Mapping Irish Theatre: Theories of Space and Place
by Chris Morash and Shaun Richards (review)

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interesting observations; yet, as this whirlwind of artists, locations, and dates suggests, the transnational scope of her project threatens to overwhelm her ethnographic lens. Festivals have a lot of moving parts, and it proves impossible to convey a consistently rich picture of what took place both onstage and off, or to adequately analyse the ripple effects that she refers to as “festival aftermath.”

That said, the theoretical and the empirical pull together in the concluding chapter, which discusses the technique of forum theatre pioneered by the Brazilian director Augusto Boal. Drawing on her observations of two performances at FESTLIP, in Rio, involving a Guinean group, she argues that, in the festival setting, forum theatre is not a “rehearsal for a revolution” but an exercise in what Boal elsewhere called “invisible ethnography.” Ultimately, the role playing and arguments of actors and audiences reveal that “if a Lusophone ‘family’ does exist, it is only through constant debate and disagreement about individual cultures and differing national identities” (177). This, perhaps, is the most important take-away from the book. In remaining attuned to both the obstacles and opportunities of these cross-cultural encounters, McMahon not only sheds light on the neglected subject of Lusophone theatre; she also offers insights into the changing relationship of theatre and ethnography in an era of “global” capital.


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The process of place making and the concretization of space have always been a principal component of theatre performance. The expansion of spatial discourse and geographical metaphors into cultural studies has produced many remarkable theories concerning the production of space (and consequently of place). Irish theatre scholarship has followed suit, with Chris Morash and Shaun Richards describing their research as part of “a self-consciously spatial turn in Irish Studies” (5). Their book comprises seven chapters, each centred on a specific mode of place production. Juxtaposing broader spatial theories from Lefebvre, Ubersfeld, Tuan, and Nora with the peculiarly Irish theatrical motifs of colleens and country kitchens, Morash and Richards expand on the traditional rural and urban binaries of Irish theatre. They query these underpinnings by asking an intriguing question: “If theatre in performance creates an event that is by definition local, why is theatre – particularly Irish theatre – so often considered in the
context of the national?” (18). The nation-building rhetoric of mainstream Irish theatre practice, from the birth of the Irish Literary Theatre onwards, is teased out. Written in a clear and straightforward style and with deference to previous scholarship, Mapping Irish Theatre seamlessly moves between global theorists and resolutely local ideas, such as the Irish tradition of dinnseanchas and the “unspoilt spaces of the West” (41).

The first chapter, “Making Space,” contends that the concept of a national theatre “is actually a misnomer” (124). As theatre is inherently local, the depiction of rural shebeens on an urban stage illustrates the increased congruence between theatrical performance and imagined nationhood. What developed was a national theatre that capitalized on the particularities of the rural and performed them for an urban audience, as yet another nation-building exercise. There are tantalizing glimpses of the alternative national aesthetic that ran counter to the peasant plays of the early Abbey Theatre: the Edward Gordon Craig screens, commissioned by W.B. Yeats, and the “non-representational utopian theatre space” of Hilton Edwards and Micheál Mac Liammóir, at the Gate Theatre (24). What is evident, in accounts of the years following the 1922 foundation of the Irish Free State, is the impact that a narrow image of nationhood – the rural peasantry of the west of Ireland – had on the construction of a distinctly Irish theatre. As Morash and Richards argue, in the second chapter, “Staging Place,” “the real enemy in Cathleen Ni Houlihan is not the colonial power but the deeply entrenched sense of place in the rural domestic interior that is the very embodiment of a fantasised Irishness” (46). That “fantasy” has subsequently sustained contemporary authors, such as Martin McDonagh and Enda Walsh.

The subject of the third chapter, “Spaces of Modernity and Modernism,” might seem surprising, given that so much Irish theatre has a reputation for being resolutely anti-modern, but Morash and Richards argue, persuasively, that this reputation is unfounded. The Abbey plays were not realist, in a traditional sense, but a “curious kind of hybrid realism.” The Abbey was an institution that dismissed conventional realism and naturalism as “modern urban forms” (49). Theirs was a self-styled authentic folk theatre, grounded in the west of Ireland, and their brand of authenticity became more potent through the repeated use of specific sets and props. A deep attachment to this brand of authenticity – termed the “monad of realism” by the authors – countered a vigorous deconstruction of realist representation in Europe (56). These processes contributed to the deep-rooted connection to place, in the Irish theatre, that is more a memorialization than a representation of authenticity. What transpires is theatre as lieux de mémoire, a place that is open to McDonagh’s parodic challenges, but that also incorporates the heavy sense of loss and nostalgia that is evident in the work of Brian Friel and Tom Murphy.

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Moving into contemporary theatre, the final two chapters explore the global and the local repercussions of place-attachment. The touring company Druid Theatre is an example of a group that is making the place-specific transferable at a global level. As part of their rehearsal process for staging Synge, their journey to Inishmaan on the west coast of Ireland (the place that inspires Synge) was, according to Morash and Richards, “clearly taking the specificity of place as a factor in understanding his work to the ultimate level, transmuting the Aran Islands from inspiration into the inevitable destination of all analysis” (134). The tightly ravelled density of historical connections and long-standing theatrical references point to the centrality of place in Irish drama, one that shows no indication of dissolving, given the strong growth of site-specific theatre in Ireland since 2005.

Using Yeats’s observation that “the days of the drama are brief and come but seldom,” Morash and Richards seek to capture the fallout of what could arguably be the high-water mark of Irish theatre practice (175). Synthesizing transnational theory and local theatre work, and mapping the evolution of Irish theatre space, from the foundational Werburgh Street theatre in 1635, to the collapsing spatial boundaries between audience and performer in site-specific theatre, *Mapping Irish Theatre* succeeds in maintaining precision, while being extensive. The central thesis, that theatre is a “machine for making space into place,” is reinforced chapter after chapter (75). The study will be of interest to theatre scholars and cultural historians and invaluable to those studying the formation and emergence of an Irish performance of place. The authors say, in the introduction, that they “harbour the hope that the theoretical approach we have taken will allow others to navigate the space of theatres in different places” (5). The breadth of understanding that the authors clearly show – combined with their insight into the practicalities of staging theatre – will ensure that this hope is realized.


*Reviewed by Harley Erdman, University of Massachusetts at Amherst*

Opening with Kate Smith’s 1938 debut performance of Irving Berlin’s “God Bless America,” and closing with a description of the 2005 “ReJevvenation” conference at the University of Toronto, Andrea Most’s *Theatrical Liberalism* builds on her previous book, *Making Americans: Jews and the Broadway Musical* (2004), in arguing for the myriad ways that American popular culture has been profoundly shaped by Jewish sensibilities and attitudes. Unlike the earlier monograph, though, which focused on