



FACULTY OF ARTS
OF CHARLES UNIVERSITY
IN PRAGUE



Department of Anglophone Literatures and Cultures

Opponent's Report

Hana Pavelková MA, "Monologue Plays in Contemporary British and Irish Theatre" PhD dissertation

Monologue plays have indeed been frequent in Anglophone theatre since the 1990s, and markedly so in an Irish context. By the twenty first century, monologue based theatre/performance has become a very widespread mode spanning 'conventional' drama to 'alternative' theatre in exciting, provocative and vastly diverse ways. As this dissertation vividly illustrates, monologue plays are not confined to a particular genre of dramatic activity (in the sense of tragedy/comedy/melodrama) nor to a specific set of thematic agendas (although a number of thematic tendencies may be identified). These qualities mark both the attraction and the challenges of the monologue play as a subject of investigation. The project thus approaches a topic of much relevance to both British and Irish theatre scholarship, and one ripe for scholarly appraisal.

The dissertation opens with a set of questions centred on the popularity of monologue on contemporary stages, taking its lead from a 1995 article in the *Boston Globe*. The core objective of the project is to provide a "systematic framework" for the study of monologue drama and the ways it "elicit[s] audience engagement" (2). The methodological angle of the dissertation therefore appears to be typological and its argument structure inductive. While this approach is promising one, it is important to note the disparity between the implied impetus of the investigation – monologue plays are a frequently favoured theatrical form since the mid-1990s, why is this the case? – and the direction then taken methodologically, which tends towards an enumeration and elaboration of monologue plays on the basis of types of performed/performative utterance, their functions and effects. The temporal (from the mid-1990s to the present), geographical (UK and Ireland) and formal (text-based work) horizons of the project are plainly delineated and quite logically justified, yet as is soon evident the dissertation at times departs from these restrictions. Eleven of the plays afforded serious analysis predate 1995 and one of the playwrights, although Irish, has no major work in Ireland or Britain. Some issues also arise with the sample of work chosen: an impressive total of thirty seven plays are discussed at some length throughout the work, yet of these only nine are British, similarly of the twenty four playwrights seriously dealt with, nine are British (counting, admittedly problematically, the Northern Irish as British). Despite the commendable scope of the research, the matter of selection and balance remains. This



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disproportion and its potential implications for the dissertation's findings should be further discussed at the defence.

The opening chapter is successful in describing the general context for a study of monologue plays and gives a detailed chapter-by-chapter description of the work as a whole. Where it is less informative is in terms of its review of existing literature of relevance to its field. This is very narrowly defined; it only surveys previous work specifically treating monologue and monodrama (some of it at MA level) and this is done in a perfunctory manner on pages 5 and 6. No attempt is made to critically analyse or evaluate any of the nine sources listed. It would have been interesting to know what they add to the critical discourse pertaining to monologue drama, were there specific points which the author of this dissertation wishes to debate or modify, what questions of interpretation do they raise and how these will impact upon the study in hand? Moreover, as the dissertation proposes a typology of monologue, some discussion of the existing theoretical work in theatre studies, specifically Patrice Pavis's *Dictionary of Theatre: Terms, Concepts and Analysis*, Manfred Pfister's *Theory and Analysis of Drama* or Marvin Carlson's *Theories of Theatre*, would have been warranted as they speak to the questions and problems raised by categorization of theatre texts and practice.

Although the dissertation takes contemporary examples of monologue drama as its focus, the topic provides an excellent opportunity to systematically explore the genealogy of this fluid, yet distinctive, form of play and its performance. Historically the emergence of the monologue play might be dated the late nineteenth century in a European context, and considered within the frame of aesthetic responses to modernity, or as a form shaped by avant-garde and modernist attempts to present the human condition/psyche in a more immediate, possibly more 'truthful' manner. Here, the significance of the rupturing of narrative stability using stream of consciousness and collage techniques comes to mind. Experiments with symbolism and expressionism are initially the theatrical counterpoints to such developments. The reason for mentioning such a distant point of departure is that it would seem to provide a context for understanding more adequately Nikolai Evreinov's theory of monodrama which had its roots in symbolism, and which plays some role later in this work. Evreinov's vision of the divided self as emblematic of the modern human condition and his emphasis on subjectivism (cited on page 106) provide a footing for how monodrama was conceived in its earliest formulations and then comes to be re-conceived post World War II and, more precisely, mid-century by Samuel Beckett. Such contexts for monologue drama are perceptively surveyed by Mateusz Borowski and Małgorzata Sugiera in the introductory section of their essay in *Monologues: Theatre, Performance, Subjectivity* and would have provided some useful grounding for the discussion of monologue drama's contemporary forms and functions.

In place of a historically or theoretically inflected approach the dissertation turns to two British writers, Alan Bennett and Arnold Wesker to provide templates for an understanding of the monologue drama. Contemporary text-based monologue plays are seen to "oscillate



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between [...] two basic approaches, i.e. between richly theatrical plays [...] and more minimalist plays based on storytelling” (14). Monologues by Bennett and Wesker are taken to exemplify these tendencies. Something is lost in the expression of these differences, partly because “richly theatrical” and “minimalist” are not very precisely defined, nor are they necessarily opposites. Since neither Bennett or Wesker are particularly widely known as contributing to stage monologue, there are some novel details in this chapter that enrich an understanding of the form in mainstream British theatre in the 1980s and early 1990s. That said, a number of questions arise with regard to the plays discussed in this chapter. First, how does the fact that Bennett’s *Talking Heads* was first written for television affect its form as monologue drama? Second, Klaus Peter Müller’s assessment of Wesker’s monologue plays (cited on page 26) as a presenting comic stereotypes, is rather compelling – is Wesker’s use of monologue exemplary in some way? In what ways do these plays work with ‘the fourth wall,’ are they innovative in any respects? Finally, at a methodological level, what are the consequences of using part of one’s sample to articulate the conceptual framework for the whole sample? Do Bennett and Wesker function as a synecdoche in the system proposed by the dissertation?

Structurally the chapter divisions are logical; however chapter titles are at times extremely awkward, especially those for chapters 4 and 8. Could the author propose some more eloquent or precise category labels? Further to the matter of structure and development it is notable that the content, focus and length of chapters vary considerably. Chapters 3, 4 and 8 traverse many play texts, sometimes very briefly. Chapter 5 concerns two plays, one of which is arguably not necessarily a monologue at all. Chapter 6 analyses one play alone and its reception by critics in the UK and USA, while chapter 7 is devoted to the work of one playwright. The range of approaches here somewhat undermines the dissertation’s claim to systematic analysis. The comments that follow proceed chronologically through the chapters.

The contrast between British and Irish theatre mid-1990s is well observed at the outset. One might question the assertion on page 30 that in contrast to Bennett’s *Talking Heads*, in Conor McPherson’s “introspection of the psychology of the characters [sic] is not an issue” (30) as over simplistic. The comment by McPherson cited on page 32 is very interesting as it implies a socio-political stimulus for the proliferation of monologue plays in an Irish context. This might be followed further as it is an assumption that governs, for instance, Brian Singleton’s work on Irish masculinity and monologue. States of crisis indeed seem to unite the plays explored in this chapter, and yet they are clearly not crises of the same order. The inclusion of work by Jennifer Johnson here provides an important counterpoint to the male playwrights; it is just a shame that most of these plays are late 1980s works. In many respects Johnson is coming from a different place, not only because she provides a “female perspective” (42), but also because, as Maria Kurdi observes, she is a novelist and basically imports novelistic first person techniques to the play form. It would have been really useful to have some female voices of the same generation as Simon Stephens and Owen McCafferty here. Finally, it is not entirely clear how a play like *The Match Box* illustrates a shift “from the



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introspection of the speaker's subjectivity more to the ability of the monologue play to tell a story" (53). Could this be explained further at the defence?

This chapter combines work that is hugely diverse and it struggles to rationalize this diversity. The plays treated in this chapter range from works rooted in the political conflict in Northern Ireland, to a trauma narrative about infanticide, to comedies on the topic of divorce and cross cultural communication, to metatheatrical experiments. Given the vastly different contexts and agendas at work here, the links between the plays, even at a formal level, do not come across convincingly. There seems little to connect the theatre of Marie Jones with the theatre of Tim Crouch beyond the incidental. Would Jacques Rancière's work on spectatorship, mentioned in relation to Crouch's *My Arm*, provide a unifying mode of approach for the plays under discussion? The inclusion of an Irish ex-patriot writer whose work was performed in the Czech Republic, for a Czech audience sits uneasily with the other material. *Maureen* in addition is an autobiographical play and thus crosses into the category proposed in chapter 7.

The chapter proposes a "focus on plays that experiment with the ability of the monologue to go beyond the surface, beyond the mask of character and explore the consciousness and subconsciousness of their monologists rather than to address the audience directly with a compelling story" (100). Evreinov is introduced via Kurt Taroff's PhD work in order to frame the chapter's monologue category. This certainly has potential, but as suggested above could have been introduced earlier in the dissertation as a guiding principle, or a historical point of departure. It also needs to be qualified. Obviously a turn of the century conception of the split self in theatre will not serve to explicate the modalities of psychological trauma or political 'schizophrenia' as they are conceived in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. The pairing of *Baglady* a 1985 trauma monologue play by Frank McGuinness with Caryl Churchill's politically provocative *Seven Jewish Children* (2009) is questionable for two reasons: *Baglady* lies outside the proposed temporal focus of the research; and, to my knowledge, *Seven Jewish Children* has not been habitually presented as a monologue, with the exception of the *Guardian* sponsored film discussed here. Sarah Kane's *4.48 Psychosis* or perhaps even Debbie Tucker Green's *Random* could have served well here.

Along with the plays considered in chapters 6 and 7, the issue of British theatrical considerations of the politics of the Middle East becomes a prominent aspect of the dissertation as a whole. Chapter 7 provides an engaging and thorough exploration of David Hare's attempts to use monologue to probe the Israeli-Palestinian political conflict and modes of response. This intensely complicated issue of ethics and allegiance provides a great deal to discuss.

Finally in chapter 8 the attempt to balance British and Irish examples is dropped. Undoubtedly Brian Friel's work is pivotal; however it has also been the subject of extensive, perhaps even exhaustive, scholarly attention, in marked contrast to the other plays described here. Would some understanding of the ensemble monologue in narratological terms be of use



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here, to account of questions of form, perspective and effect? Some conclusion to this chapter is wanted, instead it finishes with a journalistic tribute to Mark O'Rowe's *Terminus*.

The concluding chapter reiterates the chapter summaries provided at the outset with little enough variation. It returns to the question of why monologue plays have been so popular, mainly using the Irish plays as support and comes to the conclusion that it is the linguistic richness of the form that fosters its continued attraction. This is undoubtedly a valid point. Another reason, perhaps more pragmatic, is an economic one – after all, especially for novice writers the cost of a cast is a major issue, hence the proliferation of solo shows at Fringe festivals. This may seem a banal point but it is a significant factor in the practice of theatre in the UK and Ireland today.

At the level of primary research the dissertation demonstrates a wide knowledge of monologue drama since the late 1970s and a close acquaintance with a compendious array of play texts. This is without doubt the work's prime strength, but is offset by the quality of research of a secondary, abstract and non-literal nature. At the level of secondary research there is an extremely heavy reliance on journalism as is perhaps foreshadowed by the dissertation's opening citation and is confirmed by its closing one. Of the 153 secondary sources, 74 are journalistic/blogs/websites. Little distinction is made between scholarly work and reviewers' commentaries or brief newspaper articles.

Research has been acknowledged throughout and is handled with clarity though not always critically. Reviewers' assessments of plays are frequently taken on faith or without qualification. Citations at times substitute for analysis by the author, while summary is a dominant mode in the processing of secondary perspectives. The format of both footnotes and the bibliography would be well served by more attentive proofreading. A couple of sources are repeated in the bibliography, names are sometimes misspelled, and punctuation is inconsistent. The font style of the footnotes is not entirely regular and on page 111 has jumped in size. Hyperlinks have been left in both the footnotes and the bibliography.

Language is generally correct and clear. Expression is mixed, often settling at a journalistic register that rests on an assumption of the stability of certain terms or judgements, and review style assessments of plays' achievements. Regrettably at times names are misspelled; see for instance "Rancièr" (57), "Arteudian" (90), "Chruchill" (110) or "Pavice" (202). On page 113 hyperlinks remain in the main text from the original source.

To conclude, this dissertation addresses a space within the existing scholarship with a wide-ranging project that presents a workmanlike structure for understanding different monologue plays in terms of types of utterance and narrative situation. It assembles a broad range of dramatic works and describes them quite lucidly within the structure proposed. Theory is applied at a minimal level. It covers some ground that has been explored before, in particular with regard to playwrights such as Brian Friel, Frank McGuinness, Marie Jones and Conor McPherson and does not actively challenge previous interpretations of their work. The findings of its investigation of the monologue play are clear, but not complex: there are many different types of monologue play in contemporary theatre, their success or failure depends on



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how well they engage their audiences, they do this in various ways. Although some of the dissertation in previous versions has already been published in article form, the lack of historical context and an overarching theoretical rubric limit its future potential as a monograph.

I recommend the thesis for defence.

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