Resisting the Irish Other: The Berliner Ensemble’s Production of *The Playboy of the Western World*

Introduction

*The Playboy of the Western World* by John Millington Synge stands today as a classic of modern Irish drama and is regularly produced in the Western world and further afield. At its centre is a peculiar tale and its peculiar reception: Christy Mahon arrives cold and uncertain at a rural pub on the coast of Country Mayo and announces that he has killed his father. Rather than unleashing a scandal and a call to the constabulary, the locals celebrate the deed, until the apparently dead father makes an appearance. Christy’s attempt to put Old Mahon to rest once and for all meets with anger and outrage from the other characters who decide to hang Christy in order to distance themselves from his actions. The father then releases the son, and they head off to roam Ireland. The main plot is augmented by the love tangles of Christy, Pegeen Mike, Shawn Keogh and the Widow Quin. Shawn and Pegeen are betrothed, but the entrance of Christy and the wonder of his tale show her that there is more to life than Shawn’s feckless promise. The more mercenary Widow Quin also latches on to Christy in the hope that he will provide a useful partner to further her own material ends. Pegeen triumphs, yet she disowns her intended when he misjudges the mood and declares that he will kill his father anew before his audience’s eyes. Once the two men have left, Pegeen realizes the mistake she has made and closes the play with the line: ‘I’ve lost the only Playboy of the Western World’.[[1]](#footnote-1) The comedy is presented in a lively local vernacular that is at once down-to-earth and poetic. Indeed, the combination of stylization and realism in the language strikes at the heart of the problems regarding performance and it informs the rest of the article.

Christopher Murray opines: ‘the play is so rich […] that it defies satisfactory exegesis: it is the *Hamlet* of the Irish dramatic tradition’.[[2]](#footnote-2) While one may query such a comparison, the text is certainly resonant and open, as Synge stated in a letter: ‘I follow Goethe’s rule, to tell no one what one means in one’s writings’.[[3]](#footnote-3) This is evidenced by a very Shakespearean avoidance of interpretive suggestiveness or authorial judgement. However, the performance history of the play has somewhat belied its literary qualities. In a book devoted to *The* *Playboy* on stage, various commentators register a rather disappointing reception of such a lively text. Ophelia Byrne notes that in Northern Ireland the play has been ‘promoted as an appealing comedy classic with no remarkable effect’ since the 1920s.[[4]](#footnote-4) In the USA, John Harrington identifies three phases of reception: it was initially considered ‘incendiary’ for its warts-and-all portrayal of the rural poor, then ‘poetic’ for the richness of its milieu and curious action, and has latterly been staged as ‘sentimental and exotic’.[[5]](#footnote-5) An analysis of the play on the Viennese stage echoes its American reception. Dieter Fuchs concludes that ‘it was first of all received as a grotesque and eccentric Irish Comedy whose plot does not really concern continental Europe’.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Such abiding responses are very much in contrast to the premiere at the Abbey Theatre, Dublin, on 26 January 1907. Much has been written about the upheaval provoked on that day. Heidi J. Holder argues that the lifelike setting of the original production undermined the play’s careful artifice and presented the action in the straitjacket of aesthetic realism. As a result, ‘the demands [Synge’s] drama placed on the audience for self-examination and involvement far outstripped its desire or willingness to particular in such an exercise’.[[7]](#footnote-7) The production thus elicited a powerful reaction, one that was steeped in conservatism, protecting a self-image tarnished by the representations on stage. Lionel Pilkington, however, challenges this position and argues that a tendency towards naturalism, the directorial emphasis of the original production, was itself a conservative mode of presentation: ‘[naturalism] offers the reassurance that national identity can be realized through forms of behaviour that seem normal and that show action itself as constrained by known and familiar conventions’.[[8]](#footnote-8) In this light, it is the production that is revealed as conservative.

The question arises as to how this powerful work could provoke such ructions in its early performance history, yet become a classic comedy with little bite when staged later. It would appear that, unlike productions of, say, Shakespeare, directors have been satisfied to restrict readings and anchor them in the then-and-there of turn-of-the-century Mayo. The result is that many productions fail to connect with their audiences as anything more than entertainment or as a freak show of sorts, displaying a cabinet of backward and wayward curiosities. A failure to liberate the dynamics of the play from the specificity of its setting can lead to the kind of production of *The Playboy* at the National Theatre, London, in 2001, discussed by Nicholas Grene. He quotes two separate reviews that mention ‘Oirishness’, the stage Irishry that has turned vibrant works of art into stereotypical representations of the Irish Other.[[9]](#footnote-9) The text itself may also bear some responsibility for exoticizing the Irish peasant world as spectacle for Dublin audiences in treatment of language and action as other.

The problem here is that an insistence on an unproblematized aesthetic realism in performance can present that stage world ‘as it is’, that Irish peasants of this time and in this place are simply ‘like that’, replete with their earthiness, wit and menace. The characters are naturalized and deprived of any context other than that of early twentieth-century Irish peasantry. Their foibles and their behaviour are located purely in their own personalities and are consequently easy to laugh at or mock from the safety of the stalls.

This propensity to treat the play as ‘exotic’ or ‘distant’ can be countered, of course. Gregory Castle makes an interesting point in this respect that is worth quoting at length:

[…] Synge’s *Playboy* functions as a kind of cultural performance in which the indigenous scene of storytelling […] is transformed into stage drama. Performance thus becomes self-reflexive, meta-discursive; and it is at this point that it can begin to function as part of a strategy of cultural translation, whereby ‘eccentric’ or ‘marginal’ rituals can become accessible in a ‘dominant’ discourse without suffering the violent and wholesale transmutation of native ritual into Western social text.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Castle proposes that foregrounding storytelling can serve to prevent the setting and language from becoming exoticized and commodified, and to expose the potentially natural personae on stage as constructions.

An emphasis on process over product is to be found in the theatre of Bertolt Brecht. The theorist and practitioner of a dialectical theatre oversaw a production of *The Playboy* staged by his own company, the Berliner Ensemble. It was co-directed by two of his assistants, Manfred Wekwerth and Peter Palitzsch and premiered on 11 May 1956. The discussion that follows examines Brecht’s understanding of realism before engaging with a production that privileged material conditions, rhetorical processes, and social relationships over verisimilitude, naturalization and individual character. My case study serves two purposes. First, it examines the staging strategies that allowed Synge’s play to become ‘accessible in a “dominant” culture’ while resisting the fetishization of the Irish Other. Second, it casts light more generally on a series of principles with which other ‘realistic’ plays[[11]](#footnote-11) might be staged in order to liberate them from confirming certain prejudices or limiting understandings of the subject matter.

Realisms in the Theatre

I have deliberately used the term ‘aesthetic realism’ for modes of direction and presentation that aim to capture life as experienced from day to day. Such realism is associated with Stanislavsky, yet it is worth remembering that he also differentiated it from naturalism, as Jean Benedetti notes:

Naturalism, for [Stanislavsky], implied the indiscriminate reproduction of the surface of life. Realism, on the other hand, while taking its material from the real world and from direct observation, selected only those elements which revealed the relationships and tendencies lying under the surface.[[12]](#footnote-12)

Here, Stanislavsky is concerned with questions of human interaction and psychology. The play of text and subtext was to reveal the complexity of human relationships without presenting everything to the spectator on a plate. Brecht shared Stanislavsky’s belief that realism was about making connections in the auditorium, but understood the nature of those connections differently. Brecht maintains, through the figure of the Philosopher in *Buying Brass*:

The problem is that making reality recognizable in the theatre is just one of the tasks of true realism. You still need to be able to see through this reality, though. The laws that determine how the processes of life develop must be made visible. These laws aren’t visible in photographs. Nor are they visible if the spectators simply borrow the eyes or hearts of the characters involved in these processes.[[13]](#footnote-13)

This quotation covers several important principles that underpin Brecht’s understanding of realism. The Stanislavskian quest for aesthetic realism is only the first part of a more complex operation. The more important one is to be able to make connections between such representations and the forces that produce them in a clear and apparent manner. These ‘laws’ are social and historical, and thus go beyond the actions of the human subjects on stage. In this reading, spectators require a measured gaze that is not blinkered by empathy: they must see the big picture, not the one mediated by any single character.

Brecht further noted in his journal: ‘as long as by realism one understands a style and not an attitude, one is nothing other than a formalist’.[[14]](#footnote-14) An attitude towards reality is something that requires not simply a passive reflection of, but an active reflection on lived experience. Brecht’s attitude to reality can be understood with reference to a figure often considered to be at odds with his views, György Lukács. With reference to the essay ‘Narrate or Describe?’ (1936), Steve Giles argues that Lukács differentiated between ‘showing’ and ‘telling’ in novelistic narration. Here ‘showing’ is unreflected reproduction, whereas ‘telling’ introduces an interpretive voice that distances the reader from the read.[[15]](#footnote-15) What, then, is Brecht ‘telling’ the spectator in his dramatic presentation? For him, reality is to be interpreted dialectically: what is seen on stage is always predicated on contradiction, and contradiction is the motor of the action itself. Brecht’s ‘telling’ is the inclusion of dialectical processes in the production of staged representation: his realism is philosophical rather than aesthetic.

Such a position opens new vistas on *The Playboy*. Synge’s elegant combination of realism and artistry has often been refracted in an overstatement of the former over the latter in performance. The dialectical interpretation, on the other hand, focuses on the contingency of the specific circumstances and their potential to provoke particular actions and behaviours. A Brechtian production is able to retain the uniqueness of the local circumstances *and* generalize their problems in such a way that a dialogue between text and context can arise. The realist trap in performance can make *The Playboy* appear parochial when its themes and action clearly reach well beyond the peasantry of Mayo at the dawn of the twentieth century.

Brecht’s theatre practice at the Berliner Ensemble began not with the characters, but with the action. Manfred Wekwerth set out a dialectical analysis of *The Playboy* using headings reminiscent of Friedrich Engels’s ‘laws of the dialectic’.[[16]](#footnote-16) One finds, for example, under ‘the interpenetration of opposites’ that Christy is neither a wretch nor a playboy, but both a wretch and a playboy ‘with a different emphasis on the one or the other’.[[17]](#footnote-17) Similarly, under the heading, ‘the same thing twice is not the same thing’, Wekwerth notes that Christy’s murder of his father at a distance makes him a hero, while the attempted murder before the villagers’ eyes makes him a criminal. Correspondingly, Pegeen is disappointed to discover Christy’s lack of experience with women, but is further disappointed when he finds himself surrounded by female admirers. Under the heading ‘negation of the negation’, that is, the dialectical resolution of a contradiction, one reads that while Christy is honoured, Old Mahon is hostile to his son. Yet once the tables are turned, the father protects his son: he rejects his rejection. These musings applied dialectical categories to the play’s action in order to understand how the characters responded to the situations with which they were confronted. The aim was to articulate the contradictions as clearly as possible on stage in order to provoke curiosity in the audience. The theatrical effect of such an approach was to rob the characters of inherent qualities and to invoke the social environment as an active agent.

The production also needed to maintain a connection to reality. A material basis for a production was an important prerequisite and needed to be established in order to ground any situation in real circumstances. In the recent translation of Brecht’s ‘Short Organon for the Theatre’, a term once rendered as ‘dialectical materialism’ now appears in its literal form as ‘materialist dialectics’.[[18]](#footnote-18) That is, Brecht did not associate himself with a (sanctioned and codified) system, but preferred to deploy his dialectic without doctrinal limitation, ultimately prioritizing dialectics over materialism without, however, neglecting the latter. *The Playboy* offers much concrete social material and this will be discussed below in the context of the play’s translation and the production itself.

Preparing the Translation

It is not clear how Brecht came upon the play. Wekwerth believed that Brecht remembered seeing a production of *The* *Playboy* at the Theater am Schiffbauerdamm, the theatre in which he had his first major triumph (*The Threepenny Opera* in 1928) and in which the Berliner Ensemble had been based since 1954.[[19]](#footnote-19) Werner Mittenzwei maintained that Brecht had seen Werner Bernhardy’s *Ein Polterabend* (*The Wedding-Eve Party*) in a Berlin theatre and wanted to stage something similar. In response, actor Ernst Busch remembered a production of *The Playboy* from the Weimar Republic.[[20]](#footnote-20) However, what seems more likely is that the Berliner Ensemble saw an Irish production at the Théâtre des Nations festival in Paris, at which it first garnered international prizes and plaudits. Directing assistant Carl M. Weber wrote a review in which he mentioned that the Abbey Players had cancelled their production, and so Cyril Cusack brought a swiftly rehearsed *Playboy* which was not that well received. Weber noted: ‘a translation of *The Playboy* for the repertoire of our theatres would be really valuable’.[[21]](#footnote-21) A poor production of a promising play may have provided a negative example that spurred the company to action.[[22]](#footnote-22) The play’s promise can be detected in this observation from Anthony Roche:

Brecht’s objections to dramatic character as something fixed and immutable would be satisfied by the extent to which Christy Mahon’s character is constructed for him by those with whom he comes into contact; and if Christy finally becomes that character he does so by embracing it in a deliberate act of will rather than by any organic evolution.[[23]](#footnote-23)

The protean nature of the characterization, also picked up by Wekwerth, above, tallied with the company’s ideas about the interplay of individual and society, but also connected with certain thematic interests, as set out in the programme for the production.

Brecht was fascinated by the phenomenon of adulation in *The Playboy* and noted its own dialectical contradictions. He wrote in the programme that the play ‘mercilessly criticized exaggerated hero worship in a nation accustomed to heroic deeds’ while acknowledging that such a nation also managed to tear itself away from the ‘erstwhile mighty British Empire’, an act of heroism itself.[[24]](#footnote-24) The analysis dispelled the philosophical concept of an impervious ‘thing in itself’ and qualified heroism as something that was both positive and negative, attributes dependent on context. Synge and other representatives of the Irish Dramatic Revival were somewhat ambivalent themselves about the nationalist move to independence, and so Brecht might be diagnosing a complex politics that informed the nationalist theatre movement when Synge was writing.

The translation of the play as *Der Held der westlichen Welt* (*The Hero of the Western World*) drew on this thematic focus, but the title was itself problematic on two levels. The move from ‘playboy’ to ‘hero’ exchanged an open term for something more concrete, although both retain a sense of irony. In addition, Synge’s ‘Western World’ contrasts itself with the concept of the ‘Orient’. In German, such a notion is usually rendered by the word ‘Abendland’; yet Brecht insisted[[25]](#footnote-25) on the more literal ‘westliche Welt’ to emphasize Western capitalism as opposed to Eastern socialism. Again, the effect was to limit the universality of the play, but here also to arraign the West for its propensity to create the most unsuitable of heroes, something to which I will return, below. That said, the programme to the production printed Synge’s English title in capitals above the new German one that was placed beneath it in parentheses. In addition, the titles of three existing German translations also appeared inside the pamphlet for comparison. Thus, Brecht’s ideologically inflected title had to defend itself against a number of alternatives while asserting its own primacy nonetheless.

The translation was made by the young playwright Peter Hacks and his wife Anna Elisabeth Wiede. The Berliner Ensemble was accustomed radically to adapting plays it wanted to stage, and had premiered, in the same season as *The Playboy*, a version of George Farquhar’s *The Recruiting Officer* as *Trumpets and Drums*. Several changes had been made to this text, not least to shift the action from the playwright’s own time forward to the American War of Independence. In the case of *The Playboy*, no adaptation occurred at all, yet the translated text clearly bore Brecht’s imprint. In addition, a series of songs, not found in Synge, were commissioned, and I will discuss their place in the production in the following section.

While the speeches were all translated with neither omission nor addition, it would be wrong to mistake the final text for a literal translation. The translators decided to substitute a version of the Bavarian dialect for the Irish vernacular found in the original. This had several advantages, according to a note made during rehearsals: Bavaria, too, was rural, had its own poetry, and it was Catholic.[[26]](#footnote-26) All these elements were considered to have an effect on the play’s action. Peter Voigt, an assistant on the production, reports that once Hacks and Wiede had completed and were satisfied with the translation, Brecht called for a thorough revision: ‘the peculiar Irish-German remained the language of the play, but was pared back, made more concrete and gestically intensified’.[[27]](#footnote-27) The revisions fulfilled Brecht’s desire to foreground the social context in the language itself, and it is worth focusing on a couple of examples.

The conditions of the rural poor offered the new translation a number of points that could be brought out. A phrase that occurs a couple of times in *The Playboy* as a note of thanks, ‘God increase you’, was presented in *Der Held* as ‘Gott vermehre Ihr Eigentum’ (‘may God increase your possessions’).[[28]](#footnote-28) Elsewhere, the concrete economic basis was more emphatically established than in the original. When the Widow Quin, for example, describes the pub that Christy will gain by marrying Pegeen, she calls it ‘a place with fine trade’, whereas the Berliner Ensemble version rendered it as ‘eine Wirtschaft mit gutem Umsatz’ (‘a business with a good turnover’).[[29]](#footnote-29) The commercially savvy character was more clearly defined by her understanding of the establishment’s economics. Such a sharpening of the language recurred whenever there was an opportunity to highlight the social conditions of the village.

The gestic quality of the language that Voigt mentions requires a little more explanation. Gestic, the adjectival form of Brecht’s neologism *Gestus*, has a variety of meanings because Brecht was loose in his own usage of the term. An actor’s *Gestus*, for example, relates physicality to society, so that the body can reveal the social forces acting upon it in performance. This might mean that an office worker walks stiffly to reflect the hours of sitting in the same position day in, day out. Gestic language also has a deictic quality in that it plays with rhythm and emphasis, to throw material already present into relief. Brecht illustrates his point with reference to a well-known line from the Bible, ‘pluck out the eye that offends thee’. He suggests that a gestic re-presentation would read ‘if thine eye offends thee, pluck it out’ in order to set out two gestic modes, the first of explanation, the second of command.[[30]](#footnote-30) The rewrite clarifies the nature of the line, and the same can be seen in the language of gestic translation in *Der Held*. Compare the following examples from Pegeen in Act II:

Synge:

What call have you to be that lonesome when there’s poor girls walking Mayo in their thousands now?

Hacks’s original translation:

Was brauchst Du so einsam sein, wo noch tausende von armen Mädchen in Mayo herumlaufen?

(Why do you need to be lonely when thousands of poor girls are walking about Mayo?)

Brechts’ revision:

Wieso einsam, wo die armen Mädchen in Mayo herumlaufen zu Tausenden?[[31]](#footnote-31)

(How-so lonely, when the poor girls walk about Mayo in their thousands?)

Both German versions rendered the line in more prosaic and less colloquial forms than the original. The ‘local colour’ was lost in Hacks’s version, but regained in Brecht’s in its clipped nature that violates normal German syntax and stresses the hyperbolic number in the final position. Brecht’s line reproduced the poetry of the original, something lacking in Hacks, while making a rhythmic point at the same time. This metric refashioning runs through the final version and has two main effects. First, the lines reflect artistic intervention and wrench the speeches out of a simple aesthetic realism. That said, as the above translation shows, the revised text is not stilted. Second, the unusual rhythms help the speakers reach rhetorical clarity, and, in the context of the play, this focuses attention on the strategies they employ to achieve various ends. As Holder points out, Synge’s early drafts of the play reveal that the comedy initially arose from action, as in traditional farce. Yet as they developed, Synge removed ‘the appearance of “institutions” and social trappings’ and focused the action on the use of language. Thus, he ‘lays the groundwork for a drama of intellectual action in which the central figures all seek to assert their imaginative views as reality’.[[32]](#footnote-32) The revised translation was able to map out the stratagems undertaken more clearly, allowing the actors to take up positions in response to them.

The translation, then, betrays its dialectical credentials in that it establishes lines of action through the dialogue and acknowledges Synge’s sophisticated approach to accuracy and artifice in the language. The new text avoids vernacular directly, preferring more standard vocabulary, but inflects the language in such a way that a constructed syntax confers particularity upon the community of speakers. As such, there are benefits both for the actors and the audience. The actors do not approach the characters as figures to be ‘inhabited’ because they speak too oddly for such a procedure to be self-evident. Instead, the actors can work with their characters as models of behaviours and note how they change as the action progresses. The audience can then observe the contradictory ebbs and flows of the action without a naturalistic anchoring in milieu. However, the artificial nature of the translation also lends the language a specificity that attaches it to the play’s setting. The result is that the translation has its cake and eats it: the language is made strange by its gestic inflection, yet this process also associates it with the specific conditions that help produce it. The language is thus both grounded in its context and can generalize the play’s themes beyond their setting.

Rehearsal and Performance

The casting of the play was somewhat contentious. Originally, Brecht had cast his own daughter, Barbara, as the female lead Pegeen and her boyfriend and later husband, Ekkehard Schall, as Christy. That Barbara could play the lead with no experience of a major role already gestured to nepotism (although Schall had previously established himself as a significant actor playing Hörder, the male lead, in Johannes R. Becher’s *Battle in Winter*). However, it was Brecht’s own sentiments that led to a decision that rent the two real-life lovers apart on stage. Brecht surmised that Christy and Shawn were not to be understood as disparate rivals because he considered that they were ‘of the same wood’. The distinction between them was that they had been ‘carved differently’.[[33]](#footnote-33) This led directors Manfred Wekwerth and Peter Palitzsch to propose the decidedly unheroic actor, Heinz Schubert, then cast as Shawn, to play Christy. Their argument was that this was a far more dialectical approach to the two characters: the proven hero, Schall, would play the craven, scheming fiancée, while the slight and comical Schubert would have greatness thrust upon him. Such an argument also played into Brecht’s predilection for casting against type:

In my opinion the true actor both wishes and is able to display *other* people, to perform for the audience people who are completely different than himself [sic], and it is the wish and ability to observe people that makes the true actor.[[34]](#footnote-34)

Brecht thus accepted the proposal, as it fitted his own preference for acting outside one’s comfort zone in order to make lively, new discoveries.

The rehearsal documentation reveals much about the approaches the company took to staging the play dialectically. It also shows Brecht’s hand in the process: although the play was formally directed by Manfred Wekwerth and Peter Palitzsch, several documents note Brecht’s input in and out of rehearsals. As was often the case at the Berliner Ensemble, Brecht simply could not resist ‘overseeing’ a production even if he was not directly involved. The upshot of such a presence was, like the treatment of the translation, that Brecht could still be considered a major creative force in the production.

The basis of the production was not the characters, but the situations. As Brecht noted: ‘the environment for the hero has to be provided. C[hristy] doesn’t bring it himself’.[[35]](#footnote-35) Under the telling title ‘Necessity of Establishing Poverty’, a rehearsal note made the connection between the social context and the action: ‘the characters’ notion of heroism portrayed in the play is unthinkable for the wealthy’.[[36]](#footnote-36) The costumes were thus suitably shabby and the scenery deliberately featured grubby white-washed walls rather than ‘romantic wooden vaulting’.[[37]](#footnote-37) Poverty was also built into the blocking. In Act I, Brecht advised the directors to have Christy warm his hands by the hearth while declaring his love for Pegeen in order to contrast the strength of feeling with the desperate conditions [see fig. 1].[[38]](#footnote-38) Yet the poverty itself was not, as in any dialectical interpretation, a quality that inevitably produced certain behaviours: despite being written around the same time, *The Playboy* is neither Hauptmann’s *The Weavers* (1892) nor Gorky’s *Lower Depths* (1902). Here, poverty drives a different kind of action, predicated upon a need to create light in darkness. As one note put it: ‘the play’s romanticism shouldn’t only be used for atmosphere; the romanticism should also inform the story. It has to be made strange [*verfremdet*] to a certain extent: it has to facilitate the great legend’.[[39]](#footnote-39) The category of romanticism was treated as a dialectical factor in the construction of the plot; it did not represent a passive milieu, but an active contributor to the action itself. At the same time, it was a product of the dire conditions and represented the characters’ desires to transform their drab existences into something more exciting.

Brecht noted that ‘the style for speaking the lines is that of citation, interrupted by real events [Vorgänge]’.[[40]](#footnote-40) This idea set up the dialectics of the whole production. The position that the play’s speech was a series of quotations already robbed the characters of a sovereign claim to agency. Instead, they derived their lines and their idiom rather than creating them themselves. Yet the events that intervene, such as the Widow Quin’s wheeling and dealing, the surprising appearance of Old Mahon, or Pegeen’s mistaken rejection of Christy led the dialogue down new avenues, provoking different attitudes and behaviours.

Thus, Christy unwittingly tapped into romantic notions of heroism that precede his first entrance, for example. One finds the following directions for a section that comes just after the opening of Act II, when the local girls ask him about his murderous deed:

1. Driven on by Quin, [Christy] tells the real facts in response to the big questions.
2. He takes on the mysterious tone of the girls.
3. He gets wilder and more hoarse (very exaggerated).[[41]](#footnote-41)

The three points describe a negotiation of a situation, from a position of unwillingness to one of uncontrolled enthusiasm. It is worth remembering that Christy had already been surprised by the response to his murderous revelation in Act I, yet here he was still at a loss initially and had to be re-constructed as a hero by the Widow Quin. This emphasis on process was made clear in an early note: ‘the audacity of [Christy’s] big words is mixed with an astonishment at their impact. Long before he discovers the hero in himself, he discovers it in the mirror of his surroundings that make him so. Basic *Gestus*: astonishment at the discoveries’.[[42]](#footnote-42) The key to Christy in this production was to show how he depended on the responses of others, and so he was never wholly in control of his actions and there was no suggestion of malign intent to further his own ends. Indeed, at the point at which he believes he has understood the locals – when he decides to do away with his father before their eyes – he miscalculates completely and finds himself as pitiful and friendless as when he entered the pub in the first place.

This production was not, however, exclusively populated by the naïve and the starry-eyed. As one note states:

We will show Quin, the murderer of her husband, as the most real person in the whole play, whereby we’re especially seeking to bring out her unromantic, mercantile interests. In contrast to Pegeen, she understands C[hristy] perfectly and doesn’t care for the legend. She deploys romanticism and eroticism deliberately to achieve specific ends.[[43]](#footnote-43)

Yet even someone as savvy and calculating as the Widow Quin is acting within the limitations of her circumstances and, as the play demonstrates, even she cannot bend events to her will and ends up with no material advantage. She, too, is at the mercy of the plot and not vice versa.

In order to establish the romanticism of the play concretely, the production needed to anchor itself in the reality of the situation. By definition, this meant that the action was not to be presented as in some way peculiar or unusual, but as typical and representative. At the same time, *The Playboy* lives from its remarkable events, and so these were to be emphasized. At one point, the suggestion was made to use a bell over the pub’s door as a point of punctuation. So, when the playboy makes his first great entrance, the bell was to ring ‘feebly and faintly’, whereas Old Mahon’s surprising appearance would bring forth ‘wild and furious’ peels.[[44]](#footnote-44)

The desire to ground the scenes in their environment appeared to go against some central principles of a Brechtian theatre, as can be seen in the use of songs. Orthodoxy has it that songs play a productively disruptive role in Brecht’s theatre. Brecht wrote in 1935, in reference to *The Threepenny Opera* of 1928, that epic theatre’s ‘most striking innovation lay in the strict separation of the music from all other elements’.[[45]](#footnote-45) Here the songs offer a reflective and/or critical counterpoint to the action and are signalled as theatrical elements by changes of lighting, the visibility of the orchestra and actors deliberately stepping out of their roles. *The Playboy*’s translator Peter Hacks originally provided the songs in the form of limericks in order to connect with the Irish context and to reflect ironically on the action. Brecht, however, rejected this approach: ‘the musical numbers have to arise logically from the action. The proposed ballads were too strikingly signalled as supplements [Einlage]’.[[46]](#footnote-46) The composer Hanns Eisler, one of Brecht’s most important musical collaborators, noted that there was no place for irony in the songs either, because Christy was not an ironic, but a genuine hero to the locals, even if he bumbles into such a position.[[47]](#footnote-47) The songs, in other words, became organic elements of the production, not critical foreign bodies, as one might expect.

A closer inspection of the texts reveals that the songs did not simply provide local colour. A song about the great Irish heroes, such as Brian Boru and Chu Chulainn, interwove heroism with more prosaic elements. In the case of Chu Chulainn, for example, the verse stated how he finished off a dish of eggs royale before defeating the king’s army. Other verses were more humdrum. The aim was to give a richer picture of how heroism was received by the rural poor, combining quotidian activity with great names. Hacks was also instructed to write a ‘Moritat’ (a street ballad, a term closely associated with the ‘Ballad of Mack the Knife’ from *The Threepenny Opera*). Here it would seem that Brecht wanted the song to play its more customary role in epic theatre, but again, this was not the case. The Moritat told Christy’s story, from the crime to the criminal’s prospective demise. Yet again, one finds a sincerity in the song: ‘the tone of the Moritat has to be tragic; fashioned to honour the hero, concluding with his death’ [see fig. 2].[[48]](#footnote-48) One reviewer noted how seamlessly the songs had been integrated into the fabric of the show.[[49]](#footnote-49) Such an approach to the songs shows just how flexible Brecht’s aesthetic demands could be and just how much they depended on the context of the production. Here, the songs served a thematic rather than a formal end: they gestured to the dialectical construction of the hero figure among the poor.

Brecht’s hopes for the resonance of this central theme were astonishingly high. He wanted to demonstrate a mechanism that generalized the rise and fall of the questionable Christy and could be applied far beyond the Mayo coast. The new translation of the play’s title formed an element in this strategy and the production’s programme made clear a connection between Christy’s fate and that of no other than Hitler, as well as the gangsters of the popular imagination. In short, it wanted to show how heroes were made and how the hero himself could be most undeserving of the title. The Berliner Ensemble had special curtains made for the end of the final act that featured comic-book superheroes to emphasize the point. The ambition of such an intention was not realized, and several newspaper reviews from both Germanys rejected it out of hand.[[50]](#footnote-50) However, they did not make Eric Bentley’s mistake: he reproached Brecht directly for ‘a ridiculous interpretation of the playboy himself as a would-be Hitler’.[[51]](#footnote-51) This is a peculiar interpretation, as the production was far more concerned with a series of processes that were to attain a metaphorical significance rather than an allegorical reading of Christy. As one note makes plain: ‘C[hristy]’s first great account of his deed mustn’t be too theatrical. Here he’s telling the naked truth. The effects of the naked truth are theatrical’.[[52]](#footnote-52) For the duration of the production, Christy struggled to make sense of the effects his words had on his audience.

By the play’s conclusion, the directors decided not to go down a romanticized route in which Christy was revealed as a genuine impostor, off to sing his own song on the roads of rural Ireland. Instead, they decided on a restoration of the family unit as the ‘twice-murdered father brings the dilettante murderer back to the fold’ so that the pair could live off the legend in perpetuity.[[53]](#footnote-53) The change of emphasis continued to draw on the materialist basis for the production: the father capitalized on the accidental fame of the son, and the two, once opposed to each other, were dialectically reconciled by their mutual self-interest.

Concluding Remarks

The Berliner Ensemble’s production managed to tear *The Playboy of the Western World* away from a folkloric, sentimental interpretation without sacrificing the specificities of the local environment or the strength of feeling that runs through the text. It was able to achieve this by taking Brecht’s notion of the realistic and applying it to the dramatic material. Newspaper reviewers across the board were generous in their praise for both leading actors. They admired how each detail was brought out ‘with well-honed diligence’ and the way in which the humour was not used to denounce the characters ‘by way of bitterness or grotesquery’.[[54]](#footnote-54) The Brechtian promise of an attention to the ebb and flow of the *action*, and its positioning in the realistic context of the play itself showed how dialectics could be applied to a modern classic and change the terms of its reception. The characters were no longer essentialist representations of the Irish poor, but contingent figures responding to a series of surprising events in ways that were related to their material conditions. The fluidity of the performances proposed that these were figures responsive to change, never settling into fixed characteristics or being held back by notions of innate psychological traits. The ongoing development of the ‘hero’ and his reactions to his new-found fame became the focus, not the peculiarities of a certain notion of Irishness. While the link between one form of hero worship and more grandiose ones failed to emerge (not a single review registers the successful connection), the careful unfolding of the story did.

The production’s significance today can be understood in three main ways. First, it liberated itself from a patronizing and fetishizing treatment of the play, its setting and its characters. The directors’ interest in the material mechanisms at the heart of the piece were set out clearly to the audience. Second, the approach to staging classics texts reveals itself as a productive way of opening up formerly closed readings. The role of dialectics as the motor of the action, articulating contradictory material and dramatizing opposing positions, had the effect of focusing the gaze on the interaction between environment, action and character. Third, Brecht’s theatre is often associated with certain fixed ideas about how to perform, such as consciously distancing the actor from the character, direct address to the audience as a form of anti-illusionism, or the necessity of breaking frame through song. Yet none of these features figured in this production, whereas the presence of dialectical interpretation was still clear and present. This is perhaps the most telling quality of the production: Brecht’s theatre does not live from its own hypostatized performance features, but from a philosophical approach to the material itself that then generates suitable modes of performance. It is the task of the production team, the direction and the cast to determine the suitability of the theatrical means. Taken together, the three features gesture to the continued productivity of the Brechtian method: it can provoke lively and challenging productions of familiar plays without resorting to fanciful readings or frivolous directorial impositions.

1. John Millington Synge, *The Playboy of the Western World*, in Synge, *The Playboy of the Western World & Riders to the Sea* (London: Unwin, 1979), pp. 9-77 (77). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Christopher Murray, *Twentieth-Century Irish Drama: Mirror Up To Nation* (Manchester: MUP, 1997), p. 80. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Synge to Anon, 19 February 1907, in Synge, *The Playboy*, pp. 12-13 (13). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ophelia Byrne, ‘Belfast Said “No” to *The Playboy*, in Adrian Frazier (ed.), *Playboys of the Western World: Production Histories* (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2004), pp. 29-45 (30). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. John Harrington, ‘The Playboy IN the Western World: J.M. Synge’s Play in America’, in ibid., pp. 47-58 (51 and 56). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Dieter Fuchs, ‘“That is No Country for Young Men”: The Reception of Synge’s and O’Casey’s Plays in Vienna from 1914 to 1969’, in Rudolf Weiss, Ludwig Schnauder and Dieter Fuchs (eds.), *Anglo-German Theatrical Exchange: ‘A Sea-Change into Something Rich and Strange?’* (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill, 2015), pp. 87-128 (122). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Heidi J. Holder, ‘Between Fiction and Reality: Synge’s *Playboy* and its Audience’, *Journal of Modern Literature*, 14: 4 (1988), pp. 527-42 (532). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Lionel Pilkington, *Theatre & Ireland* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2010), p. 55. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See Nicholas Grene, ‘Two London Playboys: Before and After Druid’, in Frazier (ed.), *Playboys*, pp. 75-86 (85-6). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Gregory Castle, ‘Staging Ethnography: John M. Synge’s *Playboy of the Western World* and the Problem of Cultural Translation’, *Theatre Journal*, 49:3 (1997), pp. 265-86 (268). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. As already noted, *The Playboy* cannot be considered unproblematically ‘realist’ – it is doing far more than that. It is more its overwhelmingly conservative production history that allies it with non-stylized performance. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Jean Benedetti, *Stanislavski: An Introduction*, fourth, revised edition (London: Methuen, 2008), p. 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Bertolt Brecht, *Messingkauf*, or *Buying Brass*, in Brecht, *Brecht on Performance: Messingkauf and Modelbooks*, ed. by Tom Kuhn, Steve Giles and Marc Silberman (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), pp. 11-125 (98). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Brecht, entry for 26 November 1948, in Brecht, *Journals 1934-1955*, ed. by John Willett (London: Methuen, 1993), p. 404. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. See Steve Giles, ‘Realism after Modernism: Representation and Modernity in Brecht, Lukács and Adorno’, in Jerome Carroll, Steve Giles and Maike Oergel (eds.), *Aesthetics and Modernity from Schiller to the Frankfurt School* (Oxford et al: Peter Lang, 2012), pp. 275-96 (277-82). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. See Fredric Jameson, *Valences of the Dialectic* (London: Verso, 2009), pp. 13-14 for further explication and a critique of their claim to universality. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Manfred Wekwerth, ‘*Der Held der westlichen Welt*’, in Wekwerth, *Schriften. Arbeit mit Brecht*, second, revised and expanded edition (Berlin: Henschel, 1973), pp. 131-4 (132). All translations from the German are mine unless otherwise acknowledged. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Compare Brecht, ‘Short Organon for the Theatre’, in Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre*, ed. by Marc Silberman, Tom Kuhn and Steve Giles, third edition (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), pp. 229-55 (242) with Brecht, ‘A Short Organum for the Theatre’, in Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre. The Development of an Aesthetic*, ed. by John Willett (London: Methuen, 1964), pp. 179-205 (193). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. See Wekwerth, in Hans-Dieter Schütt, *Manfred Wekwerth* (Frankfurt/Oder: Frankfurt Oder Editionen, 1995), p. 73. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. See Werner Mittenzwei, *Das Leben des Bertolt Brecht oder der Umgang mit den Welträtseln*, vol. 2 (Berlin: Aufbau, 1997), p. 646. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Carl M. Weber, ‘Theater des Nationen in Paris’, *Die Weltbühne*, 22 September 1954, pp. 1201-6 (1203). [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. This was certainly the case when Brecht saw Johannes R. Becher’s *Winterschlacht* (*Battle in Winter*) in Leipzig in 1954 and decided to offer the playwright a better production in Berlin: see Brecht to Johannes R. Becher, 2 February 1954, in Brecht, *Letters 1913–1956*, ed. by John Willett (London: Methuen, 1990), p. 527. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Anthony Roche, ‘Synge, Brecht and the Hiberno-German Connection’, *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies*, 10: 1-2 (2004), pp. 9-31 (30). [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Brecht, ‘[Note in the programme for *Der Held der westlichen Welt*]’, premiere 11 May 1956. That Brecht wrote the anonymous note is attested to in Peter Voigt, ‘Karussellpferde. Brechts letzte Spielzeit’, in Erdmut Wizisla (ed.), *Begegnungen mit Brecht* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 2014), pp. 336-53 (346). [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. The translators, Peter Hacks and his wife, Anna Elisabeth Wiede, note that they deferred to Brecht on this point ‘after some hesitation’, in Hacks, ‘Notiz zum Stück’, in John M. Synge, *Stücke* (Leipzig: Reclam, 1972), p. 128. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. See Anon, ‘Der Held der westlichen Welt – Notate 19. 2. 56’, undated, n.p., Berliner Ensemble Archive (henceforth BEA) File 22. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Voigt, ‘Karussellpferde’, pp. 340-1. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Synge, *The Playboy*, p. 58; and Synge, *Der Held der westlichen Welt*, in Synge, *Stücke*, pp. 65-127 (108). [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Synge, *The Playboy*, p. 61; and Synge, *Der Held*, p. 111. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Brecht, ‘On Rhymeless Verse with Irregular Rhythms’, in Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre*, third edition, pp. 170-6 (171). [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. The extract from the original translation is to be found in Voigt, ‘Karussellpferde’, p. 341. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Holder, pp. 532 and 534, respectively. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Voigt, ‘Karussellpferde’, p. 338. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Brecht, ‘What Makes an Actor’, in Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre*, third edition, p. 271. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Brecht, in Anon, ‘Notizen *Playboy* 2. II (Brecht)’, undated, pp. 2 (2), BEA File 22. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Anon, ‘Notwendigkeit, die Armut zu etablieren’, undated, n.p., ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Anon, ‘*Der Held der westlichen Welt* – Notate 20.12.55’, undated, pp. 2 (2), ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. See Peter Palitzsch, in Peter Iden, *Peter Palitzsch: Theater muss die Welt verändern* (Berlin: Henschel, 2005), p. 52. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Anon., ‘*Der Held der westlichen Welt* – Notate 20.12.55’, undated, pp. 2 (1), ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Brecht, in Anon, ‘Notizen *Playboy* 2. II. (Brecht)’, undated, pp. 2 (1), ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Anon., ‘*Der Held der westlichen Welt* – Notate 1. 3. 56’, undated, n.p., ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Anon., ‘*Der Held der westlichen Welt* – Notate 19.2.56’, undated, n.p., ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Anon, ‘Die Witwe Quin’, undated, n.p., ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Anon., ‘*Der Held der westlichen Welt* – Notate 8.1-1956’, undated, n.p., ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Brecht, ‘On the Use of Music in an Epic Theatre’, in Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre*, third edition, pp. 124-31, (125). [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Brecht, in Anon, ‘Die Musiknummern’, undated, n.p., BEA File 22. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. See Eisler, in ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Anon, ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. See Henryk Keisch, ‘*Der Held der westlichen Welt*’, *Neues Deutschland*, 6 June 1956. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. See, for example, M-o, ‘Held ohne Heldentat’, *Der Morgen* [East Germany], 15 May 1956; or Florian Kienzl, ‘*Der Held der westlichen Welt*’, *Stuttgarter Zeitung* [West Germany], 29 May 1956. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. Eric Bentley, *The Brecht Memoir* (Evanston IL: Northwestern UP, 1989), p. 70. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. Anon., ‘*Der Held der westlichen Welt* – Notate 1.3.56’, undated, n.p., BEA File 22. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. Anon., ‘*Der Maulheld der westlichen Welt* – Notate’, 16 December 1955, pp. 3 (2), ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. Martin Schulz, ‘*Der Held der westlichen Welt*’, *BZ am Abend*, 16 May 1956; and Sabine Lietzmann, ‘Der Mann, der seinen Papa killte’, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 15 May 1956, respectively. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)