

# AUDACIOUS MUTABILITIES\*

Paulo Eduardo  
Carvalho  
Universidade do Porto

## RESUMO:

Em 1997, com *Mutabilitie*, Frank McGuinness seguiu as pisadas de Thomas Kilroy e Brian Friel – respectivamente com *The O'Neill* (1969) e *Making History* (1988) –, voltando a sua atenção para os finais do século XVI como um imagem capaz de iluminar algumas das realidades políticas contemporâneas do dramaturgo. "Audacious Mutabilities" recupera a perturbada recepção crítica da peça, explorando não tanto a complexa rede intertextual de material histórico, cultural e literário que caracteriza a peça, mas antes a sua ousada estrutura dramatúrgica. A sugestão final é que, fora de um quadro de leitura estritamente irlandês e inglês, algumas teorias europeias sobre a evolução das formas dramáticas contemporâneas ajudam, talvez, a melhor iluminar a audácia artística do dramaturgo.

## ABSTRACT:

In 1997, with *Mutabilitie*, Frank McGuinness followed the footsteps of Thomas Kilroy and Brian Friel – respectively with *The O'Neill* (1969) and *Making History* (1988) – turning his attention to the late sixteenth century as an image of contemporary political circumstance. "Audacious Mutabilities" recalls the troubled critical reception of that play, exploring not so much its complex intertextual web of historical, cultural and literary material, but especially its daring dramaturgical structure. The final suggestion of this essay is that, outside a strict Anglo-Irish frame of reference, some foreign European theorization on the evolution of contemporary dramatic forms illuminates perhaps better the artistic audacity of the playwright.

## PALAVRAS-CHAVE:

Irlanda, dramaturgia,  
contemporâneo, formas  
dramáticas

>>

## KEYWORDS:

Ireland, drama,  
contemporary, dramatic  
forms

In a study of contemporary Irish drama, published in 1994, in which Frank McGuinness was used both as a chronological and artistic point of arrival, Anthony Roche characterized the playwright as "the most disruptive and experimental of contemporary Irish dramatists, adding that "[i]n all his plays he subjects the syntax of stage language to the greatest fragmentation, insisting on discontinuity and a formal foregrounding of intimate primal speech" (Roche, 1994: 11-12). Having started his work for the stage in 1982 – only 12 years before the study by Roche –, with a play called *The Factory Girls*, McGuinness rapidly acquired the reputation of an experimentalist, which, during that first period of his career, could no better be exemplified than with the texts *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme* (1985) and *Carthaginians* (1988). The dramaturgical singularity of these and other experiences, frequently dedicated to the exploration of "conflicted" – when not even traumatic – "pressure points of Irish history", earned him the reputation of an original and unpredictable artist, permanently committed to the extension of his range as a dramatist: experiences in dramatic form, together with a bold interpellation of Irish (past) history and (current) conditions, became something to be expected from any new play by Frank McGuinness.

In 1997, the writer followed the footsteps of Thomas Kilroy and Brian Friel – respectively with *The O'Neill* (1969) and *Making History* (1988) – turning his attention to the late sixteenth century as an image of contemporary political circumstance. McGuinness places the action of his play *Mutabilitie* in the immediate aftermath of the Munster Wars, creating two separate but connected communities, that of the English and that of the Irish, respectively installed in a castle and in the woods. The first one includes Edmund, his wife Elizabeth, his children, and William, a visitor rescued from the waters. Living with Edmund and working as his Irish servants – and also as spies for the Irish camp – are a female bard, the File,

and Hugh, son to Sweeney, the dispossessed Irish chieftain living in the woods with his wife Maeve, his daughter Annas and his other son Niall, as well as a priest named Donal. The two visitors to this domain are William's friends Ben and Richard.

The characters are, thus, the result of historical and literary people that lived in Ireland at that moment of history, like the author of *The Faerie Queen* and *The Two Mutabilitie Cantos* that give the title to the play, Edmund Spenser; others that are simply imagined there, but without any historical evidence for that, like William Shakespeare and Richard Burbage; and still others that come from Celtic legend, and in fact from different legends, like Sweeney and Maeve. Although no direct reference is made to Hugh O'Neill, the names of the two sons of Sweeney, Hugh and Niall, work as a forceful suggestion of that other historical figure's role in that particular moment of Irish history. >>

The play is, as someone has already suggested, "fertile territory for academics in quest of literary allusions and evidences of intertextuality" (Lojek, 2004: 139), simply because it is an intrinsic part of McGuinness's dramaturgical project to play with canonical texts, the same way that theatre is presented as "a place of mutability, where individuals may transform their roles and genders and passions (...). This transformational quality of theatre is part of the play's general theme of changeability" (*idem*, 142). As the pragmatic William says at a given moment:

I have been... I have also been a king and his queen and a boy and his girl and a lover and a clown, all these trades come naturally to me when I sit alone and sometimes I hear sweet airs in the fire, throw water on the fire, let the ashes sing - .  
(McGuinness, 1997: 20)

The more mystical female File, who believes on a prophecy that said a saviour would arrive through the water, insists on the more transformative possibilities of theatre:

You wish to turn away from the all-consuming theatre, why?... I have imagined this place... It is not now a sacred dwelling? Is it not a temple where the remembered dead rise from their graves?... Sins are forgiven there... Cries are heard... Prayers are answered... Is it not there that your race now speaks to God? Is that theatre not your country's true place of reformation?... Are you not a priest in this new religion that may attach itself most secretly, most devoutly to the old abandoned faith? (*idem*, 56-57)

236>237

It would be important to remember that *Mutabilitie* appeared at a time when an intense reappraisal of both Spenser's and Shakespeare's work and their relation to Ireland was taking place, through the organization of conferences and the publication of many new and influential studies, that simultaneously reflected and contributed to the ongoing discussion in the historical and literary fields between revisionist, post-nationalist and postcolonial approaches, just to mention some of the perspectives used. Even before its opening in London's Royal National Theatre, in November 1997, in a production directed by Trevor Nunn, *Mutabilitie* was given a rehearsed reading the 22nd March 1997, by the company of the Abbey theatre directed by Patrick Mason, within the context of the conference *Shakespeare and Ireland*, organized at the Trinity College Dublin. McGuinness himself would write the Foreword to the volume with the same title published later that year that examined the complex relationship between the most celebrated icon of the British establishment and Irish literary and cultural traditions. In the previous year, and coinciding with the quadricentennial of the publication of the six complete books of *The Faerie Queen* in 1596, Professor Anne Fogarty had already edited a special issue of the *Irish University Review* dedicated to *Spenser in Ireland*. Two of the contributors to that volume, Willy Maley and Andrew Hadfield, co-edited that same year the volume *Representing Ireland: Literature and the Origins of Conflict, 1534-1660*, and in the following year a new publication of the contentious *A View of the State of Ireland*. The year of 1997

also saw the publication of other contributions for a more complex understanding of that period and to the relation of the work of some of its major literary protagonists to Ireland, like Willy Malley's *Salvaging Spenser: Colonialism, Culture and Identity*, Andrew Hadfield's *Spenser's Irish Experience: Wilde Fruite and Salvage Soyl*, and Christopher Highley's *Shakespeare, Spenser and the Crisis in Ireland*.

The coincidence of the publication and of the English premiere of McGuinness's *Mutabilitie* with this renewed interest in late sixteenth century history and literature reinforced the participation of the play in the contemporary cultural debate; like Csilla Bertha suggested in an essay published in 2002:

>>

[T]he exploration of its ideas may lead not only to clarifying notions of cultural identity, hybridity, difference, otherness, the relationship between change and stasis, continuity and disruption, source culture and homogenization, but also to illuminating the contradictory nature of some familiar statements of post- and neo-colonial roles. (Bertha, 2002: 320)

The fact is that since 1997, *Mutabilitie* has been read not only as a "postcolonial treatment of the colonial situation" (*ibidem*) and as a metaphor for the Belfast agreement that was evolving while the play ran at the Royal National Theatre (see Mikami, 2002: 113), but also as a continuation of McGuinness's exploration of the relationship between poetry and culture and of the social responsibility of the artist (see Lojek, 2004). Other incursions into the play used the historiographic writings of Walter Benjamin and particularly the German philosopher's suggestion that "the relationship between history and the dramatic text may take (...) not [a] direct and literal form but rather [an] indirect, oblique, and allegorical [one]" (Hurt, 2000: 279), or even the writings of Michel Foucault and Homi Bhabha, isolating the concepts of heterotopic, liminal or in-between space and cultural hybridity for an exploration of the use of performative space in *Mutabilitie*.

This extraordinary critical fortune is all the more surprising for a play that was greeted on its English premiere with “mixed reactions” – so “mixed” in fact that they compromised the previously planned presentation of that same production at the National Theatre of Ireland, that is, the Abbey. Nicholas de Jongh, in the pages of the *Evening Standard*, sarcastically presented the play “about as clear and inviting as the muddy Irish stream into which a feverish William Shakespeare tumbles during the very first scene”; Michael Billington, in the *Guardian*, reinforced the general consensus that “McGuinness has put too much into one play”; Charles Spencer, writing for the *Daily Telegraph*, involuntarily suggested a very interesting clue for the exploration of the Irish playwright’s experimental dramaturgy, when he stated that the “hapless McGuinness appears to have been possessed by the spirit of that ranting Wildman of the theatre Howard Barker”, insisting that much of that “over-written play” was “windy rhetoric”. When a new production of *Mutabilitie* opened in Ireland, at the Samuel Beckett Theatre, Trinity College, directed by Michael Caven, in September 2000 “received opinion maintained that McGuinness needed a good editor” (Lojek, 2004: 155).

Although some Irish theatre critics revealed a more favourable opinion on the play than their English colleagues – John Waters, for instances, in the pages of the *Irish Times*, spoke of McGuinness’s “best work”, considering that the experience offered “a sacred eruption of the lived possibility of history [making] you think and feel at the same time” (Waters, 2001) –, the fact remains that most of later critical explorations of *Mutabilitie*, which I briefly mentioned above, kept on demonstrating a shared unease if not even a more direct criticism of what is frequently presented as an artistic and dramaturgical failure.

Christopher Murray, for example, didn’t hesitate to consider that the “play is so rich in ideas and themes, so rich, I would maintain, that it finally collapses under the impossible

burden and, to borrow a line from Hamlet, 'growing to a pleurisy, / Dies in [its] own too much'" (Murray, 2002: 162-263). Helen Lojek, within a larger study dedicated to the playwright, *Contexts for Frank McGuinness's Drama*, also admitted that although he had created "a stage world that makes its own rules and establishes its own reality", "the resulting tragical-comical-historical-pastoral risks collapsing into the black hole of its own intertextuality" (Lojek, 2004: 158). Even Csilla Bertha that, as mentioned above, dedicated a long essay to the play's capacity to deconstruct "stereotypical and hierarchical binary oppositions" (Bertha 2002: 323), insisted on the idea that *Mutabilitie* is an "enormously rich – too rich, too long and somewhat overwritten – play" (*idem*, 331).

>>

Curiously enough, in spite of these negative remarks, all these critical explorations and others show themselves to be highly stimulated by the play's "ideas" and even managed, in most of the cases, to give ample evidence of many of *Mutabilitie's* "audacious" dramaturgical strategies, regarding the different categories of plot, characterisation or dialogue. For instances, Christopher Murray, acknowledging the playwright's believe in drama as "a ritual of healing", also recognized that his vision is dominantly emotional and not logical:

Far from being dialectical, McGuinness writes organically, scene upon scene, theme upon theme. There is a burgeoning of material, or character interaction, marked by a fierce expenditure of energy in the romantic mode. There is in his work usually no clear through-line of dramatic action. In its place persists a Blakean neglect of the logic of the plot development in favour of scenes autonomously existent and emotionally viable: discrete, intense, polarized, lyrical. (Murray, 2002: 172)

Helen Lojek characterizes the "excessive" nature of McGuinness's play as "lush, almost operatic", identifying the audacious heterogeneity of the play's ingredients and dramatic

genres, what she calls the “mix of naturalism, historicism, mysticism and madcap imagination that went into *Mutabilitie*” (Lojek, 2004: 151, 154-155). Émile Jean Dumay also suggests that the playwright takes the reader or the spectator “round other strange realms and along unexpected avenues”, adding that the play “evidences McGuinness’s taste for experiment in dramatic manner and theme”:

The various worlds which the play is made of incessantly overlap to make up a sort of fade in/fade out: poetic incantation and history, closely interwoven, resemble the bog where water and land are the components of two distinct worlds but, at the same time, make up a whole landscape, which both entices and allures explores and puts them off. (Dumay, 2001: 211)

240>241

Others speak of the “lyrical freedom” of *Mutabilitie* (Hurt, 2000: 285), of the play’s “complex, rather fragmented narrative” (Llewellyn-Jones, 2002: 55) and “episodic structure” (Bertha, 2002: 323). While there seems to be an agreement on the play’s “fantastic mode”, all these different approaches seem to vary in the dramatic genres according to which *Mutabilitie* would best be described: history play, allegory, myth and legend, neo-Shakespearian romance, Shavian dialectic, epic, even music is suggested as a parallel language for the play, etc.

Equally disturbing seems to be both the – in fact, very Shakespearean – ostensible “cross-fertilized style that blends high and low, ancient and modern culture” (Lojek, 2004: 152-153) and the bold theatricality of the whole project, together with a very productive and totally coherent metatheatricality that is somehow at the core of the play’s enactment of transformation and alternative temporary realities. Joseph Long, for instance, considers that “[t]he strangest moment, perhaps in this remarkable play occurs in the fourth act when William conjures spirits and the Irish appear and chant the Homeric story of Hecuba and Cassandra and the Fall of Troy”



(Longe, 2007: 132). Besides the more obvious political message, which also puts to the fore the title theme of inevitable change, this is the most clear moment in *Mutabilitie* in which role-playing “confronts rigidity, unsettles lazy thinking and mobilises possibility” (Jordan, 2000: 197).

In an interview, McGuinness’s himself regarded this scene in Act Four as one the two “breaking points” in the play, the first one being the “polyphonic chorus” at the end of the previous act in which eleven voices speak to us, from four different locations on stage, thus having four dialogues intercut. This was the scene that Michael Caven, the director of the Irish production of *Mutabilitie* in 2000, described as “an astonishing wave of sound”:

>>

It’s a scene in which you are wrapped up, pierced, and overwhelmed by language that comes at such a pace that you don’t have a chance to grab any particular moment. You have to let it rush into and through you. (Caven, 2002: 184-185).

If we bear in mind the fact that during his prolific career, Frank McGuinness has written not only original plays for the stage and scripts for both TV and film, but also many adaptations and rewritings of foreign plays – with a particular attention to some of the founding fathers of modern European drama, like Ibsen, Strindberg, Chekhov, Pirandello, Lorca and Brecht – it becomes easier to agree with Joseph Long when he suggests that “[t]he dense and complex texture of Frank McGuinness’s writing for the stage brings together many influences and experiences”; on the one hand all that appears “imbedded in the mainstream of Irish writing, bringing the creative imagination to bear upon the central issues of conflict, identity and survival”, on the other, and “[a]t the same time, it has remained open to the forces of renewal which characterize dramatic writing in continental Europe, in Great Britain and elsewhere over the past quarter of a century” (Long, 2007: 132). An it is still Long who suggests that:

It has the nature of a conscious project, consciously pursued. Frank McGuinness has extended the accepted boundaries of what can be represented on the Irish stage, and he has explored a full gamut of different modes of representation, contributing to widening the horizon of expectations which an audience brings to the experience of theatre. His theatre is, in a sense, a theatre of extremes. (...) The scope of the issues which McGuinness opens up in his theatre and the energy of his explorations in dramatic form have asserted the place of contemporary Irish theatre within the context of a European consciousness and imagination. (*idem*, 132-133)

242>243

I would dare to suggest that the resistance of some of the critics quoted before to *Mutabilitie*'s audacious "excess" and almost "monstrous" form can be best understood not in the more limited frame of an Irish or even Anglo-American-Irish dramatic tradition of, but precisely in the broader and larger movement of continental European drama since the turning of the nineteenth to the twentieth century, precisely the moment that coincided with and informed the creation of a native school of Irish drama, distant from the then English dominant models.

This is an evolution that many historians and theorists have tried to characterize, namely Peter Szondi in a very influential study originally published in 1965, *Theory of Modern Drama (1880-1950)*. Szondi was however still too much influenced himself by the Brechtian project to recognize that modern drama manifested many other forms besides the trend towards what he described, following Brecht, as an "epicization". At the end of the eighties, the French theorist Jean-Pierre Sarrazac published a stimulating essay called *L'Avenir du drame* – that would be *The Future of Drama*, although, to my knowledge, it has never been translated into English – in which he recovered the ancient concept of "rhapsody", "rhapsode" and "rhapsodic" to describe what he also calls the "monster", that is, the many audacious forms of contemporary drama as opposed to the "beautiful beast" dominated by the Aristotelian dogma.

This was the way found by Sarrazac to describe the

fragmentation of the plot as well as the deconstruction of dialogue and characterization that were put forward at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and that still seem to be active today. This "rhapsodization" of dramatic forms is the way suggested to express the hybridization of genres (dramatic, epic, lyric, argumentative...) in a movement that Sarrazac characterizes as dominated by an "endless overflow" – "débordement" is the original inspired French expression. In the afterword he added to the second edition of his essay in 1999, Sarrazac insisted on the idea of a "rhapsodic impulse" to express the movements of continental European contemporary drama, offering a list of some of its main characteristics – a list that I'll quote, but in the original French, because I see there some interesting possibilities for the characterisation of such an audacious project like *Mutabilité*:

>>

[R]efus du «bel animal» aristotélicien et choix de l'irrégularité; kaléidoscope des modes dramatique, épique et lyrique; retournement constant du haut et du bas, du tragique et du comique; assemblage des formes théâtrales et extra-théâtrales, formant la mosaïque d'une écriture résultant d'un montage dynamique; percée d'une voix narratrice et questionnante qu'on ne saurait réduire au «sujet épique» szondien, dédoublement (...) d'une subjectivité tour à tour dramatique et épique (ou visionnaire)... (Sarrazac, 1999: 197)

Following Sarrazac's conceptual proposal, one of our colleagues here at our Faculty, Alexandra Moreira da Silva, has recently proposed the recovery of the idea of "dramatic poem" not to characterize a specific form, but instead to express the wide textual possibilities currently open to drama and its complex figuration on stage: a dramaturgical exploration open both to the dis-continuity of experimental forms and to the many contaminations that might lead to "anomalies", "degeneracies" and other dramatic "monstrosities", because those are the only "escape routes" for a subtle and incisive reinvention of drama (see Silva, 2007: *passim*).

Michael Caven, the already quoted director of the first Irish production of *Mutabilitie*, came close to an awareness of the play's audacity in an Irish – or English, for that matter – context, when he referred to McGuinness's creation as "[a] totally brave, ambitious play that breaks every contemporary rule of what a play is supposed to be about". Reacting to previous criticisms that alleged the play had a deficient structure, "that it tried to do too much and failed to deliver any form of clarity" (Caven, 2002: 176, 180), Caven also opposed a strictly textual or literary consideration of the play, insisting on its theatricality, "a different dimension of experience that we just don't find in the surface":

*Mutabilitie* is like that from beginning to end. It never for one second tries to pretend to be anything other than a huge *theatrical* experience, a Mass in a sense. Every scene is trying to use Frank's belief in the transformative, transcendent power of theatre to make people shift internally, to experience a thought or a feeling about themselves as individuals, about their imaginations, about their sense of Irishness or Englishness or whatever, that is not out of a pamphlet or out of a dogma or out of textbook, but something that comes at them from out the mist or out of the wind in the trees or out of the roughness of the earth. (*idem*, 179)

When the director speaks of the demand made by theatre that we need to apprehend together rather than merely comprehending and that "flying" – in the sense of a "leap of faith" or a "leap of vision" – "is a hugely important part of great theatre" he is somehow echoing Moreira da Silva cautionary comment regarding the reception of "rhapsodic drama":

Le plus difficile pour le lecteur/spectateur est peut-être de ne pas se laisser tenter ni par le besoin de cataloguer, de créer une grille bien maîtrisée, ni par l'automatisme d'un regard normatif et évaluatif qui irait forcément chercher le singulier et oublier la diversité et la pluralité (...). (Silva, 2007: 165)

That Frank McGuinness managed to pursue that vision out of a material so complex and historically traumatic as the

one he chose for *Mutabilitie* might function as the most clear demonstration that he might well be "one of the last voices that is writing theatre of imagination and poetry and metaphysics" (*idem*, 194). Besides, it would quite pointless and artistically incoherent to write a play whose fundamental truth regards the acceptance of change without using the subversive possibilities that grant theatre its continuing energy. <<

## NOTES

---

>>

\* This text was originally presented at an event organized by the *Instituto de Estudos Ingleses* (FLUP), "Evasion, Dispossession: Transit and Trauma in the Irish Imagination - A seminar to commemorate the Flight of the Earls (1607)", the 30th November 2007, Faculty of Letters of the University of Porto.

## WORKS CITED √

Bertha, Csilla (2002), "'They raigne ouer change, and doe their states maintaine': Change, Stasis and Postcoloniality in Frank McGuinness's *Mutabilitie*", *Irish University Review*, 32.2, Autum/Winter, 319-333.

Caven, Michael / Lojek, Helen (2002), "A Director's Perspective on *Mutabilitie*", in Lojek, 175-194.

Dumay, Émile Jean (2001), "Dramatic *Terræ Incognitæ*: A French Perspective", in Dermot Bolger (ed.), *Druids, Dudes and Beauty Queens: The Changing Face of Irish Theatre*, Dublin, New Island Books, 196-214.

Hurt, James (2000), "Frank McGuinness and the Ruins of Irish History", in Stephen Watt, Eileen Morgan and Shakir Mustafa (eds.), *A Century of Irish Drama: Widening the Stage*, Bloomington & Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 275-290.

Jordan, Eamonn (2000), "From Playground to Battleground: Metatheatricality in the Plays of Frank McGuinness", in Eamonn Jordan (ed.), *Theatre Stuff: Critical Essays on Contemporary Irish Theatre*, Dublin, Carysfort Press, 194-208.

Llewellyn-Jones, Margaret (2002), *Contemporary Irish Drama and Cultural Identity*, Bristol & Portland, Intellect.

Lojek, Helen (ed.) (2002), *The Theatre of Frank McGuinness: Stages of Mutability*, Dublin, Carysfort Press.

-- (2004), *Contexts for Frank McGuinness's Drama*, Washington, D. C., The Catholic University of America Press.

246>247

Long, Joseph (2007), "Frank McGuinness: Plays of Survival and Identity", in Hiroko Mikami, Minako Okamuro and Naoko Yagi (eds.), *Ireland on Stage: Beckett and After*, Dublin, Carysfort Press, pp. 121-134.

McGuinness, Frank (1997), *Mutabilitie*, London, Faber and Faber.

--/ Long, Joseph (2001), "In conversation", in Lilian Chambers, Ger FitzGibbon and Eamonn Jordan (eds.), *Theatre Talk: Voices of Irish Theatre Practitioners*, Dublin, Carysfort Press, pp. 298-307.

Mikami, Hiroko (2002), *Frank McGuinness and His Theatre of Paradox*, Gerrards Cross, Colin Smythe.

Murray, Christopher (2002), "On *Mutabilitie*", in Lojek, pp. 162-174.

Roche, Anthony (1994), *Contemporary Irish Drama: From Beckett to McGuinness*, Dublin, Gill & Macmillan.

Sarrazac, Jean-Pierre (1999), *L'Avenir du drame*, Belfort, Circé.

Silva, Alexandra Moreira da (2007), *La question du poème dramatique dans le théâtre contemporain*, Thèse de doctorat en Littérature comparée / Études théâtrales présentée à la Faculté de Lettres de l'Université de Porto et à l'Université de Paris III – Sorbonne Nouvelle.