

Worthen, William B., *Modern Drama and the Rhetoric of Theater* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1992).

Notes

1. Sebastian Barry, *Plays 1*, p. 19.
2. Cf. Elizabeth Cullingford, 'Colonial Policing: *The Steward of Christendom* and *The Whereabouts of Eneas McNulty*', p. 14.
3. Colm Tóibín, 'Hinterland: The Public Becomes Private', p. 207.
4. Compare Conor McCarthy, *Modernisation, Crisis and Culture in Ireland 1969–1992*, pp. 135–64.
5. Sebastian Barry, 'Introduction: The History and Topography of Nowhere', *The Inherited Boundaries: Younger Poets of the Republic of Ireland*, p. 16f.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 17f.
7. Compare Declan Hughes, 'Who the Hell Do We Think We Still are? Reflections on Irish Theatre and Identity'.
8. Ger FitzGibbon, 'Sebastian Barry in Conversation with Ger FitzGibbon', p. 17.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 19.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 17.
11. Interview with the author.
12. Maria Kurdi, "'Really All Danger": An Interview with Sebastian Barry', p. 43.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 42.
14. *Ibid.*
15. Barry, 'Introduction', *op. cit.*, p. 16.
16. Kurdi, *op. cit.*, p. 50.
17. Ger FitzGibbon, 'The Poetic Theatre of Sebastian Barry', p. 234.
18. William B. Worthen, *Modern Drama and the Rhetoric of Theater*, pp. 100–2.
19. Cullingford, *op. cit.*, p. 12.
20. Fintan O'Toole, 'Marking Time: From *Making History* to *Dancing at Lughnasa*', p. 205.
21. Claire Gleitman, 'Reconstructing History in the Irish History Play', p. 219.
22. Scott T. Cummings, 'The End of History: The Millennial Urge in the Plays of Sebastian Barry', p. 295.
23. Compare Colin Coulter, *The End of Irish History? Critical Reflections on the Celtic Tiger*.
24. Fintan O'Toole, 'Introduction: A True History of Lies', in Barry, *Plays 1*, p. x.
25. Compare Jürgen Wehrmann, 'Revising the Nation: Globalisation and Fragmentation of Irish History in Sebastian Barry's Plays'.

2 DERMOT BOLGER

Christina Wald

The Lament for Arthur Cleary; Blinded by the Light; In High Germany; The Holy Ground; One Last White Horse; April Bright; The Passion of Jerome; From These Green Heights

Introduction

Dermot Bolger (born 1959) is an extraordinarily prolific and versatile writer, editor and publisher. As a novelist, he gained prominence with *Nightshift* (1985) and the bestselling *The Journey Home* (1990). The popular book project *Finbar's Hotel* (1997), to which seven Irish writers contributed chapters about the events of one night in a Dublin hotel, as well as its sequel *Ladies' Night at Finbar's* (1999) by women authors, were commissioned by Bolger. Bolger has had a seat on the Arts Council of Ireland for several years and lives and works in Dublin.

His dramatic work, beyond the plays discussed below, includes a free adaptation of Joyce's *Ulysses* for the theatre, entitled *A Dublin Bloom* (1994), television and radio plays and a number of (as yet) unpublished stage plays, for instance the one-act play *Consenting Adults* (2000) and the monologue '... scuffed shoes' (2005).

The Plays

The Lament for Arthur Cleary (1989)

Bolger's debut play *The Lament for Arthur Cleary* began as a poem, in which Bolger adapted the eighteenth-century Gaelic elegy, 'Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoghaire', written by Eileen O'Connell for her husband.

Bolger transposes the setting to the Dublin of the 1980s, inventing a new identity for Arthur Cleary.

Both the subject matter and the aesthetics of *The Lament for Arthur Cleary* prefigure many of Bolger's later plays. The play focuses on the question of belonging, exploring how far the feeling of being at 'home' is and has to be connected to a particular place – in this case, to Dublin. Arthur, a thirty-five-year-old unskilled worker, returns to Dublin after having worked on the continent for fifteen years. He falls in love with Kathy, an eighteen-year-old girl who dreams of leaving Ireland to live a better life elsewhere. A politician's speech in the play places Arthur's past in the Irish diaspora and Kathy's wish to emigrate in the larger political and economic context, when it praises Ireland's best-exported 'articles': 'Young people are to Ireland what champagne is to France!' (p. 6). The play explores the considerable problems that arise when these workers are 're-imported'. Arthur is deeply disturbed by the enormous differences between the Dublin to which he comes back and the city he once left, which he has transformed into an idealised, immobile image of his 'home', of 'something to come home to that would never change' (p. 27). He tries to map his imaginary Dublin on to the material city, unable to accept the fact that not only its architecture, but also its inhabitants and social structure have changed. Since Arthur does not obey the rules of the newly developed criminal subculture, he is killed.¹

The play is told in retrospect, partly as Kathy's lament for her dead beloved (which she recites in verse form) and partly from the perspective of Arthur's ghost. The attempts of the two characters to come to terms with their past are presented in an open dramatic form that could be characterised as an experimental memory play. *The Lament for Arthur Cleary* is structured in two acts without further division into scenes, but presents a variety of scenic snapshots which are established by means of music changes, sound effects, lighting and acting. The action shifts from the present to various situations set in the past (Kathy and Arthur's love story, Arthur abroad, Kathy's childhood), which are replayed in an associative rather than causal or chronological order and also include dream and nightmare scenarios. The play ends several years after its beginning, at a time when Kathy

has overcome Arthur's death and emigrated to 'Europe . . . the future . . . her children' (p. 67). In the play's final image, Arthur's ghost learns to let go of his obsessive memories and is released.

The theatrical realisation requires skilled transitions between the snapshots and versatile actors who switch their roles onstage in a Brechtian manner (for example by the use of masks) to play a variety of stock characters whom Kathy and Arthur encounter and who create a mosaic of Dublin life. Since new characters keep emerging in this way, since the scenic snapshots are not chronologically or causally ordered and since their quality (actual, remembered, imagined or dreamt) is not classified, audiences are put in a position similar to that of the protagonist, who tries to make sense of a world that is unfamiliar to him. Therefore, they might share Arthur's feeling, '[s]ometimes . . . it frightens me . . . you know like in a dream . . . the sequence doesn't make sense . . .' (p. 49). In this way, the play conveys the subjective perception of the protagonists and their inner realities rather than an external, 'objective' reality. This aesthetics of radical psychic realism has become typical of Bolger's dramatic style and has sometimes made the reception of his plays difficult. Despite the bleak topics of the play, the tone is not only dreamy and elegiac, but also interspersed with comedy, a combination that has become characteristic of Bolger's oeuvre. Bolger's second play, *Blinded by the Light*, highlights the comic; it remains, so far, the only play which the author himself straightforwardly classified as 'comedy'.

Blinded by the Light (1990)

Blinded by the Light was first staged by the Abbey Theatre on its Peacock stage, directed by Caroline FitzGerald. The two-act comedy is divided into scenes and progresses in chronological order, covering a period of several weeks. It depicts the experiences of Mick, a young Dubliner, into whose untidy bed-sit a number of other characters intrude, thus keeping Mick from smoking joints and reading his stolen library books: Mick's girlfriend-to-be, Siobhan, his neighbours and two Mormons determined to convert Mick, which Mick's landlord tries to prevent with the help of his friends from the Legion

of Mary. Mick, entirely uninterested in religious matters, tries to convince the insistent Mormons that he is 'not convertible' and no 'Mormon material' (p. 165), taking measures such as boasting about his alleged sexual adventures with three under-age sisters and dressing up in women's underwear. Since Siobhan accidentally learns about this and initially takes it at face value, a number of comic misunderstandings occur.

At the end of the first act, Mick's neighbours hide an ominous parcel in his flat, which he clandestinely opens to find the head of the Irish saint Oliver Plunkett, the remains of Ireland's first beatified martyr. To Mick's surprise and dismay, the head begins to speak to him, constantly switching from old-fashioned preaching to a light, cynical conversational tone. As it turns out, Mick's neighbours kidnapped the relic from Saint Peter's Church in Drogheda to blackmail the Church. The play's second act focuses on the emerging relationship between Mick and 'the Head': Mick initially regards him as a horrific drug-induced hallucination, but soon grows to treasure his company and learns that the Head is an 'impostor' (p. 186) called George MacSpracken, a man executed the same day and mistaken for Saint Oliver. As a result of his encounters with various people throughout the centuries, he has become, among other things, a Communist and passionate poker player. Since the Head yearns for 'Oblivion' and 'Peace' (p. 185), tired by centuries of exhibition and lack of communication, Mick pretends to his neighbours to have burnt the head, and in the play's final image, Mick and the Head merrily watch TV together.

In a light-hearted manner, the play touches on a number of issues which Bolger treats more seriously in his other plays, such as drug abuse, the grip of the past on the present, the sense of being haunted, and the issues of ghosts and of a supernatural afterlife. It mocks religious zealotry with the comic stock characters of the Mormons as well as with the missionaries of the Legion of Mary and reinforces its comic critique of the Catholic Church by revealing the precious relic as a fraud and by recounting George's disillusioning experiences with the Church.

In High Germany (1990)

Largely complying with the conventions of stage realism, the one-act monologue captures Eoin, a passionate Irish soccer fan in his early thirties, who lives in Hamburg, in a critical moment of his life: he returns from the 1988 European Championship, in which Ireland, participating in the championship for the first time, amazingly beat England in this 'Brit sport' (p. 80), but finally lost against the Netherlands. Eoin recounts decisive experiences from not only this championship, but also his childhood and adolescence in Ireland and his life in the Irish diaspora since. His monologue oscillates between the narration of past events (and reflections about their impact on his present situation) and the re-enactment of scenes, in which he imitates the voices and accents of other characters.

The play interconnects Eoin's personal coming-of-age story with that of Irish soccer and of Ireland itself. Eoin was brought up in the belief that he belonged to a 'chosen generation' expected to make up for centuries of oppression, colonisation and deprivation, and to be 'the generation which would make sense of the last seven hundred years' (p. 85). As a teenager, Eoin found an expression of this new national pride in the Irish soccer team, which became increasingly successful, but he soon had to accept that the Irish soccer team recruited expatriate players whose 'new faces and accents to be suspicious of' did not fit his purist 'vision of Ireland' (p. 88). Once Eoin himself was forced to work abroad in Germany, the ritualised attendance of soccer matches became a means to reunite with the Irish community. During the match against the Netherlands Eoin realises that he feels much more at home in foreign stadiums among the diasporic Irish fan community cheering for a hybrid team of Irish players than in Dublin itself:

even if we went back [to Dublin] and they hadn't changed then we would have. [. . . N]ow when we said 'us' we weren't thinking of those Dublin bars any more, but the scattered army of emigrants. (p. 90)

Eoin develops a sense of Irish diaspora which does not, as in Arthur Cleary's case, presuppose a recuperating return to the home country, but acknowledges the hybrid, intermediate, processual state which critics have termed the "post-modern" version of diaspora.² His growing awareness of an Irish diaspora and his positive attitude towards this community epitomises a development within Irish society at large, which likewise began to value the large group of (formerly) Irish people living abroad.

While Eoin thus emancipates himself from a particular version of Irish nationalism, he does not depart from nationalism as such. Nor does he abandon his patriarchal upbringing. On the contrary, once he learns that his German girlfriend Frieda is pregnant, he imagines a patriarchal passing on of a national tradition. Being convinced that he will have a son who will replicate him, Eoin asserts, 'I [...] finally [...] found the only Ireland whose name I can sing [...]. And the only Ireland I can pass on to the son who will carry my name and features in a foreign land' (p. 97).

The Holy Ground (1990)

Bolger's second one-act monologue was first staged in tandem with *In High Germany* at the Gate Theatre under the direction of David Byrne. Together, these plays offer two complementary perspectives on Irish identity: in *The Holy Ground*, a woman in her late fifties rather than a young man reflects on her life, which was troubled not by the opening up of possibilities through emigration but by the cruel narrowing down of chances in a section of Irish society that drastically oppresses and marginalises women, in particular women who are not mothers. The monologue is set in a living room in Drumcondra, a suburb of north Dublin. On the day of her husband's funeral, Monica clears the flat of his personal belongings, reflecting on their common past. Like Eoin, she imitates the voices and accents of the people she remembers, particularly of her husband Myles, sometimes also re-playing situations from the past. The play soon signals that Monica is not the mournful widow one might expect: 'Grief, that's what they were looking for. Me to play my part, a public tear at the church or

graveyard' (p. 104). On the contrary, she experiences Myles's death as the liberation from a prison-like marriage – as a liberation, however, that came too late for Monica to start a new life.

Monica recounts their relationship from the happy early days of courtship in the 1950s and gradually reveals how seriously their marriage deteriorated when it turned out that they could not have children. Myles responded to his infertility with a hatred of all sexual matters and grew into a reactionary Catholic activist who fought against changes in his personal life and in Irish society, in particular against the pill, divorce, pornography and abortion. Since Myles strictly and jealously confined Monica to their home, she clung to the dream of a family, all she 'had ever been taught to dream of' (p. 114), by pretending to have two children for company in her lonely domestic life. When Myles increasingly humiliated his wife and taunted her for her insanity, Monica imagined the murder of her children. Since she could conceive of no other way to terminate her utter loneliness, she set out to kill Myles as well by slowly poisoning him:

I killed for companionship, can you understand? Those rough women in prison, they didn't frighten me any longer. Four of us crammed into a cell, at least they would have to talk to me.
(p. 122)

Ironically, after Myles's death, Monica learns that she prolonged rather than terminated his life, since the rat poison delayed the clotting in his blood from which he eventually died.

In contrast to the conciliatory endings of the earlier plays, *The Holy Ground* ends on a pessimistic and fatalistic note. The final words of Monica's monologue, addressed to Myles, show that she feels unable to begin a new life and even has lost hope of a more comforting spiritual afterlife:

I tried to pray but nothing would come. You've stolen my youth and left me barren, you've stolen my gaiety and gave me shame, and when I die I will die unmourned. But I could

forgive you [. . .] everything except that . . . seated there at the right hand of God, you had stolen my Christ away from me. (p. 125)

Here, as in many of Bolger's plays, the protagonist's personal story is interlinked with the country's development at large. *The Holy Ground* reflects on the suffocating, repressive impact of radical Catholicism and, through the defeat of Myles's campaign against divorce and through his death, on the decline of this influence,³ while at the same time it raises the question whether the liberation from the strict rules of the Catholic Church necessarily entails the abandonment of the Christian faith. On a metaphorical level, the deconstruction of motherhood and the assertion of (unsatisfied) female sexual desire in the play can be regarded as a critical, post-colonial and post-nationalist comment on the 'Mother Ireland', which has been feminised in colonialist and desexualised in nationalist discourse.⁴

One Last White Horse (1991)

Bolger's darkest play to date most radically stages his aesthetics of psychic realism. Being 'set in the head of a young man', Eddie, its action follows 'the logic of the dreamer' (p. 147) and requires surreal, abstract scenery devoid of realistic detail. The play's action unfolds as an associative and non-chronological blending of Eddie's nightmares, memories, soliloquies and encounters with figures, both real and imagined, from his past and his present life in Dublin in the mid-1980s. Eddie's early childhood trauma of witnessing the violent death of his mother in a car crash, or possibly even a prior, seemingly trivial, betrayal by his mother left him deeply damaged (p. 155). As Eddie himself concludes towards the end of the play, he has 'a hole in his heart': 'Long ago something was torn out of me, I don't even know what, [. . .] making me never really belong anywhere, never at ease' (p. 198). Searching for a compensation for this loss, Eddie had to experience ever-new losses: the death of his beloved elder brother, the loss of his job, the decline of his masculine self-esteem as the family provider. Like many Dubliners in this play, he seeks

comfort in drugs and even robs his child daughter of her scarce savings to satisfy his addiction. At the end of the play (just as, due to the circular, associative dream structure, at its beginning), Eddie is homeless, without family relations, desperate for heroin and cursed by an old man whom he killed accidentally. Having injected himself with air, he envisions his entry into hell but also imagines meeting his mother again.

An enigmatic figure called 'Horse', who wears a shroud-like white robe, is introduced as a personification of heroin (p. 148); accordingly, her recurrent line is 'I have stilled your body, but even I may not control your dreams' (p. 150, see also p. 190). Drug addiction has become the sad fulfilment of Eddie's childhood dreams of domesticating a wild, white mare – a soothing fantasy of belonging, safety and unconditional trust (pp. 191, 203). Accordingly, the eponymous Horse plays several characters who might have provided this sense of belonging for Eddie: his mother, his daughter, a lover. *One Last White Horse* thus combines the fatal consequences of unemployment and drug abuse with a psychological exploration of a primal human need for home.

April Bright (1995)

Byrne directed the first production of *April Bright* at the Peacock. Set in an empty house in Dublin, the play intertwines two stories of families, set in the 1940s (with one scene in the 1970s) and the 1990s. Typically, the two-act play is not divided into scenes but develops in a continuous motion, with both strands of action taking place concurrently. An initially mysterious figure named The Caller mediates between the two levels of action: she unexpectedly visits a young couple, Anna and Sean, when they move into their newly acquired house where they plan to raise their as yet unborn child. As it turns out, The Caller alias Rosie Bright was born in the same house. The scenes set in the 1940s spring from her memories, which recall not only merry scenes of family life, but also the painful loss of her sister April, who died of tuberculosis in her teenage years.

Since the play's action conforms to the psychic reality of The

Caller, for whom her recollections are as vivid as the present-day events, Bolger's memory play again departs from stage realism by presenting real and remembered events in the same theatrical fashion. The double time frame generates ambiguity and dramatic irony for audiences, since Anna and Sean are oblivious of Rosie's memories but at some points seem to react to the presence of the Bright family or to comment on their actions. Likewise, the Bright family at some moments seem to anticipate the presence of the future inhabitants. Bolger describes this effect as a mutual 'unconscious haunting' of the two families (p. 7). A sense of mutual haunting applies also to the desires and fears of the characters: while the family life of the Brights is initially portrayed as happy, April's illness and her eventual death leave them in utter despair and isolation. Conversely, the relationship of Anna and Sean, which is heavily strained by their 'bad memories' (p. 15) of two miscarriages and their fear of losing their third child as well, improves towards the end of the play, so that the play ends on a hopeful and cheerful note, in the expectancy of their 'precious child to come' (p. 120).

April Bright revisits central issues raised in *The Holy Ground*, such as the importance of (unborn) children and the decreasing influence of the Church in shaping family values. Although the play demonstrates how much has changed since the 1940s, it also highlights the persistent social expectancy that women become mothers and their sense of failure when they are unable to do so. The play's ending seems to advocate an almost Freudian *working through*, that is, an acknowledgement of the past that helps to leave its painful and paralysing aspects behind. In the play's final image, April cradles her doll and envisions a happy future as mother (which she will never have, as she already knows), while Anna simultaneously talks to her unborn child and dreams of 'all the happiness that [. . .] [it] will bring' (p. 120). This sentimental ending corresponds to The Caller's earlier comments that projected Anna's baby as a redeemer figure that is able to make up for all past suffering.

The Passion of Jerome (1999)

Bolger's subsequent play, *The Passion of Jerome*, could be read as a sequel to *April Bright*, as it extends the play's sense of haunting and explores the devastating consequences which the loss of such a child-as-redeemer can have. Its ambiguous title encapsulates two important issues of the play. Beginning as the story of Jerome, a successful, married businessman in his late thirties who has a passionate sexual affair with his young colleague Clara, the play develops into a story of suffering modelled on the Passion of Christ.

The play is clearly structured in two acts with seven scenes each, features realistic settings and adheres to a chronological time structure. This unusual agreement with stage realism offers a foil which allows Bolger to explore once again the borders of what we commonly accept as real. Jerome, whom his environment perceives as an unusually efficient and rational man – in his brother's words, 'Jerome the perfect, with an invoice book for a brain' (p. 14) – is confronted with events that suggest the existence of an uncontrollable metaphysical power. The play is set in a Ballymun flat which Jerome uses to meet his lover and which is said to be haunted by the ghost of a teenage boy who committed suicide after having lost his parents. When Jerome falls asleep, audiences see the silhouette of the young boy, hanging by the neck from a rope. A bag of nails and a hammer fall down from the top of a packing case and Jerome awakes in agony, each of his hands pierced. Despite medical treatment, the wounds keep reopening, fitting Jerome's recurrent dreams and visions of the young boy asking him 'to play Jesus' for him (p. 30).

Jerome's visions have religious sources as well as psychic motives: he has repressed the grief caused by the death of his baby daughter (with the telling name 'Felicity') as well as by the subsequent childlessness and unhappiness in his marriage. While Jerome's (Protestant) wife became angry with a God figure she still believes in but detests, Jerome (a Catholic) abandoned faith altogether. He claims, 'God should be like the measles, a short childhood illness we can't get twice. He went out with black and white TV' (p. 35). He rather believes in his 'own eyes . . . logic . . . reason' (p. 29). This attitude is opposed to that of

Rita, an inhabitant of Ballymun, whose granddaughter is in danger of dying from lung failure as Jerome's child did. Rita clings to her faith, accepting that 'God works in ways we can't understand' (p. 56). Her response to the issue of theodicy is her belief that 'God makes nobody suffer needlessly' (p. 56) – accordingly, she sees Jerome as a redeemer figure whose pain might save her granddaughter. Jerome eventually blesses her granddaughter with his blood and prays to God, asking him to transfer her suffering on to him. The child dies nevertheless, but shortly before her death she has a dream of a man with stigmata who releases her from her pain – at the same moment that Jerome is beaten and humiliated by three thugs in his brother's flat. Thus, the play does not validate the hope for a Catholic miracle (in which even the local priest no longer believes), but proposes a broader understanding of reality than allowed for by logic and reason. It suggests the existence of (possibly just psychically projected) supernatural forces which cannot neatly be classified as Catholic or Christian, but which are expressed in Christian imagery and stories. *The Passion of Jerome* thus offers one answer to the question raised at the ending of *The Holy Ground*, namely if and in which forms religious faith and spirituality are possible in a largely secularised world.

The play's ending itself adheres to the plot line of Christ's Passion and Resurrection; after having lost his former life (his wife, his lover, his job, his house) and after having been tortured, Jerome awakes from the (psychically and spiritually) dead and begins an afterlife that he perceives as more genuine. Bolger's subsequent play is likewise concerned with the intertwining of family histories as well as with the 'spiritual' history of a building, namely the very Ballymun Towers where Jerome encounters the poltergeist.

From These Green Heights (2004)

Spanning the years 1966 to 2004, *From These Green Heights* gazes back at the history of the Ballymun Towers, which represents the hopes and defeats of three generations of Dubliners: originally planned as a landmark site of modern living, the towers were soon abandoned by local politics. Since the flats increasingly

accommodated the unemployed, the poor and drug addicts, the towers became instead an epitome of social stigma and urban decay. Despite attempts by the inhabitants to rehabilitate the area, the towers were eventually demolished. Bolger initially composed a 'Ballymun Incantation' (reprinted in the play text), which was recited by actors and local people as the centrepiece of a public wake on the eve of the destruction of the first tower in summer 2004.

The play negotiates questions of belonging in terms of kin structures, the local community and, occasionally, the macro level of nation. The basic plot line is delivered in scenic snapshots in a non-linear order. All eight actors are permanently onstage, with those not involved in the action observing, and the presentation of characters does not distinguish between the living and the dead. The tone of the play is dreamy and at times mournful, but this atmosphere is interspersed with elements of dark humour that allow for comic relief. The first scenic snapshots interlock the arrival of five-year-old Dessie with his parents, full of hope and expectation, with the departure of Dessie, Marie and their daughter Tara thirty-eight years later. In a powerful stage image, the families pack and unpack the same suitcase. The play's action unfolds the development between these two moments and connects the life cycle of the Ballymun Towers to developments within Irish society – initially, the Towers are constructed as a shelter that has religious overtones of 'the Promised Land' (p. 4), which is 'halfway to paradise' (p. 10) and offers a valid alternative to the 'exodus' abroad. However, all characters (except Dessie) increasingly come to see this 'halfway' state as a deficient 'halfway Limbo' (p. 19), in which they are stuck due to unemployment and social stigma. The only respect in which Ballymun proves to be the gate to heaven is that it becomes a place of dying. After having depicted the difficulties that the characters had in abandoning old and in adapting to new homes, the play closes with a monologue by the youngest character, Tara, who looks forward to her new room, which she will, she is sure, 'be able to call [. . .] home' (p. 102). This ending on a hopeful and future-oriented note suggests that a new Irish generation, in times of a thriving Irish economy, will more easily be able to transport their notion of home by constructing new homes

within Ireland itself. This upbeat ending is undercut again by *The Townlands of Brazil*, a sequel that also chronicles the history of the Ballymun Towers, focusing on the lives of the new immigrant workers whom the rapid economic growth brought to Ireland. The second act in particular shows the xenophobia, poverty and loneliness from which the guest workers suffer, among them Eileen's son Michael.

Summary

The central motif of Bolger's dramatic oeuvre is the quest for a 'home': the characters search for a sense of home in love relationships, in their family, in a particular house or city, in Ireland as a territory and in Ireland as a community that transcends the borders of Irish territory. Bolger's plays depict both the soothing, strengthening impact of experiencing a sense of home and the tormenting, deadening effect of clinging to a vision of home that cannot be achieved. Related thematic concerns are the fear of change and the simultaneous need to feel being on a journey, the crisis of masculinity in the face of unemployment and women's emancipation, the pain of (social) stigma and the loss of trust in the Catholic Church but, at the same time, the persistent need for faith and spirituality. The grip which the past can have on the present is visualised in many of Bolger's plays by the presence of ghosts. Bolger's plays reflect the significant change in Ireland that has taken place in the two decades after the first production of *The Lament for Arthur Cleary*. As a result of the exceptionally fast economic development of the 'Celtic Tiger', Irish emigration is no longer a pressing topic. Instead, the growing division between the exceptionally rich and the poor, among them immigrants, as well as the spiritual emptiness despite material well-being, have become relevant.

Given Bolger's enormous productivity and popularity, the academic reception of his plays has been relatively scarce. Critics disagree about the ideological implications of his preoccupation with notions of home. Christopher Murray and Declan Kiberd consider Bolger an 'outspoken conservative' and label his work nostalgia for lost, better

times, 'a golden age, somewhere in the 1950s before he was born, when stability, poverty and happiness went nostalgically together. His plays are a lament for this lost paradise.'⁵ The majority of critical assessments of Bolger's dramatic oeuvre, however, argue that Bolger on the contrary invites audiences to let go of such idealised versions of the individual and national past, 'while advocating nomadic subjectivities in their stead'.⁶ Since Bolger's plays highlight the constant search of all characters, often through the metaphors of a journey and of moving house, they support a processual notion of personal and national identity. They demonstrate the debilitating impact of fossilised identities which draw on the past as the only directive for the future, perhaps most powerfully in his debut play *The Lament for Arthur Cleary*, which is generally regarded as Bolger's 'masterpiece so far'.⁷

Vic Merriman argues that Bolger's debut play is typical of a shift in Irish drama away from nationalist and neocolonial tropes. Rather than defining Ireland against the 'despised other' of the 'colonising overlord',⁸ Irish plays begin to tackle the inequalities and exclusions within Irish society and give a voice to marginalised groups. Frequently set in the working-class suburbs of Dublin that are afflicted by unemployment, poverty and criminality, Bolger's plays innovatively explore a 'virgin territory' for Irish literature,⁹ in which the 'rural melancholia familiar on Irish stages gives way to urban anger'.¹⁰

Bolger has created an individual dramatic form of the memory play that radicalises psychic realism and integrates poetic devices. All the plays except Bolger's only comedy, *Blinded by the Light*, privilege the internal, subjective realities of the protagonists over external, 'objective' reality. Since the plays are indebted to the thoughts, perceptions and imagination of their characters rather than to rules of verisimilitude and probability, they dissolve linear and causal time structures, blend different settings and do not differentiate between the living and the dead. Aspects of Bolger's dramatic style are shared by contemporary Irish playwrights such as Sebastian Barry and Marina Carr, perhaps most prominently the presence of ghosts (especially those of lost children) and imaginary figures, which not only connect past and present, life and death, but are also 'symbols of incompleteness'¹¹ and of loss.¹²

Relinquishing 'a naturalistic theatre of recognition',¹³ Bolger's

psychic realism invites audiences to participate in alternative views of reality, be it the looking back of the dead and socially marginalised (in *The Lament for Arthur Cleary* and *Walking the Road*), the hallucinations of a desperate character addicted to heroin (in *One Last White Horse*), the sudden supernatural visions of a highly rational businessman (in *The Passion of Jerome*), or the history of a stigmatised building complex and its inhabitants (in the Ballymun trilogy). Bolger himself perceives his creation of a 'theatre of evocation' as an obstacle in the reception, marketing and 'mainstreaming' of his plays and is unsure whether there is 'necessarily a place in Irish theatre for me'.¹⁴

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Notes

1. Margaret Llewellyn-Jones considers Arthur a positive male role model who offers an alternative version of male heroism in a rough urban context (Margaret Llewellyn-Jones, *Contemporary Irish Drama*, p. 105).

2. Mary J. Hickman, 'Migration and Diaspora', p. 119.
3. See Eberhard Bort, 'Come on You Boys in Green', p. 94.
4. See Mireira Aragay, 'Reading Dermot Bolger's *The Holy Ground*'.
5. Christopher Murray, 'The State of Play', p. 15. See also Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland*, pp. 609–10.
6. Paul Murphy, 'Inside the Immigrant Mind', p. 1359. See also Fintan O'Toole, 'Introduction: On the Frontier', and Paula Murphy, 'From Ballymun to Brazil'.
7. Martine Pelletier, 'Dermot Bolger's Drama', p. 250.
8. Vic Merriman, 'Centring the Wanderer', p. 166.
9. O'Toole, op. cit.
10. David Grant, 'Introduction'.
11. Pelletier, op. cit., p. 253.
12. See Eamonn Jordan, 'Introduction', pp. xxxviii–xxxix on ghost characters and dead children in contemporary Irish drama.
13. O'Toole, 'Irish Theatre: The State of the Art', p. 57.
14. Dermot Bolger, 'Dermot Bolger in Conversation', p. 41.

3 MARINA CARR

Aleks Sierz

The Mai; Portia Coughlan; By the Bog of Cats . . . ; On Raftery's Hill; Ariel; Woman and Scarecrow

Introduction

The drama of playwright Marina Carr has been described as 'characterized by the expression, in richly scabrous language, of unhappy personal relationships in a comparatively wealthy new society only one generation removed from peasant culture'.¹ If this gives an immediate impression of the social context of her work, it doesn't do justice to its richness of theatrical experimentation, and especially the way that Carr weaves mythological material into the texture of her stories. Over the past two decades, she has built up a remarkable body of work, and is now widely appreciated as 'one of the most powerful, haunting voices on the contemporary Irish stage'.²

Carr was born in Dublin on 17 November 1964 and grew up in County Offaly. Her father was a playwright and novelist, her mother a primary school teacher; they had six children. In her 'Introduction' to *Plays One*, she describes the melodramas the children created: 'We loved the havoc, the badness, the blood spillage, but loved equally restoring some sort of botched order and harmony' (p. x). When Carr went to University College Dublin, she joined the Drama Society, and completed her first play, *Ullaloo*. In 1987, she graduated with a degree in English and Philosophy, and started an MA on Samuel Beckett. In 1989, *Ullaloo* was given a rehearsed reading at the Dublin Theatre Festival and her follow-up, *Low in the Dark*, was staged at the Project Arts Centre, Dublin. The next year, *The Deer's Surrender* was put on at the Andrews Lane Theatre, Dublin. In 1991, *Ullaloo* was given a full production at the Abbey Theatre's Peacock space, and *This Love*