



ARTIGOS



FROM HOUSE TO HOME: SPATIAL INTERSECTIONS IN *BAILEGANGAIRE* AND *A THIEF OF A CHRISTMAS*, BY TOM MURPHY

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Abstract

Late twentieth-century Ireland was permeated by the paradoxical relationship between modernity and tradition, which is captured in two plays by Irish dramatist Tom Murphy, *Bailegangaire* (1993b) and *A Thief of a Christmas* (1993a). This article aims at examining the urge felt by the three primary female characters, Mommo and her granddaughters, Mary and Dolly, to come to terms with their respective pasts and feel “at home” in the present. A study of spatial elements that intersect the two plays both onstage, the A-Zone, and offstage, the diagetic space, is conducted. Hence, this paper demonstrates that it is precisely

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these spatial “juxtapositions” and “superpositions” of time and space that occur between the two plays which enable the characters’ conflicts to be solved as a form of accommodating the traditional peasant play to a new and modernized Ireland.

Keywords

Tradition. Space. Home.

“Home is the desired place that is fought for and established as the exclusive domain of a few. It is not a neutral place, it is a community”
(GEORGE, 1999, p. 9).

Irish theater has undergone numerous changes as of its creation which, according to John P. Harrington (1991), dates back to 1897 with the declaration of intentions to construct an Irish National Theatre as opposed to the English, agreed upon by William Butler Yeats, Edward Martin, and Lady Augusta Gregory. Harrington (1991) sustains that the purpose of a national drama, in late 1890’s Ireland, was primarily to represent its audience on the stage in an improved and elevated way. This practice would become troublesome when what was staged worked against the image the audience had of itself. A famous example of this was the riots which took place in 1907 during the staging of J. M. Synge’s (1995) *Playboy of the Western World*, based on the story told by the anti-heroic protagonist, Christy Mahon, of his committing patricide, which was taken as an insult against public morals.

In order to illustrate this practice, Shaun Richards (2004) makes use of Christopher Murray’s (1997) metaphor of the Irish Theatre as a mirror held up to the nation, but that would reflect reality in a distorted way. This idea of the Irish theatre mirroring the nation would become even more complex with the advent of modernity in 1960s Ireland. Richards asserts that historian Terence Brown unmasks the ideology in which the recently independent Irish Free State was informed: by the “inhibiting values expressed through the peasant play¹ in which individual desire was subordinate to communal dictates”, and the outcome of this was “an ‘attitude of xenophobic suspicion’ of all

¹ The peasant play is characterized for depicting Irish rural life and the customs, dialect and stories of the Irish country people. This kind of play became popular during the Irish Literary Revival for it aimed to capture the essence of what it was to be Irish. For more information, see Clarke (1982).

manifestations of modernization and a deep reverence for the Irish past” (BROWN *apud* RICHARDS, 2004, p. 5).

However, this reverence of the past and aversion toward modernization would ease off in the 1960s under the government of Prime Minister, or Teaoiseach, Sean Lemass and his intent to open Ireland to the world, along with T. K. Whitaker’s Report on Economic Development, in 1958. The aftermath of this moment of transition, which also served as a cultural changing point, is captured by the Irish theatre as of the 1960s, when, according to Christopher Murray (1997, p. 162), “drama enjoyed a second renaissance”. In this regard, Richards (2004, p. 8) explains that the “ancient idealism” upon which the peasant plays of the early 20th century were based gave way to an innovative style that reflected a new content and an interrogation of the issues that the country was now facing, informed by the economic directive that “[i]t would be well to shut the door on the past and to move forward”.

Hence, a new type of literary representation of Ireland began to emerge, and since “the economic impulse was directed towards modernization, the stage image of the society, which for so long suggested the essential continuity of tradition and unity of culture, had also to be contested” (RICHARDS, 2004, p. 8). The tendency was to reject the so-called “peasant play” in favor of the staging of the modernized Ireland of the 60’s and 70’s, as Brian Friel (*apud* MURRAY, 1997, p. 164) has suggested: “Write of Ireland today, the critics scream. Show us vodka and tonic society. Show us permissive Dublin. Forget about thatched cottages and soggy fields and emigration. We want the now Ireland”.

Therefore, the correlation between tradition and modernity is the main subject tackled in contemporary plays of the 1980s and 1990s in the sense that they have kept both the urban and rural as onstage or offstage spaces, though not as essentialist binaries, but as holistic and interconnected spaces. Spatial intersection is a fundamental element in Irish dramatist Tom Murphy’s² *Bailegangaire* (1993b) and *A Thief of a Christmas* (1993a), the plays that are the object of this study. For instance, what takes place in the urban space of the 1980’s Ireland of the play *Bailegangaire* (1993b), either represented by a somewhat urbanized Ireland, or by a foreign London where characters would immigrate in order to find work, affects life in the rural space.

2 Tom Murphy (1935-2018) is considered one of Ireland’s greatest dramatists, born in Galway, but who lived most of his life in Dublin. Murphy as an active playwright throughout his life, having worked closely with the Abbey and the Druid theatres in Dublin.

In *The Country and the City*, Raymond Williams (1973, p. 1) explains why these interconnections occur, for instead of being separate from the country, the existence of the city is, in fact, a consequence of its preceding existence:

In the long history of human settlements, this connection between the land from which directly or indirectly we all get our living and the achievements of human society has been deeply known. And one of these achievements is the city: the capital, the large town, a distinctive form of civilization.

This paradoxical relationship that unfolds between rural and urban spaces is dramatized in Tom Murphy's plays by his use of traditional settings in the midst of the 1980's, when Ireland was experiencing the effects of modernization. These effects, according to Nicholas Green (1999, p. 219), represent "an attempt by a modern playwright to come to terms with the older, by now classic phase of Irish drama and, in refiguring it, to work through a past which still lies buried below the surface of an only partly modernized Ireland".

Bailegangaire was written after, and is in a way a sequel of, *A Thief of a Christmas*, having been first staged in the year of 1985 by the Druid Theatre Company, Galway. The choice of the onstage spaces of the two plays is by no means made at random; it went against the new tendency of showing contemporary Ireland onstage, seeing that the setting where the action takes place is, at a first glance, traditional. In *Bailegangaire* the stage is the interior of a cottage kitchen thatched house, the idealized rural setting in Irish Drama since the late 19th century, contrasted by the presence of few modern conveniences, "a cooker, a radio (which is switched on), electric light – a single pendant" (MURPHY, 1993b, p. 91). In *A Thief of a Christmas* it is a pub, also a typical setting for the Irish peasant play, which can be considered an extension of the home for the pub owner and his family, who may live in that same space, and for the "neglected peasantry", as a place of gathering to discuss misfortunes, among other topics.

Bearing in mind that the paradoxical relationship between modernity and tradition permeates *Bailegangaire*, and that this is ultimately symbolized by the search on behalf of the three primary female characters, Mommo and her granddaughters, Mary and Dolly, to come to terms with their pasts and feel "at home" in the present, the aim of this article is to perform a study of the spatial elements in Murphy's *Bailegangaire* and examine the way in which they relate to those of *A Thief of Christmas*. Thus, I will examine the way in which the

onstage, or A-Zone, and offstage, or diagetic spaces³ of these plays intersect at certain moments of *Bailegangaire* for the characters' conflicts to be solved, as well as for the reader/ audience – being or not familiar with *A Thief of a Christmas* – to be able to grasp the complexities of the subliminal “juxtapositions” and “superpositions” (POULET, 1992, p. 76-79) of time and space that occurs between them.

The plot of *Bailegangaire*, is somewhat complex, for there are two threads of the main plot that take place simultaneously: one in the present, which is enacted onstage, and one that takes place in the past. A story is told repeatedly, and interruptedly, by Mommo, the grandmother, who takes over the role of the of the *seanchaí*, a traditional Irish oral story-teller. Initially, it might be challenging for the reader to decipher what her story is about and how it connects to the onstage events. Mommo's use of Hiberno-English, or Irish-English dialect, permeated with words in Irish, allows us to identify her as an old woman, which contrasts with the current English of the 1980s spoken by her daughters Dolly and Mary, representing a generational gap onstage.

Both *Bailegangaire* and *A Thief of a Christmas* are traditional, mimetic and naturalistic plays, meaning that the elements seen by the audience are to be taken as realistic. Anne Ubersfeld (1981 *apud* RICHARDS, 2010, p. 32) describes this kind of play as “a piece arbitrarily detached from the rest of the world, but which could be extended indefinitely”. This is relevant for my analysis as I will rely on the concepts of A-Zone, which refers to the world that that is seen on the stage, coined by Ubersfeld, and that of the diagetic space which, for Richards, refers to the conditions of the offstage world.

In *Bailegangaire*, there is an intersection between three different levels of times and spaces. There are two main diagetic spaces that help us locate the onstage play historically: the first refers to the present, it is the modernized Ireland of the 1980s immediately surrounding the house, represented by Dolly, who seeks to keep pace with modernity, for she rides a motorcycle, has linoleum all over the floor of her house and who breaks the news about the closing of the Japanese computer plant where her husband, Stephen, was supposedly working. The second diagetic space is represented by the past, the Ireland of the 1950's, which is time when Mommo's story takes place. There is also the

3 Diagetic spaces are those that are mentioned onstage, but that refer to events which have taken place offstage, in a different time and/or space. For instance, in *Bailegangaire* there are references to events which have taken place earlier in time, that are described in *A Thief of a Christmas*.

A-Zone, the onstage space of the interior of the cottage-kitchen, which is the limbo, a place where time is stagnant, caught somewhere between the past and the present; and those who inhabit it, Dolly's sister Mary and Mommo, are at the same time victims and agents of this paralysis.

A routine of cleaning, cooking and making tea is established onstage by Mary as a means of avoiding the feeling of self-consciousness by "keeping busy". Yet, it becomes clear that she is getting tired of performing these chores, and of listening to Mommo's story-telling. This vicious cycle is suddenly broken by Dolly, who invades the private space of the cottage-kitchen bringing along a bottle of vodka for her older sister's birthday. The bottle of vodka is a significant stage prop, for it is common in Irish theater practice that, by drinking alcohol, the characters will eventually open up to one another and expose their intimate problems and conflicts, causing drastic changes in the course of events and in their lives.

Owing to the heated dialogue that follows between the sisters, the different secrets kept by each of the three are gradually unveiled: Mary had first been chosen by Stephen, Dolly's husband, but instead, she went to London to practice as a nurse. However, she was unable to adapt to exile, which resulted in her coming back to a situation that brings her close a nervous breakdown. Dolly is also uncomfortable in the home she has constructed for herself; although she does not have financial problems, when her husband, who has also emigrated to London to work, returns to Ireland she is beaten her for unfaithfulness. Furthermore, Dolly's pregnancy out of wedlock is revealed, and she wishes to either give Mary the child, or get rid of it. Dolly and Mary's senile grandmother mother, Mommo, is on the verge of being put into the County Home; she is caught in the past and repeatedly tells the same unfinished story about a laughing competition with disastrous consequences, and how the town of Bóchtan was renamed *Baileganair*, or the town without laughter.

All three are consciously – in the case of Dolly and Mary – or unconsciously – in the case of Mommo – unsatisfied with their present condition, wishing to escape, and to feel in peace with the place where they are at; they want to feel at "home":

MARY. Do you remember Daddy?

DOLLY. Well, the photographs. [...] Y'are, y'are, too serious.

MARY. I suppose I am. I don't know what I'm trying to say. (*Sighs.*) Home (MURPHY, 1993b, p. 98).

The word “home” is constantly spoken by the characters of *Bailegangaire*, for the edifice represented by the house is not synonymous to home, as it offers no refuge. Homi Bhabha (1992), in “The World and the Home”, states that to be “unhomely” is not to be homeless, but the estranging sense of the relocation of the home and the world into an unhallowed place. According to Bhabha (1992), the “unhomely” has less to do with forcible eviction and more to do with the uncanny literary and social effects of enforced social accommodation, or historical migrations and cultural relocations. This can be understood when considering that, once the Irish have suffered the consequences of British imperialism, the idea of homeland is challenged and becomes a site for individual crisis.

According to Robert Fraser (2000, p. 158), the idea of home is generally associated with the image of the house, for in postcolonial literatures it can be seen as “an edifice which embodies the condition of the nation” that can stand for fragile social stability. In *Bailegangaire*, the cottage-kitchen house is a metaphor for the idea of the nation, which becomes problematized by the characters’ not feeling at home within its walls. The old, traditional structure must yield to modernity and adapt to the changes that the world is facing in order to shelter the younger generations, that is, to, in some way, accommodate changes.

The feeling of “unhomeliness” is also present in Murphy’s other play, *A Thief of a Christmas*, which takes place in a time before that of *Bailegangaire*. In *A Thief of a Christmas*, a younger Mommo and her husband Seamus O’Toole are strangers in the small town of Bóchtan. The couple hadn’t been close and intimate for a long time, but they eventually reconnect in the public space of the pub; yet, their reunion will lead to a tragedy. In the pub, Seamus is encouraged by his wife to take part in a laughing contest and wins, but ends up losing his life a few days after knowing that his grandson, Tom, had died after having been burned with paraffin for having been left alone with his sisters, Mary and Dolly that same day. This tragic incident will only be revealed at the end of *Bailegangaire*, and the outcome of this is Mommo’s guilt, pointed out by her granddaughter Dolly, that leads her to being caught in the past, in the pub where the action of *A Thief of Christmas* takes place:

DOLLY. Wait’ll we have a drink. She’s guilty.

MARY. Guilty of what?

DOLLY. I don’t know (MURPHY, 1993b, p. 98-99).

One possible way of approaching the spatial intersections in *Bailegangaire* is with the use of Georges Poulet's (1992) conceptions of space and time applied to Marcel Proust's works. Poulet (1992) sustains that occasionally there are moments when a sensation felt in the present, like the smell of the *madeleine*, coincides with an already existent one, one that is enclosed in our memory, which results in the liberation of past remembrances and, thus, the lost moments are recovered and relocated to the present. Therefore, he continues, thanks to memory, time is not lost, and, consequently space, which comes along with it, is not lost either. Poulet (1992) explains that when time is recovered, so is space, thanks to the movements that are triggered by memory. Thus, space is capable of being transported, as it is not an ultimately fixed entity.

What I refer to simply as an intersection of different times and spaces, actually occurs in two different forms: first by what Poulet calls "juxtaposition", and finally, by "superposition". To Poulet (1992), juxtaposition presupposes simultaneity of realities, while superposition implies the effacement of one reality for another to assume its place. Thus, juxtaposition is one space being placed next to another, like a sequence of stained-glass windows, each one depicting a different story, but sharing the same general space. This notion of spatial juxtaposition can be applied to *Bailegangaire* in the following excerpt of the play, when Mommo is searching for sweets:

MOMMO. Where was I? ...The joslin' and pushin' (then her eyes searching the floor, in half-memory, lamenting trampled sweets.) The sweets.

MARY. Here they are. (The ones that Dolly brought.)

MOMMO. The sweets (Rejecting the sweets, her eyes still searching the floor). In the jostlin' and pushin' ... The sweets for her children trampled under her boots (MURPHY, 1993b, p. 139-140).

At first, Mary thinks that those were the sweets that Dolly had brought to her, which she refuses them and continues her search. The sweets she is looking for are not located in the A-Zone, but in the diagetive space of the pub of *A Thief of a Christmas* as we can see in the didascaly, or stage directions, followed by Mommo's line, "the stranger's wife" in *A Thief of a Christmas*:

Now that they have returned to their places, we see the STRANGER'S WIFE, face aghast, on her knees, looking at the floor. In the jostling and pushing the three sticks

of rock (the sweets) were knocked out of her hand and trampled underfoot. She picks up crumbles of sweets and looks at them – dust.

STRANGER'S WIFE. The sweets. (*A whisper*) (MURPHY, 1993a, p. 207).

Hence, we find that in *Bailegangaire*, Mary's and Mommos's actions are juxtaposed, for they are occurring simultaneously with the character sharing the same space, but each in their own private worlds. This occurs throughout the play, in various levels: Mommo telling her story while Dolly and Mary are discussing, or Dolly and Mommo talking and leaving Mary out, or Dolly discussing her marital problems while Mary is helping Mommo finish her story.

However, the *tour the force* occurs when different times and spaces become, using Poulet's (1992) term, superposed, for this is the key moment that will lead to the solution of the conflict and the *denouement*. There is no equivalent to Proust's *madeleine* in *Bailegangaire*. Nevertheless, there is an instance of connection between the granddaughter and the grandmother when both engage in telling the same story and Mary actually becomes the mouthpiece for the conclusion of Mommo's tale that is enacted in *A Thief of a Christmas*. Poulet (1992) describes this movement as a moment of displacement in which there is a transposition of a certain spatial image of the past to the present. This is a crucial moment of intersection when the A-Zone of *A Thief of a Christmas* momentarily penetrates that of *Bailegangaire* once Mary and Mommo reenact it together:

MOMMO. Save the children, until they arrive at the age of reason. Now! Bochtán forever is Bailegangaire.

MARY. To conclude.

MOMMO. [...] 'Twas dawn when they got home. Not without trepidation? But the three small children, like ye, their care wor safe an' sound fast asleep on the settle. Now, my fondlings, settle down an' be saying your prayers. I forget what happened to the three sticks of rock. Hail Holy Queen – Yes? Hail our lives? – Yes? Our sweetness and our hope.

MARY. It was a bad year for the crops, a good one for the mushrooms, and all three small children were waiting for their gran and their granddad to come home. Mommo? My bit. Mary was the eldest. She was the clever one and she was seven. Dolly, the second, was like a film star and she was granddad's favorite. [...] And Tom, who was the youngest, when he got excited would go pacing o'er and oe'r the boundary of the yard (MURPHY, 1993b, p. 120).

In this excerpt, Mary is able to recover Mommo's story and continue it until she reaches the end, adding to it their brother Tom's death in the fire that took place when her grandparents stayed in Bochtán for the laughing contest between Seamus and Costello, that is dramatized in *A Thief of a Christmas*:

MARY. [...] And then May Glynn's mother came and they took Tom away to Galway, where he died... Two mornings later, and he had only just put the kettle on the hook, didn't granddad, the stranger, go down too, slow in a swoon... Mommo? MOMMO. It got him at last (MURPHY, 1993b, p. 121).

Throughout *Bailegangaire* there is a failure in communication among the characters, who often speak at the same time, and it takes much effort for them to be heard by one another. Yet, the kernel of this conflict lies in Mommo's guilt, which keeps her mind shut into the diegetic space of *A Thief of a Christmas*. The conflict lived by the three characters is only solved after Mommo finishes her story and communication is reestablished once she recognizes Mary as her granddaughter again. The "strangers", mentioned by Mommo in her story-telling, also turn into Mommo and her husband, Seamus:

MOMMO. Be saying yere prayers now an' ye'll be goin' to sleep. To thee do we send up our sighs – Yes? For yere Mammy an' Daddy an' Grandad is (*who are*) in heaven.

MARY. And Tom.

MOMMO. Yes. An' he only a ladeen was afeared of the gander. An' tell them they're all good. Mourning and weeping in this valley of tears. And sure a tear isn't such a bad thing, Mary, and haven't we everything we need here, the two of us (MURPHY, 1993b, p. 162, my emphasis).

Thus, in *Bailegangaire* the closing events – Mommo's story being finished, Mary becoming her granddaughter and the recognition of Tom's death by referring to him in the past – symbolize an attempt for Irish theatre to come to terms with modernity, to include, not to exclude, for it to be both traditional and modern. Dolly's baby to be born, who will be named Tom, if a boy, embodies this hope of reconciliation between present and past.

Once the conflict between the A-Zone and the diegetic space of Mommo's remembrances is solved, the house becomes home to Mary, to Mommo, to the future child and even to Dolly, for although she does not live in the house, she will be helping her sister financially in supporting the baby, as we see in Mary's final speech:

MARY. To conclude. It's a strange and old place alright, in whatever wisdom He has to have made it this way. But in whatever wisdom there is, in the year of 1984, it was decided to give that – fambly ... of strangers another chance, and a brand new baby to gladden their *home* (MURPHY, 1993b, p. 170, my emphasis).

A new beginning is crafted by the characters who undergo a process of transforming their “house” into their “home”; therefore, hope stems from relationships that already exist, but which are crafted into something new, as tradition and modernity are momentarily joined. The “fambly”, constituted by three different generations of people – grandmother, granddaughters, and future great-grandchild – sharing the same bed in the denouement, symbolize the hope for the family to be in peace and to feel “at home” in their homeland.

I conclude with Shaun Richards’ (1989, p. 87) idea that, “In opposition to postmodernism’s parodic/ironic relationship to history, as to the tendency of many Irish intellectuals to reject the master narrative, Murphy is engaged with the past, but above all a past which forms a continuum with the present and the future”. As I have pointed out, home is an allegory for the nation, and in letting Mommo finish her story, like the *seanchaí*, trying to tell the story of Ireland, the past is reconciled with the present. *Bailegangaire* tackles the concepts of tradition and modernity in an ingenious way as it is a play that continues to make use of the structure represented by the traditional pub-cottage-kitchen setting but under a different historical and dramatic context of the 1980s, which subverts the early aesthetic forms of Synge and Yeats-Gregory, resulting in a new form of accommodating the old peasant play to the new and modernized Ireland, thus opening the path to further changes of the dramatic tradition that were to come in the future.

Entre casa e lar: interseções espaciais em *Bailegangaire* e *A Thief of a Christmas*, de Tom Murphy

Resumo

No final do século XX, a Irlanda era permeada pela relação paradoxal entre modernidade e tradição, captada em duas peças do dramaturgo irlandês Tom Murphy, *Bailegangaire* (1993b) e *A Thief of a Christmas* (1993a). Este artigo tem como objetivo analisar o ensejo das três principais personagens femininas,

Mommo e suas netas, Mary e Dolly, de chegar a um acordo com seus respectivos passados e de se sentirem “em casa” no presente. Assim, é realizado um estudo dos elementos espaciais que entrecruzam as duas peças, tanto no palco, na zona-A, como fora dele, no espaço diegético. Logo, este artigo demonstra que são precisamente as “justaposições” e “superposições” espaciais de tempo e espaço, que ocorrem entre as duas peças, que permitem que os conflitos das personagens sejam resolvidos como forma de acomodar a tradicional peça camponesa a uma Irlanda modernizada.

Palavras-chave

Tradição. Espaço. Casa.

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