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“‘Keep the Aspidistra Flying’: The Satirising of Celtic Tiger, ‘Aspirational’ Lifestyles in Mark O’Rowe’s Early Work”

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In recent years, Fintan O’Toole and other commentators have alleged that Irish writers have shirked the responsibility to capture and critique the changing Ireland within which they live.¹ O’Toole is particularly appalled by the fact that Irish writers have not written more explicitly about Celtic Tiger greed and corruption. It is certainly true that, over the past twenty years, many – or, indeed, most – of the major works produced by Ireland’s celebrated playwrights and fiction writers have been set in pre-Celtic Tiger Ireland, or (more worrying still) in an Ireland that seems quite unlike the one that we inhabit today.² This tendency to look back may be due to future shock – that is, Irish writers might have found it hard to describe such a rapidly changing environment. On the other hand, it may simply be because great literary works are often born out of an author’s memory. (After all, Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1922), like Beckett’s *Company* (1980) and Friel’s *Dancing at Lughnasa* (1990), did appear before the public many years after the autobiographical incidents they describe.)

Against this trend of “hiding” in the past, Irish writers for film and television have been much happier to dissect contemporary Ireland – both its economic boom and bust, and its rapidly changing culture and demographics. Screenplays which vividly capture (and archly

¹ Although O’Toole has written about this topic on several occasions in *The Irish Times*, his most extended treatment of the subject was his *Arts Lives* documentary about contemporary Irish drama, *Power Plays*, which was first broadcast on RTÉ One Television on 7 June 2011 at 10.15pm. This documentary and O’Toole’s columns on this subject have been much debated in the letters section of *The Irish Times*.

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² My assertions in this opening paragraph apply only to celebrated *individuals* who write plays and literary fiction; I am fully aware that companies who make devised theatre, such as Corn Exchange, Anu Productions, Brokentalkers, and TheatreClub have consistently engaged with contemporary issues in recent years.

comment upon) Celtic Tiger Ireland include Mark O'Halloran's *Adam and Paul* (2004) and *Garage* (2007); John Carney's *Bachelor's Walk* (2001-2003) and *Once* (2007) – the former co-written with Kieran Carney and Tom Hall; Eugene O'Brien's *Pure Mule* (2005-2009); and Michael McElhatton and Ian Fitzgibbon's *Paths to Freedom* (2000). Another such work is the brilliant screenplay to the 2003 film *Intermission*, written by Mark O'Rowe. The fact that this screenplay makes incisive observations about boom-time Dublin should come as little surprise; by the time of the film's release, O'Rowe had already demonstrated that he was one of the few playwrights of his generation interested in confronting contemporary Ireland. O'Rowe's first four major plays³ – *The Aspidistra Code* (1995), *From Both Hips* (1997), *Howie The Rookie* (1999), and the vastly underappreciated *Made In China* (2001) – clearly reveal that he was inspired, rather than intimidated by, the new energies present in the country.

As critics routinely point out, O'Rowe's work is deeply informed by his Tallaght working-class background. However, while such critics frequently dwell upon the ways in which this background informs O'Rowe's language, settings, and depictions of masculinity,⁴ they have (in the main) underestimated the degree to which his work deals directly with class issues. In O'Rowe's Celtic Tiger-era work, he repeatedly examines the unthinking, as well as the conscious, adoption of middle-class "aspirational" lifestyles by many Irish people during the boom. Indeed, in the early plays *The Aspidistra Code* and *From Both Hips* – accurately described by their creator as "kitchen-sink-crime-comedy-drama[s]"⁵ – and the screenplay to *Intermission*, O'Rowe satirises the attempts by many Irish people during the boom to acquire (or retain) certain "middle-class" material possessions, to change their accents, and to exchange their distinctly Irish way of life for a more homogenised, Western existence. His characters, like their real-life Irish counterparts, go to such extremes in order to "keep up with

³ O'Rowe began writing in 1994, and his early work also includes pieces written for Tallaght Youth Theatre and Dublin Youth Theatre, such as *Sulk* and *Buzzin' to Bits* (both 1996), and a one-act monologue about a snuff film director entitled *Anna's Ankle*, which was staged by Bedrock Productions at the Project Arts Centre in 1997. The play *Rundown* was written in 1996, but was not produced until New York's Origin Theatre Company took it on in 2002.

⁴ See, for example, Eamonn Jordan. "Urban Drama: Any Myth Will Do?". In *The Dreaming Body: Contemporary Irish Theatre*. Edited by Melissa Sihra and Paul Murphy. Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 2009. 9-25. 15-17; Ed Madden. "Exploring Masculinity: Proximity, Intimacy and *Chicken*". In *Irish Masculinities: Reflections on Literature and Culture*. Edited by Caroline Magennis and Raymond Mullen. Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2011. 77-88. 82-83; Michael Raab. "Mark O'Rowe". In *The Methuen Guide to Contemporary Irish Playwrights*. Edited by Martin Middeke and Peter Paul Shnierer. London: Methuen, 2010. 345-364. 351, 355; Brian Singleton. *Masculinities and the Contemporary Irish Theatre*. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011. 79-80; Mary Trotter. *Modern Irish Theatre*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008. 183-184.

⁵ Mark O'Rowe. Introduction. *Plays: One*. By Mark O'Rowe. London: Nick Hern Books, 2011. vii.

the Joneses” or to emulate the people they see in American and British visual and print media.

While O’Rowe considers himself (and is considered by others) an “apolitical” writer,⁶ his depiction of Celtic Tiger “aspirational” lifestyles is undoubtedly satirical. The definition of “satire” is hotly contested, but a helpful recent definition comes from critic Jill E. Twark:

Satirical humour is produced when humour is directed pointedly or aggressively against an object to illustrate its flaws or to censure it in some way. Satire may serve to teach or uplift morally.⁷

In *The Aspidistra Code*, *From Both Hips*, and *Intermission*, the humour that O’Rowe generates at the expense of characters struggling to become globalized, conformist, middle-class, Western citizens clearly indicates his negative feelings about the foolhardy choices they make. He encourages audience members to look in the mirror and see if they are making similar choices.

During the boom, O’Rowe was fascinated by the fact that so many Irish people (from all classes and backgrounds) were going to great lengths to gain the totems of Western, middle-class success. When I interviewed O’Rowe in 2008 (at the start of the downturn),⁸ he said that during the Celtic Tiger, there was intense social pressure to attain these items, because without them, you weren’t considered “a fully-fledged adult.”⁹ He noted that Irish people seemed to “buy into this peer pressure completely, without questioning it.”¹⁰ These sentiments echo those of other Irish commentators during the Celtic Tiger; as Colin Coulter lamented in 2003:

Over the last generation, the Republic of Ireland has, like other western societies, become a place that elevates having over being. It would seem,

⁶ Mark O’Rowe. Personal Interview. Eason’s Cafe, Dublin. 12 March 2008. Gerry Stembridge, who directed the rehearsed reading of *From Both Hips* at the Peacock and the Abbey production of *Made in China*, has also commented upon the apolitical nature of O’Rowe’s writing. (As quoted in Lilian Chambers, Ger FitzGibbon, Eamonn Jordan, Dan Farrelly, and Cathy Leeney, eds. *Theatre Talk: Voices of Irish Theatre Practitioners*. Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2001. 463.)

⁷ Jill E. Twark. *Humor, Satire, and Identity: Eastern German Literature in the 1990s*. Berlin: de Gruyter, 2007. 14.

⁸ Although September 2008 is often thought of as the start of the downturn, house prices and tax revenue began to drop steadily from March 2007. These developments, combined with the onset of the U.S. financial crisis in August 2007, meant that, by the time I interviewed O’Rowe in March 2008, he and I were both aware that the boom was over.

⁹ O’Rowe, 12 March 2008.

¹⁰ O’Rowe, 12 March 2008.

increasingly, that the principal way in which most southern Irish people are willing or able to express their sense of who they are is through the commodity form.¹¹

In O’Rowe’s breakthrough play *The Aspidistra Code* (first produced as a rehearsed reading on the Abbey Theatre’s Peacock stage in December 1995)¹² and the IFTA-winning screenplay *Intermission*, he contends that simply purchasing commodities associated with “adulthood” and “sophistication” does not actually indicate maturity or taste in the consumer. In *The Aspidistra Code*, the dangerous loan shark Drongo is redecorating his apartment to Celtic Tiger standard, complete with wooden floors and a Persian rug. Far from believing himself a cretin, Drongo regards himself as a “bohemian”,¹³ who has a taste for poetry and who previously refused to smoke anything but Gauloises and Gitanes. Likewise, the gangster Lahiff from *Intermission* is interested in purchasing some of the trappings of middle-class refinement, including a juicer, a wok, and extra virgin olive oil. As O’Rowe indicates in each work, however, changing these surfaces does not alter the fact that these men are anything but refined as people; in fact, they are violent maniacs with no moral “code”.¹⁴ A clear analogy can be drawn between these criminals and the “gangsters” in all walks of life during the Celtic Tiger (such as bankers and developers), who merely took on the appearance of “civility”, but who were, in fact, selfish and even more of a danger to society than Drongo and Lahiff.

Like Drongo and Lahiff, sympathetic working-class characters in these two works also attempt to rise socially by obtaining, or holding onto, the items often associated in America and Britain with a prosperous, middle-class lifestyle. In *The Aspidistra Code*, Brendan and Sonia, who owe Drongo money, are willing to risk their lives to hold onto an antique chair and an aspidistra plant that the loan shark wants for his Celtic Tiger pad. Antiques have the reputation of conferring “middle-class respectability” on those whose class status is suspect, or on those whose families have only recently risen in the world. Sonia, therefore, wants to hold on to the chair, not only because it may be monetarily valuable but

¹¹ Colin Coulter. “The End of Irish History?” *The End of Irish History?: Critical Reflections on the Celtic Tiger*. Edited by Colin Coulter and Steve Coleman. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003. 25.

¹² I consider this a Celtic Tiger-era work, because, according to most economists, the boom started in 1994. Indeed, Ireland’s economy was first referred to as the “Celtic Tiger” by Kevin Gardiner (an investment banker working at Morgan Stanley in London) in August of that year. (Coulter, “The End of Irish History?”, 3.)

¹³ Mark O’Rowe. *Plays: One*. London: Nick Hern Books, 2011. 51.

¹⁴ O’Rowe, *Plays: One*, 63; 70.

also because it confirms that her family is from a higher social class than her present circumstances might suggest. Drongo desires the chair because it will help him to mimic those who come from “old money”.

With regards to Brendan’s beloved aspidistras, they have long been associated with “middle-class respectability” in the British and Irish literary traditions. In the novel *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* (1938), George Orwell’s hero, Gordon, comes to view the aspidistra as “a symbol” of “lower-middle-class people” attempting to keep themselves “respectable”,¹⁵ and he reaches this conclusion after reading *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* (1914), by the Dublin socialist author Robert Tressell (real name Robert Noonan). Gordon is struck by Tressell’s account of “the starving carpenter who pawns everything but sticks to his aspidistra.”¹⁶ In O’Rowe’s play, Brendan foolishly risks the lives of himself, his wife, his brother, and his friend, as he tries to hang on to one of the many aspidistras that he has cultivated. For Drongo, the plant will add yet more respectability to his redecorated flat.

Just as Brendan and Sonia risk their lives for the sake of “middle-class” material possessions, Mick from *Intermission* – a bus driver who recently lost his job – takes to a life of crime in order to “keep up with the Joneses”. He plans to use the money he earns from a tiger-kidnapping to pay for a new garden shed and “lovely oak” flooring in his home.¹⁷ Mick, like Drongo and Lahiff, desires to partake in the new, prosperous Ireland, and part of that is having a lovely house finished to a “high spec”. According to O’Rowe, Mick is driven to obtain the garden shed and the wooden flooring not because he likes them personally, but because “his wife is pushing for them. She thinks having these things will make them the perfect couple.”¹⁸ A wife pushing a non-plussed husband to obtain such items is one that O’Rowe claims he often noted among couples of his acquaintance during the boom, and he thought it would be interesting to include that dynamic in his screenplay.¹⁹ In bowing to pressure from his wife, Mick (like Brendan and Sonia in *The Aspidistra Code*) jeopardises his very existence; this is O’Rowe’s comment on the fact that many Irish people took foolish

¹⁵ George Orwell. *The Complete Works of George Orwell, Volume Four: Keep the Aspidistra Flying*. Edited by Peter Davison. London: Secker & Warburg, 1987. 47; 267; 268.

¹⁶ Orwell, *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*, 47. Brendan Behan also associates the aspidistra with middle-class pretensions in his 1958 play, *The Hostage*.

¹⁷ Mark O’Rowe. Screenplay to *Intermission*. Directed by John Crowley. Buena Vista, 2003.

¹⁸ Mark O’Rowe, 12 March 2008.

¹⁹ O’Rowe, 12 March 2008.

risks during the Celtic Tiger (including jeopardising their financial futures) in order to rise economically and/or to appear as wealthy as their neighbours.

While these working-class characters may be quite materialistic, Sam – the middle-class bank manager from *Intermission* – is even more so. No longer fettered by the religious and legal constraints of decades past, Sam decides, in the spirit of the age, that he deserves more out of life and leaves his wife of fourteen years for a younger woman. As O’Rowe pointed out to me, there were men during the Celtic Tiger who believed they had “everything” – a good job, a nice house, a new car. In their minds, all that was “missing” was a beautiful, young wife, so Sam “trades in his old wife for a younger model”²⁰ – a common enough story in the rest of the Western world but new for Ireland. Even more tellingly, Sam (in O’Rowe’s words) is “not too angsty about it”;²¹ indeed, he tells his wife that he simply fell in love with another woman so she doesn’t “come into the equation”.²² O’Rowe is suggesting through this character that “Catholic Ireland is dead and gone” (including the famous, guilty, Catholic conscience). While many might see this as a good thing for Irish society as a whole, Sam’s lack of moral conscience and his Celtic Tiger selfishness are chilling, especially when, late in the film, he decides to preserve his own life (and his job) by not complying with the tiger-kidnappers’ demands, thus risking his new lover’s life.

In O’Rowe’s second major play *From Both Hips* (first produced by Fishamble Theatre Company in 1997 in Dublin and Glasgow) and *Intermission*, the desire to appear prosperous and worldly leads characters to change their accents and/or to culturally “sell out” their Irishness. In *From Both Hips*, the Drugs Squad detective, Willy, is distressed by the “fake-newsreader voice” that his therapist, Dr. Kielty, puts on, which “sounds kind of English”; it stands in sharp contrast to what Willy knows the man’s real (or normal) accent to be.²³ Dr. Kielty’s “RTÉ newsreader accent”²⁴ is clearly part of his attempt to appear to be from a higher social class than he actually is. While this irritates Willy, his wife, Irene, discounts her husband’s criticisms of the therapist, perhaps because she too desires to portray herself as being from a higher class background. When she finds Willy in what is described in the stage directions as the “normal, working-class house” belonging to Paul (a man he

²⁰ O’Rowe, 12 March 2008.

²¹ O’Rowe, 12 March 2008.

²² O’Rowe, *Intermission*.

²³ O’Rowe, *Plays: One*, 106; 105.

²⁴ O’Rowe, *Plays: One*, 159.

accidentally shot while on duty), his wife asks, “What are you doing here with these people?”²⁵ It is a moment pregnant with class snobbery. (The social class standing of Willy and Irene’s house is tellingly elided in the script.)

Willy’s nemesis, Paul, is proud to be working-class and (unusually for these works) scorns attempts by others to deviate from the Dublin working-class norms in which they were raised. For example, he considers the Drug Squad’s habit of celebrating with “curries” instead of “pints” to be a sign of their “elitist” attitude.²⁶ (The introduction of curries into the Drug Squad’s routine is O’Rowe’s acknowledgement that Ireland was becoming more open to international cuisine during the mid-1990s, especially as people from the Asian subcontinent began to move to the country in significant numbers; since Paul is – overall – an unsympathetic character, his resistance to this new cultural trend could carry the taint of racism.) Most “elitist” of all, in Paul’s mind, is the Drug Squad’s tendency to regard everyone in poorer, working-class areas as criminal. Even though Willy likes people to be “down to earth” (unlike his wife), Paul includes Willy in his criticisms of the Drug Squad. When Willy asks Paul what he was doing in the rough neighbourhood where he was shot, Paul replies:

I told you before, a mate of mine lives there. The whole block isn’t criminal. See, it’s this kind of attitude, now... You think you can judge these innocent people who don’t have the money to live anywhere else?²⁷

While Paul may differ from other characters in these works in that he is resisting the Celtic Tiger pressure to appear “middle-class”, he is similar to them in that, at the same time, he is happily allowing himself to be transformed by globalized, consumer culture (as his use of the American term “block” – cited above – indicates). Paul is fascinated by the degree to which Willy’s work on the Drugs Squad conforms to the violent fantasies associated with the American police dramas he loves. His speech is peppered with American television and film references. He compares Willy unfavourably to “Don Johnson” from *Miami Vice*; he refers to Willy as “the man who shot Liberty Valence”; and he describes himself after the shooting as being “filled with hot lead”.²⁸ O’Rowe suggests that the incorporation of corny lines from American Westerns, gangster films, and television programmes is common across Irish culture. We are told that the gangster Maurice Joyce yelled “Youse’ll never take me alive!”

²⁵ O’Rowe, *Plays: One*, 79; 160.

²⁶ O’Rowe, *Plays: One*, 142.

²⁷ O’Rowe, *Plays: One*, 140.

²⁸ O’Rowe, *Plays: One*, 137, 147; 157; 146.

when running from the Drug Squad; Liz talks about Willy and Paul going “*mano a mano*” and tells Theresa that their secret code word should be “Geronimo”; and, finally, when Willy proposes that Paul shoot him in the leg (as reparation for the accidental shooting), he taunts Paul, saying: “Are you man enough to dish it out?”²⁹ As O’Rowe commented to me in a public interview I conducted with him at NUI Galway in February 2013, all Irish people may soon be speaking in accents and with syntax that he describes as “Hiberno-American”.³⁰

Most of O’Rowe’s characters have unconsciously started to use Americanisms in their everyday speech, and O’Rowe seems to regard this as, to some degree, inevitable and not terribly serious. (Among his characters, only Hugh from *Made in China* is actively resisting the introduction of Americanisms into Irish speech; he repeatedly criticises Paddy for using the word “pants” instead of “trousers”).³¹ However, in the case of two characters from *Intermission* – the Garda detective Jerry Lynch and the supermarket manager Mr. Henderson – the process of “Americanization” brought about by Ireland’s engagement with the forces of “globalization” is much more profound, and, to O’Rowe’s mind, troubling. Lynch lives as though he actually is a character in an American police drama. He brings a fierce commitment to his job that is reminiscent of the ruthlessly pragmatic and overly intense policemen frequently found in such programmes, and it is hinted that Lynch’s job in Dublin does not actually warrant such intensity. As Lynch delivers his terse put-downs of the criminals and fellow cops he encounters, his accent (as portrayed by a riveting Colm Meaney) flattens out and takes on a Yankee twang. Blind to the cultural sell-out so prevalent in the rest of his life, Lynch boasts that he has the “requisite Celtic soul” to appreciate the internationally successful CDs produced by “Celtic Mysticism” artists like Clannad.³² While many might assume that Lynch’s love of this music is a sign of his Irish pride, O’Rowe suggested to me that Lynch’s perspective on Irish culture is “almost the view of an outsider”.³³ He loves the Irish music that the rest of the world appreciates and sees as mystically Celtic, not what Irish people themselves esteem. Re-assessing Lynch’s character with this in mind, one can see that even Lynch’s self-esteem as an Irishman is built around what America thinks is “cool”.

²⁹ O’Rowe, *Plays: One*, 144; 160; 169; 164.

³⁰ Mark O’Rowe. Public Interview. Conducted by David Clare. Moore Institute Seminar Room at the National University of Ireland, Galway. 25 February 2013.

³¹ O’Rowe, *Plays: One*, 233, 240-241.

³² O’Rowe, *Intermission*.

³³ O’Rowe, 12 March 2008.

Lynch is not alone in the film in having an eye cast towards America. John and Oscar's boss, Mr. Henderson, repeatedly uses Americanisms with great and obvious relish, always adding "as they say in the States".³⁴ Those he is speaking to are meant to be bowled over by the authority given to his words by their American provenance. The idea that something American is inherently better, or should be given more weight, is reminiscent of Martin McDonagh's lampooning of the national inferiority complex in *The Cripple of Inishmaan* (1996) – a play in which the characters repeatedly say things like "Ireland musn't be such a bad place so if the Yanks want to come [here] to do their filming."³⁵

During the Celtic Tiger, as Irish people struggled to come to terms with how to be "successful" (in the Western, materialistic sense of the word), they often looked to the models of success and behaviour that they saw coming from American film and television, and from British lifestyle programmes and Sunday supplements. This was perhaps understandable, given the fact that they were standing on new ground (and perhaps embarrassed to be so unsure of themselves). However, even though Ireland was culturally enriched during this time by the arrival of the New Irish (the immigrants who came to the country during the boom from Africa, Eastern Europe, Asia, and Latin America), the society-wide tendency to unthinkingly buy into Western, globalized, consumer culture undoubtedly diminished the nation's cultural distinctiveness. This willingness to "sell out" to Western globalized culture was an abrupt shift from attitudes in pre-boom Ireland, as we shall see.

During the late 1980s and early 1990s, much of the excitement around being Irish stemmed from the belief that (in Roddy Doyle's famous phrase) "the Irish are the blacks of Europe".³⁶ The connections between Ireland and the developing world made by postcolonial critics such as Declan Kiberd, playwrights such as Brian Friel, filmmakers such as Bob Quinn, and musicians from rockers like U2 and Sinéad O'Connor to proto-"Nu Trad" artists like Dónal Lunny and the Afro-Celt Sound System breathed new life into Irish art. The daring, culturally-hybrid works that Irish writers and musicians produced out of the (admittedly reductive) belief that Ireland was, in essence, a Third World country led people across the world to see Irishness as a form of "enriched whiteness" (to borrow a concept from

³⁴ O'Rowe, *Intermission*.

³⁵ Martin McDonagh. *The Cripple of Inishmaan*. London: Methuen, 1997. 8.

³⁶ Roddy Doyle, Dick Clement and Ian LaFrenais. Screenplay to *The Commitments*. Directed by Alan Parker. Twentieth Century Fox, 1991. In Roddy Doyle's original novel, the quote is slightly different (the "n-word" is used). (Roddy Doyle. *The Barrytown Trilogy: The Commitments / The Snapper / The Van*. London: Penguin, 1995. 13.)

Diane Negra).³⁷ As prosperity (and actual non-whites!) came to the country, however, many Irish people no longer wanted to emphasise their downtrodden, troubled history or to take pride in the cultural and political similarities that Ireland shares with countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. They traded “enriched whiteness”, or their status as “soulful” whites, for the ordinary, conformist, middle-class, prosperous whiteness associated with the majority populations of Western Europe and “developed” Anglophone countries such as the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. A good example of this shift is the phenomenon highlighted by Patrick Lonergan in his important study, *Theatre and Globalization: Irish Drama in the Celtic Tiger Era* (2009). Here, Lonergan shows that a desire to succeed on the global stage led many Irish playwrights during the boom to produce work that catered to the expectations of the global marketplace; they either depicted Ireland as a “normal”, prosperous, developed country, or they deliberately included elements in their work that they knew international audiences would expect from an “Irish” play (in other words, they commodified “Irishness”).³⁸

One of the reasons why O’Rowe is one of the most important writers of his generation is because he has highlighted and critiqued Ireland’s move away from dynamic and fruitful artistic dialogue with “non-white” cultures and towards bland, globalized, Western “whiteness”. As shown above, in his early work, he mocks Irish people who, during the boom, sought to jettison their cultural baggage and to ignore their actual, personal, socio-economic histories. In particular, he pointed up the absurdity of trading one’s culturally rich Irish background for an ersatz American or neutered British identity. In these early scripts (including ones not covered in detail in this essay), he suggests that, while the American and British cultures can certainly be inspiring, there is also much to be gained from engagement with non-European cultures. Not only do the characters in *The Aspidistra Code*, *From Both Hips*, *Howie the Rookie*, and *Made in China* repeatedly reference martial arts, Asian cinema, Thai culture,³⁹ and the indigenous peoples of North and South America,⁴⁰ O’Rowe himself is

³⁷ Diane Negra. “The Irish in Us: Irishness, Performativity and Popular Culture”. In *The Irish in Us*. Edited by Diane Negra. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006. 1-19. 1.

³⁸ See Patrick Lonergan. *Theatre and Globalization in the Celtic Tiger Era*. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.

³⁹ In *Howie the Rookie*, “Ladyboy”’s nickname is clearly a reference to the ladyboys of Bangkok, and we are told that his Betta fighting fish (spelled “Beta” in the play) come from “Siam, which is Thailand”. (O’Rowe, *Plays: One*, 205.)

⁴⁰ The Native American chiefs Crazy Horse and Geronimo are name-checked (after a fashion) in *The Aspidistra Code* and *From Both Hips*, respectively. In *Howie the Rookie*, the Rookie Lee and his father subscribe to Mayan spiritual beliefs. Finally, in *Made in China*, Native Americans and the Irish are subtly linked when Hugh

known to quote his hero Bruce Lee during public appearances.⁴¹ (Of course, it must be admitted that, as much as the characters in *Howie the Rookie* and *Made in China* admire – and are even obsessed by – exciting aspects of non-European cultures, they also unreflectively use racist epithets like “Paki”, “Chink”, and “Gook”.⁴² This is presumably because they are disenfranchised males, who believe that being crudely racist will enhance their “hard man” image.)⁴³ An Irish writer taking inspiration from “non-white” cultures is certainly not new. W.B. Yeats was inspired by Japanese Noh drama and Indian writers like Rabindranath Tagore. Samuel Beckett’s exposure to North Africa can be detected in works such as *Not I* (1972). Going further back, Frances Sheridan, Thomas Moore, and James Clarence Mangan all wrote works that drew on Middle Eastern literature. In Irish music, African and Afro-Caribbean artists have inspired Bob Geldof, Damien Dempsey, Kíla, and Liam Ó Maonlaói of The Hothouse Flowers, as well as the artists listed earlier in this essay (to name only the most prominent examples).

In Mark O’Rowe’s case, I would also contend that the inspiration from “non-white” cultures extends beyond his love for martial arts and Asian cinema (frequently cited by critics as important influences on his work).⁴⁴ In Noel Ignatiev’s landmark study, *How the Irish Became White* (1995), he explains that, for many years, the Irish in America were regarded as non-white, or, at least, not-quite-white.⁴⁵ The same was true of Jewish immigrants to the United States and Britain.⁴⁶ All three of the writers that O’Rowe claims to admire most – David Mamet, Harold Pinter, and Samuel Beckett⁴⁷ – come from these marginalised, not-quite-white backgrounds. Their imprint is easily detectable in O’Rowe’s work, and not just in his use of beats and pauses. For example, the “tough-guy back-and-forth” in plays like *Made in China* clearly derives from Mamet’s early work. Likewise, there is a brilliant Pinteresque power shift during the highly entertaining *tête-à-tête* between Paul and Willy at the start of

explains to Paddy that the clothing designer John Rocha looks like “an [American] Indian” but is, in fact, “Irish”. (O’Rowe, *Plays: One*, 232.)

⁴¹ Mark O’Rowe. Pre-show talk before *Crestfall*, by Mark O’Rowe. The Gate Theatre, Dublin. 30 May 2003; Mark O’Rowe, 25 February 2013.

⁴² O’Rowe, *Plays: One*, 188, 205, 249, 250, 256, 257, 294, 295, 296.

⁴³ This same desire to look “hard” may be behind Paul’s (possibly racist) disparagement of curries in *From Both Hips*.

⁴⁴ See, for example, Jordan, “Urban Drama: Any Myth Will Do?”, 16-17; Lonergan, *Theatre and Globalization*, 107; Raab, “Mark O’Rowe”, 345.

⁴⁵ Noel Ignatiev. *How the Irish Became White*. New York: Routledge, 1995.

⁴⁶ See, for example, Nell Irwin Painter. *The History of White People*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2011. 77, 192, 202.

⁴⁷ Mark O’Rowe, 25 February 2013.

Act Two in *From Both Hips*. And O’Rowe has admitted that Beckett’s *Molloy* (1951) helped inspire *Howie the Rookie*,⁴⁸ and that *Play* (1963) was a key influence on *Terminus* (2007).⁴⁹

Another Jewish influence on O’Rowe (and one that has been strangely ignored by critics) is the work of the Coen Brothers. As O’Rowe admitted to me during the public interview at NUI Galway, he has seen their 1990 film *Miller’s Crossing* “over sixty times”, and it informed his depiction of an Irish male who is reluctant to share his feelings and desires in *Intermission*.⁵⁰ (Indeed, a key line that Verna says to Tom in *Miller’s Crossing* is paraphrased by Deirdre when confronting John towards the end of *Intermission*: “You always take the long way around to get what you want; don’t you, Tom?... You could have just asked.”)⁵¹ I would contend that the influence of *Miller’s Crossing* can also be seen in *The Aspidistra Code*. The discussions between Crazy Horse, Drongo, and Joe about “ethics”, “principles” and a criminal “code” recall similar discussions initiated by Caspar in *Miller’s Crossing*.⁵²

Ultimately, one of the most important connections between O’Rowe and his Jewish and Irish heroes is their treatment of social class. The concern that O’Rowe has for those on the financial margins is also a feature of works such as Mamet’s *American Buffalo* (1975), Pinter’s *The Caretaker* (1960), Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* (1953), and the Coen Brothers’ *Raising Arizona* (1987). Likewise, O’Rowe’s sensitivity to cross-class power dynamics and the perils of social climbing can also be detected in, for example, Mamet’s *Boston Marriage* (1999), Pinter’s *Celebration* (2000), Beckett’s *All That Fall* (1957), and the Coen Brothers’ *The Man Who Wasn’t There* (2001). We can only be grateful that O’Rowe maintained this perspective during the Celtic Tiger, a time when greed was causing Irish people to forget their personal and national pasts and to blindly pursue dubious personal and financial goals. During the boom, O’Rowe reminded Irish people of where they had been and questioned where they were going.

⁴⁸ O’Rowe. Introduction. *Plays: One*. viii; Mark O’Rowe, 25 February 2013.

⁴⁹ Mark O’Rowe, 25 February 2013.

⁵⁰ Mark O’Rowe, 25 February 2013.

⁵¹ Joel and Ethan Coen. Screenplay to *Miller’s Crossing*. Directed by Joel Coen. Twentieth Century Fox, 1990.

⁵² O’Rowe, *Plays: One*, 40, 63; 40, 51; 70, 71.