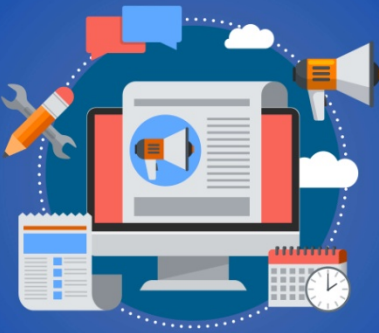


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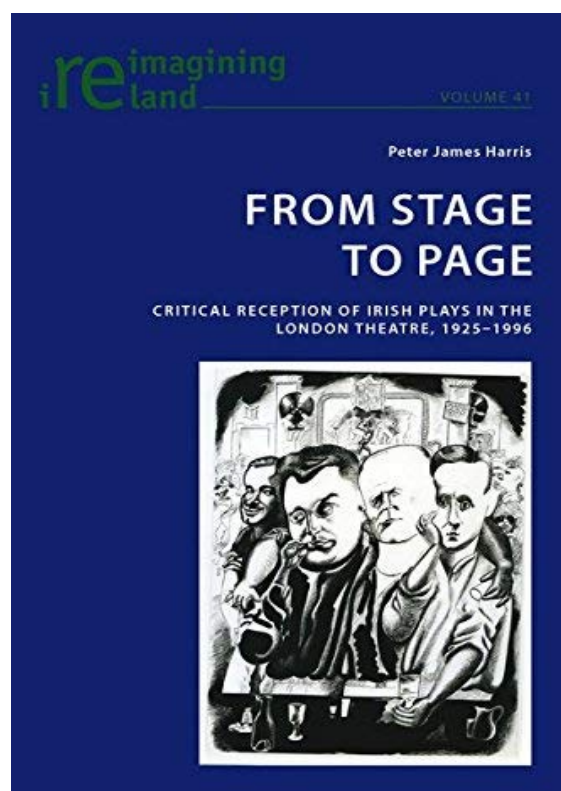
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A Review of Peter James Harris's *From Stage to Page*



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Title: *From Stage to Page: Critical Reception of Irish Plays in the London Theatre, 1925-1996*

Author: Peter James Harris

Publisher: Bern Switzerland, Peter Lang AG International Academic Publishers

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The title of the book, *From Stage to Page*, itself captures the inevitable connection between the productive and receptive processes in the field of theatrical communication. Reception theory in the theatre has put emphasis on reading the theatrical performance as a

text. Here the focus rests on the strategies deployed by various non-academic interpretive communities in deciphering a particular performance indispensable to various cultural, social, political standpoints.

In the present study, Peter James Harris undertakes a daunting and rigorous enterprise of vast library research providing the academicians and research scholars with an analytical study of which Irish plays came off well with London audiences and why. This exacerbates the methodological need to embed the plays within the larger social and political domain of shifting Anglo-Irish relations. This sheds light on issues of power and responsibility involved in its production and reception. Moreover, the reactions to these plays by London theatregoers become emblematic of how English perceived the Irish both politically and artistically.

The book starts with questioning the historicity of the staging of Irish plays on the London Stage. Dramatists like R.B. Sheridan, Oscar Wilde and G.B. Shaw who staged on the London theatre were Irish by birth but the ambiguity about the play's setting and subject matter deprive them the status of being typical Irish plays. This leads to Brian Friel's reductive interpretation who traces the beginning of staging of 'typical' Irish plays on the London stage back to 1903. Conforming to this idea, the author has been judicious in selecting the plays covering the time period 1925-1996.

Peter James Harris bases his research on a detailed examination of eight plays representative of a particular decade along with the political history of Anglo Irish relations since the formation of the Irish Free State in 1922. The juxtaposition of nuanced modes of theatrical staging in Ireland and England sheds light on the turn of literary studies to cultural studies. This brings to the fore concerns such as 'commitment to the political relevance of the intellectual work,' no specified method to conduct research and its emphasis on 'popular' in opposition to high culture. He provides the meticulous study by incorporating newspaper reviews, BBC interviews and excerpts from the theatre critics in leading journals from diverse cultural backgrounds to grant authenticity to his work. Addressing to the reception of these plays by London audiences both as an individual and collective bring with it ethnographic constraints and absence of participant observation on his part. He expresses his inevitable reliance on the theatre critics who act as a particular interpretive community within the audience as their mouthpiece. The major drawback lies here as the theatre critics from a

privileged vantage point shape the heterogeneous reaction to the plays and form the expectations of future audiences.

In the **Critic as Artist** (1890) Oscar Wilde expands on the complex affinity between arts and criticism, commemorating criticism and asserting its superiority over the primary artistic work. The critic's loyalty to the work of art does not count as much as the status of the critical output as an independent work of art. This gets reflected as one goes through the chapters which are logically tabled giving a sense of continuity. The analytical study of each play accompanied with variegated published comments renders the true heterogeneous voice of the theatre audience and the work of art nullified. What one receives is a bunch of incoherent reactions preventing the readers from drawing any consistent conclusion.

He deploys several methodologies for his investigation which includes extensive library research, breaking down the time period (1925-1996) into decades, cautious choice of a play representative for each decade based not on 'popularity' or box-office collection rather directed by objective and subjective factors which would add to the then climate in the West End of the day and textual analysis as the foundation for the development of reactions of the London Critics.

Each chapter interestingly starts with the quotation by a notable critic which provides a summation of his main argument in selecting a particular play. The chapter in an organised way offers a summary of political and cultural events for a particular decade aided with footnotes providing contextual information. There are illustrations of the longest runs on the London Stage for a time period to suggest to the readers the preference of the London theatregoers and how does it evolve gradually by the end of the book.

Chapter One, 'Juno and the Paycock' (Royalty Theatre, 16 November 1925) shows that by the 1920s, the public's interest in serious drama 'tragedy' had dwindled down. The table expresses that the public was more interested in musicals and comedies. To which, Juno and the Paycock is an exception as it being a tragedy became a huge hit. The subject of Irish Civil War was thought as inappropriate for the London audience. The chapter raises several concerns such as who decides the productive output, is it the public's preference or the commercially driven theatre management, issue of reception vis-à-vis the diverse compositeness of the theatre audience and is it possible for the audience to do away with latest impressions and come to the theatre with his mind as 'tabula rasa.'

Chapter Four, 'The Hostage' (Theatre Royal, Stratford East, 14 October, 1958) brings into question the biography which makes a playwright uniquely qualified to undertake a specific topic of interest. The issue of IRA and militancy was of no concern to the London public and so the play was deemed as a melodrama, too sensitive to be tackled on the stage maintaining the realistic element in it. This brings the debate of fusion of 'melodrama and realism' to bring awareness of the predicament of the Irish to its intended London audience. The resistance to the established order in the play becomes a site of resisting the theatrical form itself.

Chapter Five, 'Philadelphia, Here I Come!' (Lyric Theatre, 20 September, 1967) raised the Irish theatre to International level by focusing on the obnoxious issue of emigration laid down in the British agenda since 1958. The play was attacked for being 'too Irish' lacking in its universal appeal. This leads to the idea of naturalistic theatre which is indispensable to the empiricist view that struggles for its justification.

Chapter Seven, 'Translations' (Hampstead Theatre, 12 May 1981) talk of how history and fiction are inextricably related and there is a need to deconstruct historiography itself. Despite the cultural and linguistic domination which the English enjoys over the Irish, the London critics cast aside the correlation between the fictional story of 1833 riots and the troubles of 1981. This leads the readers to confront the vexing issue of topicality.

Chapter Eight, 'Portia Coughlan' (Royal Court Theatre, 14 May 1996) was received as a global phenomenon as it was "Irish in language and detail... and universal in emotion." By this time, the London public had come to associate the theatre space as a site of resistance. The rebellious mood of the Irish was explicit in the attack on the conventions of syntax, spelling and sounds of Standard English in the language of the plays. But the need to discuss the plight of the Irish to London audience, the playwrights had to fall back to the western literary tradition which created a dualism in them.

One of the merits of the present study is its vast research which is definitely broad, original and unbiased in its scope. What lie at the heart of the study is the issues around audience and context. The reliance on the theatre critics seem problematic as they would definitely be not untouched by the political affiliation of the publication they are writing for. To this, Peter James Harris takes a safer point in stating that the critics are not infallible and their reviews are subject to change. He brings the pertinent issue of how Consumerism and Capitalism has affected the real worth of a work of art. He makes his study relevant to the

contemporary scenario by stating how work of art is perceived as a product of consumption and its worth is determined by economic forces. People these days have become impassive consumers and they do not go for detailed analysis rather bank on star rating on Internet site or box-office collection.

The book is well referenced with index and bibliography which consists of both primary and secondary sources such as newspaper reviews, articles by critics, journals and BBC radio interviews that make his study more authentic. For the researchers, body of reviews is so much varied that it is difficult to arrive at a consistent conclusion. The scholars would have to bank on their own literary merit. The book on the face of it does not suggest further study but for new research scholars the domain of the area could be extended. The present study covers the time period of 1925-1996. It would be an interesting project to extend the area and research on the plays staged on the London Stage post -Belfast Agreement of 1998. The social and political milieu post- agreement would definitely add to the concerns of reception theory in the theatre in the light of contemporary Anglo Irish relations.

It is also commendable that Peter James Harris' upbringing as an English did not affect his study. Moreover, he seems to be critical to some of the London critics for their prejudiced view of the plays. He is Professor of English Literature at UNESP and has expertise on British Literature, post colonial theory, literary criticism and theatre which makes him suitable for the given enterprise.

I recommend this book to research scholars specializing in the field of Irish Studies.