

# Review

Flann O'Brien, *Flann O'Brien: Plays and Teleplays*, ed. Daniel Keith Jernigan (Champaign, Il: Dalkey Archive Press, 2013), xx + 300 pp., ISBN: 9781564788900. €11.00, £8.85, \$15.00 (paperback)

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Hard on the heels of *The Short Fiction of Flann O'Brien* (2013),<sup>1</sup> Dalkey Archive Press has brought us *Flann O'Brien: Plays and Teleplays*, collected and edited by Daniel Keith Jernigan.<sup>2</sup> As the most significant collection of Brian O'Nolan's dramatic writing ever published, the volume is a valuable resource for Flanneurs. It includes the few plays that were staged during his lifetime, along with unpublished and unproduced plays which will undoubtedly delight readers, whether already familiar with O'Nolan's dramatic work or coming to it for the first time.

Jernigan's selection is representative of O'Nolan's writing for the stage and the screen. A short introduction explains his choice of the volume's seven stage plays and seven teleplays. Each is briefly introduced and appears along with a few quotations and comments about reception and production history. Each (tele)play is presented with lists of characters and casts (where relevant), but without further explanation or detailed footnotes on production history, technical terms, or local words that may be unfamiliar to readers. This is in keeping with contemporary standards of the printing of plays, but because so little is known about O'Nolan's dramatic works, readers will likely find themselves wanting to know more about production history (or the lack thereof), contemporary reception, and so on.

A further, perhaps small note on contemporary printing standards: in the work of a man who was so particular about even the correct *misspelling* of certain words, it is unfortunate that some typos were inserted where they were not in Claud Cockburn's *Stories and Plays* (1973)<sup>3</sup> or Robert Tracy's *Rhapsody in Stephen's Green* (1994).<sup>4</sup> One hopes an overzealous spellchecker is responsible for this minor vandalism.

Overall, *Plays and Teleplays* has given scholars a single, attractive, and affordable paperback volume to begin the work of filling in the gaps in Flann O'Brien studies.

## Stage plays

When Brian O'Nolan and theatre appear in the same thought, it is often in connection to the author's sporting, or derogatory, criticism of the Abbey in *Cruiskeen Lawn*. O'Nolan was probably drawn to playwriting – at least initially – by financial necessity, but his stage plays were not phenomenally successful during or after his short life. When they were produced the runs were short, and his reviewers hardly wrote accolades.

A favourite in student theatre and pub theatre festivals for many years, *Thirst* (1942) is probably his best-known and most successful play. The strength of this one-act play is the weakness of several of the other plays: there is little action and the drama unfolds primarily through dialogue, with only a few visual gags and actions. A comparison of the long and short versions (reproduced here side-by-side for the first time) reveals that the removal of funny but repetitious material resulted in a much improved, more concise short version with fewer and shorter stage directions. This may seem insignificant when not reading for performance, but in writing for the stage, O'Nolan the prose writer typically over-explains the movements and motives of characters (like the sergeant in *Thirst*) as if he were writing a short story instead of a play to be interpreted by a director and performed by actors.

The dialogue-heavy *Faustus Kelly* (1943) attempts more action than *Thirst* but is still relatively static. It has many good lines, and as a representation of some of the less savoury aspects of Irish political rhetoric and life in the mid-twentieth century, it is acerbic, critical, and funny all at once. But even with its conceptually brilliant ending, with the devil preferring to flee with his forked tail between his legs rather than remain a minute longer in Ireland, *Faustus Kelly* is not dramatically compelling enough to sustain two acts, let alone three and an epilogue. The carry-on with the cupboard at the end of Act III, the action alluded to in O'Nolan's stage directions at the beginning of the act, promises more than is delivered both visually and dramatically. But *Faustus Kelly* also exhibits one of O'Nolan's greatest strengths as a (dramatic) writer: effective characterisation is achieved through accents and (character-specific) rhetoric. Shawn Kilshaughraun's carefully measured speech, his loving use of adjectives and the hundred I do, I do, I do's that punctuate his speech, make the play well worth reading. Shall I compare thee to a greater playwright? Like Shakespeare, O'Nolan dramatises ideas through assigning views to individual characters and then bringing them into conflict; like Shakespeare, he is good with the (lewd) puns and more than admirably dexterous with language, but O'Nolan is less accomplished at creating dynamic, dramatic action.

Language is the hero of all these plays, but again, strength becomes weakness when O'Nolan's reliance on dialects and accents becomes tedious. Cultural and

regional stereotypes dominate, which is part of the gag in the excellent *Rhapsody in Stephen's Green* (1943), but superficial accent stereotyping can complicate identification with characters in other plays. Jernigan acknowledges the problem with accents and accurately notes that 'accents alone are hardly sufficient to quash the pathos of the original poem [Moira O'Neill's 'The Boy from Ballytearim']' in response to O'Nolan's comment in the preface to his teleplay of the same name, that comedy was attempted through exploiting the regional accent (p. xiv; p. 287). 'Attempted' is right, and *The Boy from Ballytearim* (1961) ultimately disappoints, creating the impression of its having been a useful exercise in adaptation, but one which should have remained private. The extent to which the teleplay capitalises on a northern accent without really developing other aspects of verbal humour or content could also be seen as offensive or alienating. It certainly raises questions about O'Nolan's perception of southern Irish audiences' beliefs about the comedic or intrinsic value of anything said in Ulster. The exaggerated Belfast accent in Act III of *Rhapsody in Stephen's Green*, however, cannot 'quash the pathos' inherent in the futile 'bottles' of the global Awnt population. O'Nolan's skill and excellent ear (and eye) show in his rendering of the Belfast, Cork, and Dublin accents in particular. One wonders how a Belfast actor would in fact read things like 'Eff yew poot wun finger on thon beetle,' as the phonetic value assigned to the dialogue is made for a Dublin baseline, but here the exaggeration adds value.

An adaptation of Karel and Josef Čapek's *Ze života hmyzu* (*The Insect Play*, 1921), *Rhapsody* is much more than accents: the futile yet spirited 'bottles' between the Awnts and their ultimate destruction over a beetle carcass is moving and raises the most serious and philosophical questions of all O'Nolan's plays; perhaps, as Robert Tracy suggests, because he was able to build it using the Čapek brothers' successful blueprint.<sup>5</sup> The play is sturdy though, and given the involvement of influential theatre makers such as Hilton Edwards and Michéal MacLiammóir, it is hard to imagine why it ran only a week at the Gaiety Theatre.

One of this volume's gems is the recently discovered play *An Scian* (1944), translated here from the Irish by Jack Fennell as *The Knife*. Of the little-known works included here, it is the best and most noteworthy, partly because it plays with kitchen comedy conventions. The play focuses on a domestic dispute about the virtues of *Ailtirí na hAiséirghe* (for him) and *Glún na Buaidhe* (for her), during which the husband stabs his wife with a knife they received as a wedding gift from the Gaelic League. Also representing the domestic stabbing genre in this collection is *The Handsome Carvers: A Tragedy in Two Acts*, which Jernigan describes as reading 'suspiciously like a skit written for the Abstinence League' (xv). *The Knife* is a better version of *The Handsome Carvers*; they basically share the same plot, but the former is funnier because of its less predictable contemporary relevance to the theatre-going crowd (the lovers

are divided by Irish cultural politics instead of alcoholism).

*A Moving Tale: A Dublin Hallucination* has strong characters but fails to deliver a punchline. Mindful of the play's shortcomings, Jernigan points out that, 'as always,' O'Nolan's language still makes the play engaging (xiii). His felicitous suggestion in reference to *The Time Freddie Retired* – sometimes no joke is also a sort of joke – may apply here too, but the play lacks resolution (xiii). The characters' exchanges recall the 'The Brother' pieces from *Cruiskeen Lawn* and would likely have pleased audiences, but the play would work better on television.

## Teleplays

O'Nolan wrote for television from its introduction in Ireland in 1961, seeing the new medium as 'the most attractive proposition' for a working writer in 1964.<sup>6</sup> Jernigan wisely includes only the first episodes of the Telefís Éireann TV series *O'Dea's Yer Man* and *Th' Oul Lad of Kilsalaher*, in the interest of conveying the tone and atmosphere of each series without making the volume too long.<sup>7</sup> O'Nolan's teleplays were better received than his stage plays, and both series were popular with audiences. *O'Dea's Yer Man* had 'the highest TAM rating in the country, with advertising time [...] booked into 1965' and the author even took pains to watch it at his sister's house since he didn't own a set.<sup>8</sup>

The adaptation of the short story 'Two in One,' *The Dead Spit of Kelly* (1962), may be O'Nolan's screenwriting at its best, but it is still haunted by the technical demands of the theatre. Having murdered Kelly by the end of Part I, Burke tells the audience that Kelly is dead by talking to himself, which seems unnecessary on camera, what with all of Burke's copious skull-crushing and pulse-checking. Perhaps my view is too accustomed to the visual vocabulary of TV murder, but a television audience would hardly be helped by the closing lines of Part 1, apparently intended to prepare them for Part 2's taking place in a pub: 'Me a murderer, ah? Lord save us! I must do some thinking. Maybe a drink might help' (395). Such a device seems uncomfortably out of place in a less self-conscious medium such as TV. However, the monologue voiceover that makes up all of Part 2 (where Burke goes over his apprehension and makes a plan) and much of Part 3 is highly effective: the delivery of Burke's thoughts through Kelly's voice and body is a spooky contrivance that works best on screen.

The relatively conventional *The Time Freddie Retired* (1962) mostly confirms and plays to viewer expectations but ends with a twist and a sigh. Freddie has plans for retirement; Freddie's plans come to nowt; Freddie's a burden to his wife; the wife arranges a visitor to get Freddie out of the house (so far so conventional), and then the visitor offers Freddie a job ... in a zoo combing dandruffy kangaroos. Again, after all

the build-up to a punchline, the absence of a gag may be the joke. Some similarities with *The Dalkey Archive* are evident here too: the visitor's name is Hackett, and an older man who appears to mean well gets his comeuppance in some degrading appointment (combing kangaroos or mending the Jesuits' undergarments).

Jernigan identifies *The Man with Four Legs* (1962) as one of the best plays in this volume, especially in its inversion of the reversal of fortune formula seen in *The Time Freddie Retired* (xiii). A brief voiceover by the serious 'O'Brien' establishes the standard comings and goings of his office. As the voice transitions to the action on screen, we see how O'Brien faces constant interruptions from well-meaning female co-workers (each with a stereotypical accent) selling raffle tickets for various charitable causes. Eventually, O'Brien wins a dying donkey and is saddled with all kinds of costs and misfortunes because of the poor beast's ill-health and its transport. The winning ticket, a harmless purchase done in the interest of working in peace and quiet, makes O'Brien lose all. The language is tight, the author refrains from letting the accents do too much of the heavy lifting, the dialogue is funny, and despite the tragedy, the audience can smile at this reversal of fortune.

*Flight* (1962) showcases O'Nolan's fascination with that 1960s preoccupation *par excellence*: air travel. The play works well as it is not much more than an extended scene consisting of a simple reversal. It is fun, pleasantly predictable, and plays off and to popular opinion and interests, dealing superficially also with Anglo-Irish relations of the day in an ironic revenge plot-twist that leaves the 'Ao'-saying English passenger stranded in Wexford.

O'Nolan's plays may rely too much on accents for comedy and conflict, but his skill at transcribing regional accents (from that Dublin baseline) is unparalleled. In his defence and to his credit, he usually goes the extra mile of spelling dialogue in an actor- or reader-friendly way, and there is no better place than the theatre to flaunt that skill. But it is hard to imagine any director not dismissing the majority of his stage directions about accents (or actions). O'Nolan too frequently details a character's emotions in stage directions instead of letting them be shown; all-caps are used excessively to indicate the volume and pitch of anger or surprise, but his plays are still amusing to read, especially for enthusiasts of dialogue-driven drama.

Jernigan and Dalkey Archive Press have done the expanding field of O'Nolan studies a service with *Plays and Teleplays* by providing more materials for new research into O'Nolan's dramatic writing. Jernigan's introduction opens a valuable discussion of the plays' reception and production history and also invites more (overdue) biographical research into O'Nolan's contribution to Irish drama, his playwriting motives, and his ideas about theatre or television as popular media. Success on the stage or screen demands not only the skill of identifying and criticising popular tastes,

a skill O'Nolan had in spades, but also the ability to cater directly to these tastes, a skill he possessed but did not always have in his full control. With this volume, scholars, students, and fans of Myles or O'Brien now have several of O'Nolan's plays at their disposal, either for research or just the simple pleasure of reading such sharp dialogue – but let us hope that someone revives these plays for performance so that they can be heard and seen as well.

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### Notes & references

<sup>1</sup> Flann O'Brien, *The Short Fiction of Flann O'Brien*, eds. Neil Murphy and Keith Hopper, trans. Jack Fennell (Champaign, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 2013).

<sup>2</sup> Flann O'Brien, *Plays and Teleplays*, ed. Daniel Keith Jernigan, trans. Jack Fennell (Champaign, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 2013). Hereafter cited in text.

<sup>3</sup> Flann O'Brien, *Stories and Plays*, ed. Claud Cockburn (London: Hart-Davis, MacGibbon, 1973).

<sup>4</sup> Myles na gCopaleen, *Rhapsody in Stephen's Green: The Insect Play*, ed. Robert Tracy (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 1994).

<sup>5</sup> 'Introduction,' in *ibid.*, 7.

<sup>6</sup> O'Nolan to Legge, 15 February 1964, SIUC MSS.

<sup>7</sup> For a discussion of the often-overlooked merits of these programmes and O'Nolan's writing for TV, see Amy Nejezchleb, 'O'Brien's Your Man: Myles, Modernity and Irish National Television,' in *'Is it about a bicycle?' Flann O'Brien in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Jennika Baines (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2011), 98–111.

<sup>8</sup> O'Nolan to Legge.