



# Post on J. M. Synge: Performance, Modernity and the Plays of J. M. synge

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Why engage with a canonical playwright? Isn't there enough work to do trying and recovering the works of playwrights who have all but been erased from the canon of Irish theatre history and whose plays have not made it past the stage of the premiere production? Do the plays of J. M. Synge still speak to twenty-first-century Ireland? What about the feminist in me? Shouldn't she concern herself with the work of female playwrights? Surely there are more pressing issues than performance as the world faces into an unprecedented ecological catastrophe, and as, after protest movements such as Rhodes Must Fall (2015) for example, the West is just about beginning to realise, the urgency of addressing the unbearable, continuing legacies of Europe's colonial past? Those are some of the many questions that crossed my mind as I was writing *Performance, Modernity and the Plays of J. M. Synge*.

Well, thinking about performance, about the possibilities that it opens up and the sense of retrieving agency that it confirms might be precisely the thing to do. The more I inquired into Synge's engagement with early twentieth-century Western modernity, the more relevant to contemporary Ireland Synge's plays became. The plays compel the audience, the critics and most importantly the theatre practitioners that engage with them to think about time: its acceleration, the deadliness of teleological time, disrupted linearity and temporal alternatives to modern time. In Synge's work, these are issues begging to be explored. The temporal revolution of the late-nineteenth and early twentieth-century is of a different order than the one forced on us by new technologies but the questions are similar.

My book is concerned primarily in the transformative possibilities of performance. Specifically, I am fascinated by the capacity of performance to disrupt narratives of modernity and progress, and so to challenge representation and offer alternatives. To this end, the book pays particular attention to Synge's interest in keening, which, I argue, can be thought about as a ritual of female empowerment. Rather than apprehend keening as a nostalgic tribute to a lost Ireland, or as the vestigial remains of a supposedly archaic culture, my concern is to highlight the transformative and utopian possibilities of this collective performance practice rooted in a woman's protest tradition. And this is where the works of J. M. Synge and that of internationally renowned, Irish visual artist Alice Maher, who was kind and generous enough to authorize one of her 2018 pieces, *Vox Hybrida I*, be reproduced on my book's front cover, intersect.

When it came to look for a visual for the cover, Jack B. Yeats was my first port of call. An obvious choice, undoubtedly. A powerful one, nonetheless. “The Barrel Man” (1912) was the painting I had in mind. The fierce defiance in the Barrel Man’s eyes that Yeats’s painting captures marvelously exemplifies the vitality, indomitability, violence, but most of all the spirit of resistance of a marginalized Irish culture that fired Synge’s imagination as it did Yeats’s. Copyright matters meant that I had to think again. In hindsight, it was a blessing in disguise.

Alice Maher’s exploration of the aesthetic and political potential of recalcitrant objects and hybrid forms in her 2018 installation *Vox Materia* resonates very much with the argument that I articulate in *Performance, Modernity and the Plays of J. M. Synge*. I was particularly sensitive to the way in which one piece, *Vox Hybrida I*, a large-scale wood relief watercolour print recalling a silhouetted figure, problematizes the body and refuses to see it as a self-contained, fixed entity. *Vox Hybrida I* affirms the transformative possibilities held by moving bodies, not just for the individual but, most importantly for the collective. This is an area that is especially congruent with the argument of my book, which is also deeply interested in the promises of social reconfigurations that performance holds.

Another aspect of Alice Maher’s work which I find thought provoking and challenging has to do with its engagement with the past. If the source of inspiration for *Vox Hybrida I* lies in times immemorial – a twelfth-century carved stone mermaid from Kilcooley Abbey, Co. Tipperary (Ireland) – I see the piece as an invitation to apprehend the past not as a frozen memento or as disjoined from the present, but, on the contrary as retrieving the agency of the past in the present, as recognizing the past as a force within the present and therefore as an invitation to think anew about agency.

Maher’s *Vox Hybrida I*, not unlike performance, is fundamentally about hope and invites thinking of (female) collective identities as not fixed entities, but as forever fluctuating and therefore open to change. Her work talks fruitfully to Synge’s and vice versa. Synge’s plays are definitely contemporary.