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Pipes Aloft: *After Hours* and 'Shows and Showers'

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This note presents a first glance at two newly discovered texts by Brian O'Nolan.

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An old friend of mine, an elderly linguist who specialised in English syntax, used to ask patrons in the university bar if they had ever read *The Third Policeman*. If they replied ‘no,’ he would clap them on the back and gleefully exclaim: ‘Ha ha, you lucky dog, you still have that to look forward to!’ I recently made some exciting discoveries at the Charles Deering McCormick Special Collections library at Northwestern University that mean that even the most seasoned of Brian O’Nolan’s readers can still anticipate the pleasure of reading something new by the man himself.

While conducting research on the Gate Theatre papers, I found two new pieces by O’Nolan. The first is a column called ‘Shows and Showers’ that Myles na gCopaleen contributed to the playbill for the Gate Theatre’s 1942 Christmas revue show, *Jack-in-the-Box*, which ran until 28 February 1943 and at which na gCopaleen’s play *Thirst* premiered. The second piece is a rehearsal script for a television adaptation of *Thirst* that aired on the BBC in 1959 as *After Hours*.¹ Next year, St Augustine willing, I will publish an article about *Thirst* and *After Hours* that will reveal more about O’Nolan’s position in Irish theatre from the 1940s to 1960s, especially his collaborations with the Gate Theatre’s Hilton Edwards and Micheál mac Liammóir. For now, I would like to share some thoughts about these new texts, as well as some titbits from them to indicate the flavour of the new dialogue in the script and the content of the playbill’s article.

After Hours

The teleplay *After Hours* mostly aligns with the short version of *Thirst*² but includes five pages of new dialogue. It was a surprising and fortuitous discovery, especially because it was not connected to the names Brian O’Nolan, Myles na gCopaleen, or Flann O’Brien in the Gate Papers finding aids. While following a lead about correspondence between Orson Welles and Hilton Edwards, the author credits on a script caught my eye: Brian Nolan and Larry Morrow. I recognised the names of characters and the first lines of dialogue as identical to *Thirst* and forgot all about Welles. The librarians had not yet made the connection between ‘Brian Nolan’ and our author, which illustrates how his use of pseudonyms can complicate searches for his work in archives and suggests that there is more to discover in various holdings, including those of other cultural producers with whom O’Nolan collaborated. The fact that I found this script in some of

¹ The BBC Programme Index gives writer credits for *After Hours* to ‘Brian Nolan.’ The programme was produced by Barbara Burnham and starred P.G. Stephens as the Sergeant, J.G. Devlin as Mr Coulahan, Wilfred Brambell as Peter and Shay Gorman as Jem. BBC Programme Index, <https://genome.ch.bbc.co.uk/c3510785b05e441f9df6644575ebc851>. *After Hours* is also listed on IMDB, but with no writing credits to O’Nolan. See https://www.imdb.com/title/tt5614364/fullcredits?ref_=tt_ov_st_sm.

² There are two different scripts for *Thirst* collected in Flann O’Brien, *Plays and Teleplays*, ed. Daniel Keith Jernigan (Champaign: Dalkey Archive Press, 2013), a shorter version (117–136) and a longer version (137–156).

Edwards's miscellaneous papers augers well for future research on O'Nolan's working relationships with other producers of culture in mid-century Ireland. Many of these opportunities are also challenges since so much Irish archival material is spread across academic libraries in the United States.

The new dialogue in *After Hours* is given mostly to the Sergeant, and his contribution results in a more complex characterisation that completely changes the dynamic of the play. After Coulahan, the publican, tries to make his customers and the Sergeant thirstier by recounting the experience of extreme dehydration during a desert march in the First World War, the Sergeant tells his own story of thirst. It concerns a violent encounter on the job which left him badly injured and unable to drink liquid while he recovered in hospital. The visceral new lines describe how he bit off his own tongue and later woke up at the barracks, bloodied and unable to speak:

SERGEANT: I was plastered with blood, a lot of the teeth were gone and...I couldn't speak. I couldn't answer when they asked was I all right....Do you know why? I had bit me tongue off.

COULAHAN: You what?

SERGEANT: It was hanging out of me. Just held on by a few little weak muscles. And talk about blood!³

Compared to his role in *Thirst*, in *After Hours* the Sergeant's greater involvement in the talk at the bar, especially about his suffering, makes him more human and less of a stock authority figure. In this newly-discovered teleplay he is a victim; a patient and a son whose mother gets the doctor to save him (he may be these things in *Thirst* too, but if so, the audience does not know). The stories that both Coulahan and the Sergeant tell – of a desperate desert march in a foreign army, of brutal injury and near-death experience – are serious, harrowing, and traumatising. Both men have, to different extents, roles of authority in *Thirst*, but in *After Hours* their stories focus on moments in their pasts in which they held subordinate roles as a soldier and a victim/patient, respectively. This new dimension to their characters' histories raises questions about the trapping of men in systems as well as the enduring pressure of the past on the present (and of past trauma on present identity).

Additionally, *After Hours* develops the idea of thirst and the properties of water further. In *Thirst*, water is absent but once given can quench thirst and save the soldiers. In *After Hours*, there is no shortage of water but to drink it will be both torture and

³ Brian Nolan and Larry Morrow, *After Hours*, Folder 1, Box 2, Dublin Gate Theatre Archive, 1928-1979, Charles Deering McCormick Library, Northwestern University, 12.

salvation. The plot of *Thirst* deploys Coulahan's military march story as a device to make the Sergeant drink. In *After Hours*, the addition of the Sergeant's story and the dialogue and interaction surrounding it changes the character dynamics by revealing that Coulahan and the Sergeant have a deeper personal relationship than the cat-and-mouse, authority-infringer dynamic of *Thirst*.

'Shows and Showers'

The Gate's popular 1942 Christmas production *Jack-in-the-Box* featured fifteen humorous plays and sketches, including *Thirst* (which premiered on this occasion). The playbills for all the Gate's shows usually included advertisements and announcements, information about the play(s) and the players, and a one-pager (sort of an editorial leader) written often by mac Liammóir, sometimes by Edwards or an actor, or (if they were alive), by one of the playwrights. These three-to-five-hundred-word pieces typically introduced the play (or plays) in connection with historical and/or contemporary contexts. But how to introduce fifteen plays? O'Nolan, who had been asked by Edwards if he would take on the challenge, eschewed a standard introduction and instead wrote 'Shows and Showers.'⁴ In this piece he reflects, as Myles, on innovation, modernist experiment, and national themes in the Irish theatre *du jour*.

Myles begins by asking if 'all [is] well with Irish theatre audiences? Or (Mutt and his mute tandem) is all well with the theatre itself?' He then posits that the spirit of innovation has left the theatre before identifying a quite inexplicable absence in modern Irish theatre: rain.

For myself, I think there is an undue retreat from experiment. The theatre remains the primitive thing of words and light that it was in your father's day. Hardly ever do you see water used on the stage. A play is always staged in fine weather. Rain is out of the question. But rain, remember, is the cause of most of the sombre murders that punctuate the drama of rural Ireland. Murder is the only intelligible protest against rain the native can effect with his moist hands. Rain, sodden steaming clothes, colds and universal damp, these are among the most truly national things we have.

The following paragraph lists several understated necessities to achieve this technical feat: 'All you require is a waterproof stage and plenty of perforated water-pipes aloft.' Myles adds pataphysical controls that could adjust the rain 'by operating a dial

⁴ Maebh Long writes that the Gate publicity department wrote to O'Nolan on 12 December 1942 asking if he 'will write a short article for the programme for the Christmas show, and if *Thirst* can be performed in it.' Flann O'Brien, *Collected Letters of Flann O'Brien*, ed. Maebh Long (Victoria, TX: Dalkey Archive Press, 2018), 139, note 166.

bearing every reading from *Drizzle* to *Cloud-burst*. One can imagine the true dramatist manipulating his incidental rain with the delicacy coarser souls reserve for music.⁵ These mechanically adjustable rain controls recall the infernal knobs and levers in *The Third Policeman* and anticipate the future appearance of the Myles persona in Arthur Riordan's *Improbable Frequency* (2005).⁶ Myles then imagines the interactive possibilities of this innovation for audiences in Ireland and beyond: 'For a good stark Russian play it would probably help to have artificial rain descend also on the audience.'⁷

But rain is not tied exclusively to gloom, so Myles also describes the potential for 'beautiful rain-ballets' involving 'little gnomes in skin-tight oilwear' dancing to 'that "Water Music" of Wagner's' under glistening rain with advanced lighting techniques. No matter that the composition is G. F. Handel's, the *Gesamtkunstwerk* that Myles outlines would make Wagner salivate:

The little sodden gnomes wallow and thrash about in the rainbow foam. Trombones choked with water emit delicious gurgles. Barrels of live fish are released on the stage, monstrous dolphins show their heads, seals are heard barking. It is evening at Foynes, A fairy Flying Fortress alights on the water. It is Orson Welles and his son Vic—home once more after making good. He takes a bow and the curtain comes down amid sodden applause.⁸

On one hand, 'Shows and Showers' is an extended gag that builds and builds to a terrible yet meaningful pun, as Myles's short pieces and columns often do; he announces his decision to 'write a play about rain. I am off to Connemara to get some local cholera.' While this pun seems like more of damp squib than, say, the necessary end to a Keats and Chapman pun, it is worth remembering that O'Nolan had published *An Béal Bocht* the year before, a book whose satirical targets included westward travelling Gaeilgeoirí and folklorists on the hunt for authentic (Gaelic) Irishness.⁹ A pun about travelling to the West of Ireland to observe the local colour and perhaps to contract a water-borne illness often co-morbid with poverty is hardly a dull barb. In light of the indirect

⁵ 'Shows and Showers,' in the *Jack-in-the-Box* programme, in Folder 21, Box 16, Dublin Gate Theatre Archive, 1928-1979, Charles Deering McCormick Library, Northwestern University, 5.

⁶ In the musical comedy *Improbable Frequency*, Myles and physicist Erwin Schrödinger are working together to adjust probability to keep Ireland neutral. A radio host conveys messages to Myles over the airwaves during his show. An invention called the Probability Adjustment Tank (PAT) is responsible for keeping Ireland out of the war, and also manipulating the weather. When the radio host plays a song that mentions a particular type of weather, the actual weather changes to match it.

⁷ 'Shows and Showers.'

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *An Béal Bocht* also contains no shortage of rain.

criticism of national theatre implied in 'Shows and Showers,' it becomes easier to see how O'Nolan's artistic values aligned with those of Edwards and mac Liammóir.

Perhaps the journalist O'Nolan was simply fulfilling the requirements of the brief for writing an article for the *Jack-in-the-Box* programme, but I think the similarities between O'Nolan's critical attitude to representing contemporary Irish life in art and that of Edwards and mac Liammóir invite further examination. For example, 'Shows and Showers' is also stylistically attuned to the professional and creative ambitions of the Gate Theatre in its balance of Irish and international material. Charlie Chaplin, Castlebar fair-day squalls, Russian plays set in frozen rainstorms, Wagner/Handel, a fairy Flying Fortress¹⁰ carrying Orson Welles (who started his acting career with the Gate), the Phoenix Park, Foynes, and Connemara all feature in the article. Myles's advocacy of more experimentation in Irish theatre also aligns with Edwards and mac Liammóir's mission and reputation. The piece playfully, indirectly criticises Irish modernist theatre's (read: the Abbey's) obsession with being national by asking why the Irish obsession with rain has not been properly represented on stage. At the same time, 'Shows and Showers' suggests genuine, if absurd and/or infeasible, technological innovations that would advance the theatre's modern mission.

My upcoming article dealing with the *After Hours* script will explore further some of the issues that Myles touches on in 'Shows and Showers' pertaining to the tension between representing national themes rooted in the past and creating innovative Irish theatre with a modernist aesthetic. I will also divulge more details about different revisions by Edwards and O'Nolan to *Thirst* both for later (international) productions and for television. Edwards wrote to O'Nolan in October 1956 about reviving *Thirst* for 'an entertainment [at the Gaiety in February 1957] ... not unlike the Christmas shows that we used to do but ... on a much higher literary level.' He made it clear that he especially wanted O'Nolan to be involved because he saw him as an artist who represented contemporary Irish life in its sometimes improbably complex blend of tradition and modernity.¹¹ Edwards appeals to O'Nolan as a like-minded artist whose work he wants

¹⁰ O'Nolan here seems to be analogously invoking the plot of a 1942 film, *Flying Fortress*, to suggest that Welles has become arrogant and forgotten a debt he owes the Gate after it launched his career. A flying fortress is a B-17 American bomber aircraft. The aeroplane referred to by the film title returns battered but whole. O'Nolan's insertion of 'fairy' and having the Welles' means of conveyance 'alight' [sic for land? B-17s were not seaplanes] on the water at Foynes makes it all the more absurd. Foynes in Co. Limerick was one of the largest civilian airports in the world during the Second World War, when it was also the last port of call for seaplanes before they crossed the Atlantic. In 1942, it lost its position to the newly opened Shannon Airport.

¹¹ Edwards wanted to include material by 'Joyce, Merriman and others' and in addition to *Thirst*, hoped that O'Nolan would send him 'something new as well, and, of course, Wildly Funny.' Letter from Hilton Edwards, 8 October 1956, *Letters*, 213.

to include as a contrast to the nostalgic focus displaced in other productions: ‘however true it may be that nothing much is happening today, we naturally do not want to give this impression if we take the programme abroad.’¹²

‘Shows and Showers’ hints at this idea too and is just one example of similarities between Edwards and O’Nolan’s views of contemporary Irish culture that I will unpack at a later date.

¹² *Ibid.*

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

