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Adapting the Journalism of Myles for the Stage

Val O'Donnell

Dublin, IE

donnellvalo@gmail.com

Abstract

In this article, actor Val O'Donnell discusses the opportunities and challenges of adapting Myles na gCopaleen's column writing for stage performance in 4 parts.

1. Introduction: O'Donnell's background in adapting Brian O'Nolan's work for the stage and why he has confined the topic to Myles's journalistic writing.
2. Attractions and possible limitations of restricting adaptations of O'Nolan to his journalism.
3. Possible criteria for selecting material and suitable structures for adaptations.
4. O'Donnell's three adaptations for the stage from O'Nolan's writing and lessons learned from them.

Keywords

Adaptation, theatre, performance, journalism, one-man show

I: Introduction

My interest Flann O'Brien and Myles na Gopaleen started in the early 1960s when I began working as a civil servant in Dublin. I noticed that Myles's *Cruiskeen Lawn* column was priority daily reading for my older colleagues in the office. But most of the Mylesian banter which they sprinkled over the official business of the day went over my head. Then one day I discovered that these *aficionados* were quite ignorant of Myles's literary pre-history. This emerged one day in late 1960, when one Mylesian rushed into the office and announced: 'Yer man has written a book. It's in Eason's. It's called *At Swim-Two-Birds*. But he's written it under another name – Flann O'Brien. I hadn't enough money to buy it.' One fan couldn't contain himself and raided the tea and biscuits money to purchase a copy, before Eason's bookstore closed that evening. They were completely unaware that the work of Flann O'Brien, the novelist, had been eclipsed by Myles na Gopaleen, their daily journalist jester, in the years since 1939. I do not know how many of them pursued the transition into literary fiction, but I

noticed that references to Flann O'Brien and *At Swim-Two-Birds* declined over the coming weeks, while their daily devotion to Myles na Gopaleen continued, unabated. I have to confess I did not finish my first attempt at reading Flann O'Brien's post-modern masterpiece. That took me two further attempts. But one lesson I learned from this early episode, maybe subliminally, was that Myles was accessible, witty, and entertaining, but Flann could be hard work.

Reel on through decades of acting with amateur and semi-professional theatre companies in Dublin, and more serious involvement with the professional theatre after I left the day job, and I had discovered a flair for adapting literature for the stage. It started with adaptations from Joyce, mainly from *Dubliners* and *Ulysses*, but soon my attention turned back to Flann and Myles. I had seen many adaptations from the novels of Flann O'Brien down the years, before the innovative Sligo-based Blue Raincoat Theatre Company presented three highly original adaptations from *The Third Policeman* (2007), *At Swim-Two-Birds* (2009), and *The Poor Mouth* (2011), and Arthur Riordan staged a highly imaginative, site-specific adaptation of the uncompleted *Slattery's Sago Saga*. But my most enduring memory was the impact of Eamonn Morrissey's great one-man show *The Brother*, first performed in 1974. It presented a multi-dimensional portrait of the quintessential Dubliner as medical quack, hob-lawyer, general know-all, and fixer, to delight theatregoers for decades. It reminded me of my introduction to Myles in the early 1960s and of the entertainment value of *Cruiskeen Lawn*. I made a mental note that, if an opportunity arose for me to adapt any of Brian O'Nolan's writing for the stage, I would look first to *Cruiskeen Lawn* for material. But that would be decades away and not before other important developments had occurred in the reappraisal and reproduction of Myles's journalism.

A reassessment of O'Nolan's large output of journalism in recent years has focused attention on its value as literature. Carol Taaffe, in her celebrated *Ireland Through The Looking Glass: Flann O'Brien, Myles na Gopaleen, and Irish Cultural Debate* has, perhaps, done most to rehabilitate the status of O'Nolan as a serious commentator on social and political issues and on the cultural state in Ireland over three decades in the mid-20th century. Her work has gone a long way to challenge the conventional wisdom that *Cruiskeen Lawn* was the ruin of O'Nolan's literary ambitions.¹ Even before this revitalised academic interest, the journalism of O'Nolan had been receiving renewed attention from publishers. In 1985, John Wyse Jackson published *Myles Before Myles*, an invaluable selection from the earlier writings of O'Nolan from *Comhthrom Féinne* and *Blather*.² In the same year, Martin Green published an extensive selection, *Myles Away From Dublin*, drawn from the *Bones of Contention* column written for *Carlow's Nationalist and Leinster Times*.³ And finally, we had Wyse Jackson's imaginative selection from *Cruiskeen Lawn* during the period of the Second World War, *Flann O'Brien at War*, published in 1999.⁴ All these selections complement earlier compilations from Myles's

Cruiskeen Lawn, starting with the ever-popular classic, *The Best of Myles* from 1968.⁵ Add in the recently published *The Short Fiction of Flann O'Brien* (2013),⁶ and it is clear that a rich source of material now exists for writers and other artists to adapt creatively from O'Nolan's journalism and short writing.

2. Attractions, Limitations, & Genre

So, what are the attractions and possible limitations in looking to the journalism of Myles as vehicles for theatrical transformation, compared with working on his better-known novels? Apart from the obvious point that all the novels have been adapted for the stage already – some of them a number of times and many to mixed reviews – there is great scope for an adaptor who turns to Myles's large, if heterogeneous, volume of journalism and early writing, extending over a period of almost 35 years. These writings featured a host of colourful characters, quirky insights, mad flights of fancy, wordplay, and extended storytelling. What a potential for entertainment if they could be brought from the page to the stage!

But what about the limitations? The adaptor will be on the lookout for material that contains a lot of dialogue between characters, ready-made for transposition to the stage. Myles's journalism is not, I think, over-rich in dialogue. Even looking at the dialogue in the famous 'The Brother' pieces, there is a noticeable lack of dynamic interplay between the lines of the voluble, colourful promoter of the polymathic Brother and his interlocutor. Indeed, the noted author and Irish TV producer James Plunkett, who worked with O'Nolan on a popular TV series, *O'Dea's Yer Man*, in 1963, expressed surprise at his inability to write good dialogue. He concluded that the 'Brother' pieces are essentially interrupted monologues. Further evidence that this is not a harsh judgement may be taken from the approach of Morrissey in turning the 'Brother' dialogues into monologues in his celebrated adaptation. I have followed the master in treating the utterances of this quintessential Dubliner in the same way in my own work.

Another important point is that a licenced approach to the journalism of Myles is often necessary in bringing its language to the stage. Long or complex sentences may look alright on the page, but they are usually inimical to theatrical effect – particularly in the case of comedy where the performer must be able to hit the right word or cadence when aiming for a laugh. Compared with the more crafted language of the novels, there is a need to edit the journalism – which, let us remember, was produced in conveyor-belt fashion for daily consumption. Sometimes radical editing is needed. The essence of a joke or a punch line can be preserved but may need to be encased in the adaptor's own 'Myles-compatible' language for effect.

Turning to the question of genre, a modern development in the theatre has been the emergence of the one-man/woman show, the monologue, and the monodrama

as normal theatrical presentations – indeed, some would argue that the traditional play based on the unities of time, space, and action is now in decline and is mainly encountered today in revivals of classic plays. In 1974, Morrissey's one-man show *The Brother* was an unusual theatrical experience, and some reviewers questioned its structural integrity. *The Irish Times* reviewer David Nowlan, writing on 19 February 1974, acknowledged the play's 'virtually unmitigated hilarity,' yet still thought that, 'It would almost certainly benefit from having a director who might give it coherence when occasionally it threatens to fall apart.'⁷ Another critic wondered was it 'Actor's Equity or Actor's Ego that is responsible for the increasing number of solo shows being presented in these times.' An examination of the script of *The Brother* shows that Morrissey ranged widely in creating a varied pastiche of colourful extracts – sometimes entire short works – drawn from the novels, short stories, plays, journalism, and contributions to literary magazines, of both Flann O'Brien and Myles na Gopaleen. The whole work is anchored by about fifteen pieces from the 'Brother' dialogues, but they represent less than half of the material included. It works as a piece of theatre due to the skill of the adapter, the easy ambiance of the snug of a public house, the charisma of the performer, and an astute use of lighting and sound. And it confirms the entertainment value of selecting disparate elements from the writings of Flann and Myles, when treated with theatrical skill and technical knowhow. Add to this, the prevalence of the solo-performer and the monodrama where the same actor assumes multiple roles, and one can say that theatrical fashion was never more favourable for adaptations from the journalism of Myles than is the case today.

3. Criteria for Selecting Material & Possible Structures for Adaptations

I followed different approaches in my own three staged adaptations from the work of Flann and Myles, but external circumstances influenced the final product in each case.

In 2006, the Dublin Shakespeare Society, with whom I acted and directed, approached me about compiling a show based on the writing of Flann and Myles to mark the 40th anniversary of the writer's death. The Society has a big membership, and they were certainly not looking for a one-man show! So I planned for a cast of 10 actors in a show I called *Time, Gentlemen, Pleaaase!* after the familiar closing-time call of the Dublin barmen (Myles's 'curate'). I chose a number of the dialogues from *Cruiskeen Lawn*, including some of the 'Brother' pieces, set them in a few dedicated areas on stage, and used them to provide linkage to some larger ensemble pieces adapted from the novels and some of the more extended pieces from *Cruiskeen Lawn*. All the ensemble pieces were performed in separate areas of the stage and were isolated by lighting. So, an entire composite set was accommodated on a deep stage, and no scene changes were needed in the course of the show. Some members of the O'Nuallain

family attended and urged me to tour the show to other venues in Ireland. But that was not practical with a cast of 10 and there would be little point in offering the script to professional companies because of the large cast required. *Time, Gentlemen, Pleaaase!* was revived in 2007 at the Theatre@36, Parnell Square, Dublin and continued to do good business both at the box office and at the bar.

2011 marked the centenary anniversary of the writer's birth and I was approached by the professional Whirligig Theatre Company to write a short play of about 50 minutes for presentation at the prestigious Bewley's Lunchtime Theatre venue in Dublin city centre. Like so many of Myles's fans, I retained a special affection for *The Brother*. I knew that Morrissey had not included all the *Cruiskeen Lawn* 'Brother' dialogues in his 1974 show. So, I reckoned there could be enough unused pieces which, if they could be moulded together in a coherent story, could be staged as a short play. Fortunately, a number of these residual pieces centred on the behaviour of 'The Brother' over Christmas. In this way *The Bother with the Brother* was born. It featured the Brother's advocate narrating a catalogue of sometimes overbearing and eccentric behaviour by 'The Brother' in his digs over Christmas. It ran for three weeks, including the centenary anniversary date of the writer's birth on 5 October 2011. It received good reviews, with Eithne Shortall commenting in *The Sunday Times* that 'Theatre makers insist on adapting Flann O'Brien's novels for the stage [...]. O'Donnell's brilliant production [... demonstrates] that what enthusiasts should have been doing was adapting the newspaper columns that O'Brien wrote under the pseudonym Myles na gCopaleen.'⁸

My most recent adaptation from the works of Flann and Myles is *Flann's Yer Only Man*. The show has been on the road since 2014, in a production by Terry O'Dea's Bare Bodkin Theatre Company. It has toured to about 30 venues outside Dublin and played at five venues in the city, including a two-week run at The Smock Alley Theatre in May 2017. We have described it consistently as 'An entertainment based on the life and work of Flann O'Brien, aka Myles na Gopaleen, aka Brian O'Nolan.' The unusual structure of the entertainment, which aims to be both informative and performative, occurred in the following way. It was never my intention to create a play in the traditional sense. I had planned to craft an entertainment using material drawn mainly from the more recent publications of Myles's journalism and early work and from personal research into unpublished material. But when I approached the O'Nolan Estate for permission to use my selected material, they asked me to look at the possibility of including some material about the writer's own life and the ups and downs of his career as a writer. They had a view that people in general know very little about O'Nolan and what they know is often negative. That is how *Flann's Yer Only Man* came to be fashioned as both a narrated commentary on the writer and as a performance of some of his less well known comedy and satirical writing. The main challenge was to integrate these two elements in a single theatrical work. I do not claim to have succeeded completely

and some reviewers have had difficulty in describing the format – one calling it ‘pure documentary theatre.’⁹ But I have been very encouraged by the number of audience members who knew little or nothing about the writer – beyond hearing him quoted or referred to – that have gone away from the show with a fuller appreciation of, and new interest in, an important Irish modernist writer. I have been struck also at the numbers who said they intended to re-read Flann/Myles or to complete a reading abandoned in the distant past.

4. Some Conclusions & Pointers

So, what have I learned from my three adaptations that I could pass on to others interested in adapting the writing of Flann or Myles for the stage? Well, I can say that:

1. There exists a large body of his writing that has not yet found its way into stage adaptations.
2. It includes relatively unknown characters, stories and themes that would entertain audiences. For example:
 - The oracular gifts of Brother Barnabas
 - The antics of Press Baron The O’Blather
 - The transcendental experiences of Sir Myles na Gopaleen of Santry Hall and life with Lady na Gopaleen (‘reputed to be one of Europe’s foremost bottle-women’)
 - The Rural preoccupations of the O’Shaughran of the Bogs
 - The investigative journalism of the little known Siochra Ni Sleeveen
 - The financial ‘acumen’ of banker Theodrick ‘Silent’ O’Moyle.

I could go on and on... And there is much more mirth to be mined from better-known material – like Myles’s reports on the activities of his Research Bureau, WAAMA, Book-handling and Escort Services, Institute of Archaeology, Banking Corporation, Court of Voluntary Jurisdiction – and characters – his unforgettable bores, obsessive Steam Men, vernacular Dubbalin men –, as well as his love/hate relationship with the Irish language. I have dipped into these reservoirs of humour and wit many times in my work in bringing Myles’s journalism to the stage.

3. There are structural options for bringing Myles’s characters and creations onstage and current fashions in the theatre provide new opportunities for staging adaptations from his journalism.
4. The relative success of any adaptation will depend on artistic judgement and material selection, acting and technical resources, stage facilities and on the target audiences and their expectations.

The last point – audience expectations – prompts a warning. My experience over 10 years in putting O’Nolan’s writing on stage forces me to conclude that not everyone likes Flann or Myles. Many do. Many still find his quirky humour hilarious. But others simply do not ‘get’ him, either initially or not at all. Sadly, I think that some are actually irritated by his writing. Fortunately, there is much more to the writing of O’Nolan than a quirky way of looking at things. His magnificent comic imagination, delight in language, black humour, and skills in storytelling will still provoke laughter – often at an uproarious level. I warmly recommend his journalism for the close attention of theatre producers, companies and adapters. I say, let us have more of it on the stage.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

Notes & references

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² Flann O'Brien, *Myles Before Myles: A Selection of the Earlier Writings of Brian O'Nolan*, ed. John Wyse Jackson (London: Grafton, 1988).

³ Flann O'Brien, *Myles Away from Dublin: Being a Selection from the Column Written for The Nationalist and Leinster Times, Carlow, under the name of George Knowall*, ed. Martin Green (London: Granada, 1985).

⁴ Flann O'Brien, *Flann O'Brien at War: Myles na gCopaleen 1940–1945*, ed. John Wyse Jackson (London: Duckworth, 1999).

⁵ Flann O'Brien, *The Best of Myles: A Selection from Cruiskeen Lawn*, ed. Kevin O'Nolan (London: MacGibbon and Kee, 1968).

⁶ Flann O'Brien, *The Short Fiction of Flann O'Brien*, eds. Neil Murphy and Keith Hopper, trans. Jack Fennell (Champaign: Dalkey Archive Press, 2013).

⁷ David Nowlan, ‘“The Brother” at the Peacock,’ *The Irish Times* (19 February 1974): 10.

⁸ Eithne Shortall, ‘The Bother with the Brother,’ *The Sunday Times* (2 October 2011). Available at: <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/the-bother-with-the-brother-6612x5cjf0d>.

⁹ ‘Flann’s Yer Only Man @ Theatre@36,’ *Red Curtain Rising* blog (29 January 2015). Available at: <http://www.theredcurtainreview.ie/2015/01/flanns-yer-only-man-theatre36.html>.