

## *A Skull in Connemara: Digital Dramaturgy*

By Martin McDonagh

Directed by BJ Jones

Jan 25–Mar 4, 2012

In a flyspeck of a town in Ireland's fabled West, four lonely, lovable misfits dig for the truth—and get so much more. This sidesplitting yarn conjures a macabre mystery packed with merriment, mayhem, and might-be murder that is as full of twists as a shillelagh and as haunting as a whistle in a graveyard.

The Boy from County Nil  
By Kellie MeCleary, Production Dramaturg



**“McDonagh is the man from nowhere, elsewhere, anywhere and everywhere, displaced without the longing for a place or a position either within a single nationality or canon.”**

—Lillian Chambers and Eamonn Jordan, *The Theatre of Martin McDonagh*

This is an apt description of a man who grew up in London, the son of Irish immigrants—a lover of punk rock, Tarantino films, and Australian soap operas; writer of unsentimental, brutal comedies; and provocateur extraordinaire. Since his ascendance into the theater limelight in 1996, McDonagh has made a name for himself not only as a formidable playwright but also as the industry's rebel-without-a-cause—dissing theater, Ireland, even Sean Connery (drunkenly spewing expletives at the man during an awards ceremony), without blinking an eye.

Like any good bad-boy, McDonagh dropped out of school at age 16. Surviving on his parents, welfare, and menial jobs when necessary, McDonagh spent his days reading, watching TV, and entertaining his brother with new twists on old fables. It was in this time that McDonagh discovered his knack for storytelling. He began writing—short stories, radio dramas, and film scripts. Nothing came of any of this until one day, in 1994, at the age of 24, he decided to quit working and do nothing but write—not fiction, not film, but plays. As McDonagh tells it, theater was something of a last resort: the easiest medium to write in, and therefore the one most likely to guarantee success. Nine months of writing produced two trilogies and a drama, *The Pillowman*. Six of those plays, including *A Skull in Connemara*, were major successes—launching McDonagh's career.

The bulk of these plays are set in wild Western Ireland. According to McDonagh, the choice was as practical as was writing them in the first place; perceiving similarities between his style and that of Pinter and Mamet, he wanted a way to set himself apart from these influences. Ireland provided a distinctive setting and language with which to do so. McDonagh visited Irish relatives

in Connemara every summer, and he found Gaelic syntax and rhythms fascinating and stage-worthy.

He recalls, “That seemed an interesting way to go, to try, to do something with that language that wouldn’t be English or American.” The playwright also cites as influences the work of film directors Quentin Tarantino, Martin Scorsese, David Lynch, and Terrence Malick; the structure of soap operas; and the energy and attitude of punk rock bands like The Clash and the Pogues—one of his rare (acknowledged) Irish inspirations. When it comes to other Irish artists, McDonagh is like the rebel teen who denies any relation to his parents. But his features give him away. McDonagh’s plays cannot hide their descent from Joyce, Yeats, Beckett, and, perhaps most notably, J.M. Synge. The playwright responsible for *The Playboy of the Western World*, Synge similarly satirized and celebrated the rural Irish through humor and violence. Also like McDonagh, Synge was criticized for these elements by many of his countrymen.

Others see McDonagh’s work in a different, more hybrid light. Garry Hynes, Artistic Director of the Druid Theatre—where the *Leenane* trilogy got its start—states, “There’s this issue about Martin and authenticity—the response that his [work does not represent] Irish life now... Of course it isn’t [authentic]...it’s not meant to be. It’s a complete creation, and that’s fascinating.” In gleefully smashing together old tropes with contemporary styles, this rebellious youth produced something new. Though it resists categorization, it’s certainly bold, brash, defiant—and above all else, one hell of a ride.



**A healthy nation is as unconscious of its nationality as a healthy man of his bones. But if you break a nation’s nationality it will think of nothing else but getting it set again.**

—G.B. Shaw

Returning to Ireland after many years, James Joyce wrote, “I have lived so long abroad and in so many countries that I can feel at once the voice of Ireland in anything. The disorder of the table was Irish, the wonder on the faces also, the curious looking eyes of the woman herself and her waitress.” Joyce recognized some quality that he could point to but not describe, one that is curiously mixed. It is hard enough to define a national character, or to say what makes a space, a face, an attitude stand for a country. This difficulty becomes infinitely more challenging for a land with a broken nationality, like Ireland. By the 17th Century, the English had invaded and colonized their western neighbor, imposing through law and force a foreign culture and language. For a time, the most dominant representations of the Irish came from outside: harsh, negative images in arts and popular entertainment. Only after more than two centuries was this

set of stereotypes successfully challenged, by members of the Irish Nationalist movement. They called for Irish artists to take part in reclaiming their culture, identity, and national pride. Some embraced this call to arms, others wrestled with it, and still others challenged it. The question of how to represent the Irish and Irishness became a heated one, never adequately answered. Here is just a small sample of some explorations of Irish Representation—historical and contemporary, affirmative and critical. Somewhere in all this lies the conversation McDonagh is joining, another voice in Ireland’s difficult and fraught exploration of itself.

**“It is a melancholy object to those, who walk through this great town, or travel in the country, when they see the streets, the roads and cabin-doors crowded with beggars of the female sex, followed by three, four, or six children, all in rags, and importuning every passenger for an alms.”**

– Jonathan Swift, *A Modest Proposal*, 1729.

[Click here for the full text](#)

**“On the first day of march it was raining  
It was raining worse than anything that I have ever seen  
Stay on the other side of the road  
Cause you never can tell  
We’ve a thirst like a gang of devils  
We’re the boys of county hell  
And it’s lend me ten pound and I’ll buy you a drink  
And mother wake me early in the morning.”**

– The Pogues “Boys from The County Hell,” 1984

[Click here for the full song on youtube](#)

**“If poetry creates a paradise of its own, and tends to make mankind happier, Ireland has indeed need of song...The days of her mourning are not yet ended. The dirge of a thousand years still swells over the land of numberless sorrows. The voice of her song is still plaintive over the razed homesteads of her valleys, over the sweltering plague-ship and shattered bark of the Western Main.”**

– Edward Hayes, *The Ballads of Ireland*, 1856

[Click here for the full text](#)

**“Our poets and artists...will teach us, by their vision, the noble race we may become, expressed in their poetry and their pictures.... They have to show us the way, and the people will then in their turn become the inspiration of the poets and artists of the future Gaelic Ireland.”**

—General Michael Collins, Nationalist leader in Irish War of Independence, ca. 1920s

**“If poetry creates a paradise of its own, and tends to make mankind happier, Ireland has indeed need of song...The days of her mourning are not yet ended. The dirge of a thousand years still swells over the land of numberless sorrows. The voice of her song is still plaintive**

**over the razed homesteads of her valleys, over the sweltering plague-ship and shattered bark of the Western Main.”**

—Edward Hayes, *The Ballads of Ireland*, 1856

**“Well,’ said Gabriel, ‘if it comes to that, you know, Irish is not my language.... [T]o tell you the truth...I’m sick of my own country, sick of it!’”**

—James Joyce, “The Dead,” 1914

**“Is it possible that you don’t know that all this top-o-the-morning and broth-of-a-boy and more-power-to-your-elbow business is as peculiar to England as the Albert Hall concerts of Irish music are? But when a thoroughly worthless Irishman comes to England, and finds the whole place full of romantic duffers like you, who will let him loaf and drink and sponge and brag as long as he flatters your sense of moral superiority by playing the fool and degrading himself and his country, he soon learns the antics that take you in. He picks them up at the theatre or the music hall.”**

—G.B. Shaw, *John Bull’s Other Island*, 1904

**A Plenteous place is Ireland for hospitable cheer, Uileacan dubh O! Where the wholesome fruit is bursting from the yellow barley ear; Uileacan dubh O! There is honey in the trees where her misty vales expand, And her forest paths in summer are by falling waters fann’d, There is dew at high noontide there, and springs i’ the yellow sand, On the fair hills of holy Ireland.**

—Samuel Ferguson, “The Fair Hills of Ireland,” 1834

**“It is not without pleasure that I catch at an opportunity of justifying myself from the charge of intending any national reflection in the character of Sir Lucius O’Trigger. ...if the condemnation of this comedy...could have added one spark to the decaying flame of national attachment to the country supposed to be reflected on, I should have been happy in its fate.”**

—Richard Brinsley Sheridan, Preface to *The Rivals*, 1776

**“...the really uncultured Irishman is the man who has lost the Gaelic tradition and culture and has not yet gained the tradition and culture of England.”**

—Lady Gregory, Playwright, 1898

**“It is a melancholy object to those, who walk through this great town, or travel in the country, when they see the streets, the roads and cabbins-crowded with beggars of the female sex, followed by three, four, or six children, all in rags, and importuning every passenger for an alms.”**

—Jonathan Swift, *A Modest Proposal*, 1729

**“Anyone who has lived in real intimacy with the Irish peasantry will know that the wildest sayings and ideas in this play are tame indeed, compared with the fancies one may hear in any little hillside cabin in Geesala, or Carraroe....”**

—J.M. Synge, Introduction to *The Playboy of the Western World*, 1907

**On the first day of march it was raining It was raining worse than anything that I have  
ever seen Stay on the other side of the road 'cause you can never tell We've a thirst like a  
gang of devils We're the boys of the county hell And it's lend me ten pounds and I'll buy  
you a drink And mother wake me early in the morning**

—The Pogues, “Boys From The County Hell,” 1984

## **The Fisherman**

BY WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS

Although I can see him still—  
The freckled man who goes  
To a gray place on a hill  
In gray Connemara clothes  
At dawn to cast his flies—  
It's long since I began  
To call up to the eyes  
This wise and simple man.  
All day I'd looked in the face  
What I had hoped it would be  
To write for my own race  
And the reality:  
The living men that I hate,  
The dead man that I loved,  
The craven man in his seat,  
The insolent unreproved—  
And no knave brought to book  
Who has won a drunken cheer—  
The witty man and his joke  
Aimed at the commonest ear,  
The clever man who cries  
The catch cries of the clown,  
The beating down of the wise  
And great Art beaten down.

Maybe a twelve-month since  
Suddenly I began,  
In scorn of this audience,  
Imagining a man,  
And his sun-freckled face  
And gray Connemara cloth,  
Climbing up to a place  
Where stone is dark with froth,  
And the down turn of his wrist  
When the flies drop in the stream—  
A man who does not exist,  
A man who is but a dream;  
And cried, “Before I am old  
I shall have written him one  
Poem maybe as cold  
And passionate as the dawn.



# Mr. Body, I Exhume?

By Kellie Mecleary, Production Dramaturg

Before encountering *A Skull in Connemara*, I had never heard of grave exhumation, the job of *Skull*'s protagonist, Mick Dowd. In the play, Leenane's cemetery is short on space, so Dowd must dig up the old dead to make room for new corpses. The practice seemed grotesque and horrific, even unbelievable. Since McDonagh is known for dabbling in surrealism, creating worlds with larger-than-life characters who follow twisted logic, I assumed Dowd's job was a fabrication. I thought, "surely, people don't actually exhume bodies once they've been laid to rest, do they?"

Yep, they do. Turns out grave exhumation has a long, fascinating history that traverses continents, spans centuries, and continues today. There are many exhumation stories worth telling, but those that sound the most like *Skull*'s—the most tonally, situationally, and philosophically similar—all took place in pre-Enlightenment urban Europe. At that time, it was common to bury bodies near or even under churches, in the hope that the sacred ground would rub off on souls and help their chances at the Gates of Heaven. Combine this with a growing lack of space in cities, and they had a real problem on their hands: church floors began to rise as bodies built up underneath, and the smell of decay began wafting through the floorboards, which did little to improve church attendance. There are even tales of cemeteries becoming so overcrowded that the walls burst under the pressure, spilling bodies into the church and neighboring basements.

For a time, church officials attempted to solve the problem by secretly removing some bones from graves, and depositing them in ossuaries—buildings that essentially serve as bone dumps. At one point in Paris, six million bodies were removed from graveyards and placed in quarries outside the city limits. Workers operated by night, filling carts with remains and pushing them through the streets, followed by prayer-intoning priests. Passersby helped by picking up bones that fell off the cart on the way.

It should be noted that mass grave exhumations still take place today, just in a more organized fashion. Necropolis is a London company that has been providing funereal and exhumation services since 1852. They exhume roughly 15,000 bodies per year, for every reason from city park development to forensics cases. It is, apparently, a highly competitive and lucrative industry. Further, should you decide to exhume an Irish body, the Irish government provides clear, easily accessible exhumation regulations online. There you will find a list of situations in which a grave may be exhumed, including "for public health reasons (e.g. if a graveyard or cemetery is being moved)." If they were so inclined, the citizens of Leenane could certainly claim this as the reason for their exhuming antics.

Perhaps it is this lack of bureaucracy—this absence of paperwork, corporate companies, and regulated procedure—that makes Mick's work in *Skull* feel so otherworldly, so unimaginable to me. Maybe if Mick were wearing a sanitation suit and protective goggles I would feel less

perturbed. Without them, the scenario acquires a rawness that affects me much more than any realistic depiction might have done. It is an aspect of McDonagh's technique: to take reality and warp it slightly, revealing the truth underneath. They say the truth isn't always easy; in this case, it's downright icky. So don't be surprised if, like me, you squirm during its unearthing.

## McDonagh's Influences

By Kellie Mcleary, Production Dramaturg



Martin McDonagh draws inspiration from every corner of the arts and entertainment industries. The title of *A Skull in Connemara* comes from Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, and its plot bears a striking resemblance to that of *Playboy of the Western World* by JM Synge. What is unique to McDonagh's work is the way he combines elements of the theatre tradition with non-theatrical (and less "high brow") styles such as soap opera, Tarantino films and punk rock. On this page you'll find a gallery of some of McDonagh's influences, both stated by the playwright and implied through his plays: a hodge-podge of high and low.

### Theater

JM Synge – *The Playboy of the Western World*

[Find Out More](#)

Samuel Beckett – *Waiting for Godot*

LUCKY: ...the skull fading fading fading and concurrently simultaneously what is more for reasons unknown in spite of the tennis on on the beard the flames the tears the stones so blue so calm alas alas on on the skull the skull the skull the skull in Connemara in spite of the tennis the labors abandoned left unfinished graver still abode of stones in a word I resume alas alas abandoned unfinished the skull the skull in Connemara in spite of the tennis the skull alas the stones Cunard ... tennis ... the stones ... so calm ... Cunard ... unfinished ...

### Literature

Jorge Luis Borges

### Film

Quentin Tarantino

*Pulp Fiction*

David Lynch

Ex. *Blue Velvet*

### TV

Australian Soap Operas

Ex. "A Country Practice"

American Detective Shows

Ex. *Hill Street Blues*

### Music

The Clash

Ex. "Police and Thieves"

The Pogues

Ex. "Streams of Whiskey"