

Paul Fagan, Dieter Fuchs, Tamara Radak (eds.)

STAGE IRISH

PERFORMANCE, IDENTITY, CULTURAL CIRCULATION

# Irish Studies in Europe

Volume

10

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# **STAGE IRISH**

**PERFORMANCE, IDENTITY,  
CULTURAL CIRCULATION**

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**Stage Irish:**

**Performance, Identity, Cultural Circulation /**

Paul Fagan, Dieter Fuchs, Tamara Radak (eds.). -

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*Irish Studies in Europe* is a series of peer-reviewed academic publications in Irish Studies. The series aims to publish new research from within the humanities and social sciences on all aspects of the history, society and culture of Ireland, Northern Ireland, and the Irish diaspora. The programme of the series is a deliberate reflection of the objectives of the *European Federation of Associations and Centres of Irish Studies (EFACIS)*, under whose aegis it is published.

The “European” dimension suggested by the series’ title is an indication of a prioritised, but by no means exclusive, concentration on European perspectives on Irish Studies. With such an “etic” approach the publications in this series contribute to the progress of Irish Studies by providing a special viewpoint on Irish history, society, literature and culture. The series also documents the vitality and wide variety of European traditions of Irish Studies as an inter-, trans- and multi-disciplinary field of research.



# CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS ..... IX

*Paul Fagan, Dieter Fuchs, Tamara Radak*  
(University of Vienna/Salzburg University)

INTRODUCTION: TRANSCULTURAL REFRACTIONS AND  
RECEPTIONS OF IRISHNESS ON PAGE, STAGE, AND SCREEN ..... 1

## WHAT ISH MY NATION? CONSTRUCTING IRISHNESS FROM ROMANTICISM TO MODERNISM

*Paul Fagan* (Salzburg University)

GROVES OF BLARNEY: FAKE SONGS, MOCK-HOAXES, AND STAGE IRISH IDENTITY  
IN WILLIAM MAGINN AND FRANCIS SYLVESTER MAHONY ..... 25

*Marguéríte Corporaal* (Radboud University)

STAGING IRISHNESS IN THE TRANSNATIONAL MARKETING  
OF LOCAL COLOUR FICTION ..... 45

*Elke D'hoker* (KU Leuven)

STAGING IRISHNESS IN ETHEL COLBURN MAYNE'S "THE HAPPY DAY" ..... 61

*Richard Barlow* (Nanyang Technological University, Singapore)

DION BOUCICAULT, *ARRAH-NA-POGUE*, AND STAGE IRISHRY IN *FINNEGANS WAKE* ..... 73

## SPECIAL FORUM (CO-EDITED WITH IGOR MAVER) EXPATRIATE PERSPECTIVES: STAGING IRISHNESS IN VIENNA, TRIESTE, AND LJUBLJANA

*Dieter Fuchs* (University of Vienna)

AUSTRIA AND THE IRISH PADDY: SEÁN O'CASEY'S *JUNO AND THE PAYCOCK*  
STAGED IN 1930 AND 1934 VIENNA ..... 89

*Elisabetta d'Erme* (Trieste)

"AND TRIESTE, AH TRIESTE...": STAGE ASCENDANCY AND  
CHARLES LEVER'S IRISH CHARACTERS ..... 107

*Igor Maver* (University of Ljubljana)

JAMES JOYCE AND THE SLOVENIANS: AUTO- AND HETERO-STEREOTYPES ..... 123

**POPULAR PADDIES: PARADING IRISHNESS ON THE SCREEN  
AND IN THE STREETS**

*Michael Connerty* (National Film School at IADT Dublin)  
“BEGUILING SHENANIGANS”: IRELAND AND HOLLYWOOD ANIMATION 1947-1959 ..... 135

*Michelle Witen* (University of Flensburg)  
OBJECT LESSONS AND STAGED IRISHNESS  
IN *DARBY O’GILL AND THE LITTLE PEOPLE* ..... 149

*Eimer Murphy* (Abbey Theatre)  
‘WEAR SOMETHING GREEN’:  
THE RE-INVENTION OF THE ST. PATRICK’S DAY PARADE ..... 171

COLOUR SUPPLEMENT ..... 187

*Verónica Membrive* (University of Almería)  
DECONSTRUCTING STEREOTYPES AND OTHERING THROUGH HUMOUR  
IN LISA MCGEE’S *DERRY GIRLS* ..... 193

**POLITICAL THEATRE: RENEGOTIATING IRISHNESS  
ON THE TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY STAGE**

*Anne Fogarty* (University College Dublin)  
RECONFIGURATIONS OF GENDER IN CONTEMPORARY IRISH STAGE ADAPTATIONS,  
2019-2020: DEIRDRE KINAHAN’S *THE UNMANAGEABLE SISTERS*,  
EDNA O’BRIEN’S *THE COUNTRY GIRLS*, MARINA CARR’S *HECUBA*,  
AND MICHAEL WEST’S *SOLAR BONES* ..... 209

*Clare Wallace* (Charles University Prague)  
SET PIECE, SET PEACE? NEGATIVE EMOTIONS AND THE POSSIBILITY  
OF CHANGE IN RECENT STAGE IMAGES OF THE NORTH ..... 227

*Natasha Remoundou* (Deree, The American College of Greece)  
REGARDING THE RIGHTS OF OTHERS: SPECTRES OF THE MIDDLE EAST  
IN CONALL MORRISON’S *THE BACCHAE OF BAGHDAD* ..... 241

LIST OF CONTRIBUTORS ..... 267



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The collection is offered in Werner Huber's memory.

June 2021

Paul Fagan  
Dieter Fuchs  
Tamara Radak



## INTRODUCTION: TRANSCULTURAL REFRACTIONS AND RECEPTIONS OF IRISHNESS ON PAGE, STAGE, AND SCREEN

**Paul Fagan, Dieter Fuchs, Tamara Radak**

The Stage Irishman, Maebh Long writes, “cast[s] a long shadow” (37). For evidence of the endurance of the stock stereotype, which critics have traced back as far as the sixteenth century, we need only note the online response to the 2020 trailer for *Wild Mountain Thyme*, John Patrick Shanley’s film adaptation of his play *Outside Mullingar*. Nate Jones documents the fall-out to “the film’s *bejaysus*-ly broad depiction of Ireland”:

When the film’s trailer dropped in November, seemingly all of Ireland was united in savaging the project. “What in the name of holy bejaysus and all the suffering saints is this benighted cowpat?” asked one columnist. Said a YouTube commenter: “This is worse than the Famine.” (n.p.)

Séamas O’Reilly coined the term “spudface” to describe Christopher Walken and Emily Blunt’s “mangled Irish accents” in the film (n.p.), a term that both acknowledges a history of Irish oppression through representation and ironises that history from a twenty-first-century vantage. In interview with Jones, O’Reilly situates the trailer’s reception within this complex legacy of the Stage Irish stereotype in contemporary Ireland:

[T]here’s a [...] history of Irishness being portrayed in ways that are, I would say, objectively harmful. Thankfully, there’s been an evolution in the standing of Irish people. I think we’ve become less of a bedraggled, loathed, vermin class of people that we were often portrayed as, in everything from *Punch* cartoons to British radio serials to American anti-Irish propaganda. Then in the ’50s and ’60s, it was more of a silly, simplistic, quite sentimental view of Ireland. Now it’s kind of just a mishmash of weird stereotypes and odd touchstones, most of which were invented in America.

Most of the time, it’s actually just laughable, and I think [...] *Wild Mountain Thyme* [...] kind of transgressed being offensive. Irish people don’t take themselves that seriously. We understand where we are in the pecking order of aggrieved peoples. [...] [W]e are ruthlessly sarcastic and incredibly eager to engage with these myths about ourselves because we find them really entertaining. It brings people together. In the absence of having a right to be genuinely offended, we at least preserve the right to mercilessly take the piss. (Jones n.p.)

The contention that in contemporary Ireland, and especially in online discourse, such hetero-stereotypes have become fodder for community-building humour is evidenced in the positive response that met the 18 March 2019 episode of *This Time with Alan Partridge* (S1 E4), a spoof of current affairs programmes broadcast by BBC One. In the episode’s last segment, Steve Coogan plays both Alan Partridge and Partridge’s Irish double, Martin Brennan, a crooked-toothed and thickly accented Irish farmer

who ambushes the show by singing Irish rebel songs (“Oh my god, that was like an advert for the IRA,” Partridge mutters on mic over the closing credits). The Irish broadcaster RTÉ declared it to be the “TV moment of the year” (Anon., “Watch” n.p.).

The distinction between the negative response to the romanticised, but ultimately timid, American ‘Oirish’ fantasy portrayed in *Wild Mountain Thyme*, and the positive response to the provocative portrayal of the cunning, rural, rebel-rousing Brennan for BBC One’s primarily English audience, is worthy of note. In part, the discrepancy can be attributed to the knowledge that Coogan himself has Irish ancestry: “The decisions I make on comedy aren’t made on a whim. That whole history between the British and the Irish runs through me,” he tells Donald Clarke of *The Irish Times* (n.p.). More substantially, the difference lies in the fact that while *Wild Mountain Thyme* offers a fetishised, nostalgic simulation of an Ireland that was always a Hollywood construction to begin with, Coogan’s Stage Irish performance carries a subversive political edge. Coogan’s persona is distinguished from the wholly non-ironised performances of Shanley’s film through an underlying satire, which creates an ironic double exposure to distinctly conceptualisable audiences: to an imagined English audience for whom Brennan might well be the butt of the joke in his fulfilment of long-circulated stereotypical representations of the Irish across media; to an idealised Irish audience, who discern an act of resistance in the visible discomfort that Brennan creates for his English host Partridge, and who can perceive the humour, and historical significance, of Coogan leveraging this Stage Irish conceit to sing “The Men Behind the Wire” and “Come Out Ye Black and Tans” on the BBC.

Rather than relics of Ireland’s colonial past, the figures of the Stage Irishman and Stage Irishwoman retain their power in the twenty-first century to stereotype and Other Irish national identity in ways that can still provoke outrage. Yet, they also preserve a certain vibrant potential – in the tradition of Jonathan Swift’s *A Modest Proposal*, Maria and Richard Edgeworth’s *An Essay on Irish Bulls*, or G. B. Shaw’s *John Bull’s Other Island* – for resisting, ridiculing, or renegotiating such contemporary representations through ironic communal humour and sharp-edged political satire. Less a rigid, historicised stereotype of a previous phase of national identity formation, then, Stage Irishry remains central to contemporary attempts to perform, negotiate, and deconstruct ‘Irishness’ before diverse national and international gazes by engaging, earnestly or ironically, with prevalent myths about Irish selfhood.

*Stage Irish: Performance, Identity, Cultural Circulation* brings together chapters which revisit and reconsider these diverse modes of (mis)representing, performing, articulating, witnessing, constructing, and deconstructing ‘Irishness’ from a twenty-first-century vantage. The time is ripe for such an inquiry. The Celtic Tiger and Brexit, the Marriage Equality referendum and the #Repealthe8th and #WakingTheFeminists campaigns compel us to turn to history and representation (in literature, drama, art, music, film, television, non-fiction, popular and digital culture) to reassess how ‘Irishness’ has been shaped and reshaped through parochial, national, and international