University of Alberta

Martin McDonagh's Spatial Narratives and the Reinvention of Theatrical Heterotopias

by

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A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Department of Drama

Fall 2012
Edmonton, Alberta

Dedication:

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my family. Without their constant love, support and telephone calls, I never would have made it through my thesis. To my Dad for being able to turn my mood around with a much-needed “Dad lecture”, to my Mom for the many hours spent discussing “lace” and to Barry for bringing me here in the first place.

Abstract:

At the turn of the 21st century, the New Brutalist theatre movement dominated stages in Britain. Despite the large number of playwrights involved in the movement, few had the same large-scale commercial success as Martin McDonagh. Through his *enfant terrible* public persona, extreme stage violence and a dystopic yet naturalistic depiction of settings, McDonagh became synonymous with the 'black pastoral'. This thesis interrogates McDonagh's theatre and film's cohesive spatial narrative and the violent logic of the New Brutalists.

Current criticism of McDonagh's theatre generally falls into two distinct camps: one relating to his 'Irish' plays and the other dealing with his 'non-Irish' plays and film. While both camps deal primarily with how McDonagh manipulates the audience's perception of space, they divide his oeuvre based on the location of setting. This thesis challenges that division and provides a comprehensive analysis of his spatial manipulations on stage and screen.

Acknowledgements:

I would like to thank the Department of Drama's faculty and staff for their tireless efforts to cultivate me as both a person and a scholar. A particular thank you must be given to the office administrative staff whose insight gave me the knowledge to navigate the intricacies of the program. From helping me register for my classes to directing me around campus, Ruth Vander Woude has been my savior on more than one occasion.

I owe a debt of gratitude to the Chair of the Department, Professor Kathleen Weiss, whose compassion and intelligence has been a true inspiration. Her willingness to listen to my concerns helped make my experience at the University such a positive one. To Dr. Rosalind Kerr and Dr. Alex Hawkins, thank you for making even the most difficult subjects engaging and relatable. A special thank you must be given to Dr. Stefano Muneroni, whose tireless faith in my abilities never wavered.

To my Examining Committee, Professor Jan Selman, Dr. Piet Defraeye and Dr. Natasha Hurley, thank you for all your tough questions and teaching me how to properly pronounce 'Spokane'. Finally, to my supervisor, Dr. Donia Mounsef to whom I owe the biggest 'Thank you' of all. Without your support, and inspiration, this thesis would not have happened. I may not have always appreciated your 'tough love' but without you, I would still be writing at a very superficial level. Thank you for pushing me to become the writer and scholar that I am today and I faithfully promise to never use 'hodgepodge' in academic writing again.

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Introduction:

Theatrical space is seductive because of its ability to simultaneously simulate actual locations/places/spaces through associations with the 'real' world and create new spaces out of the imagination. Theatrical space is unique in that, unlike other mimetic forms such as television and film, it does not work solely on a visual level but also through three dimensional bodies, discursive, acoustic and auditory spatial attributes, and the suggestion of imaginary narrative spaces. French critic Anne Ubersfeld was the first to point out the functioning of space in performance. In *Lire le théâtre* (1977) she proposed a five-part taxonomy of theatrical space: "stage space" (*espace scénique*), scenic place (*lieu scénique*), theatrical space (*espace théâtral*), theatrical place (*lieu théâtral*), and dramatic space (*espace dramatique*). Ubersfeld distinguishes between space, which has physical attributes (the building, the division between the stage and audience, the set), and place, which is the fictional setting of the action (the forest in Shakespeare, Nero's palace in Rome, etc). Place also embodies the "topological transposition of the major features of the social space experienced by a particular group within a given society" (Ubersfeld 154). Dramatic space is made up of both textual and performance signs. The physicality of theatrical space and its fictionalization puts theatrical semiosis at the heart of sociopolitical reality and an audience's capacity to draw abstraction from it.

Dramatic space is always "multiple, divided, built upon oppositions" (Ubersfeld 58). This points to another concept developed by Michel Foucault in his 1967 essay "Of Other Spaces", called 'heterotopias'. Heterotopias refer to the

human mind's ability to create a strong emotional connection with a geographic location based on principles of socio-political affiliations. Although Foucault was not addressing theatrical space specifically, his definition has relevance for theatre analysis, as a heterotopia is a geographic location that is both a space and place. Space in this context refers to the socio-emotional implications associated with specific physical locations, or places. This slippage in between the social and the physical is explored by Joanne Tompkins in her essay, "Space and Geographies of Theatre" where she hypothesizes that spatial slippage allows for the theatrical creation of space: *"space* slips between both a literal location and metaphoric capacity to structure our perceptions of the world: the advantages in capitalizing on this slippage can be outweighed by the potential for confusion" (Tompkins 538). By manipulating the heterotopic qualities of the setting of a play, a playwright is able to subvert the cultural significance of a location to create an eerily familiar, yet dystopic post-modern landscape.

Performances create a distinct heterotopia, and can be analyzed, in Foucault's terms with a heterotopology: "a sort of simultaneously mythic and real contestation of the space [and] reality in which we live" (Foucault, http://foucault/infodocuments) where characters, signs, symbols and other entities function with specific rules that are unique to the world of the performance. This world is located within a logic governed by outside rules and laws of mainstream and, at times, even counter-culture. Even excluding a complicated visual set, theatre productions must create a heterotopic sense of space in order to direct an audience to a collective singular concept of an imaginary setting. Further, as

Foucault noted, not unlike theatrical 'parenthesizing' of time and space, "heterotopias presuppose a system of opening and closing that both isolates them and makes them penetrable" (Foucault, http://foucault/infodocuments). Even in the presence of more complicated background scenes, the physicality of the theatre necessitates choices be based on both the requirement of transmitting a message and the practicality of physical limitations. When attempting to manipulate space, playwrights must take numerous elements into consideration as space is used in theatres to create meaning, move bodies, contain objects, and allow transformations necessary for characters to evolve. Unlike other visually mimetic forms such as television, film and to a lesser extent, video games, theatre must deal with far greater physical restrictions in producing a perfect visual representation of a 'space.' This pushes theatre into producing the sensation of location by using a complex combination of 'place' and 'space' to stimulate and trigger cognitive pathways of association for the audience.

Even negotiating what constitutes a heterotopia for a large audience can be challenging. Not every location constitutes one; Foucault, in his original essay was selective in his designation. In order to organize the various elements of the different constituents, Foucault designated six categories. Each of the categories lays out various elements of a different kind of heterotopic space:

> As for the heterotopias as such, how can they be described? What meaning do they have? We might imagine a sort of systematic description - I do not say a science because the term is too galvanized now -that would, in a given society, take as its object the study, analysis, description, and

> 'reading' (as some like to say nowadays) of these different spaces, of these other places. As a sort of simultaneously mythic and real contestation of the space in which we live, this description could be called heterotopology. (Foucault, http://foucault/infodocuments)

The heterotopic properties therefore do not come from the specificities of their location but rather their potential to interact with the people who enter them. Depending on how a person interacts with a heterotopic space the classification can shift to fit a given type of interaction, allowing for a 'doubling' to occur within a single location. In other words, a single location can be representative of several different, and even opposing, kinds of heterotopic spaces.

In order to produce the feeling of a recognizable 'space,' (the socio-political space of Ubersfeld, or Foucault's heterotopias) theatre productions must be able to link the intended audience's emotional response to a particular location through the narrative and through the physical cues of body, light, sound and props. However, theatre faces a further challenge in its ability to replicate both 'spaces' and 'places' due to the physical limitations of what can actually be produced on the stage. Therefore, the creation of a replicable feeling of spatial understanding falls onto the playwright (or in some cases the designer), who must be able to create audience associations of time and location through both narration and suggestions for action. To accomplish this, many modern playwrights push back against realism to avoid the emotional and physical limitations associated with perfect mimetic representations. However, British playwright Martin McDonagh not only seeks out these implications, he also chooses to court

controversy through his treatment of both location and its heterotopic implications. Through his plays and films he seeks to manipulate his intended audience into making clear-cut associations of existing idyllic locales with horrible emotional consequences. His juxtaposition of an audience's positive preconceptions of setting with their visceral emotional reactions to the action on stage is deliberately designed to shock and provoke the audience.

Although McDonagh's earlier, and arguably most popular, work was set in two regions of Ireland, his most recently produced plays and films have branched out from that location. With this shift in site, a new critical approach is needed to discuss his work, because although his use of location has changed, the emotional response evoked for the narrative space remains somewhat the same. This thesis will examine the critical implications of this shift in geographic focus and the consistent narrative tools used by McDonagh to create a cohesive spatial agenda that transcends the locality of setting. Each chapter will focus on both the similarities of McDoangh's treatment of space and how the transition of time and medium impacts his ability to create and manipulate the audience's understanding of spatial constructions. Chapter one lays the foundation for heterotopic discourse within McDonagh's canon by establishing the link between the playwright's spatial agenda and theatrical heterotopic space. Through the analysis of *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* (1996), chapter one will establish the importance of a spatial critical discourse when approaching McDonagh's work. Chapter two moves the conversation into the realm of imagination by placing its focus on the playwright's ability to create a heterotopic relationship with a fictional space

through the use of polyphonous narrative and conflicting intertextual references to real world counterparts. By using the example of *The Pillowman* (2003), chapter two will highlight the similarities between McDonagh's 'Irish' canon and his most recent 'non-Irish' work. Chapters three and four will shift the discussion to the playwright's most current work, *A Behanding in Spokane* (2010) and the film, *In Bruges* (2008). These chapters will highlight the shift in McDonagh's spatial handling of the stage and the 'third' space that he has crafted using the cinematic medium. Consideration will be given to how these spatial constructions are both informed and complicated by narrative tone, popular culture and geographic location.

Although I will be dealing with both theatrical texts and film, it is important to methodologically distinguish them. Theatrical and cinematic spaces are inherently different in their interaction with the audience, because of the presence of live bodies in theatre, and the vastness encapsulated by film. The visual focus of theatre rests primarily with character, while film must constantly push and pull against the heavy-handed presence of background scenery. Film is also both mutable and reproducible in a way that theatre cannot be, because film is a finished product. To account for this difference in form, I will be focusing on a textual analysis of both McDonagh's plays and film. While audience will be mentioned in a theoretical sense throughout the thesis, the audience is only described in relation to McDonagh's perceived intention to create shock and controversy. This presumption is built upon the nature of the McDonagh's theatrical agenda to both shock and create controversy amongst his intended

audience. This thesis focuses on the spatial implications of McDonagh's theatrical agenda to shock and create controversy with his intended audiences and not on an assessment of its success of failure with actual audiences. Because of McDonagh's theatrical approach to handling cinematic space and cinematic approach to handling theatrical space, a mixture of film and theatre theory will be applied. While consideration will be given to several theorists including Rebecca Schneider and André Bazin, the theoretical framework of the thesis will remain rooted in the principles of Foucault's heterotopias. Foucault's theories are mercifully free of overarching political ideologies that dominate the spatial theories of other theorists such a Henri Lefebvre. The ambition of this analysis will be to direct and illustrate the need for a cohesive and comprehensive approach to addressing McDonagh's spatial agenda in his recent work.

Chapter 1: The Emerald Isle Turned Vile: Martin McDonagh's Theatre of Dystopic Ireland

The first six, and most well known of McDonagh's plays, are all set in Ireland. These plays are typically discussed in terms of trilogies; despite the fact that the only connecting element is the geographic proximity each play has to another. The stories are individual vignettes, with little follow through from one play to another. The very term trilogy implies that there is some form of continuity from one to another, yet for McDonagh, the only relationship that is worth examining is the one between the characters and the heterotopic space of village life. While there is no narrative continuity in the trilogies, there seems to be a spatial one. It is the land that is the central character, not the living and breathing actors. Set in the communities of Leenane and the Aran islands, the trilogies follow the negotiation of individual families as they relate to their community and realities of living within a small and remote community that is facing economic depression. The Ireland that McDonagh creates is not supposed to be interpreted as a realistic depiction of the living Ireland, but rather a heterotopic version of Ireland.

The accessibility of Irish stereotypes is far reaching in the Western world. McDonagh, a Londoner, uses these stereotypes to his advantage and courts the images and ramifications of a recognizable faux-Irish culture. Ondřej Pilný writes in his article, "Martin McDonagh: Parody? Satire? Complacency?" that:

> McDonagh makes the most of the exotic nature of Ireland for spectators abroad (which is possible chiefly due to favourable preconditioning towards the easily accessible exoticism of the Emerald Isle), while at the

> same time exploiting 'the kitschification of Ireland and its meanings in the modern world'. (229)

In short, McDonagh is not making a political statement about the state of affairs of Irish politics or Irish society. He is instead playing to the mass cultural understanding of what the 'Irish' stereotype is on a global scale. In this sense, the entire country of Ireland has in this sense become a heterotopia all on its own through the pervasiveness of what Pilný refers to as the "kitschification" (229). The proliferation of faux-Irish pubs, St. Patrick's Day and Celtic inspired jewelry, clothes and music makes the tourist friendly Irish culture ideal for a young playwright experimenting with heterotopic notions of spatial identity.

While the heterotopic space ought to correspond to a geographic location, the truth in the presentation of location can be a little fuzzy. Theatrical understanding of space is far more complicated than what it would be in the real world because the relation between location and its metaphorical significance is created for the purposes of an individual production. The metaphorical significance of a location is understood by the audience to be, although relational to the real world, colored through the lens of the production. This is extremely important to recognize when discussing heterotopias in terms of the theatre as Foucault's original theories were supposed to be used solely within a 'real world' context. In fact his only acknowledgement of the theatre throughout the entirety of the essay "Of Other Spaces" is in terms of the physical building of the theatre:

> Thus it is that the theater brings onto the rectangle of the stage, one after the other, a whole series of places that are foreign to one another; thus it is

> that the cinema is a very odd rectangular room, at the end of which, on a two-dimensional screen, one sees the projection of a three-dimensional space (Foucault, http://foucault/infodocuments)

Foucault readily acknowledges that the theatre can illustrate various locations but he only does so based on their incongruous relationship to the structure and the function of the building itself. He ignores the potential of the various heterotopias that can be depicted through the theatrical acts themselves, or how those heterotopias interact within the context of the play world. For a heterotopia to function in the context of the play world, one must recognize that it is not the presence of the space that creates the emotional connotation but the pathways by which we make these attachments. In simple terms, it means that the experience of a heterotopia can only be simulated through our association to the place depicted. In his article, "Museum As Media-Form: Constructing Context, Deconstructing the Museum Space", Mike Jones suggests that our compliant 'suspension of disbelief' on entering an interpretive space, allows for flexibility in the geographic fixity of hetertopias when crafting a heterotopic space:

> If we accept that it is not the *thing* that has meaning, but rather the pathways, connections and network linkages between *things* that forge meaning, then the networks (and tools for forging net- works) become as important (or more important) than the *things* themselves. In this sense, it might be argued that the best way to explore a Heterotopian space is with tools for creating Heterotopias (38)

In short a 'virtual' heterotopia can only be formed if one is able to simulate the

understanding or emotional trigger used by a person to recreate the feelings associated with a 'real-world' heterotopia. A more factual interpretation of Ireland may not be able to simulate a strong enough heterotopic experience to carry the weight and attention that Martin McDonagh puts onto the locales of his plays.

That being said, the potentiality of the location is very important when crafting a heterotopic space. The space must be able to be felt to be in the 'real' world, regardless of the accuracy of the portrayal. Virtual heterotopias, are explained by Foucault through the experience of gazing in the mirror:

> it is also a heterotopia in so far as the mirror does exist in reality, where it exerts a sort of counteraction on the position that I occupy. From the standpoint of the mirror I discover my absence from the place where I am since I see myself over there… I begin again to direct my eyes toward myself and to reconstitute myself there where I am. The mirror functions as a heterotopia in this respect: it makes this place that I occupy at the moment when I look at myself in the glass at once absolutely real, connected with all the space that surrounds it, and absolutely unreal, since in order to be perceived it has to pass through this virtual point which is over there. (Foucault, http://foucault/infodocuments)

In order to understand a heterotopic space then, the viewer must be able to reconstruct himself within that space. If the viewer cannot do that, then the space is not able to simulate the emotional experience of a heterotopia because the viewer has no way of relating the space they are perceiving as 'real'. The action of what they are witnessing falls into the realm of fantasy or play and the impact

afforded by the heterotopic presence of the scene is lost. The associations garnered by a heterotopia are unique in that they do not equate themselves with every spatial experience found on stage, making the margin for truth in heterotopic interpretation secondary to their figurative meaning. For example, the small cottage in *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* is more than a cottage that is shared by a mother and daughter. The cottage creates a heterotopia, not because it is set in Leenane or even Ireland but because the feelings of entrapment and stagnation associated allegorically with the space are relatable well beyond their geographic locality.

It is no surprise that many of his plays highlight the setting in the title of the work. With titles like: *The Beauty Queen of Leenane, The Lieutenant of Inishmore* and *The Cripple of Inishmaan*, McDonagh focuses on setting as not only a key element of the plot but also the central focus of the theme. The majority of his plays' titles utilize a term describing the main character such as cripple, or beauty queen and then a locational possessive term such as 'of'. It is this possessive that highlights McDonagh's fascination with location and belonging. The term 'of' in relation to setting suggests that the location is responsible for the creation of the character. The character becomes notorious within the community but also within the larger culture. The town creates the character, and the character goes on to foster an image of the town through their notoriety. The character and their location have a co-dependant almost parasitic relationship. Even before the audience sees the opening moments of the first scene, the setting is at the forefront of their minds, challenging them to see how

these chosen locations fostered such characters. Questions that haunt the spectator at the onset are: What is Innishmore? Where is Leenane? How can one be from Innishmaan? Even though, as spectators we are well aware that these unfamiliar spaces have an antecedent in the real world, they remain somewhat imaginary in the way they help construct and deconstruct character as a spatial attribute.

To create a memorable association with the setting McDonagh writes in a style that subverts the beautiful pastoral landscapes that are stereotypically associated with the inlets and communities of the west coast of Ireland. Critic Nicholas Greene coined the term 'black pastoral' when analyzing McDonagh's work due to its ability to subvert the joy and light of the pastoral poem into something dark and twisted. In his essay, "Black Pastoral: 1990's Images of Ireland," Greene writes that a 'black pastoral' is:

> […] formed by analogy with black comedy, a genre that self-consciously inverts or flouts the earlier conventions of the form. Comedy normally avoids the more painful dimensions of the human situation; black comedy makes laughter out of unhappiness, suffering' death, all the things traditionally ruled out by the comic mode. Black Pastoral involves a similar kind of travesty of the pastoral mode. (68)

The pastoral space however, is not heterotopic in nature. The pastoral falls more within the utopian space because the beauty and pleasure that is found in the pastoral setting is also understood to be fantasy. Critic Mike Jones, in his article "Museum as Media-Form: Constructing Context, Deconstructing the Museum Space" aptly surmises the difference between the two:

> If a Utopia is a non-place outside of the bounds of real-time and real-place, which cannot be pointed out on a map (e.g. Heaven, Shangri-La, Valhalla), then a Heterotopia is a real-time, real-space, human construction, which *can* be pointed out on a map but is in some way intangible and outside human perceptions of time, space and geography. (36)

By rooting plays in recognizable real-life locales such as Ireland, McDonagh seeks capitalize on both principles as the locals he chooses as his settings could apply to either category depending on his audience. In the case of his plays set in Ireland, McDonagh is able to subvert a landscape that closely parallels the utopian beauty of the pastoral with the realism of a heterotopic geography.

In McDonagh's *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*, the setting of the small Irish community of Leenane is at the forefront of the action. The characters are only driven to action out of a direct reaction to the town itself. This push-pull relationship is triggered in part by the socio-emotional relationships that are derived from an economically depressed small town. The reaction of the characters is in direct relation to staying or going within a community that is slowly dying. While grounded in a very real location, the events are fixed in a claustrophobic naturalism that subverts the intimacy of the pastoral landscape. Reminiscent of Naturalist theatre of the 19th century, the sickness of the characters is understood to come from the landscape itself and is referenced continually throughout the play with an obsessive regularity. The characters are constantly at war with themselves and others, debating the decision to stay or leave the

community. The contention of space and location is the central focus of the characters. In the third scene, Pato sums up his own push-pull relationship with his hometown by telling Maureen:

> I do ask meself, if there was good work in Leenane, would I stay in Leenane? I mean, there never will be good work, but hypothetically, I'm saying. Or even bad work. Any work. And when I'm over there in London and working in the rain and it's more or less cattle I am, and the young fellas cursing over cards and drunk and sick, and the oul digs over there, all pee-stained mattresses and nothing to do but watch the clock… when it's there I am, it's here I wish I was, of course. Who wouldn't But when it's here I am… it isn't *there* I want to be, of course not. But I know it isn't here I want to be either. (31)

The characters are unable to function within the community, and yet completely leaving Leenane is also not achievable. There is a cyclical pattern that develops when the characters interact with the community in which they live. They are unable to leave it, yet they understand that staying within the community is also not an option. This creates a multi-level perilous environment as the characters attempt to navigate danger within their own community but also life outside the community.

Many critics categorize the piece as a play between mothers and daughters. This is an understandable response, given that at first sight the action centers on the mother/daughter relationship of Mag and Maureen Folan. Maureen, is the primary care giver to her elderly mother Mag. Throughout the course of the

play, this relationship is continually being re-negotiated as each of the women attempts to best the other, ultimately culminating in a matricide. However, this interpretation is at times limiting as it is almost impossible to discuss the play, even with this interpretation without examining the connotations of space that are raised throughout the crucial moments of the text. What Maureen is fighting against is not in truth her mother, but rather the fear of remaining stagnant, "Arsing me around, eh? Interfering with my life again? Isn't it enough I've had to be on beck and call for you everyday for the last twenty years? Is it one evening out you begrudge me?" (22). Maureen consistently raises concerns regarding her freedom, yet she is just as guilty of trapping herself as her mother is. Their home, like the community of Leenane itself, has become known for being a location where people stay in stasis. This association does not come from its real world counterpart but from the heterotopic attachments placed on the setting by the audience through their own pre-conceived notions of small town life. While the geography of the setting helps guide the audience into making these connections, it is the audience who makes the connections. These connections could just as easily be done through transposing the setting into any small-town as McDonagh later does with *The Pillowman*.

The remoteness and isolation caused by small town life can be ascribed to what Foucault described as his first herterotopic principle, a crisis heterotopia:

> In the so-called primitive societies, there is a certain form of heterotopia that I would call crisis heterotopias, i.e., there are privileged or sacred or forbidden places, reserved for individuals who are, in relation to society

> and to the human environment in which they live, in a state of crisis: adolescents, menstruating women, pregnant women, the elderly, etc. (Foucault, http://foucault/infodocuments)

Although in Foucault's original work, he ascribed these locations to places such as schools, which acts as a holding place for people going through a period of crisis. The crisis heterotopia, is disappearing. However, one could argue that small towns are fostering an atmosphere of crisis, where the purpose of those who enter the town is to leave it. The town is considered to be a starting point, not the destination. Both those who have managed to leave, and those who have never left consider those who cannot make it outside the town to be a failure. The town is a place for those to develop enough to leave or for those too old to continue being of service outside of the community. It becomes a town for the very young and the very old, fostering an environment of stasis. It is a place for people who are either waiting to leave or waiting to die. Maureen in this way is considered an oddity and a failure; she was not able to survive in another society so she was forced to return home. This is what makes her the beauty queen of Leenane referenced in the title. It is not that she is particularly beautiful but that she is so much a product of her environment, that despite her desire to leave it, she is incapable of doing so. The stress caused by this struggle for individual identity is a driving force behind her actions.

The colloquial term shack-wacky is used to refer to someone who is driven to the point of madness by isolation from an unrelenting environment. The isolation that McDonagh perpetuates in all of his plays is the cause of the stress

and heightens the drama felt by his characters. The human interaction always ultimately comes back to the simple question of whether or not his characters are going to survive or escape the environment they find themselves in. In *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*, it is often noted that Maureen and Mag live not only in a small community but on its periphery which isolates them to a second degree. It is little wonder that the play takes a lethal spatial turn, and Maureen takes desperate measures to escape her mother. Ray Dooley, who goes to visit the Folan family on semi-regular basis to bring them news, highlights this separation from the main township repeatedly:

> Ray: Well, I'm not wading through all that skitter just to tell her. I've done enough wading. Coming up that oul hill.
>
> Mag: It's a big oul hill.
>
> Ray: It *is* a big oul hill
>
> Mag: Steep
>
> Ray: Steep is right and if not steep then muddy.
>
> Mag: Muddy and rocky.
>
> Ray: Muddy and rocky is right. Uh-huh. How do ye two manage up it everyday?
>
> (14)

Ray's insistence on the difficulty of his travel situates the heterotopic properties of the Folan residence even further. Not only are they in a small isolated community, but also they are further isolated by poor road conditions that make visiting or interacting with the town difficult. One can hardly experience the scene

between Ray and Mag discussing the quality of the roads without thinking about the Folan women's ability to travel in harsh weather. With the tension between the women in earlier scenes of the play, coupled with the desolation that is simulated through the heterotopic experience, the level of passive aggressive behavior between the two women, or that it ultimately culminates in acts of extreme violence, is not surprising.

McDonagh further heightens the experience of the heterotopic space through the vastness of both action and speech. Each character, although coupled with very naturalistic motivations, is always behaving in one extreme of personality or another. The exchange between Mag and Ray, in which they discuss the quality of the hill, expands from one single small comment into a contest of who can out do the other through a larger than life depiction. Surprising details are always being added to the script, stage directions and even the setting, to make the mundane extraordinary. This is in part caused by the dreary day-to-day culture that McDonagh is able to capture through the heterotopic experience. With the prior tidbits of preconceptions that the audience might have about the play settings, and the types of people and interactions that might come out of that setting, they are able to project simplistic elements of their own day-to-day lives onto the characters of the play text.

Unfortunately, the world depicted in McDonagh is both familiar and terrifying. He bases his actions through the most dystopic lens possible, making the experience of the characters as bleak as possible. Yet, despite the negativity

and grotesque nature of the characters' situations and outcomes, McDonagh is able to infuse the play with an unmistakable humor and wit.

This humor is in part generated by the juxtaposition of the familiar with the strange, the grotesque with the sublime, the uncanny with the mundane. The audience can relate to struggling with the heterotopic experience presented to the characters, yet cannot rectify the extremes to which the characters take their situations. At the climax of the play, when Maureen discovers that Mag has lied to her about Pato writing her from England, Maureen's reaction is to shamelessly beat her mother. The audience can relate to Maureen's feelings of hurt, frustration, fear and resentment yet cannot justify the force in which she implements these feelings into action. By pairing the outrageous action with a heterotopic space, McDonagh is able to create a grotesquely comedic and disturbing action by creating incongruity through all points of association for the audience.

> *Same night. The only light in the room emanates from the orange coals through the grill of the range, just illuminating the dark shapes of Mag, sitting in her rocking chair, which rocks back and forth of its own volition, her body moving, her body unmoving, and Maureen, still in her black dress, who idles very slowly around the room, poker in hand.* (70)

The scene is very reminiscent of the first scene where the audience can anticipate some form of confrontation between mother and daughter. Maureen's subsequent monologue, acts as affirmation of her desire to leave her mother and start a new life away from Leenane, in America. The audience can relate [deleted comma] the

heterotopic image of America fresh in their minds. Idealisms of freedom and independence dance through their heads, when suddenly:

> *The rocking chair has stopped its motions. Mag starts to slowly lean forward at the waist until she finally topples over and falls heavily to the floor, dead. A red chunk of skull hangs from a string of skin at the side of her head. Maureen looks down at her, somewhat bored, taps her on the side with the toe of her shoe, then steps onto her back and stands there in thoughtful contemplation.* (72)

It then becomes clear that the only way for Maureen to free herself is not to run away to America but to kill her mother. This is done by juxtaposing her final monologue, filled with heterotopic images of a new life in America, with the matricide of Mag. It becomes obvious that McDonagh is not simply creating heterotopic spaces for easy associations between the audience and the characters but also to challenge our notions on how these associations work.

Ironically, as McDonagh progresses in his career, his dependence on specific cultural landscapes begins to wane. Throughout the two trilogies, McDonagh firmly planted his feet in the heterotopic landscape of an exoticized Ireland. Yet, with his last two plays, the *Pillowman* and *A Behanding in Spokane*, and the film *In Bruges,* he has branched away from this comfort zone. While all three landscapes continue to play on the simulated experience of a heterotopian geography, the specificities are much less instantly recognizable. As McDonagh steps away from grounding his work in a dystopic Ireland, he begins to play with the implications of heterotopias on a more global scale through shifts in settings

and changes in media.

Chapter 2: The Power of Suggestion
Mixing Spatial Fact and Fiction in *The Pillowman*

Following the production of his six plays set in Ireland, criticism of McDonagh's work, particularly his use of space, was settling into a comfortable pattern. He was an acknowledged member of Britain's New Brutalist school of theatre with a predilection for Irish settings. A significant degree of his shock value came from the contrast between the audience's pastoral associations of his settings and the disturbing narrative and action of his plays. Discussion often focused on the credibleness of this contrast and even on the playwright's personal legitimacy to make it as a lasting theatre presence. The production of his play, *The Pillowman*, should have caused some re-assessment of this comfortable school of criticism. Although produced for the first time in 2003, *The Pillowman* was McDonagh's first play. *The Pillowman* is unique in that it is the only one of McDonagh plays to date that employs a fictional setting. It is the nondescript nature of this setting that calls into question previous criticism of his work and use of space. His ability to shock, even without the audience's preconceived pastoral associations, indicated a greater depth to McDonagh's work and his use of space than a mere thrashing of negative preconceptions of Ireland.

In *The Pillowman*, the boundaries of theatrical space are pushed to their breaking point, as McDonagh's leading character, Katurian, is punished for blurring the boundaries between the "real" and the "fictive". Katurian is a fiction writer who has to answer to the accusation of a police state that holds him captive for having written gruesome short stories, which strangely resemble real child murders that happened in his town. Through its very premise, an author in the

process of being interrogated about his work, the audience must agree to a theatrical contract that is built upon the understanding that fiction is dependent on "slippages" between the "real" and the "fictive". Without allowing for the space to transition from plot to story, the play would be unable to operate. McDonagh's Katurian is less concerned with his physical safety as he is for his literary legacy. In Act II, despite facing certain death, Katurian's primary concern is for the safety of his stories: "I don't want to by-pass anything. I just want you to keep your word. To go ahead and kill me, and to go ahead and keep my stories safe" (77).

The Pilllowman stands out as distinct amongst the rest of McDonagh's repertoire. It is his only play to be set in a purely fictive and non-descript location. It was also the first of his plays not to be set in Ireland, until 2010's *A Behanding in Spokane*. This is particularly notable, as McDonagh has often been accused by critics as being a 'paint by numbers' playwright, referring to his habit of using similar locals, formulaic plot line and even going so far as to recycle characters throughout several plays. As critic Ondřej Pilný surmised in his article, "Grotesque Entertainment: *The Pillowman* as Puppet Theatre":

> *The Pillowman*, McDonagh's first 'non-Irish' play, raised high expectations not only due to the enormous success of the playwright's earlier work: quite a portion of the playwright's audiences were beginning to feel that it was high time for a talent of McDonagh's caliber to change the subject and prove his worth be going now for 'something completely different'. (214)

From a practical standpoint, there was a great deal of pressure for McDonagh to

create, as Pilný puts it, a non-Irish play as all of McDonagh's previous works have centered on two small communities in County Galway, Ireland. As McDonagh was in danger of becoming a theatrical one-trick pony, he needed to break outside of his crafted comfort zone in order to hold on to the theatrical relevance. The irony of this of course being, as Lisa Fitzpatrick points out in her article "Language Games: *The Pillowman*, *A Skull in Connemara* and Martin McDonagh's Hiberno-English" is that "*The Pillowman* is in fact the first of McDonagh's plays, but it was only produced after the success of the *Leenane* trilogy, premiering in its revised form at the National Theatre in 2003" (143). Consequently, although, *The Pillowman* offered a variation of location, the driving themes and spatial slippages utilized in the "Irish" plays, can be easily spotted by critics in their artistic infancy.

The coquettish egotism that dominates McDonagh's later work and public persona are just as apparent in *The Pillowman* as in his 'Irish' plays. The criticism that follows his handling of the Irish people can also be superimposed on his treatment of his fictitiously nationalized ones. As Fitzpatrick eagerly points out:

> An examination of his use of language and the construction of his dialogues reveals considerable similarities between the supposed Irish-English of the earlier plays, and his 2003 play *The Pillowman*, set in a fictionalized central European country. Like the *Leenane* plays, *The Pillowman* draws upon clichéd conceptions of Eastern Europe that have very little to do with the events or histories of actual countries (142-143).

Playing on an ubuesque cliché (Jarry's *Ubu Roi* was also set in a fictionalized

Poland), transposing the action to an "other" locale is not uncommon in McDonagh's work. Critically speaking, in many ways *The Pillowman*, was both a disappointment for critics as well as an eye opener. McDonagh's locales were not significantly used to make grandiose statements about a real world environment but rather positioning stereotypes in such a way as to push the audience to make their own connections. For instance, in the case of Fitzpatrick's assertions that *The Pillowman* was set in a "fictionalized central European country" (143), while it is logical, it is not canonical. Nowhere in the script does McDonagh state where the location could be; yet critics such as Fitzpatrick often superimpose real world equivalents upon the details of play. McDonagh offers the audience a hyperbole of stereotypes and allows the audience to make their own associations based on their own biases. As Pilný points out:

> The linguistic mélange of names only underscores the fictitious nature of the setting: the writer's name appears to be Armenian in overdose ('Katurian Katurian Katurian;' 8); his hometown is called Kamenice which is Czech, but features a Jewish quarter with the non-Czech name of Lamenec [...]. The brother is called Michal- Czech, Slovak, or Polish; the victims are Andrea Jovanovic-Serb, Croat, or Slovene, and Aaron Goldberg- a credible Germanic/ Jewish name for the Central European region. The detectives' names, Tupolshki and Ariel, blend Polish with Shakespeare. Finally, Katurian's address of 'Kamenice 443' lacks a street name […] and sounds more like a linguistic joke which concerns the writer's name: the four which echoes in his appellation, three times. (215)

The association between the play and central Europe is hinted at, but not overtly stated. We do know that many of the names of the characters and locations come from a particularly geographic region but they do not match the real-world history of that region denoted by the etymology of the names. The play could just as easily take place in a region outside of central Europe that had a history of immigration. McDonagh seems to be more interested in the phonetic value of the names than their geographic affiliations. The repetitious nature of the harsh 'k' sounds has its own implications, particularly for those of a North American audience. By utilizing different etymological and phonetic associations, McDonagh is able to play off the subliminal expectations of his primary audience demographics: Western European and North American. His concern is not to make great political statements about a singular region but rather to create controversy amongst his assumed audience. His primary concern appears to be more fixated on his own image as an 'enfant terrible' than transmitting a cohesive statement based on environment or geopolitical realities.

The double entendre of McDonagh's work is not about a commentary on a specific place but rather the audience's conception of a space that is imposed on that place. Opposed to popular critical opinions, the significance of geographic locations in McDonagh's plays is imposed more by the audience than by the playwright. McDonagh is concerned more with the business of shocking than the business of being political. His ability to shock, offend, provoke and incite is a consistent element throughout his oeuvre whose main purpose seems to be to challenge the audience's preconceived notions of what they ought to see versus

what they are seeing. McDonagh's cultural relevance hinges on his ability to push his audience when they expect him to pull.

Consequently, because of the geographic similarities between his 'Irish plays', *The Pillowman*, becomes, critically speaking, his most important play to date. It is the play, which many critics looked to in order to evaluate the playwright's abilities beyond the making of cookie-cutter works that albeit successful, were not the makings of a long-lasting relevance. Unfortunately, for many, McDonagh has been unable to escape his own self-reverence. *The Pillowman*, like many of McDonagh's later 'Irish plays' had become a pastiche of his earlier work. His spatial usage functions in an identical fashion to his 'Irish plays', marking him as a particular kind of playwright that extends beyond the geographic locality of the setting by creating similar spatial pathways through which the audience is pushed to relate. Both in *The Pillowman*, and his 'Irish plays', McDonagh's characters inhabit a very relatable micro-world with strict social rules that the audience can grasp onto and translate into their own spatial understanding of the world.

McDonagh's work is clearly earmarked by how he approaches spatial conceptions, not by how he approaches conceptions of place. As *The Pillowman*, is not steeped in geography, the play becomes much more telling of McDonagh's perspective as a playwright than the rest of his plays. It can be discussed without the focus on the Irish agenda that beleaguers much of the current critical perspectives of McDonagh's work. While this shift does not de-legitimize earlier criticism, it does require a shift in focus when discussing McDonagh as an artist.

It becomes increasingly difficult to view McDonagh's Irish agenda as the distinctive voice that binds his work as a whole. The critical practice of dividing his work into two camps, based on the locality of the setting cripples the potential for a cohesive critical discussion of how McDonagh operates within the larger scale of the Western theatre tradition. Using *The Pillowman* as the basis for critical comparison within McDonagh's body of work, literary trends more readily emerge than by only using his 'Irish' plays as a basis. McDonagh's work is not as split as many critics would have one believe, the pre- and post-*Pillowman* plays have much more in common on how they manipulate spatial conventions than the setting would have you believe.

The most simplistic examination of McDonagh's work hinges on how he is able to juxtapose the reality of his script against the expectations of theatrical traditions. This juxtaposition happens squarely in the realm of the audiences' spatial understanding as the play takes place in two distinct worlds, the 'real world' and Katurian's imagination or 'story world'. The tensions perceived by the audience often come from utilizing the basic comedic premise of incongruity. However, as is trademark of all of McDonagh's work, the opposing forces are found by juxtaposing dystopic realities with sinister events. This earmarks all of McDonagh's plays as dark or black comedies, as Richard Schechner argues in *The Future of Ritual: Writings on Culture and Performance*:

> Dark play occurs when contradictory realities coexist, each seemingly capable of cancelling the other out, as in the double cross […]. Dark play subverts order, dissolves frames, breaks its own rules, so that playing itself

> is in danger of being destroyed […] Unlike the inversions of carnivals, ritual clowns, and so on (whose agendas are public), dark play inversions are not declared or resolved: its end is not integration but disruption, deceit, excess, and gratification. (36)

In the case of *The Pillowman*, the effectiveness of the play hinges on layering Katurian's opposing 'realities': the reality of the interrogation with the reality of his fantasy. Both realities are equally dark, both involve violence and pain particularly towards children, however, both are divisible in the audience's minds through the initial theatrical contract established between the play world and the audience. They view the interrogation as real, and the stories as imaginary or untrustworthy, despite the fact that both are equally improbable and Katurian (who is arguably the narrator of the play) is an untrustworthy source.

Throughout the course of the play, the details of Katurian's investigation are intermingled with narrated pantomimes of the stories that have brought him in for questioning. However, the reliability of Katurian's experience and his stories shifts through the semi-autobiographical "Writer and his Brother". The only story that draws inspiration from 'real life' events, Katurian murdering his parents for abusing his brother, is also the only story to undergo several revisions. While the first version of the story presented by Katurian absolves him of both the murder and the knowledge of Michal's situation, as the play progresses, the onus of guilt becomes more squarely placed on Katurian. Until the final version of the story in which Katurian recognizes that he killed his parents in both the fictive world of the story and 'real world', ultimately confessing the crime to the agents, "Could

you beat me up after I've finished this? I'm just up to the part about murdering my mother and father" (McDonagh 76).

Despite this admission of guilt, Katurian is also quick to point out that, 'The writer and the Writer's Brother' is the only story that has any direct real world applications: "Well… I know I hate any writing that's even vaguely autobiographical. I think people who only write about what they know only write what they know because they are too fucking stupid to make anything up, however, 'The Writer and the Writer's Brother' is, I suppose the only story of mine that isn't really fiction" (76). It is interesting that Katurian admits to disliking autobiographical fiction because the one story that he does not care for is also the only story that is retold on three separate occasions, and it is also the only story that has its content revised. As Katurian admits the guilt he feels towards Michal and the death of his parents, and realizes that his stories have consequences. Only then is he able to accept the guilt of not only the deaths of his parents but also the deaths of the children killed by Michal as a result.

This acceptance of both guilt and the consequences of Michal's interpretation of the stories is a far cry from Katurian as he appeared at the beginning of the play. At the outset of the play, Katurian is steadfast in not only his own innocence but also the innocence of his stories: "Listen, I don't understand what I'm doing here. I don't know what you want me to say I don't have anything against anybody. Any Jews or you or anybody. I just write stories. That's all I do. That's my life. I stay in and write stories. That's it" (McDonagh 14). By defining the world of his stories as separate from his own reality,

Katurian, is able to write without the concern of consequence. Despite living a reality of oppression, Katurian, shielded by the guise of fiction, initially denies any implications or real world associations can be drawn from his stories because they are a work of fiction. Any association drawn by the reader is accidental at best and not his problem: "If there are children in them, it's incidental. If there is politics in them, it's incidental. It's *accidental*" (16). Many playwrights of the New Theatre made similar disclaimers of the author's responsibility. Similarly, while Katurian wants ownership of his stories; he does not want responsibility for them. The question of authorial intent and authorial responsibility comes up often throughout the course of the play. It is also a question that is never fully answered. While Katurian appears to take responsibility for not only his own actions, but also for the consequences of his stories by admitting his guilt to Tupolski and Ariel, his motivations remain unclear. Katurian is at best self-motivated by his creative legacy, something that can only continue to exist if he makes a deal with the agents. His confession is coerced through the promise of keeping his stories alive. This is an understandable motivation for a character that draws his identity from his ability to create. However, his need for creative control also makes Katurian an extremely unreliable narrator, a role that he superimposes on himself near the end of the play. Katurian, a self-professed, writer extraordinaire, continually manipulates the events of the play to alleviate his own associations. Even his confessions of guilt are marred by their apparent martyrdom. Katurian is not confessing out of guilt for what he has done but rather over the implications of what this guilt means for his stories. Above all else Katurian is concerned with the

safety of his stories, and he makes his confession for the safety of his stories.

The approach that Katurian takes to his confession is steeped in the duality, the push-pull effect that is characteristic of all of McDonagh's plays. Katurian is both calculating and desperate. McDonagh situates Katurian in a place of complete control, allowing his character the omniscient control of an author, while questioning that very control by placing Katurian in a situation of powerlessness. While Katurian can ultimately rewrite the events so that his actions are seen as justifiable, he is unable to completely rewrite the events that comprise his own story. Through his stories, Katurian is able to manipulate the way in which his guilt is perceived, not the actions that lead up to his guilt. Even his interrogators are swayed by the Katurian's interpretation of the 'facts':

> I know all this isn't your fault. I know you didn't kill the children. I know you didn't want to kill your brother, and I know you killed your parents for all the right reasons, and I'm sorry for you. I'm really sorry for you, I've never said that to anybody in custody before. But at the end of the day, I never liked your stories in the first fucking place. Y'know? (101)

In this world, justice for the deaths is dealt with without regard for effect. Because the play is told from Katurian's perspective, the audience is set up with the unsettling possibility of sympathizing with his position, despite the fact that his stories were used as the inspiration behind the brutal murders of children. McDonagh is able to position the justice of the law versus the circumstances of the events. Katurian killed his parents to protect his brother who was being abused; Michal killed the children out of childish allegiance to his brother's

stories- his mind warped through years of abuse, both very sympathetic situations, neither just. Despite being told that children have died as a result of the stories, Katurian is unable to position the stories as bad. Regardless of being in the judicial 'right', officers of the law hunting child killers, the agents come across as brutish bullies from a totalitarian government looking to censor Katurian for his artistic choices. Yet, the events of the play could take place in even the most democratic nation. The officers found proof in Katurian's home of the murders; the stories outlined the manner in which the children were killed. They did not arrest Katurian out of artistic repression, rather out of concern for the safety of the city's citizens. Yet the discussion perpetuated by and throughout the play is not one of the murders of children but rather the importance of artistic license and the fundamental relationship between guilt and innocence.

The question becomes, not who killed the children but whether it is acceptable to write a story that recounts terrible events for the sake of exotifying the violence. Is it tolerable to aesthetisize violence and profit from tragedy? Katurian actively trivializes the violent deaths of the children in his narration. McDonagh positions his audience to be offended not by the socially unacceptable idea of a child being murdered but rather by the violence faced by Katurian and perpetrated in the name of a "disciplinary system" (as Foucault would call it) that constructs the individual as guilty in his innocence and innocent in his guilt. In *Birth of Tragedy* Nietzsche observed that the stage of tragic culture was a moment suspended between self-consciousness (Apollonian) and an earlier stage of primordial self-abandon sublimated in the aesthetic (Dionysian). This struggle

between Apollo and Dionysus collided in the modern period causing the death of tragedy: “tragedy died with the creation of the individual” (Nietzche 21).

Katurian positions himself as the quintessential martyr for modern art through his confession of guilt. The focus of his narration revolves around his art; in his post-mortem narration Katurain describes the events after his execution:

> The story was going to finish in fashionably downbeat mode, with Michal going through all that torment, with Katurian writing all those stories, only to have them burned from the world by a bulldog of a policeman. The story was going to finish that way… And maybe it was best that the story didn’t finish that way, as it wouldn’t have been quite accurate. Because, for reasons known only to himself, the bulldog of a policeman chose not to put the stories in the burning trash, but placed them carefully with Katurian’s case file, which he then sealed away to remain unopened for fifty-years. (103-104)

McDonagh highlights the redemption of the officer, not in catching the child-killer but rather in protecting the stories against all odds. The language used to describe not only Katurian but also Michal, positions them not as in the wrong but rather as victims of both their parents and society. The policeman, Ariel, is described as a bulldog, a breed that is known as violent and brutish, redeeming himself only by his decision to salvage the stories. The audience is not set up to feel for the police, but rather for the murderers. The situations may not be likeable but they are understandable if one positions themselves from a different more subtle perspective than the typical good versus evil one. One would expect that

the audience would side with the police, given objectively provided information – that children had been brutally murdered – but the way the language presents the play does not allow for a normal social response. McDonagh presents the information through a very jaded source, he also positions the child murders to be described almost exclusively through Katurian's narration, stories that Katurian assures the audience are fictional. The language used to describe Katurian and Michal is that of pity, violent language is used around them, yet rarely applies to them directly.

This is particularly ironic when we consider who actually commits violent acts throughout the play. The police are described as bulldogs, Michal tormented and Katurian as a pain-staking artist. Yet, the only act of violence committed by the police is that of Katurian's execution. They only pretend to torture Michal, and the story crafted by Tupolski involves a child who is saved. Katurian writes about child murder, Michal reenacts several of Katurian's stories and Katurian not only kills his parents but also Michal. Yet, all of the murders committed by Katurian are presented as a necessity of mercy. The positioning of language and the emphasis placed on Katurian as narrator allows McDonagh to shift the spatial understanding of the audience. The emotional response that the audience has to the environments, and the emotional cues dictated by Katurian change the sociological response of the audience. Western audiences are conditioned to be distrustful of totalitarian governments, thus by insinuating that the characters are living under a repressive regime, the audience is more willing to forgive their transgressions. In Jose Lanters article, "The Identity Politics of Martin

McDonagh," Lanters explores some of the contradictory intertextual messages that help create this confusion:

> *The Pillowman* is set in an unspecified totalitarian dictatorship […]. National "identity" is problematized: McDonagh provides a number of signifiers which, to an audience well versed in current events and recent history, present themselves as potential clues to a political mystery. However, given that the play premiered more than a decade after the fall of the Berlin wall, the free-floating signifiers do not "add up" to form a reality; they cannot be definitively attached to a signified. The material presents itself as a parody or a reproduction of no original. (12-13)

"A reproduction with no original" is a Baudrillardian simulacrum that places the notion of the real under suspicion. With the multiplicity of signifiers throughout the play used to indicate potential location, it becomes impossible, although intriguing, for the audience to come up with a real world equivalent. Yet, enough of those signifiers are recognizable to allow the sentiment of the potential signified message to attach regardless of the presence of a clear original message. Western society has become so accustomed to sound-byte media and slogan news that the presence of a meaning to the message is irrelevant to the audience's ability to interpret sentiment. In Western society, McDonagh's target audience, totalitarian states are seen as a thing of evil, as a result Katurian can be seen as sympathetic regardless of his own crimes. Katurian becomes a product of his environment allowing for his transgressions to be applied to the already implied negative transgressions of the state.

The question then becomes, what is the playwright's intention. The word play and double entendre presented in all of McDonagh's plays are sophisticated and equally capable of evoking audience response. However, McDonagh becomes challenging to critics when one attempts to attribute a greater or underlying purpose to his plays. The question of the playwright's integrity dogs much of the established criticism written about McDonagh. Critics are quick to establish a motive behind his means. Yet, McDonagh's own writing resists this kind of appropriation because he is not trying to make grand political statements but rather evoke and manipulate through story telling. He is a playwright whose motivations are located in evoking the visceral not the mental. Perhaps McDonagh himself should be seen as a product of his culture, similar to Katurian. He writes terrible things for the sake of being terrible. In the words of his character, "I say keep your left-wing this, keep your right wing that and tell me a fucking story! You know? A great man once said, 'the first duty of a storyteller is to tell a story,' and I believe in that wholeheartedly" (McDonagh 7). This use of hodgepodge cultural referencing to denote location works well in *The Pillowman* because of its fictive origins that must defy identification by the audience. However, as audiences would come to see with his next theatrical offering, *A Behanding in Spokane*, a purely narrative mélange approach to denoting space in a real-world setting creates an alienation effect that stifles McDonagh's ultimate goal, which is to tell a good story.

Chapter 3: Two In the Hand:
Shifting Spatial Styles in *A Behanding in Spokane*

Martin McDonagh's plays encapsulate the fervor of the 'New Brutalist' movement of Britain's 1990's and early 2000's. 'New Brutalists' were dependent on shock tactics meant to evoke visceral reactions from the audience. McDonagh stands out among the Brutalists such as Anthony Neilson, Sarah Kane, or Mark Ravenhill. Unfortunately, when a theatre movement's theatrical bag of tricks is reliant on shocking the audience, the time frame that the movement can live within, must necessarily be limited. The status of transgression is at best ambiguous when it comes to performance practices. Rebecca Schneider observed in *The Explicit Body in Performance* that "the claim that the avant-garde, and its 'bad-boy' hope in the political promise of transgression, died sometimes in the 1960s" (3). While shock creates a strong reaction, it can only last for a brief duration in theatrical history as a whole. In short, shock cannot result in long-term shift in theatrical practices although it may have a wider impact on social practices. In his book on the 'New Brutalists', *In-Yer-Face Theatre: British Drama Today*, theatre critic Aleks Sierz points out that "Shock is an essential part of a confrontational sensibility. Depending as it does on audience expectations, it is usually relative. What startles us the first time may merely amuse us the second time. Small shocks may gradually make us immune to bigger ones"(9). Shock, according to Sierz, is very similar to the old adage of 'fool me once shame on you, fool me twice shame on me'. The novelty of shock is just that, a novelty. Shock does not lend itself well to longevity as what is shocking at one point of time will not necessarily be shocking to a future generation or a different

audience. The 'New Brutalist' movement, at the height of its popularity, flooded the theatres of Britain and North America to the point of saturation. As the number of 'New Brutalist' plays grew, many critics began to question: what else can these playwrights do? This question has plagued Martin McDonagh career since his initial burst on the British stage with his two trilogies set in Ireland.

The critical pressure placed on McDoangh to do something different with his art comes from two distinct sources. The first of which being that McDonagh's success came very quickly from a rapid-fire succession of plays that rely on a single geographic location and the perversion of the socio-cultural representation of the people of that geographic location. The second being his own public persona as the *enfant terrible*: McDonagh the playwright became as much a provocateur as his plays. Patrick Lonergan points out in his book, *The Theatre and Films of Martin McDonagh*, that:

> It's clear both from his plays and from his public statements, that McDonagh can be flippant and perhaps somewhat sarcastic in conversation, especially when discussing his own work. So when he stated early in his career that he was interested in writing only because he wanted 'to avoid having a real job', it seemed likely (to me anyway) that he was joking […]. Yet such remarks are often presented as if they were intended to be understood literally […] (xix)

Lonergan surmises that much of the criticism faced against McDonagh comes from misquotation. However, it is obvious from the amount of quotes similar to the one presented by Lonergan, that McDonagh enjoys the controversy that not

only surrounds his work but also himself. It would also seem as if the sheen that surrounded McDonagh during the 1990's has slowly begun to wane. As Lilian Chambers and Eamonn Jordan point out in the introduction to their book, *The Theatre of Martin McDonagh: A World of Savage Stories*, that "previous comments that he made about either the Irish tradition or his own exposure to theatre writing generally can be taken almost with a grain of salt" (4). It is clear that in recent discussions of McDonagh's work, there is a weariness that comes to those who both defend and criticize his antics. As Sierz said, what is shocking once is not so shocking the second or third time around. Yet, as tiring as his antics seem to be becoming to critics, there is no denying that he is a commercial darling. As Lonergan points out, during the summer of 1997, "McDonagh was the only playwright, other than Shakespeare, to have four of his plays running simultaneously in London" (xix). With critics' growing frustration with his writing style, it becomes imperative that each of McDonagh's new plays becomes a commercial smash. Unfortunately, despite McDonagh's bankability and a star studded initial cast, his latest offering *A Behanding in Spokane* was less than a commercial or critical success.

Debuting in 2010, *A Behanding in Spokane* is McDonagh's first play set in America; it is also his first play to premiere outside of the United Kingdom. The play follows Carmichael, a man who has spent much of his adult life looking for his missing left hand. Through a 'hand-deal' gone awry, two drug dealers and a hapless hotel employee try to talk themselves out of a tricky situation when the hand they brought to sell turns out to be a fake. The problems behind *A*

Behanding in Spokane are hinged to its treatment of space, as McDonagh is a writer of habit and uses many of the same formulas throughout all of his plays. Lonergan, one of the few critics to address the play, points out that: "As we will have come to expect, *Behanding* does many of the things that the other plays do: it avoids answering all of its audiences' questions; it seems to celebrate its own ambiguity; and its allusions to films, music, and other forms of popular culture allow us better to understand that play itself" (116). Simply put, although McDonagh is again painting by the numbers throughout much of the play, he shifts the way he creates the spatial connections with the audience from a careful blend of the physical attributes and narration to simply the latter. This makes the play more difficult to relate to because the narration is at best jumbled in its approach. This is a surprising turn of events when one considers the success of *The Pillowman* that shares many of the same attributes. Just like *The Pillowman*, *A Behanding in Spokane* is also not set in Ireland and uses similar theatrical tropes in how it approaches issues such as gender and racial stereotypes, violence and shock, driven strictly by a mesh of social and cultural allusions.

Like the Irish plays, *A Behanding in Spokane* is staunchly set in a cultural geography. However, unlike the Irish plays, the exact township of the setting is never overtly discussed only alluded to in passing. The reference to Spokane in the title comes not from the setting of the play but rather the location where Carmichael's hand is taken from him. Yet, the interactions of the characters, references, even the stereotypes and slanders are centered on an American cultural lexicon. Cultural references range from high school shootings to Yoda, with

McDonagh orchestrating fast paced exchanges that are meant to trigger both recognition and revulsion from the audience:

> TOBY: It wasn't me, Mervyn. It just wasn't me. You ain't one of these cats who think all black people look the same, are ya?
>
> MERVYN: Pretty much, yeah, but I'm still sure it was you.
>
> TOBY: Oh yeah?
>
> MERVYN: Yeah, your hair was different but you had a skull and crossbones earring and you had a T-shirt with Yoda on it.
>
> *(Today glances sheepishly at Marilyn)*
>
> Marilyn: Oh you fucking asshole, Toby!
>
> TOBY: Lotsa black guys got T-shirts with Yoda on 'em! That don't prove nothing! Blacks guys dig Yoda! That shit wouldn't stand up in court! (30)

However, despite the instantaneous affiliation that the audience has with these specific references, the play cannot help but feel slightly dated. The cultural reference points used, even in this exchange feel out of place. The last blockbuster *Star Wars* film debut was in 2005 and the usage of the term 'cats' feels horribly out of place amongst the various racial slurs and curse words used by Toby and the other characters. The play is ultimately comprised of such a mish-mash Americanisms that give off the impression that McDonagh is trying very hard to sound authentic without ever quite hitting the mark. This polymorphous quality dominates over the action of the play until it shifts from depicting a series of events in a plot to a retelling of 'almost events' that primarily happen off-stage. Herein lies the greatest shift for McDonagh from his other plays; his Irish plays

and *The Pillowman* depend on intricate plot twists that hinge on stage action, while *A Behanding in Spokane* is more interested in depicting the heavily nostalgic desires of the characters. The lack of clarity in its allusions to the past make the play feel dated and difficult to relate to, vastly separating it from McDonagh's previous efforts where the clarity and focus placed on its cultural and social reenactments make even the character's most deplorable actions relatable. McDonagh is unable to create the heterotopic connections in *A Behanding in Spokane* by offering a spectrum of references and a newly directed focus on narration and a revived interest in hyping audience anticipation for violence to compensate for the lack of theatrical space.

Explicit violence is also not exhibited on stage, unlike all of McDonagh's other plays. There are inklings of the potentiality of violence but no one is ever seriously hurt throughout the action of the play. McDonagh does however toy with the audience's expectations of his reputation as a violent playwright. The play opens with the presumption of a murder-taking place:

> *Hotel room, small-town America. Window in back wall, fire escape outside. A large battered suitcase on one side of the room and a small bed on the other, upon which sits Carmichael, mid- to late 40's. His left hand is missing, and his right has bits of white tape covering tattoos below his knuckles. There is a closet stage right behind the bed, from which, on lights up, there comes a knocking, as of someone trying to get out. Carmichael sits there for some time, blankly, the reaches inside his overcoat, takes out a gun, sighs, goes over to the closet, and crouches*

down in front of it. He cocks the gun and opens the closet door. The knocking stops. Carmichael aims the gun into the closet. There's a muffled agitation. He fires a single gun shot. The muffled agitation ceases. (5)

The slow deliberateness that permeates each action is used as a means to heighten expectations. The audience, presumably familiar with McDonagh's reputation, is expecting blood, and the playwright presumably delivers… at least that is the impression the audience is given until Marilyn enters with a package to exchange for her boyfriend, Toby:

MARILYN: What have you done to him?

CARMICHAEL: I haven't done anything to him.

MARILYN: He's unconscious.

CARMICHAEL: He ain't unconscious. (*Carmichael goes over and looks in the closet*.) No, you're right. He is unconscious. I guess he must've fainted when I shot the gun off. (*She looks at Carmichael as he goes back to the package.*) Beside his head, I shot it off. (9)

The pacing taken to complete the two actions, Toby's "murder" and his reveal are hopelessly off balance. Each motion Carmichael takes from the second the lights go up is meticulous and calculated however, the moment additional cast members take the stage, the action speeds up and events lose their calculated quality. The quirky back and forth dynamic of the dialogue that is picked up by Carmichael and Marilyn is continued throughout the rest of the play with little physical action punctuating the exchanges. In this sense, the play is much more reminiscent of McDonagh's radiophonic work than a stage production as almost all of the

physical action takes place off stage. Lonergan highlights this when he writes that:

> McDonagh gives us a play in which several exciting events happen – but all occur offstage or before the action has begun. His characters constantly imagine situations in which they do interesting things or occupy significant roles. But the fact that they can only imagine such actions shows how boring their ordinary lives are and how insubstantial their actual identities. (116)

The role of imagination and imaginary moments is important throughout all of McDonagh's plays, yet, it operates differently in *A Behanding in Spokane* because the imagined moments are never actualized through physical action. Unlike *The Pillowman*, where the Katurian's stories are pantomimed on stage, the events imagined or described by the characters in *A Behanding in Spokane* remain strictly in the realm of dialogue. While McDonagh is not a stranger to transcendental monologues, they take place throughout many of his plays; he usually restrains their usage to one or two characters, such as Pato's monologue in *The Beauty Queen of Leenane.* Yet in *A Behanding in Spokane*, multiple characters are allowed to use the monologue form. The characters in *A Behanding in Spokane* never seem to be able to engage in a full dialogue: they quip, they speak at each other, but are not able to fully express themselves unless they are able to speak uninterrupted. This can lead the audience into another false direction, one in which McDonagh is setting up a grand political statement.

In the program for a 2011 performance of *A Behanding in Spokane*, director Kevin McKendrick suggests that because this was McDonagh's first play

set completely in America and written post-9/11 "[…] the play was penned as the playwright's response to America's unending and impotent quest for vengeance following the tragic events of 9/11" (Director's notes). This is, of course, an inflection of the director not the playwright. McDonagh is notoriously apolitical in most of his writings and not known for his subtlety. Yet it is also understandable why McKendrick would make this assumption, the play does deal with an obsession and the extensive use of monologues creates a preachy tone. However, the lack of direction or motivation of the characters (aside from Carmichael) would suggest that the characters are trying to reconcile an imagined future with a past that they cannot quite remember. Coping with the juxtaposition of the imagined potential with an unremarkable reality is a far more likely motivation for McDonagh.

The fact that the play takes place in a post-9/11 America is one of circumstance of when the play was written, as in fact, the events of 9/11 are one of the few cultural references that is not touched on by the characters in the play. This raises the questions as to when the play is supposed to be set; the language and slang indicates a mixture of time periods that could lend itself easily to anytime close to the turn of the 21st century. This reflects upon an audience, who although able to recognize the references, are unable to relate to their significance on a linear time scale. By blurring time through mixing reference markers, McDonagh is able to create the atmosphere of nostalgia similar to that of a memory play, while grounding the action in the recognizable reality of naturalism. While the naturalistic setting should help create the heterotopic spatial setting

found in McDonagh's other work, it actually hinders it because of the character's inability to relate to the world around them or even relate to each other in meaningful ways.

McDonagh pushes the dichotomy between the 'real' and the 'imagined' onto the characters' perception of reality as opposed to the events of their reality, making their understanding of the world skewed by the conventions of embellishment and story-telling. In *A Behanding in Spokane*, the characters are less the product of their environments as they are of their own expectations. This forges an inadvertent debate of nature versus nurture, for which McDonagh offers no response. Each character is equally prejudiced, racist and similarly jaded whether they can recognize it or not. Marilyn offers the best example of this as she frequently protests Carmichael's choice of language particularly when it includes racial profiling and derogatory elements, "MARILYN: First off, and I know you're upset and all, but it's pretty offensive you keep using the word "nigger" and that's all I'm gonna say" (McDonagh 12). Yet, she is just as quick to turn on Toby with the same prejudices exhibited by Carmichael, "MARILYN: It's all you, you, you, isn't it? Stop crying! *(Him crying)* Where's all your Black Panther shit now, cry-baby? Where's all your "fight the powers that be" now, huh? *(Him crying)* Stop crying!"(15) She is just as quick to lash out at Toby based on cultural constructions such as racial and gender stereotypes however; it is unlikely that she would perceive herself as a racist.

Race plays a more noticeable role in this play as opposed to McDonagh's previous plays. Although, McDonagh frequently uses ethnically charged dialogue

as a theatrical tool, *A Behanding in Spokane* is the first play where a character's skin color is brought front and centre. This is done not only through the dialogue of the play but also in the casting notes and stage directions. As Lonergan points out:

> So the play shows us that race is not an essence, but rather a way of looking at or seeing the world – and thus of judging people in it. Toby, after all, is the only character whose race is even named in the play: even the stage directions refer to him as a 'black guy', where Carmichael is referred to only as 'mid to late forties', Mervyn as 'hotel uniform, nametag, smiling' and Marilyn as a 'pretty twenty-two-year old'. The whiteness of these characters literally goes without saying. (122)

In McDonagh's earlier plays, characters are characterized by where they are from, whereas Toby is judged predominately by what colour his skin is. This creates an interesting dichotomy to McDonagh's other work because it suggests that the different prejudices exhibited throughout his oeuvre are related directly to the setting. While, McDonagh is not making any particular controversial statement about people based on his own inclinations, he is making a statement, however inadvertent, about the inclinations of regions he writes about and of his audiences. Through his presentation of both race and racial prejudice, McDonagh pushes his audience into making some uncomfortable connections. In some ways the introduction of new geographic landscapes weakens earlier criticism that points to McDonagh being prejudiced himself. By broadening not only the geographic landscapes but also the scope of insults, McDonagh is able to negate any

speculation that he himself is making any kind of statement based on personal biases. By making the whiteness of the actors implicit he is able to transfer the onus of association onto both the audience and the casting crew. McDonagh is not dictating the racial profiling, as his script has several racially non-descript characters, yet he is also cornering production crews into making racially based decisions as dynamics depicted in the play would not operate under other conditions.

The dichotomy that McDonagh presents in the event heavy dialogue versus the flat physical action that happens on stage creates an uneven play world. The world of the play is dependent on the ability of the characters to describe events that have happened either off-stage or prior to the action of the play. Even the character of Carmichael's mother is only present through one-sided telephone conversations, as characters react to what she is saying but the audience is not privy to the conversation directly. This makes the play difficult to follow at times because the plot of the play seems to contradict the conventions being used to tell the story. The plot is heavily based in action, yet the script is heavily based in dialogue making the plot only able to be understood through the narration of the various characters.

The plot centers on a botched black market appendage sale arranged between Carmichael and Toby. Carmichael, who had lost his hand years earlier, is looking to purchase back his hand and Toby is looking to make a quick buck through deceptive means. Marilyn gets dragged into the whole mess through her association with Toby, who is her boyfriend, and Mervyn is the on-duty employee

at the hotel where the deal goes awry. One would expect through the convoluted nature of the plot that the action of the play would clear up the plot-holes but McDonagh instead does not allow for action to take the lead over dialogue. Instead, he opts for allowing each character the time and presence to *tell* his or her own story. When Carmichael depicts how he lost his hand, he does so in the form of a story. He uses third person narration to describe how hoodlums kidnapped him as a teenager, forcing his arm onto a train track, where a train somehow not only ran over his hand severing it perfectly but also managed to leave the rest of him unharmed. Carmichael adds in details with great theatrical flourishes, like how the hoodlums "… waved the boy goodbye *with his own hand*" (McDonagh 11). Aside from the overtly darkly comic tone, the narration is one that is repeated throughout the action of play and it is well rehearsed by Carmichael, with careful emphasis on the more shocking details. Unlike the quick and quip filled dialogue he has with the other characters in the play, Carmichael's meticulous nature only reveals itself when either acting outside close physical proximity of other characters or when speaking in a monologue.

Similarly, race features heavily in Carmichael's hand story, however, in an unexpected way. The story is so reliant on dichotomies such as good versus evil that one would expect Carmichael's prejudices to be rooted in this crucial turning point in his life. Carmichael establishes the moment that he lost his hand as the moment he lost his own innocence, so one would presume that his racist tendencies might have a root cause, yet he rebuffs any attempt the other characters make to assert such claims. As Lonergan points out:

> Carmichael refers to the people who maimed him only as 'hillbillies', specifying that they were white – 'You can't get black hillbillies!' he tells Mervyn – but telling us nothing else about them. We don't know where they were from, what they looked like, what age they were, what their physical appearance was- even how Carmichael was able to determine that they were hillbillies. (122)

Carmichael's prejudice toward Toby is not retaliatory but rather part of his character. One would think that he would be equally prejudiced toward the group of people who took his hand, but that does not seem to be the case entirely. While racial stereotyping ignores socio-economic standing, the term hillbilly is entirely reliant on a person's socio-economic standing. Hillbilly refers to people from the country that are of lesser education, of a lower economic standing and having manners that reflect unsophisticated habits. Nonetheless, McDonagh manages to ruffle audience expectations with this revelation though, because the rest of the play focuses heavily on bigotry that is racially motivated. Even McDonagh's ability to subvert the audience's expectations as to what kind of bigotry to expect is something that he has done before. The question still remains as to why this play was not as successful critically as its predecessors.

While arguably, *The Pillowman*, is the play where the criticism surrounding McDonagh's work must regroup because of its ability to reflect the tropes of his earliest plays while shifting into unfettered territory, *A Behanding in Spokane* is perhaps McDonagh's most original play. Even though it uses many of the same theatrical tropes as his earlier plays, *A Behanding in Spokane* does

attempt to do things differently, as Lonergan points out:

> […] a close examination of the script suggests that McDonagh was very deliberately testing his audience's limitations. The play can therefore be seen as genuinely experimental: it shows McDonagh trying to find a way of telling stories while also working through his awareness of how tired the conventions of plotting and characterization – and indeed of performance – have become. In *Behanding* he seems to be trying to find a new way forward, even though he has yet to leave behind all his old techniques. (117)

In *A Behanding in Spokane* McDonagh seems to be testing his audience's patience. It is an unavoidably uneventful play; very little takes place in front of the audience in terms of action. The audience is presented with treatises of the character's inner ambition, however even that has its limits as entertainment, particularly when the sparse presence of relatable space makes these ambitions difficult to both track and relate to. While Lonergan suggests that McDonagh is trying to move past the trappings of drama and naturalism, even McDonagh's experimentations feel outdated. Unfortunately for McDonagh, his hiatus from the theatre was long enough for a shift in public acceptance of shock theatre. The plays of the New Brutalists were received as less shocking and more widely accepted. Other playwrights in the movement had already moved forward with similar experimentations several years prior to the debut of *A Behanding in Spokane.* The lack of connected action throughout the course of the play makes it feel more spatially incomplete than avant-garde.

What McDonah is able to do, is make even its most obvious flaws feel intentional. Throughout the play the audience is left with the understanding that they are at the mercy of the characters' interpretation of events. The audience is never allowed the luxury of omnipotent narration or a relatable micro-world for them to superimpose their own narrative. For instance, the audience is never completely certain if Toby was the dealer who stole from Mervyn during a drug deal gone wrong. Mervyn is adamant that he is but Toby insists that he is not and that Mervyn "is one of these cats who think all black people look the same" (McDonagh 30). The audience is left to make their own assumptions about what events actually happened and which were the products of the characters' flawed memory. The most telling moment of this, is when it is revealed that Carmichael had found his hand years ago but was unable to accept that his search was over, despite the presence of the word "HATE" tattooed across the knuckles, a tattoo that matched the one from his missing hand:

> MERVYN: Here's a cool one.
>
> CARMICHAEL: What's cool about it?
>
> MERVYN: It's got "HATE" tattooed across the knuckles of it.
>
> CARMICHAEL: (Pause) That ain't a… that ain't a tattoo. That's pen. I think.
>
> MERVYN: Oh yeah?
>
> CARMICHAEL: Yeah. It's uh… yeah, it's just that black kid fucking with me. (45)

Carmichael will never be able to recognize his own hand because he has built up

that hand's persona so much in his mind. The missing hand has become an enigma and without the search Carmichael would have no other reason for being. The nostalgic memory of the hand means that no hand will fit 'perfectly'. Carmichael will always be able to find some fault with a real world representation of his memory. Memory distorts reality until it is not fully recognizable even to the person who experienced the original event. As novelist John Green poignantly writes in his novel *Looking for Alaska*: "Imagining the future is a kind of nostalgia. (...) You spend your whole life stuck in the labyrinth, thinking about how you'll escape it one day, and how awesome it will be, and imagining that future keeps you going, but you never do it. You just use the future to escape the present" (54). The characters of McDonagh's *A Behanding in Spokane* are doing just as Green suggests, using an imagined future to escape an uninspired present. Unfortunately, the lack of spatial cohesion through the mixture of cultural references makes McDonagh's efforts at creating a relatable theatrical space through narration fall flat, as there is simply not enough cohesiveness to allow the audience to bridge those pathways and create a heterotopic space for the characters to operate in.

Chapter 4: Staging the Screen: *In Bruges* and Cinematic Spatiality

Regardless of whether a production is seen on stage or screen, going to the theatre is a deeply social event for the members of the audience. The theatrical stage has a three-fold relationship with the audience: the most obvious relationship of which being the one between the audience and the live performers. Given McDonagh's intention to shock the audience, audience interactions are important to consider in any assessment of his work. Theatre by its very nature is not as mutable or as reproducible as film, meaning that a film is a finished product that will not change upon multiple viewing, theatre is not perfectly reproducible and is continually a work in progress. This stark methodological difference is what often creates a line between theatrical and cinematic criticism. This is not to say that the cinematic experience lacks a communal element when viewed with multiple people. However, due to film's reproducibility, the experience of an audience member relating to a cinematic production is on a much more individual level one as the product, the film, has already been produced. The audience can only react to the production either on a personal level or with other members of the audience on a superficial level as their reaction cannot influence its creation any further. However, just as Martin McDonagh's theatre is undeniably mixed by the conventions of film, his cinematic efforts are undeniably theatrical in his presentation of space and its relationship to both his characters and his audience. By mixing these spatial conventions, McDonagh creates plays that could be staged on the screen and screenplays that could be readily performed on stage.

Martin McDonagh's breed of theatre and film is meant to induce in the

audience strong contrary mental and physical reactions, such as provoking laughter towards extremely violent acts or misfortune. As Patrick Lonergan points out in the conclusion of his book *The Theatre and Films of Martin McDonagh*:

> It has often seemed to me that those negative responses are not caused by the sentiments expressed in the plays, but by the laughter that comes from the audience in response. What is upsetting is not the sexism of the characters but the audience's willingness to laugh at that sexism – or apparent racism or apparent anti-Irish sentiment. This is a fine example of how McDonagh's plays force us to laugh at things that shouldn't be funny. I've been to dozens of productions of the plays, and I almost always overhear people saying as they leave the theatre that they cannot believe that they were laughing at such awful occurrences, such outrageous utterances, such despicable acts of violence. (224)

It is not only shocking that a civilized well-mannered member of the audience should not only find offensive material genuinely funny, but that they are also not alone in that sentiment. Although, Lonergan's experience speaks exclusively to a stage-theatre audience, the same principle can be transferred onto the cinema audience. Regardless of medium, audiences are challenged to examine their reaction in two separate yet simultaneous environments. An audience member must explore how their reaction to the material presented speaks to their individual consciousness but also how their reaction fits in the larger social construct of the group.

McDonagh entered the world of the silver screen when production ended

in 2004 on his 28-minute short film *Six Shooter*. When *Six Shooter* was released the following year, it won many awards on the film festival circuit, including an Academy Award for best director. However, it was not until several years later that McDonagh debuted his first commercial blockbuster. Just as McDonagh had received critical success for his novice film effort, his 2008 blockbuster *In Bruges*- his first full-length film- won him commercial success. Despite being his sophomore film, *In Bruges* attracted some of the most bankable action heroes such as Colin Farrell, Ralph Fiennes and Brendon Gleeson. An avid cinephile, McDonagh spoke more readily about his affiliation with action films than his affinity for other plays or playwrights – even at the outset of his career. The progression to film seemed to be a natural one for McDonagh, and to his critics it appeared that he was moving away from theatre and toward his preferred vocation. As Lonergan points out:

> In his first press interviews McDonagh seemed to speak more often about cinema than theatre. He rarely acknowledged being influenced by other playwrights […] avoiding detailed reference to most other dramatists. But he spoke constantly about filmmakers who had inspired him: Martin Scorsese, Terrence Malick, Sam Peckinpah and many others. It therefore always seemed likely that McDonagh would make a movie… It took him almost a decade to do so however. (135)

Even within McDonagh's plays there is an undeniable cinematic quality, particularly in the way that he chooses to execute violent acts. The short-story pantomimes found within *The Pillowman* have become a favorite of film students

to set to film and post on media sites such as Youtube. Film guru Quinton Tarantino is the most frequent comparison that theatre critics use to help define McDonagh's motivations and approach to story telling. If one were to look at the stage directions for McDonagh's *The Lieutenant of Inishmore*, one cannot help but draw parallels to Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction*: "**Padraic** *kisses her at length and, as he does so,* **Mairead** *reaches down behind him, picks up one gun up in each hand, slowly raises them and points them on each side of* **Padraic***'s hea*d. **Padraic** *is unaware of this.* **Donny** *looks on in horror… She shoots* **Padraic** *in the head with both guns*" (65 bold in original). The stage directions provided by McDonagh, go a step beyond detailed; they say just as much about the themes and undertones of the plays as does the dialogue. The attention paid to the execution of violence reads like a literary storyboard designed for film.

McDonagh has not been shy about blurring the conventions of theatre with the controlled and mimetically detailed spectacle of film. This is why it has proved ironic that with the pressure of film finally showing McDonagh's nerves, he should bring a stage approach to his film set. A stage approach seems to challenge classical distinctions between film and theatre as André Bazin writes, in his seminal work, *What is Cinema.* Bazin observes that film is free "of all temporal and spatial contingency," while "theatre cannot exist without architecture" (191-2). Similarly, concerning the conditions of possibility of performance, "there is no theatre without living beings, but film can dispense with actors" (Bazin 190). McDonagh's films on the contrary are bound by temporal and spatial contingencies, and cannot dispense with acting.

Although well established in the theatre world, McDonagh was admittedly a novice to the conventions and practices of film as well as to film audience. Unlike his famous cast, McDonagh had yet to set a name for himself amongst the large target demographic that was set before him.

> McDonagh has explained that the experience of *Six Shooter* made him nervous about the prospect of a full-length film. Perhaps in response to that fear, he drew on his theatre experience; decision to spend three weeks working through the script with Farrell and Gleeson before shooting began. 'That felt more like I was used to,' said McDonagh, 'analyzing a script, people talking about character and getting at the truth of something.' (Lonergan 136)

The McDonagh depicted in interviews leading up to the release and press tour for *In Bruges* is a far cry from the petulant *enfant terrible* reputation that he had crafted during the previous decade in theatre. As a film director, McDonagh wanted to learn the rules instead of unabashedly ignoring them as he did with most theatre conventions. The result was a solid production that capitalized on the playwright's strengths as a visual storyteller.

Writing quirks that did not translate well to the stage proved to find a more forgiving medium in film. McDonagh's fascination with naturalism is well known; even *The Pillowman*, a play that is staunchly set in a made-up world, is grounded in the palpable world of vraissemblance. The boroughs of Katurian's Kamenice are so clearly defined through the dialogue of the play that critics scrambled to find the fictional city's real world equivalent. The primary discourse

throughout McDonagh's entire career has always hinged back to his treatment of Ireland in the early days of his playwriting. In, *In Bruges*, McDonagh is able to capitalize on his natural affinity to personify the setting of his stories. Bruges becomes a living character throughout the film; the city is spoken to and about repeatedly by all the characters involved in the action. However, unlike many of his previous endeavors where the setting proved to be equally bleak for all the characters, Bruges proved to be far more complex. The film opens to the main character's narrating the events leading up to his arrival in Bruges, superimposed over shots of the city:

> RAY: (*voice-over*) After I killed them I dropped the gun in the Thames, washing the residue off my hand in the bathroom of a Burger King, and walked home to await instructions. Shortly thereafter the instructions came through- 'Get the fuck out of London, yous dumb fucks. Get to Bruges.' I didn't even know where Bruges was.
>
> *Fade to black.*
>
> Ray: (*voice-over*) It's in Belgium. (3)

Ray's ambivalence toward the city is useful on several story-telling levels. First and foremost, as the film was meant for a primarily North American release, Ray's attitude allows a wide spread audience who is likely unfamiliar with the Belgian city's existence to be able to situate themselves. It also is the starting point for McDonagh's telltale sense of irony as it is Ray's fault that he and his partner wind up in the city in the first place. The city's relative obscurity among pop culture would also allow for the misconception perpetuated throughout the

first half of the film that the two men are in Bruges for their own protection because of its obscurity from the scrutiny of the London police force. By highlighting Bruges' obscurity throughout the dialogue of the film, McDonagh is able to create multiple temporalities within a single location; in short he is able to establish Bruges as both a 'fairy-tale' place and a prison as the city represents something different to each of the characters. McDonagh's treatment of the city is not meant to be taken as a criticism of its obscurity in mass popular culture but rather a wink and nod approach to highlight the characters' own ignorance. Ray's disdain for the city is a common through-line throughout the production as he frequently (and passionately) interjects "in fucking Bruges" (88) into his dialogue whenever he is taken off guard by either a strategic turn of events or surprised by something the city has to offer. Through the audience's association with the characters their preconceived notions and ignorance are deconstructed. Multiple versions of Bruges are illustrated throughout the movie, as each character's heterotopic understanding of the city is both highlighted and deconstructed. McDonagh's Bruges cannot exist outside the lens of his characters' conceptual understanding of city.

A stringent follower of McDonagh's plays might expect to see his films take on a larger than life quality that is no longer fettered by the restrictions of the stage. Oddly enough, the exact opposite happens; gone are the days of dual pistols and overtly complex story structures that dominated his early playwriting. *In Bruges* is in both plot and execution relatively restrained compared to his Irish trilogies. While the film is undoubtedly violent and at times disturbing, the plot is

relatively straightforward. Even the dialogue, although peppered with McDonagh's trademark racism, sexism and profanity also holds a perverse nicety that is lacking in his stagecraft. In the middle of the final and most prolific gunfight – Ray briefly calls a time out in the action in order to push it away from endangering the lives of innocent people:

> RAY: Harry? I've got an idea. Listen, my room faces onto the canal, right? I'm gonna go back to my room, jump into the canal and see if I can swim to the other side and escape. If you run outside and round the corner, you can shoot at me from there and try and get me. But that way we leave this lady and her baby out of the whole entire thing.
>
> HARRY: Do you completely promise to jump into the canal? I don't wanna run out there and come back ten minutes and find you fucking hiding in a cupboard.
>
> RAY: I completely promise, Harry… (83)

The scene takes place within a hotel lobby, in which the two men had been shooting mercilessly at each other for several minutes. The proprietor, whom Ray is trying to protect when he establishes new rules for their gunfight, can only stare at and inform the men, "You guys are crazy!!" (84). In his earlier days, McDonagh would not have taken the care to not only transfer the fight to a safer location, he also would not have done so on such gentlemanly terms. This is probably the result of McDonagh being such a well-documented fan of films; he recognizes that within the different medium, there are different rules. Because the cinematic screen naturally creates a distancing effect between the action depicted

and the audience, film audiences are inherently able to witness more graphic acts of violence without the greater visceral reaction prompted by observing similarly violent acts on the stage. Refusing to succumb to the facility with which the filmic medium resorts to violence, he brings to the cinematic frame a subdued sense of decorum.

McDonagh also deviates from his style of story telling with regards to the relative simplicity of the plot of *In Bruges*. The plot centers on a straightforward storyline and then two inter-related sub-plots. Two assassins, Ray and Ken, arrive in the city of Bruges after a job in London goes wrong as the result of Ray killing both the intended target of their hit as well as a small boy. While they await further orders from their employer, they are instructed to sightsee and generally enjoy themselves. Through wandering the city, Ray becomes entangled with Chloe, a beautiful drug-dealer, whose primary employment comes from an actor- a dwarf – who is in Bruges filming a movie. The characters interact with not only themselves but also the city until McDonagh's infamous twist is revealed and the audience learns that Ken has been ordered to assassinate Ray in retribution for the little boy that Ray accidentally killed in London. Despite the convoluted mise en abymes between mediums, the simplicity found within this film also seems to have carried over to McDonagh's most recent play, *A Behanding in Spokane*, which follows the same easy-to-grasp back story.

Another departure for McDonagh that becomes apparent throughout this film is the more visible presence of a clear morality. In McDonagh's plays, particularly the ones written prior to *In Bruges*, there is no redemption. Characters

are punished across the board regardless of their moral standing. *In Bruges,* however, offers up the potential for Ray to find redemption from his past misdeeds. More importantly, Ray is not only presented with the potential for redemption; he also appears to be seeking it. As Ken points out about his boss, "But that's you Harry. The boy has the capacity to change. The boy has the capacity to do something decent with his life"(67). The characters in McDonagh's film are able to do what the characters in his plays cannot, and that is to see past themselves and look toward a better and brighter tomorrow. Unlike many of McDonagh's plays in which his characters seem to be unable to recognize morality, McDonagh's film depicts the humor of the opposite situation: several different and conflicting moral codes are used in a fashion that is akin to Hammurabi's code. As Lonergan states '[…] one of the curious things about *In Bruges* is that almost all the characters seem to believe that their acts of cruelty and violence are justified on moral grounds. This is because much of the film's dramatic energy (and its humor) arises from a clash between three competing forms of morality." (147). The characters all compete to have their breed of morality adopted by the group. However, as with all of McDonagh's work, the ones who profess to have the strongest moral superiority are also the ones who suffer the most as a result of their staunch moral standing, this can be most notably seen in the *Lieutenant of Inishmore* where the need for retribution for perceived slights is the driving force behind much of the violence.

As so much of the film relies on the city's backdrop to become an active character, McDonagh interjects the fast paced actions of the script with, for lack

of a better term, tourist jaunts throughout the city. The city's 'character' acts as a guide for both the wholesome and dastardly tourist traps into which the two visitors readily fall. This at times leads to some of the film's most humorous moments as both Ken and Ray are horribly equipped to deal with each others' personal visiting habits and preferences. This leads to a series of vignettes where both parties are attempting to accommodate the other. This jovial, however incongruous relationship is perhaps the healthiest in McDonagh's entire canon. None of the characters in his plays have the same compassion, as Ray and Ken appear to have for each other. Even as Ken declares, "Ray, you're about the worst tourist in the whole world" (7), the audience can clearly see that the banter between the two is just that: banter. While Ken at times adopts a more fatherly outlook towards Ray, it is clear that the two men genuinely respect and care for each other. This creates an odd dichotomy when one looks at the other familial relationships crafted by McDonagh throughout his playwriting career, all of which highlighted a family's violent dysfunction. The most notable example of this, of course, comes from McDonagh's first major stage production, *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*, which capitalized on the depiction of the breakdown of the mother-daughter relationship.

Unlike McDonagh's play worlds, his films offer a perverse form of optimism. The opening narration, in which Ray recounts how they arrived in Bruges and his closing narration where he asserts his desire to live are never fully explained. The audience is left with two possibilities. The first potential scenario is that the two narrations are Ray's thoughts as he dies. The other, more hopeful

possibility is that Ray is not dead but in hospital and is recounting the story to a third party. Salvation within a McDonagh story is a novel concept and is a by-product of the newer medium as opposed to a shift in McDonagh's literary agenda as a whole as can be seen in the bleak perspectives offered in *A Behanding in Spokane*.

This optimism makes the film more marketable to a wider consumer audience and addresses McDonagh's concerns about his abilities as a filmmaker. Unlike his other plays, McDonagh served as both the author and director of *In Bruges*, in many ways making him solely accountable for either its success or failure. While that does not discredit the film's ability to offend or shock the audience, compared to the jolts produced by plays such as *The Lieutenant of Inishmore*, McDonagh's films cannot help but feel constrained. Despite using many of the same linguistic patterns found in his plays, the jarring meanness of the *enfant terrible* persona is absent. The jabs are to be taken jokingly and are in good fun compared to the less jovial presentation of the slurs found within his plays. This is likely a result of a film camera's ability to cash in on the subtleties of an actor's facial expression and the film audience's ability to distance themselves emotionally from both the language and the action.

This is also the first time that McDonagh has written a full-length piece that is not part of the New Brutalist movement. The New Brutalist movement is specific in both locality and medium. This means that the theatrical tropes that are recognized and celebrated by the movement would not be understood in the context of a Hollywood blockbuster action movie. That is not to say however that

the film is free from McDonagh's targeting jabs. For example, the tourist inclinations of the two assassins are juxtaposed with brief interactions with 'actual' tourists. Comparatively, the antics of the two men during their stay in Bruges

> Might not seem quite so negative a description when we consider the tourists who do actually appear in the film: the obese Americans, the anti-smoking Canadians- and of course Harry, who thought of Bruges as a 'fairytale' place. McDonagh's film, then, constantly risks deconstructing itself: like the two sides of McDonagh's reaction to Bruges, the movie is both dazzled by the location and skeptical about its commodification. (Lonergan 145)

The characters portrayed in his films are just as awful as they are in his plays. However, the degree to which they are able to get away with their bad behavior is more limited. While his film characters' might behave slightly better, the characterizations they make regarding others continue to be based primarily on stereotypes. This can most notably be seen through Ray's interaction with a group of American tourists:

> OVERWEIGHT MAN: Have you been to the top of the tower?
>
> RAY: Yeah, yeah. It's rubbish.
>
> OVERWEIGHT MAN: It is? The guidebook says it's a must-see.
>
> RAY: Well, you lot ain't going up there.
>
> OVERWEIGHT MAN: Pardon me? Why?
>
> RAY: I mean, it's all windy stairs. I'm not being funny.

OVERWEIGHT MAN: What exactly are you trying to say?

RAY: What exactly am I trying to say? You're a bunch of fucking elephants!

The Overweight Man tries to hit Ray, but Ray dodges and steps away from the blows. The Man tries to catch and hit him but Ray keeps dodging easily. (9)

The additional space afforded to McDonagh through the use of the camera is useful during these sorts of altercations. Both McDonagh and his actors are able to make use of physical comedy in order to lighten the mood. In many of McDonagh's plays, the claustrophobically small and isolated settings make physical movement, like that shown in the scene with Ray and the Americans, impossible.

The transition between locations is smooth throughout the film and McDonagh takes full advantage of his ability to move from one location to the next. Unlike his films, few of McDonagh's plays have frequent scene changes. McDonagh's plays seek to create the illusion of claustrophobia within a single environment in order to highlight the helplessness of the characters. In, *In Bruges* he is able to recreate a similar feeling of helplessness by revisiting a particular location multiple times. He is able to make the entire city feel small and confined for both his audience and his characters. Ray's inability to leave Bruges, despite his obvious distaste for the city illustrates the same helpless and inevitable feelings that dominate throughout McDonagh's stage-work. McDonagh is able to handle the challenge of the additional space easily. The fact that McDonagh is

able to not only show how close Ray was to leaving Bruges, shifts the audience's perspectives just slightly. Ray on the whole is not a particularly likeable character; he is crass and confrontational, yet he is also given the chance at a different future. This potential is heightened by Ray's interactions with the other 'tourist' characters, Ken and his love interest. These possibilities allow the audience to envision the character escaping the path that he is currently set on.

Such an ending would make the film a bit too much like any other Hollywood film and McDonagh's writing style does not allow for such facile plot devices and easy answers. The audience is fully aware of how many different opportunities Ray is given to get out of his current predicament. This is a unique element of this film in contrast to characters in McDonagh's plays who take the easiest and most violent way out of a difficult situation and are consequently hard to sympathize with. The real breakthroughs of this film are the presence of choice and hope, and while both concepts are fleeting it is the first time that either has appeared in a McDonagh production. This illustrates a key difference between McDonagh's stage and screen work. In McDonagh's stage-work, he is writing within the confines of a dated and restrictive theatrical genre, whereas in the cinematic form expectations of genre are much more loose and free flowing. By blending theatrical and cinematic conventions, McDonagh is able to step away from the stagnation that has often plagued his stage-work. The question therefore, should not be in which of the genres does McDonagh do better but rather how can his participation in one medium inform his work in another.

Conclusion:

While McDonagh is primarily recognized for his ability to both offend and draw in an audience, his consistent ability to transport his audience to remote locations and then manipulate that audience into using their own preconceived notions of those locations is masterful. Regrettably, due to the similarities in the setting and the close timeframe in which his earliest plays premiered, there has been a division in the critical analysis of his work. By separating McDonagh's stage work into two distinct eras, his 'Irish' and 'post-Irish' plays and then further dividing his film work into its own category entirely, critics have missed the opportunity to take a holistic approach to the analysis of his canon. McDonagh's oeuvre is not just the sum of its parts. To view only portions of his work to date results in a fragmented analysis and one, which sees only parts of his methodology and motives. An example of this is seen in the critical focus on the perceived Irishness, or lack thereof, of his early productions. It is only when the non-Irish locales of *The Pillowman* and *A Behanding in Spokane* are considered that a more accurate assessment of his work becomes possible.

This is related perhaps to the fact that McDonagh is admittedly not a political writer; he is concerned first and foremost with telling a good story. By treating his choice of setting as part of a political agenda, it is easy to miss the point of how he manages to make the beautiful terrible and the familiar strange. As a noted member of the New Brutalist movement, Martin McDonagh has fashioned himself as Britain's *enfant terrible*. However, as time has passed, the sheen has begun to wear off of that label making it difficult for him to remain

both true to his roots and relevant in the context of the Western theatre tradition. His storylines hinge on his ability to create theatrical spaces that both devour and terrify his audience. He does so by fostering heterotopic pathways that are created through a combination of both setting and narration. However, as theatre trends push farther against these sorts of productions, McDonagh has tried unsuccessfully to reinvent himself through an attempt to create a similarly engaging spatial experience solely through narration such as the case in *A Behanding in Spokane.*

Luckily, he has found success in other mediums. His forays into film have shed new light on the blockbuster action film genre by introducing theatrical spatial treatment and basic theatre conventions. Yet the success of McDonagh's film, *In Bruges*, reveals two very key differences between his stage-work and his screen-work. In McDonagh's stage-work, he is writing within the confines of both a dated and restrictive theatrical genre, whereas the expectations of genre within the cinematic medium are much more indeterminate and forgiving. His ability to experiment with the nuances of cinematic spatiality has revealed a third space that blends the spatial configurations of both stage and screen, proving that the conventions of both mediums are not mutually exclusive, particularly to a mass audience. For a complete understanding of McDonagh's spatial technique, one must look beyond the various epochs of his career in order to apprehend the totality of his work and its contemporary relevance.

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