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*The Critic* by Richard Brinsley Sheridan.

Directed by Lynne Parker.

Rough Magic Theatre Company, Dublin, 2–13 October 2013

(staged at the Culture Box and the Ark as part of the Dublin Theatre Festival)

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Irish theatregoers owe a profound debt of gratitude to Lynne Parker and her Rough Magic Theatre Company. Since the founding of Rough Magic in 1984, it has consistently produced more plays by women than most of Ireland's major theatres and theatre companies; it has championed the work of the brilliant and underrated Stewart Parker (Lynne's late uncle); and—of special interest to readers of this journal—it has kept the great, eighteenth-century, Anglo-Irish playwrights in the Irish popular consciousness by consistently mounting high-quality productions of their work.

While these productions have been very well received, concern has rightly been raised in some quarters over the tendency of Parker and company to Hibernicize these plays—that is, to impose obvious Irish elements onto plays that were originally set in England and written for London audiences. This Hibernicizing tendency goes all the way back to the first Rough Magic production of an Anglo-Irish classic from the long eighteenth century: Declan Hughes's 1991 adaptation of George Farquhar's *Love and a Bottle* (1698). Hughes boldly elected to turn Lyrick, an English playwright, into an Irishman and to place him at the centre of the action. One would have thought that Farquhar's original script was quite Irish enough: after all, it boasts three Anglo-Irish characters (Roebuck, Lovewell, and Leathe), Farquhar's most sympathetic Irish Catholic character (Mrs Trudge), and concludes with raucous Irish music and dancing. In the end, Rough Magic's decision to add a little more "Irish" flavour to *Love and a Bottle* did little harm, but the same cannot be said of subsequent Hibernicized productions overseen by Parker and/or Rough Magic.

For example, when Parker directed Farquhar's *The Recruiting Officer* (1706) at the Abbey Theatre in 2008, she elected to reset the play in the Irish midlands, thereby playing up Farquhar's Irishness but obscuring his uncompromising loyalist sympathies. As one critic noted, "the Orange banners acknowledged in the programme were absent from the stage" (Eamon O'Flaherty, review of *The Recruiting Officer* by George Farquhar, Rough Magic Theatre Company, *History Ireland* 16, no. 2 [2008], <http://www.historyireland.com/20th-century-contemporary-history/theatre-eye-3/>).

Rough Magic's latest production of an eighteenth-century, Anglo-Irish classic was their most radically Hibernicized production to date: in autumn 2013, they reset Richard Brinsley Sheridan's *The Critic* (1779) in Georgian Dublin. Despite outstanding performances from key members of the cast (especially Eleanor Methven as Mrs Dangle and Karl Shiels as the greatest Puff I am ever likely to see), this production was highly problematic from a dramaturgical point of view.

Act 1 of the play was staged in Temple Bar's Culture Box, which was dressed to look like the Dangle's drawing room. When the scene shifted to the rehearsal of Puff's play, the audience was walked to the Ark, a nearby theatre space usually devoted to shows for children. "Ambulatory theatre" has become exceedingly popular with Dublin theatre companies in recent years, with many edgy productions requiring spectators to walk from one building to another, or at least between rooms within the same building. Because of this, as we walked to the Ark, I heard some audience members grumbling that they were sick of moving from one space to another during theatre shows and that these moves often added little to productions. In this instance, however, I appreciated the change of venue. It was great to move from a period drawing room to an actual theatre, just as the characters in the play do. Of greater concern was what actually occurred in and between each venue.

At the start of Act 1, an Auditor who was seated in the corner explained why Rough Magic had reset the play in Dublin: nearby was the Smock Alley Theatre, which Sheridan's father, Thomas, had managed, and which would have debuted his mother Frances's plays, had the family remained in Dublin. The Auditor added that Temple Bar was the city's main theatre district during Richard's Dublin childhood. Since Sheridan was clearly influenced by his early contact with the Dublin theatre world—a theatre world with extensive ties to London and Dublin Castle—I did not initially find this change of cities especially worrying.

Of much greater concern were the Auditor's subsequent contributions to the play. He would occasionally verbally interrupt the action to gloss eighteenth-century terms or historical events with which the audience might not be familiar. While I am sure Rough Magic felt that this made the play more accessible, the Auditor's often needless explanations gave the production an air of having been dumbed down. The Auditor also made forced attempts to link the play's action to important points in Irish theatre history. It soon became clear that this whole production was a tribute to "Dublin theatre" and that it was attempting to co-opt Sheridan into a rather narrow and parochial definition of "Irish drama." The most notorious example of the Auditor (and, by extension, the production) making such a forced connection was the scene involving

the singers who visit the Dangle household. In the original play, the singers speak Italian, and the Dangles cannot understand either them or their French interpreter. As part of the Hibernicizing process, Rough Magic decided to have the Italians speak Irish. This change removed Sheridan's subversive, "Irish" implication that the English gentleman Dangle was less cultured than he pretended to be; it also left the audience bewildered as to why such a change was made. Were these Dublin Dangles ignorant of Irish because they were Anglo-Irish Protestants dwelling within the Pale? Given that the Sheridans were originally a Gaelic Catholic family and that Richard's grandfather spoke Irish to his neighbours in Quilca, Co. Cavan, it was a strange point to make in a production that took so many pains to reflect on Sheridan's Irish antecedents. As the Irish singers left the Dangle home, the Auditor took the opportunity to explain that Lady Gregory learned Irish and that this link to the Irish tenantry inspired her art and eventually led her to found the Abbey Theatre with W.B. Yeats in 1904. From a historical perspective, it was disorienting to be watching an eighteenth-century play and then to suddenly hear about Gregory and Yeats.

The historical disorientation continued as we walked to the Ark. We were abruptly surrounded by people in mid-nineteenth-century dress who passed out Victorian-style handbills that read: "The famine that stalks our Land is the work of the Devil. Listen to the Voice of God. Give generously to the Central Relief Committee." We subsequently encountered Countess Markievicz and protesters calling for the release of the Birmingham Six. What exactly this had to do with the Sheridans, Dublin theatre history, or *The Critic* was hard to determine.

The time warp continued when we got to the Ark: Puff's play was performed by actual, twenty-first-century, black-clad drama students. While Rough Magic were criticized for not paying professional actors the Equity rate for these roles, *The Critic* has a cast of between twenty-five and thirty, depending on the version; therefore, even a well-endowed theatre or company would be hard-pressed to produce this important play if they paid everyone full wages.

Much more troublesome than the impressionistic anachronism or the use of unpaid students was Rough Magic's gross misinterpretation of Sheridan's ending. *The Critic* is obviously Sheridan's criticism of the emerging taste for big spectacle and hackneyed plots and characterization over clever, subtle, and surprising dramaturgy. He was hoping that his mockery would check the developments in English drama that eventually resulted in Victorian melodrama. The procession that ends the play is meant to be deeply farcical, driving Sheridan's points home. Oddly, Rough Magic chose to end their production with an unashamed, irony-free celebration of big spectacle. Bombastic music

blared and clever lighting effects dazzled as the back of the stage opened mechanically to reveal Temple Bar's picturesque Meeting House Square. PowerPoint slides were projected onto huge screens above the stage that flashed the names of great theatre companies active in Dublin over the past thirty years. While this spectacle was relatively impressive, Rough Magic clearly missed—or ignored—*The Critic's* emphatic message. Was this an acknowledgment of the fact that Sheridan later changed his mind regarding stage spectacle? (*The Glorious First of June* [1794] and *Pizarro* [1799] demonstrate that the great playwright came to understand that judicious use of extravagant stage effects could enhance strong scripts rather than simply distract from the deficiencies of contrived, poorly written ones.) If this was Rough Magic's motivation, it was not clarified when Dangle came on at the end to read a passage from Peter Brook's *The Empty Space* (1968)—this coda unwittingly came across as an apology for the production's experimental excesses.

If Rough Magic were interested in doing a spectacular version of an eighteenth-century play, or even of a Sheridan play, then why not produce the aforementioned *Pizarro*, with its "Irish" anti-colonial concerns? If their main concern was stressing Sheridan's Irishness, then why not stage his most obviously Irish play, *St. Patrick's Day* (1775)? Resetting one of his English plays in Ireland causes more problems than it solves, and, in some ways, makes his work less Irish, because it removes his subtle, "outsider" criticisms of the English. Like other great, Anglo-Irish dramatists, Sheridan enjoyed depicting England as "the native land of the hypocrite" (to quote Oscar Wilde [*The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 1891]). While a number of important plays by Farquhar, Goldsmith, Sheridan, Wilde, and Shaw prominently boast two-faced, English characters, few include as many as *The Critic* (for example, Dangle, Sneer, Plagiarist, and Puff). Ultimately, this is just one more reason why Rough Magic's Hibernicizing of this play was unnecessary and deeply perplexing.

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