

Hana Pavelkova

Monologue Plays in Contemporary British and Irish Theatre (Doctoral Dissertation)

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In this thesis, Hana Pavelkova offers a thorough survey of monologue drama from the 1990s and 2000s in Britain and Ireland. Organising her study into key themes such as: theatricality, multiple characters, inner conflict, documentary theatre, the author as performer, and alternating monologues, Pavelkova examines the formal qualities of these plays and also situates them within their critical and scholarly reception. In doing so, she uncovers some fascinating themes and tendencies, such as the focus of these plays on gender, political conflict, death, ghosting and loneliness, and also acknowledges the theatrical qualities of these plays in relation to the ways in which they enable the display of actorly virtuosity and also draw attention to the work of the playwright.

This is a very interesting thesis: it is comprehensive in its survey of the plays of the period, thorough in its close reading of these texts and is highly readable and engaging. The thesis gains in argumentative strength as it develops, so that the discussion of the work of Caryl Churchill, David Hare and *My Name is Rachel Corrie* is particularly interesting in its consideration of, not only the use of monologue as a theatrical form, but also the contradictions and tensions that occurred in the staging and reception of these works. This is excellent work and with some additional conceptual framing, is publishable.

Pavelkova is to be commended particularly for the clarity of her writing and the structure and justification of her work. She is highly methodical in how she engages with the form thematically, building up a detailed picture of its key characteristics through each chapter. The range of material she draws on is impressive, particularly in how she draws not only on close analyses of the texts but also the critical responses to the material – it's clear that she has thoroughly researched the field and the survey of monologue plays offered in the appendix of the thesis maintains this sense.

Where the thesis could be pushed further, with a view to publishing this work in monograph form, is in how it debates its key conceptual terms and frames the monologue theoretically and analytically to speak to broader debates in the field of theatre and literary studies. I hope that the following sets of questions will help Pavelkova in developing this material further with a view to publication, and may be useful during the viva defence in thinking the dissertation through.

Overall Questions

While the Introduction ends by noting the desire of the thesis to engage with the key features of the monologue form, the reader is left asking: what is the overall conceptual insight of this thesis? Is this ultimately a formal analysis (of the monologue in theatrical and aesthetic terms), is it an argument around theatricality and spectatorship, is it an examination of the emergence of the form in its social and political context? What ultimately does Pavelkova want to claim that monologues perform, achieve, mean? Foregrounding the argument of the thesis within the introduction would help the reader navigate the key thrust of the dissertation – what is the overall insight here into the monologue form?

Spectatorship

As I suggest above, Pavelkova engages with an impressive range of texts drawn from Britain and Ireland and also accounts for their reception in the USA. The question of spectatorship runs through her discussion, in her argument for the ways in which the monologue requires the audience's 'participation' in imagining and providing context for the performer's speech. The context of spectatorship itself emerges here as a key question that Pavelkova may want to explore further. How much does it matter where a monologue was staged: what country, what city, what theatre etc? How much does it matter what actor played the lead role, who the audience was, how the writer might be understood more broadly by that writer in how the monologue would ultimately be understood? What role (ethically, politically) do spectators play when watching monologues? Can they experience a collective response when watching a solo performer?

For example, in the discussion of *Night in November* – on p. 68 Pavelkova suggests that historic distance between the two performances informed the play's reception – we might ask - how did it do this? How did historic difference inform the approach of the productions and the response by critics? Another example is where *Catalpa* is received negatively by critics, on p. 86 – these critics are American. How was the play received in Ireland? Does the geographic/national context of the reception matter and if it does, in what way?

Defining Terms

There is a range of terms employed by Pavelkova to discuss the relative merits of the plays she describes, and it would be interesting to elaborate on her definitions of these terms. For example, when she describes a play or a moment in a play as dramatically 'effective' – used for example on page 100, and throughout the thesis – what does she mean? How does she define 'effective'? What effect is imagined to be produced here?

How are the boundaries drawn for defining what constitutes an Irish or a British play in the thesis? How does Pavelkova establish the distinctions? McPherson for

example is imagined here as 'Irish' but was in fact first commissioned in Britain. Equally, however, his work may be successful in Britain because of its apparent 'Irishness' – how did Pavelkova define what qualifies as 'Irish' or 'British' and what criteria did she use?

Theatre Systems and traditions

The thesis focuses on dramatic texts but also attends to the theatrical performances of these plays. In doing so, Pavelkova establishes a set of theatrical traditions and lineages in which these plays and performances could be read. It would be interesting to discuss the reasons for her choices here. Why, for example, establish Bennett and Wesker in particular, as the antecedents for these later works? The thesis situates them as establishing a particular tradition (one of a largely realist approach) for the work Pavelkova later discusses. However, Beckett also seems to shadow much of the work she talks about – if she were to 'start' her discussion with his plays instead, what would happen to her analysis of the monologues she later considers? Would the monologue look different in terms of theatrical tradition and its relationship to the audience?

Pavelkova describes *Faith Healer* as apparently naturalistic on page 151, but then rightly acknowledges its non-realist conceit of ghosts. How does she situate the terms naturalism and realism historically? What traditions is she imagining for the 'realist' or 'naturalist' monologue? Are realism and naturalism identical? And can a monologue ever actually be naturalist?

It would be interesting to discuss the relationship between the undramatic (accused of McPherson et al) and the anti-theatrical (which Pavelkova rightly suggests of Hare's work). Do these terms mean the same thing? What are the various ways in which these plays situate themselves in relation to theatricality, and what, in each case, might be understood by the concept of theatricality?

Pavelkova makes clear that the monologue functions in part to foreground actorly virtuosity. This is a good point and could be extended further by exploring some of the following questions: how do monologues support the formation of the star system in performance? This question might also be asked of the fact that playwrights are choosing to perform in their own work – which offers a different form of celebrity performance. Why might the monologue be particularly appealing to the playwright-as-actor – and what meanings do they present as 'actors' to an audience that is different to the figure of the professional actor? Pavelkova mentions the concept of 'authenticity' in relation to Hare's performance – can she discuss this term and assess it critically? How does virtuosity come into play here?

The monologue might also be situated in relation to a theatrical economy – Pavelkova mentions right at the end of the thesis that Abbie Spallen wrote her play as a monologue because it was cheap. This seems an important dimension to the emergence of the form – the fact that they cost less to perform than dialogue plays

with large casts. How does the economic system of theatrical production play into the development of the monologue and its popularity in the 1990s and 2000s?

Themes and tendencies

There are some very interesting themes that emerge across the plays that Pavelkova discusses in this dissertation, which raise further questions. Many of the monologues Pavelkova cites seem particularly concerned with afterlives – ghosts, corpses, ashes, dead children – is the form somehow particularly connected to the spectral? Could the corpse be seen as another character in these plays – like Beckett's silent figures?

Equally, many of the monologues she discusses seem to grapple in particular with gender stereotypes – either critiquing or reinforcing them. Is there something particular about the form that opens out questions of gender identity? Does the question of the actor's body make a difference here, in how virtuosity, presence and star status are gendered? When a writer offers a clichéd set of gender relations – as for example, you suggest Friel does in *Molly Sweeney* – are they maintaining or foregrounding the stereotype for critique? How much does live performance matter for how these gender stereotypes function for audiences?

Many of the monologues Pavelkova discusses engage with religious conflict and extremism – in Ireland and Israel in particular. She cites the problem raised at the beginning of the thesis, considering how monologues decontextualise stage action by focusing on the personal. Her case studies rightly complicate this problem, and this discussion raises further questions. Does the monologue form require a particular focus on identity and conflict? How are the personal and the political organised by the plays discussed? How is the individual positioned in relation to the collective or the social in the monologue? How can audiences imagine the social through the monologue? Is loneliness built into the form of the monologue? If so, how is the spectator positioned? Hare mentions the collective engagement of an audience, but does the monologue also isolate spectators?

Children seem a particularly important theme in these monologues – children and loss. Is this symptomatic of a broader social concern with children and childhood in this period, or is there something distinctive in the engagement by monologues?

The monologue inevitably reminds me of Freud's 'talking cure': the idea that verbal confession and narration can be therapeutic. Some of these plays also point to the psycho-analytic engagement idea of trauma as unrepresentable experience that inevitably fragments language. This concept emerges in a number of these examples – Bolger's *The Holy Ground*, McGuinness' *Baglady*, Beckett's *Not I*. In this case, language itself is called into question, in its ability to represent and stand in for trauma. How has Pavelkova conceptualised the idea of the conscious and sub-conscious – what psycho-analytic frames has she drawn on to think this through?

I want to congratulate Pavelkova on her impressive achievement in this thesis. She has done careful research and offers a thoughtful and reflective overview of the monologue form in a way that is engaging and interesting.

I recommend this dissertation for defence.

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