaches that focus on the change or frustration of a reader’s expectation. ‘Subjective criticism’, such as that espoused by reader-response theorists, is unsuited to McGuinness’s work for it accords little significance to a work’s original reception: a dismissal which fundamentally negates its usefulness within theatre studies. However, H.R. Jauss has derived a theory of ‘reception aesthetics’ that moves from accounts of individual reader-response to consider the communal horizon of expectation against which any work is received. Arguing that the methods of Marxist and Formalist schools ‘conceive the *literary fact* within the closed circle of an aesthetics of production and of representation’, Jauss argues that ‘in doing so, they deprive literature of a dimension that inalienably belongs to its aesthetic character as well as its social influence: the dimension of its reception and its influence.’<sup>10</sup> The reaction to individual productions will be a key consideration within this study which proceeds from the understanding that theatrical texts are

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<sup>8</sup> Frank McGuinness, ‘The Healing Touch,’ interview with Joe Jackson, *Sunday Independent* 21 April 2002, 28 Apr. 2002  
<<http://www.picks.plus.com/howard/mcguinness.htm>>.

<sup>9</sup> Frank McGuinness, ‘The Healing Touch.’

<sup>10</sup> Hans Robert Jauss, ‘Literary history as a challenge to literary theory’, *Towards an aesthetic of reception*, trans. Timothy Bahti (Brighton, 1992) 18-45. 18.

inadequately understood if one focuses on how they are produced without taking account of the original reception.<sup>11</sup>

However, it is the intention of this book to go beyond public reception and explore the mechanisms by which McGuinness seeks to provoke individually determined responses to his work. To do so, I feel it is necessary to go to the source of Jauss's theory, and in particular, to focus on how he draws from hermeneutics. Jauss is influenced by Gadamer's concept of a 'fusion of horizons', where a fusion takes place between the world embodied in the text and the world of the reader. Such a framework is appropriate to McGuinness's work. This is not to fall into a solipsistic relativism for theorists such as Jauss or Wolfgang Iser differ from reader-response critics such as Stanley Fish in that they believe that the text has an objective structure, even if that structure requires configuration by the reader. As Iser points out, the indeterminacy of a work:

represents the most important link between text and reader. It is the switch that activates the reader in using his own ideas in order to fulfil the intention of the text. This means that it is the basis of a textual structure in which the reader's part is already incorporated.<sup>12</sup>

Crucially, such a theory admits the intention of the text. Moreover, in a more holistic way, the concept of the hermeneutic circle also emphasises the connection between form and content that is often at the core of McGuinness's work: trying to understand any hermeneutic text we approach the parts by reference to the whole, yet we cannot grasp the whole without reference to the parts. I believe that this circular process is central to the meaning of McGuinness's work, where the opening dialectic and evolving tradition of such hermeneutics acts to prevent closure; and meaning is understood but is never final. I will attend to the hermeneutic concerns of McGuinness's work later when considering the importance of narrative and identity. First, I will consider the intertextual nature of McGuinness's drama.

The hermeneutic concern is one inextricably bound in intertextuality, a key feature of McGuinness's drama. At times the depth of reference and allusion can appear daunting. Academic interests are evident in his work,

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<sup>11</sup> Here Jauss argues that 'the historical life of a literary work is unthinkable without the active participation of its addressees.' 'Literary history as a challenge to literary theory', 25.

<sup>12</sup> Wolfgang Iser, 'Indeterminacy and the reader's response', *Aspects of Narrative, Selected papers from the English Institute*, ed. J. Hillis Miller (New York, 1971) 2-45. 31.

which is rich in allusions to the Old and Middle English that McGuinness once taught.<sup>13</sup> Mingled with these are quotes and allusions to film, music and song that betray his equal delight in other more accessible elements of popular culture. Roland Barthes offers a wide definition of intertextuality and considers any text an intertext, suggesting that 'any text is a tissue of past citations.'<sup>14</sup> However, I use the term to indicate a diffuse penetration of an individual text by memories, echoes, transformations, of other texts. In such cases the citation must be deliberate in some way. Here Mikhail Bakhtin has outlined some of the different forms that intertextuality can take.<sup>15</sup> In particular, he points to the dialogic element of all utterances and pays particular attention to travesty and parody. Bakhtin has also influenced Julia Kristeva's theories of intertextuality and as Eamonn Jordan has shown, her theories could facilitate a persuasive reading of McGuinness's work.<sup>16</sup> Despite this possibility, and the fact that the parodic text is common to much of McGuinness's work, it is my belief that the gender associations his parodies typically develop, suggest parodies within McGuinness's work are best explained by the work of Queer theorists such as Judith Butler.<sup>17</sup>

Queer is a term which has come to be used differently as an umbrella term for a 'coalition of culturally marginal sexual self-identifications and at other times to describe a nascent theoretical model which has developed out of more traditional lesbian and gay studies.'<sup>18</sup> It is commonly regarded as a category in formational flux, for as Annamarie Jagose points out, 'it is

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<sup>13</sup> Following the receipt of his M.Phil from UCD, McGuinness taught for two years at the University of Ulster, Coleraine and a year at U.C.D., finally he took up a full-time post in Maynooth in 1984. He eventually left this post to concentrate on his creative work, though he has returned to academia and at present lectures in the Department of Anglo-Irish literature and Drama at U.C.D..

<sup>14</sup> Roland Barthes, *Theory of the text in Untying the text: a post-structuralist reader* ed. Robert Yound, trans. Ian McLeod (London: Routledge, 1981) 37-42. 39.

<sup>15</sup> On this see Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his world*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Indiana: Indiana UP, 1988).

<sup>16</sup> Eamonn Jordan, *The Feast of Famine: The Pays of Frank McGuinness* (Bern: Peter Lang, 1997)

xiv & passim. I attend to limits of the Bakhtinian approach in greater detail later in this introduction when considering Jordan's study.

<sup>17</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1991) 21.

<sup>18</sup> Annamarie Jagose, *Queer theory: an introduction* (New York: New York UP, 1996) 1.



not simply that queer has yet to solidify and take on a more consistent profile, but rather that its definitional indeterminacy, its elasticity, is one of its constituent characteristics.<sup>19</sup> Notwithstanding this elasticity, this study reads it largely in relation to the recognisable categories of 'gay' and 'lesbian', as these are the primary occurrences within McGuinness's work. The use of queer theory is appropriate for McGuinness's work which locates and exploits the incoherences within apparently stable discourse by utilising strategies such as drag and gender play. The use of such strategies within McGuinness's drama illustrates that, as Butler argues, heterosexuality is never stable or fixed. For Butler heterosexuality constantly seeks to deny its status as notable through its claim to be normative.

Queerness, in the work of theorists like Judith Butler or Eve Sedgwick,<sup>20</sup> is very much a semiotic. To say that someone is 'queer' indicates an indeterminacy or indecipherability about their sexuality and gender. In Butler's view, queer activities like drag and unexpected identifications and sexual practices reveal the arbitrariness of conventional gender distinctions by parodying them to the point where they become ridiculous or ineffective. The avoidance by Queer theorists of a teleological view of sexuality and identity, or of characterizing any identity as lacking or incomplete, is particularly consistent with McGuinness's concerns with identity; and in McGuinness's drama the key function of a character may be to parody or disrupt received identities, or reveal the contingencies of any identity.

The key incidents of intertextuality within McGuinness's drama do not take the form of parody's analytic mimicry for the concern is more often with interpretation rather than subversion. In such cases the process is hermeneutic in that it operates to bring a past text to life. Within McGuinness's drama, intertextuality thus has a more fundamental function than parodying; it is a means of self-realisation. This brings us to a key concern of this study, namely that in McGuinness's works the process of the individual's self-realisation is always hermeneutic, with characters discovering themselves by mediating the symbols of the world around them. By the nature of such a process his plays are densely intertextual and are infused with cultural and literary references. Just as McGuinness's own artistic vision has been developed by reading other writers, characters

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<sup>19</sup> Jagose, *Queer theory*, 1.

<sup>20</sup> See for instance Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (Durham: Duke UP 1993).

in his plays explore their identity through the symbols and forms of literature and culture.<sup>21</sup>

In his conflation of high and low culture McGuinness may be termed a postmodernist. However, though his work often tends towards pastiche, it is never ahistorical and does not conform to Frederick Jameson's description of postmodernism as a movement that represents the 'failure of art and aesthetic, the failure of the new, the imprisonment in the past.'<sup>22</sup> Linda Hutcheon's challenge to this negative assessment, which sees postmodernism as both a critical and artistic process, 'obsessed with history and how we can know the past today'<sup>23</sup> is truer to the objective of McGuinness's drama, and particularly its interest in replacing history with a plurality of minor histories. Ultimately however, such a label is reductive for work that never merely situates itself in the world of postmodern play, but instead dramatises a process whereby characters sieve through texts and interpret signs in order to interrogate and discover their own identity.

In McGuinness's drama symbols and references are never casual, and while visual art is always a key metaphor, textual references are often the most explicit expression of the ongoing negotiation with identity. In a recent interview with Joseph Long, McGuinness pointed to the significance of the songs used in his plays:

The thing about the songs is, especially in *Mutabilitie*, but also in *Someone Who'll Watch Over Me* and in *Sons of Ulster*, when they sing they say what they mean. If you want to understand where *Mutabilitie* is going, what is really at the heart of it, look at the songs, look at the poems, that is where the cards are on the table, anyway.<sup>24</sup>

Songs and poems allow us to understand where a play 'is going' and therefore, intertextual analysis will be a critical key for this book. Interestingly, in McGuinness's plays such songs are rarely original compositions. Instead characters can draw on Irish ballads, the popular music of the 50s, 60s and 70s or other familiar songs to find ways of adequately expressing their situation. Though self-expression often

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<sup>21</sup> McGuinness says 'I've actually ripped off most writers that I've read actually, in some form or other' ('Personal Concerns').

<sup>22</sup> Peter Brooker, *Modernism/Postmodernism* (London: Longman, 1990) 169.

<sup>23</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 1989) 114.

<sup>24</sup> Frank McGuinness, 'Frank McGuinness in conversation with Joseph Long,' *Theatre Talk: Voices of Irish Theatre Practitioners*, eds. Lillian Chambers, Ger FitzGibbon, Eamonn Jordan, Dan Farrelly & Cathy Leeney. (Dublin: Carysfort Press 2001) 298-307: 303.

equates with musical expression it is not limited to song and this critique will also consider other intertextual forms such as visual art, for the process of McGuinness's work is always explicitly hermeneutic irrespective of form. In part this process may be explained by reference to the thought of Paul Ricoeur, works in which as Lewis S. Mudge points out:

The ruling idea of this hermeneutical phenomenology is that if self-reflection is the goal, interpretation is the means. In other words there is no direct way from myself to myself except through the roundabout way of the appropriation of the signs, works of art, and culture.<sup>25</sup>

At its core, McGuinness's work suggests that the appropriation of the works of culture allows one to engage the human condition as a whole and one's self as an individual. In each play, the process of self-realisation is bound in a more general interpretative practice and the intertextual 'signs, works of art, and culture' of each play indicate character developments to the audience. What demonstrates McGuinness's commitment to his hermeneutic method is the fact that he recognises that this interpretational process is often twofold. Thus while his plays dramatise this process internally through the characters, they also develop his method externally as McGuinness often uses disruptive forms to complicate the audience's appropriation of his work. Indeed, the words of Dido at the conclusion of *Carthaginians* may be seen to encapsulate the interpretational conundrum these plays offer to their audience: 'What happened? Everything happened, nothing happened, whatever you want to believe, I suppose'<sup>26</sup> as the form of McGuinness's works offer a similar interpretational challenge to their audiences.

Few of McGuinness's play are linear realist narratives and their episodic form invites comparison with film narratives. Despite this he has said that he does not want to see his own work filmed, claiming 'it wouldn't work, and I would hope it wouldn't work because it is a theatre piece.'<sup>27</sup> He says that what he likes about the theatre is that he 'can do anything in it'<sup>28</sup> and much of his best work is profoundly theatrical. McGuinness has worked as a director in the theatre in the past. Directing the works of several European playwrights while a student in UCD, he

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<sup>25</sup> Lewis S. Mudge, in Paul Ricoeur, *Essays on Biblical interpretation*, edited with an introduction by Lewis S. Mudge (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980) 43.

<sup>26</sup> Frank McGuinness, *Plays I*, 379.

<sup>27</sup> 'Frank McGuinness in conversation with Joseph Long,' 307.

<sup>28</sup> Frank McGuinness, 'Talking Frankly,' interview with Eithne Loughrey, *Irish Independent* 22 September 1990: 12.

went on to direct plays at the University of Ulster, Coleraine, where his choice of works by Wilde, Shakespeare, Noel Coward, Lorca and Molière all suggest the later concerns of his own drama. Since his success as a playwright he has been reluctant to direct apart from a production of Brian Friel's *The Gentle Island* at the Peacock Theatre as part of the 1988 Dublin Theatre Festival and a revised version of *Carthaginians* at the Druid Theatre, Galway in 1992. In 2002 he directed the Irish premier of his version of *Electra* for B\*Spoke Theatre Company. Generally, he tends not to impose his vision as a playwright on directors, being 'a firm believer in letting people make their own choices in theatre' though his suggestions are often contained or implied in the text. For instance, his works experiment with dramatic forms such as the Elizabethan five-act play, Greek tragedy or music hall vaudeville. They are distinguishable stylistically as they flit from naturalism to expressionism to magic realism and they demonstrate an awareness of the theatrical possibilities beyond those of traditional realist productions. True to his belief that 'Irish literature has always been far too defined in terms of its relationship with English literature'<sup>29</sup> he has also adapted the works of leading European playwrights to critical acclaim, though assessment of this work falls outside the scope of this study. Nevertheless, the influence of the European tradition is often evident in the way his plays have tended to utilise dream and fantasy, coupled with light and sound, and he notes for instance that '*Mary and Lizzie* ... was deeply influenced by *Peer Gynt*' which gave it 'its *sprawling* nature, its ability to cross continents, its ability to go anywhere it wanted.'<sup>30</sup> Overall, such influences betray his concern with the mechanics of the theatre as well as a deep knowledge of its history. These distinctions are worthy of examination in themselves as when explored in context they also suggest a major theme of this study: in McGuinness's artistic vision, form must always connect with theme.

Over the course of McGuinness's career, efforts to fuse form and content have not always been successful and his plays have not always met with a positive response from audiences or from critics. In part this book will chart the turbulent receptions of some of these plays and suggest that sometimes they reflect the radical density of these works as well as themes with which Irish society has often been uncomfortable. As I have mentioned earlier, at the core of his plays lies a concern for the integrity of the individual and many of his works are explicitly critical of the way society's norms can restrict or place conditions on this integrity. However,

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<sup>29</sup> 'Frank McGuinness in conversation with Joseph Long,' 305.

<sup>30</sup> 'Frank McGuinness in conversation with Joseph Long,' 301.

while his works often seek to challenge society by dramatising that which is marginalized and suppressed, it may be argued that his dramatic experimentation has provided audiences with a way of ignoring such challenges. Often, criticisms of his plays have tended to focus on aesthetic evaluations and have responded to presentation rather than to content. Ultimately it is McGuinness's stated belief that 'if you believe in unity, disunity is the best way to begin the process of unity'<sup>31</sup> that best encapsulates the revisionary politics of his works. This study will look at how the fragmented forms of 'The Bread Man', *Mary and Lizzie*, and *Baglady*, the structured schema of *Sons of Ulster*, the circularity of *Carthaginians* are central to the plays' meanings, and will suggest that each play's style and form fundamentally engages the issues explored in that play and thus must be understood in that context. Ultimately, I suggest that the cultural agency of the plays is such, that, to borrow Ricoeur's words, 'what has to be appropriated is the meaning of the text itself, conceived in a dynamic way as the direction of thought opened up by the text.'<sup>32</sup>

Here the performative meaning of the text is a central consideration. Performative is a term originally coined by the linguist J. L. Austin<sup>33</sup> in relation to *illocutionary* statements. For Austin, performatives depend on social relations to make them intelligible, believable, and acceptable.<sup>34</sup> More recently, Judith Butler points out that shifting the context of a performative utterance can have a strong impact. Changing the context of a performative can also draw attention to its conventional nature.<sup>35</sup> In a more general sense, performance theory holds that the meaning of a text is not some absolute or abstract quality that resides in the text and can be extracted from it. Rather, the meaning of a text is *enacted*, created in action--for example, when the text is 'read' or performed. Thus the meaning of a play is not fixed, but depends on context and is in some way

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<sup>31</sup> Liz Penny, 'In the Forbidden City,' *Theatre Ireland*. 12 (1987): 62.

<sup>32</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the surplus of meaning* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian UP, 1976) 92.

<sup>33</sup> See J.L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford: O U P, 1962). 4-20.

<sup>34</sup> Austin's best known example of a performative statement is: 'I now pronounce you man and wife.' A priest or magistrate's act of describing a couple as husband and wife is what makes them so. The activity creates the married state; what the priest does (says) brings the situation into being. *How to Do Things with Words*, 24.

<sup>35</sup> As Butler has indicated, this kind of context change mimics a cultural convention but also parodies it, and can 'displace' or complicate dominant notions about what it means to be male, female, and married. Butler, *Bodies that matter* (New York: Routledge 1993) 188.

dependent on the conditions of its enactment. It is this meaning that I take the term performative to refer to. This book will proceed as follows:

### **Chapter One: The family unit: Symbolising Inclusiveness**

The book begins by looking at representations of family units in McGuinness's work. Focusing on how individual determinism is related to the intertextual mechanism of his drama, it shows how McGuinness has charted the changing state of Ireland from the 1940s to the 1990s in three plays that develop the different possibilities of what can be conceived of as family love. Examining 'The Bread Man', *The Bird Sanctuary*, and *Dolly West's Kitchen* we see that McGuinness draws on the established issues of his drama, particularly the individual's construction through gender roles, sexuality and familial and communal identities, and uses music, song and art as key symbols of the disruption of social definitions.

### **Chapter Two: Sons of Ulster: An imaginative unity**

This study moves on to consider *Observe the sons of Ulster marching towards the Somme*, as the key exposition of McGuinness's ability to switch points of view and explore genders, politics and traditions other than his own. This play has been read variously as a profound moment of reconciliation and as an attack on the tenets of Ulster Protestantism. Both sensibilities are examined in this chapter, which looks at how McGuinness interrogates the ideology of Ulster Unionism through the figure of Kenneth Pyper, a failed artist who has returned home to Ulster to enlist and die in the Great War. This chapter then examines how McGuinness utilises disparate perspectives and formal experiments to pluralize the Ulster identity.

### **Chapter Three: Queering the National Stage**

This chapter will consider *Innocence* and *Gates of Gold* to look at their respective representations of gay characters and will argue that the achievement of *Innocence* was its deconstruction of homosexual identity and specifically, the association of homosexuality with effeminacy. We look at how in *Innocence*, McGuinness continued the interrogation of the

role of art and the artist found in *Sons of Ulster* and expanded that play's juxtaposition of the work of art and the creative impulse with destructiveness. The result, I argue, was a radical representation of homosexuality. The play is contrasted with *Gates of Gold* to show that McGuinness's work consistently strives to present the range of what he terms 'the homosexual temperament'.

## **Chapter Four: Gender and Intertextuality**

One point suggested by the numerous instances of intertextuality in McGuinness work is that he is perhaps the most hermeneutic of all our Irish playwrights (a point backed up by his numerous adaptations of other writers). This is a tendency he also extends to his characters, and his work continually positions art as a liberating medium. Chapter Four examines the possibility of transcendence achieved specifically through the repossession of texts. It also questions the way in which this liberating capacity is associated with the feminine in *Carthaginians* and *Someone Who'll Watch Over Me*.

## **Chapter 5: Feminising History**

This chapter further examines McGuinness's representation of women and the suggestion in many of his works that a feminised logic should supersede the masculine rationality. Many of McGuinness's female relatives worked in local shirt-making factories, the major industry in Donegal in the 60s and 70s and McGuinness suggests that it was 'inevitable that [he] would go and write a play like *The Factory Girl* which drew on [his] female relations' history of work.'<sup>36</sup> Beginning with *The Factory Girls*, this chapter looks at his wider exploration of history and Marxism in *Mary and Lizzie*. In his examination of the concept of history in such plays as *Observe the Sons of Ulster* and *Innocence* McGuinness has most notably sought to examine the way in which folk memory shapes the past to provide myths which explain, excuse and confuse the present and future -- the ways by which we construct our present and future through viewing our past. In particular, much of the importance of his work lies in his avoidance of standard notions of what is worth recording and what actually constitutes history. With a central focus

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<sup>36</sup> McGuinness, 'Personal Concerns.'

on *Mary and Lizzie*, this chapter examines the way in which the feminine is utilised as a disruptive mechanism by which McGuinness explores the orthodoxies of history.

McGuinness has written for television though his works have not been aired on Irish television. In 1987 along with John McGahern and Anne Devlin, McGuinness was commissioned by the BBC to write a script that dealt with non-stereotypical Irish narratives. The result, *Scout*, McGuinness's portrayal of a recruiting scout for Manchester United, was produced by the BBC. In 1989 *The Hen House* appeared on BBC2. A shocking tale of a woman who imprisons a special needs child in a henhouse, it drew on the restrictive social structures of small town Donegal that many of his plays explore. The work won the Prix de l'Intervision and the Prix de l'Art Critique at the 1990 Prague International Television Festival. He has also adapted works for screen. Though he has expressed a dislike for the lack of control allowed to a screenwriter,<sup>37</sup> his screenplay of Brian Friel's *Dancing at Lughnasa* was produced in 1998. McGuinness is also a published poet. *Boosterstown*,<sup>38</sup> his first collection, was published in 1994, followed by a second collection entitled *The Sea with No Ships*<sup>39</sup> in 1999. However, the focus of this book will be McGuinness's theatrical works.

## Critical Reception

At this stage I wish to give an overview of McGuinness's public career and critical reception to date. Such responses will be used in later chapters to highlight McGuinness's own perception of his relations with society, as well as his idea regarding the public and private role of the playwright. I draw evidence from the popular reception of McGuinness's plays from newspaper letters regarding the merits of his plays. For an assessment of the literary-academic response to his work I draw mainly from books, journals and newspaper critiques and reviews. To a certain degree newspapers bridge these two levels. A number of dissertations have been written on McGuinness's work and a number of other theses have sections on McGuinness. There are also many reviews, interviews and short

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<sup>37</sup> On this see 'Frank McGuinness in conversation with Joseph Long,' 307.

<sup>38</sup> Frank McGuinness, *Boosterstown* (Dublin: Gallery Books, 1994).

<sup>39</sup> Frank McGuinness, *The Sea with No Ships* (Dublin: Gallery Books, 1999).



newspaper articles which treat McGuinness's work in a general fashion. I have listed as many of these as I have been able to trace in my bibliography.

McGuinness's stock as a playwright has seen many fluctuations. In February 1985 his second major play, *Observe the sons of Ulster marching towards the Somme* was staged at the Peacock Theatre, before being promoted to the main Abbey stage in December. This was the play that confirmed McGuinness's status as a major Irish playwright. The Abbey also presented it in London, Edinburgh and Paris. It received the *London Standard* 'Most Promising Playwright' Award; the Rooney Prize for Irish Literature; Harvey's 'Best Play' Award; the Cheltenham Irish Literature Award; the Plays and Players Award; the London Fringe Award and the Ewart-Briggs Peace Prize.

Since *Sons of Ulster* McGuinness has had thirty-one plays produced. Many of his original works premiered at The Abbey Theatre, Dublin, Ireland's National Theatre where he was playwright-in-residence from 1991-2. In 1992 he received the American Ireland Literary Fund Award. Such recognition coupled with his 1991 election to Aosdana means that McGuinness is today considered one of Ireland's foremost dramatists. He has however demonstrated a consistent commitment to public arts education projects. In 1983, the Theatre in Education Company TEAM Theatre commissioned McGuinness to write a play that would be used in its secondary school tour. The play that resulted, *Borderlands*, demonstrated many of McGuinness's ideas regarding the Northern Irish communities. In 1985 TEAM presented *Gatherers* while in 1986 McGuinness participated in *Making a Play*, a workshop in Derry.

In recent years works such as *Gates of Gold* (2002) and *Dolly West's Kitchen* (1999) have met with generally positive responses though, with the notable exception of *Someone Who'll Watch Over Me* (1992) few of his plays have been as well received as *Sons of Ulster*. In part this is a result of what could be described as a certain intransigence on the part of McGuinness, a reluctance to give the audience what they expect or want. In 1986 he chose to follow *Sons of Ulster* with *Innocence*, a play based on the life of Caravaggio. A writer who has continually sought to go against the grain of public assessment, he conceived in *Innocence* an expressionistic play which fore-fronted the themes of homosexuality and artistry: the elements of *Sons of Ulster* which had been overlooked in most of the play's positive assessments. In 1992 *Someone Who'll Watch Over Me* won McGuinness a New York Drama Critics Circle Award. Though he may be said to have mellowed with age, throughout his career he has

demonstrated a constant desire to challenge his audience to provoke a reassessment of accepted orthodoxies.

Responses to McGuinness's work have varied throughout his career. The degree to which McGuinness polarises public opinion is noticeable from the fact that he may be said to be the only playwright of his generation who consistently provokes people to write letters to newspaper debating the value of his work. As recently as 2000, McGuinness's four-hour adaptation of Ramón del Valle Inclán's *Barbaric Comedies* sparked a censorious outcry, and the walkouts that occurred when the play was staged at The Edinburgh Festival echoed the protest that greeted *Innocence* in Dublin in 1986. *The Bird Sanctuary* and *Sons of Ulster* have also sparked individual debates in the press. While there have always been differences between critics as to the merits of a particular play, such debates have been more pronounced and regular for McGuinness than for other Irish writers. What is particularly apparent when surveying assessments of his work is that there have been differences between professional critics and the public, or between those who consider themselves part of the dramatic establishment and those who maintain the establishment through attending plays. Such a conflict suggests a certain inaccessibility in McGuinness's work, or at least a departure from the norms of popular drama. One of the best examples of such a disagreement occurred in 1994 during the Abbey production of *The Bird Sanctuary*. Though receiving generally positive reviews from the critics the play was roundly slated in the pages of the *Irish Times* as 'existential-guff'<sup>40</sup>, while other letter writers asked theatregoers to open their eyes to 'the emperor's new clothes'<sup>41</sup>.

Reactions to the explicit presentation of sexual acts in some of these plays, while not welcomed were to a degree expected, and in general the differences of opinion over McGuinness's work may be divided into two categories: form and theme. Indeed much of the negative criticism is a result of critics making this division for, as this study will argue, these two elements are always deliberately connected. It must be stated that the authorial yoking together of theatrical genres or structuring conventions with thematic explorations has not always been successful. McGuinness's two major successes have come when he has tapped into the public zeitgeist. As I have mentioned above *Sons of Ulster* coincided with a public drive towards reconciliation. His other critical and commercial hit occurred when *Someone Who'll Watch Over Me* reconstructed the Beirut

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<sup>40</sup> Peter Denman, 'letter,' *Irish Times* 11 March 1994: 11.

<sup>41</sup> John Grady, 'letter,' *Irish Times* 26 Mar 1994: 12.

hostage situation. Audiences and critics alike have rejected other works that have appeared less immediately engaging. Thus this book will explore whether much of the negative criticism of McGuinness's work to date, particularly his more experimental early work, is a result of the reluctance to consider the production as text, where the full meaning is derived from a consideration of performance. In this we will examine how in McGuinness's work light, sound and most importantly action are as central to meaning as language.

To date four book-length studies of McGuinness's work have appeared Eamonn Jordan's *The Feast of Famine: The plays of Frank McGuinness*,<sup>42</sup> Hiroko Mikami's *Frank McGuinness and his theatre of paradox*<sup>43</sup>; *The Theatre of Frank McGuinness: Stages of Mutability*,<sup>44</sup> a collection of essays edited by Helen Lojek and Lojek's *Contexts for Frank McGuinness's drama*<sup>45</sup>, (a valuable work which appeared after this research was completed and thus is not dealt with in these pages). Much more critical commentary has appeared in the form of essays in various journals and books. A number of general studies of Irish drama in the twentieth century, have appeared including D.E.S. Maxwell's *A critical history of modern Irish drama*.<sup>46</sup> Of these Michael Etherton's *Contemporary Irish dramatists*,<sup>47</sup> Anthony Roche's *Contemporary Irish Drama: From Beckett to McGuinness*,<sup>48</sup> Christopher Murray's *Twentieth Century Irish Drama: Mirror up to nation*,<sup>49</sup> Nicholas Grene's *The*

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<sup>42</sup> Eamonn Jordan, *The Feast of Famine: The Plays of Frank McGuinness* (Bern: Peter Lang, 1997).

<sup>43</sup> Hiroko Mikami, *Frank McGuinness and his Theatre of Paradox* (Ulster Editions and Monographs, Colin Smythe, 2002). This book also contains a listing of the contents of the Trilling Archive, a private archive of material about McGuinness held by Mr. Philip Tilling at The University of Ulster, Coleraine.

<sup>44</sup> Helen Lojek, ed., *The Theatre of Frank McGuinness: Stages of Mutability* (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2002).

<sup>45</sup> Helen Lojek, *Contexts for Frank McGuinness's drama* (Catholic University Press of America 2004).

<sup>46</sup> D.E.S. Maxwell, *A critical history of modern Irish drama* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge UP, 1984).

<sup>47</sup> Michael Etherton, *Contemporary Irish Dramatists*. (London: MacMillan, 1989) 47-51.

<sup>48</sup> Anthony Roche, *Contemporary Irish drama: From Beckett to McGuinness* (Dublin: Gill & MacMillan, 1994) 265-78.

<sup>49</sup> Christopher Murray, 'Playing the North,' *Modern Irish Drama: Mirror up to Nation*. (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1997) 204-7.

*Politics of Irish drama: Plays in context from Boucicault to Friel*<sup>50</sup> *Theatre Stuff*<sup>51</sup> a volume of essays edited by Eamonn Jordan, Stephen Watt's *A century of Irish drama: Widening the stage*,<sup>52</sup> Lionel Pilkington's *Theatre and state in twentieth-century Ireland: Cultivating the people*,<sup>53</sup> Margaret Llewellyn-Jones's *Contemporary Irish drama and cultural identity*<sup>54</sup> and Chris Morash's *A history of Irish theatre, 1601-2000*<sup>55</sup> all have chapters or parts of chapters devoted to McGuinness while Margo Gayle Backus' *The Gothic Family Romance*<sup>56</sup> also looks briefly at *Baglady*. *Druids, Dudes and Beauty Queen's*,<sup>57</sup> a collection of essays edited by Dermot Bolger, touches occasionally on McGuinness's work as does Susan C. Harris's *Gender and modern Irish drama*<sup>58</sup>.

A welcome development is that recently, publications have begun addressing the fact that interpretations of one of Ireland's most theatrical playwrights are conveyed through performances as well as literary

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<sup>50</sup> Nicholas Grene, 'Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme: 'Imagining the other,' *The Politics of Irish drama: Plays in context from Boucicault to Friel* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge UP, 1999) 246-51.

<sup>51</sup> Eamonn Jordan, 'From Playground to Battleground: Metatheatricality in the plays of Frank McGuinness,' *Theatre Stuff: Critical Essays on Contemporary Irish Theatre*, ed. Eamonn Jordan (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2000) 194-208.

<sup>52</sup> Stephen Watt, Eileen Morgan & Shakir Mustafa eds., *A Century of Irish drama: Widening the Stage* (Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 2000).

<sup>53</sup> Lionel Pilkington, *Theatre and state in twentieth-century Ireland: Cultivating the people* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001) 221-3.

<sup>54</sup> Margaret Llewellyn-Jones, *Contemporary Irish drama and cultural identity* (Bristol: Intellect, 2002).

<sup>55</sup> Chris Morash, *A history of Irish theatre, 1601-2000* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge UP, 2002).

<sup>56</sup> Margot Backus Gayle, "'Perhaps I may come out alive'": Mother Ireland and the unfinished revolution,' *The Gothic Family Romance: heterosexuality, child sacrifice, and the Anglo-Irish colonial order* (Durham, N.C.: Duke UP, 1999). An abridged version of this article also appears under the title "This woman has received a blow that will shut her up forever": Frank McGuinness's *Baglady*" in *The Theatre of Frank McGuinness: Stages of Mutability*, ed. Helen Lojek (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2002) 41-50.

<sup>57</sup> Dermot Bolger, ed., *Druids, Dudes And Beauty Queens: The changing face of Irish theatre* (Dublin: New Island, 2001). Within this volume see Emile Jean Dumay, 'Dramatic Terre Incognite : A French perspective, 196-214 (209-12); Ronan McDonald, 'Between hope and history: The drama of the Troubles,' 231-250 (234-5 240); Owen Dudley Edwards, 'The Irish in the Edinburgh Festival,' 148-172 (169- 70)

<sup>58</sup> Susan C. Harris, *Gender and modern Irish drama* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2002)

criticism, and a number of articles have appeared exploring specific productions. *The Theatre of Frank McGuinness: Stages of Mutability*, contains a interview with Sarah Pia Anderson,<sup>59</sup> who in addition to working on many of McGuinness's adaptations, directed the premiers of *Carthaginians* (Peacock 1988) and *Mary and Lizzie* (RSC 1989). As well as outlining some of the influences from Ibsen on McGuinness's original work, Anderson's accounts of the problems of blocking, and reflections on the rhythm of voices in many McGuinness plays counterbalance many of the more textual readings of plays such as *Carthaginians* and *Sons of Ulster*. This volume of essays also contains 'Derry comes to Mid-Michigan: Staging *Carthaginians* at Central Michigan University',<sup>60</sup> Timothy D. Connor's discussion of producing the play abroad and 'A director's perspective on *Mutabilitie*', Michael Caven's account of The Theatreworks Company's Irish premiere of the play at Trinity College Dublin's Samuel Beckett Theatre,<sup>61</sup> in 2000. In an interview that examines the difficulties of balancing language and spectacle in any production of the play Caven is often overly exuberant in his assessment of the meaning created in performance. For instance one doubts whether even McGuinness would agree with his statement that everyone who left the Samuel Beckett Theatre at his production's interval did so 'because the play had such a powerful impact on them that they had to resist it, they had to hate it.'<sup>62</sup> However, his account is a useful source for any consideration of the play that recognizes its status as Caven suggests as 'a hugely *theatrical* experience, a mass in a sense.'<sup>63</sup>

The bulk of the critical material on McGuinness is textual in its focus and the majority of the criticism has tended to focus on three plays: *Sons of Ulster*, *Carthaginians* and *Someone Who'll Watch Over Me*, though recently *Innocence* and *Mutabilitie* have received deserved critical attention. Early essays examine McGuinness's use of the outsider's perspective to challenge and critique society from its margins, and are

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<sup>59</sup> Sarah Pia Anderson, 'Directing McGuinness plays: Sarah Pia Anderson in conversation with Sharon Braden,' *The Theatre of Frank McGuinness: Stages of Mutability*, ed. Helen Lojek (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2002) 108-123.

<sup>60</sup> Timothy D. Connors, 'Derry comes to Mid-Michigan: Staging *Carthaginians* at Central Michigan University,' *The Theatre of Frank McGuinness: Stages of Mutability*, ed. Helen Lojek (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2002) 79-91.

<sup>61</sup> Michael Caven, 'A director's perspective on *Mutabilitie*: Michael in conversation with Helen Lojek,' *The Theatre of Frank McGuinness: Stages of Mutability*, ed. Helen Lojek (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2002) 175-194.

<sup>62</sup> Caven, 'A director's perspective on *Mutabilitie*,' 181.

<sup>63</sup> Caven, 'A director's perspective on *Mutabilitie*,' 179.

often framed around a discussion of *Sons of Ulster*. Studies by Anthony Roche, Christopher Murray and Michael Etherton which are included as part of book length considerations of contemporary Irish drama are amongst the best criticisms of McGuinness's work within an Irish context. At times a concern with the national identity has consumed all other concerns, and many approaches that focus on gender issues and in particular, the performative nature of gender and sexual identity within McGuinness's work have explored sexual identity in relation to the national identity. Other essays explore McGuinness's concern with history, often extending this to survey the intertextual nature of his work. Both of these approaches have thus far proved enlightening and informative. However it is my view that there is a need to also consider performance aspects, to extend consideration of performance from self to text and to go beyond the page to production elements suggested by and interpreted from McGuinness's works if we are to explore the dialogue with the audience that is central to the meanings of these plays and thus assess the implications of McGuinness's critical strategies

Here Riana O' Dwyer's 'Dancing in the Borderlands' is a useful starting point. In an illuminating assessment of McGuinness's career up until 1990, O'Dwyer extends the concept of marginality from McGuinness's characters to his plays.<sup>64</sup> Exploring McGuinness's flexibility with points of view and stage resources O' Dwyer asserts that McGuinness has also 'shifted the focus of Irish theatre from the society of consensus which accepts a narrow range as normal, to the society of exclusion where all those marginalized by "normality" wander in the borderlands.'<sup>65</sup> For O' Dwyer these plays in terms 'of theme, setting and theatrical devices' reside 'in the borderlands of theatrical experience',<sup>66</sup> going beyond realism to challenge generic norms of theatre as well as wider prevailing orthodoxies such as those of gender and sexuality. In her exploration of the significance of fantasy (conscious and unconscious), imagination and emotionalism her work suggests the possibilities for further analysis.

Many assessments of McGuinness's work focus on *Sons of Ulster*, often in critiques that focus on the cultural and political significance of *Sons of Ulster* within twentieth century Ireland. A useful prologue to many of these readings is Brian Cliff's examination of communal definitions in

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<sup>64</sup> O'Dwyer, Riana, 'Dancing in the Borderlands: The Plays of Frank McGuinness,' *The Crow behind the Plough: History and Violence in Anglo-Irish Poetry and Drama* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1991) 99-116.

<sup>65</sup> O'Dwyer, 'Dancing in the Borderlands,' 115.

<sup>66</sup> O'Dwyer, 'Dancing in the Borderlands,' 103.