

10. British and Irish drama in the 20th century

Interestingly, the most famous playwrights of the end of the 19th and of the 20th century were Irishmen. At the end of the 19th century **Oscar Wilde** (1854-1900) wrote successful witty comedies like *An Ideal Husband* (1895) or *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895) which provided a satirical commentary on some of the hypocritical attitudes of Victorian society. Drama in the 19th century was significantly hampered by censorship; that is perhaps the reason while there seems to be a gap in the line of important playwrights in the 19th century. Wilde himself became victim to the strict social conventions of his time; he was arrested because of his homosexual practices and theaters stopped performing his plays.

The other very influential playwright of the time was **George Bernard Shaw** (1856-1950). Like Wilde, Shaw was born in Ireland; he came from a Protestant Dublin family whose roots were English. His mother and sisters moved to London – his father was an alcoholic, and Shaw joined his mother and sisters in London. Through his artistic mother and sister he was introduced to the theaters. Most of his life he lived in England and his plays were performed in London. He was also a sharp critic of the theater and of literature and a very prominent, influential intellectual figure, a great speaker and a fearless participant in debates. A prolific and long-lived author, Shaw was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1925.

He was very influential in bringing the new kind, Ibsenian drama to the cultural life of Great Britain and wrote an influential essay called “The Quintessence of Ibsenism.” Shaw was influenced by Ibsen’s treatment of topics that were then seen as novel or groundbreaking, such as the position of women, but he also wrote with much humor and satire. In fact, in British literature Shaw is regarded as the father of the “comedy of ideas,” a play which is focused around one central idea which is discussed and seen from different angles of the play, and this is done with humor and sometimes unexpected twists and surprises in plot. Shaw commented, not without his typical irony, that “a play is a vital growth and not a mechanical construction; that a plot is the ruin of a story (...) in short, that a play should never have a plot, because, if it has any natural life in it, it will construct itself, like a flowering plant, far more wonderfully than its author can consciously construct it.” That doesn’t mean, of course, that his plays do not have plots; it is an argument against crafting the play according to some given structure (like for example the given structure of classical tragedies). Central for him, in the play, however, is the idea of the play and how the play depicts and supports or criticizes the idea. This happens through the contrast of characters and their attitudes to life; the tensions and clashes between them are often funny, satirical, even paradoxical.

A play that caused considerable scandal in his times was *Mrs Warren’s Profession* (1893); it depicts a strong, self-assured owner of a chain of brothels, Mrs Warren, who has become rich by running the business and who as a young woman deliberately chose to be a prostitute as a means of getting rich. This history is contrasted with Mrs Warren’s daughter Vivie, who learns the truth about the source of her mother’s wealth in the play, is shocked and breaks up with her, determined to finish her university education and to make a living as an independent and self-reliant woman. The play was banned on the grounds of dealing with prostitution and in England it wasn’t performed until 1925 (although it was staged in some other countries before that). Importantly, it examines the two extremes of women’s professional options, the “profession” of prostitution and the modern independence of the woman in professional business. The play also shows that such “dirty money” from prostitution runs, as Vivie is shocked to learn, throughout the society and is used to fund even the most charitable causes, so that those who earn them in this way (as Sir George, Mrs Warren’s lover and business partner, and the most corrupt character in the play) are known as respectable persons and public benefactors. The play also focuses on the issue of conscience: Mrs Warren is honest about her way of life once Vivie finds out the truth about her business, and Vivie listens and sort of understands her mother, although she ultimately rejects her mother’s wealth and breaks up with her.

Among Shaw’s other famous plays are *Candida* (published 1898), *Pygmalion* (1913) and *Saint Joan* (1923), presenting Joan of Arc as a strong, independent woman and creating a secular counterpart

to her canonization in 1920. Joan is a rebel who relies on her common sense against any dogma of the church or any conventions. When she stands at court and is examined for heresy, she argues passionately with her common sense against the narrow-minded church officials who are steeped in doctrine and orthodoxy. She signs a forced confession because she is not a fool to let herself be burned at stake, but when she learns that instead of being set free her sentence is lifelong imprisonment, she revolts again and is finally burned. The play ends with the paradox of Joan's 1920 sanctification. At the end of the play we learn that later in history Joan is rehabilitated and the church has officially recognized her as a saint; the other characters bow down in reverence, and yet when she asks them if she should return to earth as a living woman once again, none of them want it: this scandalous, rebellious independent woman saint might be perhaps revered, but is, in fact, unwelcome.

Pygmalion was first staged in other European countries before it was performed in London in 1914. In this famous story, Professor Henry Higgins, a London based professor of phonetics, meets an uneducated, cockney speaking flower girl, Liza Doolittle, and decides to turn her into a lady. The name, Pygmalion, refers to the classical myth of Pygmalion the statue maker who carves a beautiful female figure out of ivory, falls in love with the statue and asks the goddess Aphrodite to make the statue come alive. Higgins, like Pygmalion, crafts Liza according to his ideas: as a phonetics specialist he decides to teach her to speak like a lady. His experiment is successful; Liza learns so well that the elite London circles all take her to be an aristocrat. Higgins, however, is unaware that Liza is a full human being and that she has fallen in love with him. The play has an open ending: Higgins is faced with the decision what to do next: will he remain a bachelor or will he change to become Liza's husband? In the epilogue to the play Shaw continued the story and argued that Higgins is unable to marry Liza and that Liza will decide to marry Freddy, a young man who has fallen in love with her.

The play has become extremely popular and viewers, of course, very much wanted Higgins and Liza to be married. When the play was adapted into a film in 1938, during Shaw's life, Shaw agreed that the film would have a happy ending, and when it was adapted into a Broadway musical as *My Fair Lady* in 1956 after Shaw's death, the happy ending was also used.

YOUTUBE:

Pygmalion, BBC Play of the Month, 1973, by Cantara Christopher
watch from 1:50:58 to 1:56:54

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=meK4ujnl0hM>

this TV adaptation of the play follows the original open ending

My Fair Lady Why Can't the English Learn to Speak, by Eivind Solfjell; 6 min

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jhninL_G3Fg

A short section from the Hollywood movie

Samuel Beckett (1906-1989)

was by far the most influential playwright in 20th century Britain; another Irishman, a member of the international artistic community in Europe in the years of WW2 and after. He grew up in Dublin, studied languages and literature and then lived in London, traveled around Germany when Nazism was rising and finally settled in Paris where he became a close friend of James Joyce and other artists. During WW2 he was active in the French Resistance movement. After the war he stayed in Paris, and wrote his texts in French. He is best remembered as a playwright but he also wrote fiction, poetry and essays. Influenced by the experiences of the war and the changes that the war brought, and also influenced by the work of existentialist authors, Beckett created a new kind of drama which later came to be called "theater of the absurd." A prime example of this kind of drama is his famous play *Waiting for Godot* (1953 in French; English premiere in London 1955). The play presents four characters; two

of them, Vladimir and Estragon, hold a conversation which does not really get anywhere, to any point, they are stuck in one place, waiting for a man called Godot—at least they claim they are waiting for him but the audience is never sure if Godot is a real person; in any case he never shows up in the play. The other two characters who do not wait, but instead just wander into nowhere, are Pozzo and his slave Lucky. One can take the two pairs as a representation of two basic models of human relationships: one of friendship, and one of dominance and abuse. The bleak insight of the play is the absurdity and futility of communication and relationships; even if the more friendly relationship of Vladimir and Estragon seems better than the abuse inflicted by Pozzo on Lucky, it still does not really provide a way out of the senselessness of existence. That the play makes a general comment on the human condition is emphasized by the linguistically disparate names of the characters; each name suggests possibly a different nationality, and yet they all meet in their shared human experience. Beckett's dialogues are what make the play particularly memorable: the repeated interruptions, repetitions, dull affirmations produce both a comic and an unsettling effect, enhancing the feeling of emptiness and pointlessness. Notice also that there are virtually no stage directions and no stage decorations or props; again, the emptiness and futility of the human condition is paralleled and emphasized by this.

YOUTUBE:

Waiting for Godot, by Shereen Hamdy, start at 1:43:22 (10 min)
(Waiting for Godot movie, 2001, directed by Michael Lindsay-Hogg)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=izX5dIzI2RE>

Patrick Stewart and Ian McKellen on Broadway, Bowler Hats and Beckett, by Wall Street Journal
Stop at 2:12
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dyKnLGT74TQ>

Brian Friel (1929-2015)

Friel, the most celebrated Irish dramatist of the second half of the 20th century, was born in a small village in Northern Ireland to a nationalist family. After his studies he spent some unhappy time in a seminary and then became a schoolteacher. He first wrote short stories and published those in Ireland and in the US. Then he focused on radio drama. A friendship with another Irish writer and author of radio drama took Friel to Minneapolis, his first venture outside Ireland, and it was through this connection that his career as a playwright really started. The first theater play by Friel was *Philadelphia, Here I Come!* (1964); it was produced first in Ireland and then also in New York City and in London. It was a success. It was original in its stage setting: the stage is divided into two spaces in which the two “personalities” of the single main character speak. The play deals with the thoughts of a young Irishman who is thinking about emigrating to America and it depicts the split between the public side of the character and his inner side, the secret, private thoughts.

Friel has been influenced by Anton Chekhov and he even translated and adapted his plays (and also those of other famous authors). This connection and his artistic skills have earned Friel the nickname the “Irish Chekhov.”

Friel grew up in a small village in Northern Ireland and this setting became the inspiration for many of his plays. Friel created a fictional village/town of Baile Beag (Ballybeg), which means “small town,” located in County Donegal (where he himself lived for most of his adult life) and used it as the setting for some of his best plays: *Philadelphia, Here I Come!*, *Translations* (1980) or *Dancing at Lughnasa* (1990). This last one tells of five unmarried sisters in Ballybeg in the 1930's, during a summer when their missionary brother returns home from Africa; the story is presented retrospectively as the memories of the son of one of sisters. Serious financial difficulties, loneliness and bleak prospects are what marks the life of this family.

Some of Friel's plays are just series of monologues with no action on stage: *Faith Healer* (1979), which focuses on the character of a faith healer and the ambiguities that surround his skill—perhaps a representation of the struggles of an artist who also creates something which is not entirely under his control; and *Molly Sweeney* (1994), a story of a blind woman who is pushed into having an eye surgery. In each of these plays we get a monologue by the central characters and a few other monologues by other characters (like the faith healer's wife, Molly Sweeney's husband and doctor).

Friel was married and had five children. He shunned publicity and did not give many interviews. In 1980 he was one of the founders of the Field Day Theatre Company in Derry and he ran it for many years; the purpose was to create a new theatrical space and opportunity that would transcend the political schism of Ireland and deal with questions of cultural identity. A number of influential Irish writers were on the board of directors of Field Day (Seamus Heaney was one of them). They started publishing an academically acclaimed review and also published an anthology of Irish writing (1990).

For *Translations* Friel, himself a translator, was inspired by a book by George Steiner *After Babel* (1975), a linguistic study/translation theory, which argues that all communication is a form of translation and that translation is central to relations between cultures. His other main source of reference for the play are classical authors, Homer and Virgil. The play is set in Ballybeg in 1833—after the Act of Union of 1800, and just before the outbreak of the Great Famine in the 1840's. The Great Famine was preceded by many local crop failures; its main cause was the potato blight, and there are references to the blight and the “sweet smell” that comes with it throughout the play. The characters are local students at a hedge school. Hedge schools were an underground educational movement which started in the 17th century; the classes took place at private homes or in barns (“hedge school”—hidden behind a hedge to escape the attention of English authorities). Under English rule they were gradually replaced by the English National School system with English as the teaching language. The main conflict of the play consists in the arrival of English troops who are coming to map out the area, and for their maps they want to replace the unintelligible Gaelic names with English translations or equivalents. The different characters respond differently to this enterprise, representing a range of approaches to the gradual loss of Irish language and culture.

YOUTUBE:

Translations, An Introduction, by National Theatre; 8 min

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3gyNOor-vxc>

Caryl Churchill (born 1938)

Churchill was born in London but she and her family moved to Canada when she was 10; she returned to England to study at Oxford and remained in England. She is the author of many successful plays, most of which are feminist in tone and deal with abuses of power and gender stereotypes and politics, sometimes through an exploration of a historical theme. She started out writing plays as a student; she worked also for the radio and for television; in the latter part of her career she has experimented with varied performances mixing theater, dance and music. Among her best known plays are *Cloud Nine* (1979) and *Top Girls* (1982). The former explores the contrast and the continuities between Victorian ideas of female sexuality and those in the 1970's by focusing on characters first in British colonial Africa and then the same characters 100 years later in England—but they are just 25 years older. The seeming contrast between the rigid Victorian morality and the liberated society of the 1970's is undermined by the unveiling of the power relations and prejudice that are still at work. *Top Girls* is a play which brings together on stage, in the first act, six women from different time periods as they meet for a dinner party and celebrate their various achievements in their various cultures, but again, this celebration is contrasted with the situation of lower class women struggling in the ruthless capitalism of Thatcher's England. It is a play about female success according to male standards, inequality in the job, and what women must give up in order to succeed in a male driven career world;

“Top Girls” refers both to the female characters in the play’s opening scene and to the employment agency in which the central character Marlene works and where she was just promoted.

A Number (2002; it was staged in Czech as *Řada*) is a short play about cloning and about father-son relationships and an absent mother. The mother committed suicide, for as the father says, she was not a very happy person—we are left to wonder if perhaps the father might have been one of the causes of her unhappiness. When she threw herself under a subway train their son Bernard was two years old. When Bernard was four, the father, Salter, sent him to a child care home because he felt he failed as a father, and had him cloned to be able to start over, to enjoy parenting one more time and not make the same mistakes. All this we learn in bits and pieces throughout the play. When the play starts, we are in the middle of things and only gradually we learn the history and the truth about the clones. In the first scene we witness a conversation between the father and his son Bernard 2 (B2) who has just learned that he is a clone and that he has an older brother. The next scene is a dialogue between the father and the original son Bernard (B1); B1 has just learned the truth about having been cloned and he is very upset. In the third scene B2 tells Salter of having met B1 in the park and he is afraid that B1 wants to kill him. In scene Four B1 tells Salter that he has actually killed B2. The final scene is a conversation between Salter and Michael Black, another of his cloned sons who has grown up without knowing Salter or anything of the story. Salter tries hard to make Michael say something personal about himself, something unique, and perhaps establish a connection, but Michael is only able to share general information about his life and some superficial preferences, nothing that could be grounds for a personal relationship with Salter. We also learn from Salter that B1 has committed suicide. Salter expresses his grief for both B1 and B2 but Michael Black does not understand.

SALTER I didn’t feel I lost him when I sent him away because I had the second chance. And when the second one my son the second son was murdered it wasn’t so bad as you’d think because it seemed fair. I was back with the first one.

MICHAEL But now

SALTER now he’s killed himself

MICHAEL now you feel

SALTER now I’ve lost him, I’ve lost

MICHAEL yes

SALTER now I can’t put it right any more. Because the second time round you see I slept very lightly with the door open.

MICHAEL Is that the worst you did, not go in the night?

SALTER No of course not.

MICHAEL Like what?

SALTER Things that are what I did that are not trivial like banana icecream nor unfuckingversal like turning over in bed.

MICHAEL We’ve got ninety-nine per cent the same genes as any other person. We’ve got ninety per cent the same as a chimpanzee. We’ve got thirty percent the same as a lettuce. Does that cheer you up at all? I love about the lettuce. It makes me feel I belong.

SALTER I miss him so much. I miss them both.

MICHAEL There’s nineteen more of us.

SALTER That’s not the same.

MICHAEL No of course not. I was making a joke.

SALTER And you’re happy you say are you? you like your life?

MICHAEL I do yes, sorry.

The characters speak the way you see in this excerpt; in bits and pieces, in unfinished sentences, they interrupt each other, so it is a challenge to follow. There is no action on stage. The three sons are played by a single actor so the play is really a series of dialogues.

The play obviously raises grave questions about identity, about nature and about the uniqueness of human experience, but also about parental responsibility and guilt and the hope of

starting over, about sibling rivalry, also about the danger of scientific abuse (Salter wanted just one clone made of his son, he had no idea that there were nineteen more). Ultimately we see that it is Salter's relationship and the time spent with B1 and B2 that sets these two sons apart from Michael Black; Michael Black is a stranger to him. And yet Michael has absolutely no problem with the biological nature of his being a clone, he is married and has three kids, is a mathematics teacher and leads a happy life. But, he and Salter are strangers, despite being genetically father and son. Salter's decision to "start over" with a new son proves to be tragic: not only are B1 and B2 horrified by discovering the truth but this horror turns into hate when B1 kills the other, so that Salter in the end loses both of them and Michael Black, the unintended clone, remains a complete stranger.

YOUTUBE

"Just a bit like"—A NUMBER at WT; by WritersTheatre

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GjKB9oVsHVI>

2 min

Martin McDonagh (born 1970)

McDonagh grew up in London but in an Irish family, and he spent summers in his father's hometown in Connemara, Galway, the west coast of Ireland, an area where the Irish traditions and language are particularly strong. He is a playwright, screenwriter and film director. As a film director he has achieved major success with movies such as the Oscar winning *Six Shooter* (2005), *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri* (2017), or most recently *The Banshees of Inisherin* (2022). As a playwright he has achieved comparable success with a number of awards for his plays. He is sometimes ranked with the so-called "in-yer-face theater," the kind of drama that emerged in the UK in the 1990's with the work of authors like Sarah Kane, Mark Ravenhill or Anthony Neilson: drama which is brutal, full of violence, explicit sex, dirty language, breaking of taboos; theater which does not really argue or philosophize but lets the audience experience something shocking. His plays include the Leenane trilogy: *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* (1996), *A Skull in Connemara* (1998) and *The Lonesome West* (1997), and the two plays set on the Aran Islands *The Cripple of Inishmaan* (1996) and *The Lieutenant of Inishmore* (1997)—all plays set in the remote, rural parts of Ireland. Several of these plays have been staged in Czech theaters, like *The Lonesome West* (*Osiřelý Západ*), *The Cripple of Inishmaan* (*Mrzák inishmaanský*), *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* (*Kráska z Leenane*) or *Hangmen* (*Kati*).

The Lonesome West is a play about two single, adult brothers Coleman and Valene, who fight constantly about everything, most of all about money, alcohol and what belongs to whom. The play opens just after the burial of their father. The local priest, Father Welsh, tries to reconcile them but there is nothing that stops the spiraling arguments. Valene marks everything that belongs to him in the house with a V; he has a growing collection of plastic figures of saints which Coleman is not allowed to touch. Out of revenge, Coleman melts all the plastic figures in Valene's brand new stove, of which Valene is especially proud. And in this way they fight about everything. Father Welsh is a tragic figure, he feels like a failure, he is horrified to witness the various acts of violence, drunkenness and killings that takes place in Leenane—it was Coleman who shot their father, and not by accident. Father Welsh, whose name all the other characters keep confusing and mispronouncing, tries to stop the raising violence between the brothers by self-sacrifice: when Coleman melts Valene's plastic figures in the stove and the brothers attack each other, Father Welsh sticks his hand into the hot melted plastic, just to do something that might stop the brothers from killing each other.

YOUTUBE:

Osiřelý západ na Malé scéně – Městské divadlo Mladá Boleslav

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VACAE1BrC60>

stop at 4:15

Eventually Father Welsh drowns himself, leaving a letter behind for Coleman and Valene, urging them to stop fighting. Coleman and Valene feel they should really try to make peace now; they begin to apologize for the various acts of malice they have done to each other. This would-be reconciliation not only discloses worse and worse acts by which they intentionally hurt each other in the past but also again takes a spiraling movement of violence, so that their reconciliation gradually turns into threats and more violence. As the play ends, the situation between the brothers seems to have improved none.

COLEMAN Do you remember a couple of weeks ago there when you asked me did I go stealing your insurance money and I said no, I paid it in for you?

VALENE I do remember.

COLEMAN *(pause)* I didn't pay it in at all. I pocketed the lot of it, pissed it up a wall.

VALENE, seething, darts for the knife drawer. COLEMAN dashes out through the front door, slamming it behind him. (...)

[VALENE] brings the letter [of Father Welsh] back to the table and takes out a box of matches.

And you, you whiny fecking priest. Do I need your soul hovering o'er me the rest of me fecking life? How coul anybody be getting on with that feck?

He strikes a match and lights the letter, which he glances over as he holds up. After a couple of seconds, the letter barely singed, VALENE blows the flames out and looks at it on the table, sighing.

(Quietly.) I'm too fecking kind-hearted is my fecking trouble.

He returns to the cross and pins the (...) letter back onto it, smoothing the letter out. He puts on his jacket, checks it for loose change and goes to the front door.

Well I won't be buying the fecker a pint anyways. I'll tell you that for nothing, Father Welsh Walsh Welsh.

VALENE glances back at the letter a second, sadly, looks down at the floor, then exits. Lights fade, with one light lingering on the crucifix and letter half a second longer than the others.

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