

“AN EXTRAORDINARY DEPOSITION”: ENDA WALSH’S *MEDICINE*¹

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Abstract: The article discusses *Medicine* (2021), the latest play by Irish dramatist Enda Walsh, both as a continuation of his oeuvre and a rare moment in which the playwright has decided to engage with a topical issue. It examines Walsh’s depiction of the needless institutionalisation of those suffering from mental illness in Ireland, including its legacy and contemporary resonance, and outlines how *Medicine* is illustrative of the central role of the grotesque in the playwright’s work and the effects that it generates. The essay goes on to discuss the play’s interpellation of the audience, and ultimately the author’s metatheatrical probing of the role that theatre might have in regard to such an issue. Finally, it argues that the efficacy of the interpellation is diffused by the affective ambiguity of the play, allowing for the curative powers of this theatrical ‘medicine’ to be posited in terms of potential rather than actual effect, in tune with Jacques Rancière’s notion of the emancipation of the spectator but against Liz Tomlin’s subtle plea for the return of a more explicit political slant in theatre.

Keywords: Enda Walsh, grotesque, confinement, spectatorship, affect, interpellation.

“I’ve been writing the same play for twenty-five years,” states Enda Walsh in the programme note to his latest full-length drama, *Medicine*, adding: “Well, the same type of play in ever so slightly different forms.”² Indeed, Walsh’s theatrical

¹ This work was supported by the European Regional Development Fund Project “Creativity and Adaptability as Conditions of the Success of Europe in an Interrelated World” (No. CZ.02.1.01/0.0/0.0/16_019/0000734).

² Enda Walsh, “Programme Note” to *Medicine*, 4, *Landmark Productions*, accessed 21 November 2021, <https://www.landmarkproductions.ie/wp-content/uploads/GIAF-Medicine-Programme-Sept-2021.pdf>.

handwriting has been distinct and instantly recognisable, and has made him one of the most exciting contemporary playwrights in English; however, *Medicine* appears to be only the second play in a considerable body of work in which Walsh has addressed a specific reality, in the sense of "writing about something that [is] actually happening"³ at the moment. If *Penelope* (2010) could be interpreted as satirical engagement with the hubris involved in the collapse of the Irish economy,⁴ *Medicine* invites reflection on the institutionalisation of "those deemed to be mentally ill."⁵ Apart from examining the continuities in this new version of "the same play," the present article will thus focus particularly on its topical engagement, its interpellation of the audience in this respect, and ultimately on Walsh's metatheatrical probing of the role that theatre might actually play in relation to such an issue.

Medicine was the opening production at the 2021 Edinburgh International Festival, premiering on 7 August and continuing on to the Galway International Arts Festival, where it played from 2 September with some of the performances being streamed online, as the number of seats was limited due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Subsequently, the show moved to St Anne's Warehouse in New York, playing there for live and online audiences in November and December. Directed by the author, the production featured outstanding performances from Domhnall Gleeson, Aoife Duffin and Clare Barrett, and included live drumming improvisations by Seán Carpio; it was written with these four performers in mind.⁶ Significant contributions to the final shape of the show were made also by Walsh's principal collaborators in his major recent dramas *Ballyturk* (2014) and *Arlington* (2016): composer Teho Teardo, sound designer Helen Atkinson, set designer Jamie Vartan, and lighting designer Adam Silverman.

The play depicts a therapy session in which a young in-patient, John Kane, is to participate in a re-enactment of his life story according to a script that he has written. The acting is to be executed chiefly by two professional actors who are both called Mary, accompanied by a drummer and aided by the use of a soundboard,

³ Enda Walsh, "Foreword," *Plays: Two* (London: Nick Hern, 2014) viii.

⁴ For a discussion of *Penelope* and the relative lack of recognition of its satirical dimension by audiences, see Ondřej Pilný, "Life in a Box: Enda Walsh," *The Grotesque in Contemporary Anglophone Drama* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016) 97-98.

⁵ Walsh, "Programme Note" 5.

⁶ See Mark Fisher, "Enda Walsh: 'All my plays are about people who haven't been loved or looked after,'" *Guardian* interview, 12 July 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2021/jul/12/enda-walsh-medicine-edinburgh-international-festival-domhnall-gleeson>; "Enda Walsh in Conversation with Ian R. Walsh," plenary panel at the IASIL 2020 "Creative Borders" conference, University of Łódź (online), 19 July 2021.

microphones, and a lighting rig. Although John and the two Marys repeatedly refer to the whole enterprise as important, the actual therapeutic effect remains questionable, particularly as John mentions right at the onset that it recurs annually⁷ while in the meantime, he remains in long-term confinement.

In his programme note, Walsh indicates that the writing of *Medicine* was inspired by his reading of Brendan Kelly's *Hearing Voices: The History of Psychiatry in Ireland* (2016), one of the central themes of which is the "apparently insatiable hunger for institutionalization" which made Irish asylums disproportionately large in relation to most European countries and which lasted well into the second half of the twentieth century.⁸ Elaborating on the issue in an interview, Walsh discussed reading extremely upsetting stories of people who ended up in mental institutions in the 1940s and 50s, some of whom "were just abandoned there because they had a loud voice" and were deemed "'problematic' because they [were] a bit different to everyone else."⁹ Under the influence of these stories, Walsh came to write what may be perceived as a riff on *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*, the analogy being supported not only by John not displaying any obvious symptoms of mental illness but also by Mary 2 acting in ways resembling those of the tyrannical nurse Ratched of Ken Kesey's 1962 novel (and its film version directed by Miloš Forman in 1975), or by elements of the set, such as the glass booth at the back of the room that serves as a space restricted mostly to Mary 2.¹⁰

A recorded examination of John by an "Interviewer" is repeatedly heard in the play, first shortly after the opening, then near its climax, and ultimately at the very end (4-5, 40-41, 56-58), in which John says that he does not know why he is in the institution or how long he has been there. He tells the interviewer that he was committed at the suggestion of his parents and a local doctor. "I'm not like other

⁷ Enda Walsh, *Medicine & The Same* (London: Nick Hern, 2021) 4. Further references to this edition are given in parentheses in the text.

⁸ See Brendan Kelly, *Hearing Voices: The History of Psychiatry in Ireland* (Newbridge: Irish Academic Press, 2016) 5, 7; Walsh, "Programme Note" 5.

⁹ Sarah Weal, "Playwright Enda Walsh – On Love, Biscuits and His New Work," *The Financial Times*, 30 July 2021, <https://www.ft.com/content/3986ea47-089a-46da-9095-b0720eae8de0>.

¹⁰ The affinity with *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* has been referenced by at least two reviewers: see Mark Fisher, "Medicine Review – Domhnall Gleeson Despairs in Absurdist Institutional Limbo," *The Guardian*, 8 August 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2021/aug/08/medicine-review-domhnall-gleeson-enda-walsh-traverse-theatre-edinburgh-festival>; Rosemary Waugh, "Medicine, Edinburgh International Festival, Review: Domhnall Gleeson Unravels in This Sharp Look at Therapy," *inews.co.uk*, 13 August 2021, <https://inews.co.uk/culture/medicine-edinburgh-international-festival-review-domhnall-gleeson-unravels-therapy-1149890>.

people. [...] People dislike me because I'm not completely like them," he eventually suggests as the only reason for his confinement (57-58). Here, Walsh draws on another source that he references in the programme note, a harrowing filmed interview with an institutionalised young man suffering from catatonic schizophrenia, quotations from which are put directly in the mouth of John and the Interviewer.¹¹

Quite naturally, the basic situation of the play has been related by reviewers to the recent shocking revelations concerning the endemic abuse and neglect of children in industrial schools, women in Magdalen laundries, and single mothers and their babies in mother and baby homes in Ireland over many decades. As Ciara L. Murphy has put it, "[i]n this room echo the ghosts of Ireland's failures: tribunals, institutionalisation and complicity. Cruelty is repeated again and again."¹² Although the focus of the investigations has – so far – been largely institutions run by the Catholic church rather than mental hospitals, *Medicine* in fact consciously recalls the work of the commissions set up by the government to conduct the official inquiries, referring to John's re-enacted story as a testimony (18) and signalling the lack of care with which the victims have often been heard. Tellingly, it is the following lines that the first Mary rehearses upon her arrival in the hospital room: "That is really really interesting, John Kane. What an extraordinary deposition... let me just talk to my colleagues..." (7); ultimately, the devastated John concludes that "There's never been anyone listening." (58)

The lack of attention to the testimonies of those affected has indeed been consistently criticised by many, including the tireless local historian Catherine Corless and investigative journalist Conall Ó Fátharta, whose work has contributed to the establishment of the Tuam Oral History Project at NUI Galway in 2019, a pioneering effort to have the survivors of the Tuam Mother and Baby Home "tell their own life stories, in the way that they want them to be told."¹³

¹¹ Walsh, "Programme Note" 5. See *Psychiatric Interview Series: Patient No. 18, Evaluation for Diagnosis*, University of California Los Angeles film (1961), *YouTube*, accessed 10 December 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lehtMYIOuIk>.

¹² Ciara L. Murphy, "Medicine: Domhnall Gleeson Is a Force to Be Reckoned with. This Performance Cuts You to the Bone," *The Irish Times*, 6 September 2021, <https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/stage/medicine-domhnall-gleeson-is-a-force-to-be-reckoned-with-this-performance-cuts-you-to-the-bone-1.4666074>.

¹³ "Tuam Oral History Project," *National University of Ireland Galway*, accessed 10 December 2021, <https://www.nuigalway.ie/tuam-oral-history/about/>. The project has featured also a remarkable artistic performance devised by drama and theatre students under the supervision of Miriam Haughton, which was called "Nochtaithe" (meaning "unveiled" or "exposed" in Irish); the multimedia production ran online on 1-31 May 2021.

In this context, the opening scenery in Walsh's play which features the detritus from a party and a banner overhead that reads "Congratulations" has duly been interpreted as a scathing metaphor, suggesting – in Joyce McMillan's words – that the roots of "Ireland's recent history of fun and self-celebration [...] may be shallower than they seem."¹⁴ Furthermore as Rosemary Waugh has pointed out, since this was evidently a children's party, featuring balloons, Lucozade and all, the exhilaration is shown to have been particularly naive.¹⁵

Metatheatricality and the Grotesque

The "same play" that Walsh has been writing has had little to do with theatrical realism, however, and *Medicine* is no exception. When Mary arrives, she is dressed as an old man, wearing a wig, moustache, and adhesive bushy eyebrows, while Mary 2 wears a bright red lobster costume from children's theatre. Both Marys are musical actors and once the re-enactment of John's life commences, it bears distinct features of the genre: not only does it include flashy song numbers, but the characters also conform to set types and the presentation is quite melodramatic. Moreover as noted above, the action is accompanied by live improvisations on the drum set, the nature and speed of which are envisaged by Walsh to be different every night.¹⁶ Plentiful slapstick gags are used, including the inexplicable gust of wind that blows Mary 2 off her feet any time she opens the door of the glass booth, both Marys slide into impressive dance numbers seemingly outside the script of the story, and last but not least, the actors discuss their lives, careers, and their current job in the mental institution at several points in the play.

The eclectic mixture of disparate elements, which involves also a radical juxtaposition of humour with violence, lyrical storytelling with physical theatre, and an overwhelming manic energy in performance, has become a staple characteristic of Walsh's work. This is true as well of the central but complex use

¹⁴ Joyce McMillan, "EIF Theatre Review: Medicine, Traverse Theatre," *The Scotsman*, 8 August 2021, <https://www.scotsman.com/arts-and-culture/edinburgh-festivals/eif-theatre-review-medicine-traverse-theatre-3338378>.

¹⁵ Waugh, "Medicine, Edinburgh International Festival, Review."

¹⁶ "Enda Walsh in Conversation with Ian R. Walsh." Seán Carpio's performance has been vividly described by Chris O'Rourke: "Less Charlie Parker so much as Evan Parker, [...] improvisations don't just focus on its central melody, though there is that, they improvise on chords, riffs, notes and recurring phrases independent of melody, creating a wild, dissonant cacophony with tenderness at its core." Chris O'Rourke, "Medicine," *The Arts Review*, 8 September 2021, <https://www.theartsreview.com/single-post/medicine>.

of metatheatricity. As I have argued elsewhere, this puzzling theatrical potion is usefully viewed through the prism of the aesthetic category of the grotesque.¹⁷ Defined by blending together incongruous elements and undermining the viewer's interpretative frameworks, the grotesque presents a radically alienated version of the familiar world, one which is confusing and often terrifying to behold. Moreover, as Wolfgang Kayser has observed, metatheatricity has become a standard device of the grotesque in modern theatre, utilised to further unhinge the spectators' foothold on reality.¹⁸ Walsh's dramas at least since the celebrated *The Walworth Farce* (2006) and *The New Electric Ballroom* (2004/2008) may be perceived as an original development of this tradition, in which the puzzlement of the audience is a well-documented key effect. The response of reviewers to *Medicine* evidences the same sense of bafflement, which arises particularly from the impossibility to always clearly determine what is a scripted part of the play-within-the play, and from the constructed nature of John's story that is consistently foregrounded. Chris O'Rourke's description provides an eloquent summary of the effects that the grotesque has in *Medicine*: "this metaphysical, psychological, existential monster, engaging with slapstick, sugary drinks, and, heaven save us, musical theatre, will leave you wondering which way is up at times."¹⁹

"West End" Therapy

The grotesque nature of *Medicine* notwithstanding, the performance of John's life story with the assistance of professional actors indicates that John is the subject of some version of drama therapy. Its nature is quite peculiar though,²⁰ and the scepticism concerning what the two Marys are doing is palpable. There is truly much about the performance that mocks Mary 2's insistence on the significance of the actors' work and the "clarity and purpose" (10) that it allegedly provides. First, the notion of staging the story of John's life and institutionalisation as a "West End show"²¹ is dubious in itself: rather than being treated as the testimony that it is designated as (18), John's narrative gets performed as a glamorous popular spectacle featuring catchy songs. Moreover, while John remains stationary for

¹⁷ See Pilný, "Life in a Box: Enda Walsh" 81-102.

¹⁸ See Pilný, "Life in a Box: Enda Walsh" 82, 86-87.

¹⁹ O'Rourke, "Medicine."

²⁰ See also Fisher, "Medicine Review;" Waugh, "Medicine, Edinburgh International Festival, Review;" Beth Blakemore, "Medicine," *The Wee Review*, 12 August 2021, <https://theweereview.com/review/medicine/>; O'Rourke, "Medicine."

²¹ Fisher, "Medicine Review."

much of the re-enactment, the Marys gradually dominate the performance, engaging in mutual rivalry and – in Rosemary Waugh’s words – “literally stealing the limelight.”²² Finally, Mary 2 becomes increasingly dominant, insisting on parts of the story being cut due to her upcoming next engagement elsewhere (which is a children’s party!), eventually uses physical violence against Mary who has grown increasingly compassionate, and aggressively drives John forward to speedily finish his narrative. Rather than helping the patient, Mary 2 thus ultimately steps into the shoes of Liam, the brutal male nurse who has been abusing John in the mental hospital (45-52).

While drama therapy is supposed to assist in coming to terms with a traumatic past – and John’s story certainly unravels horrid details from his loveless childhood and bullying by his peers – Walsh’s play emphasises the scripted nature of the performance rather than the therapeutic process. Not only do all three actors often work with an actual script in hand and frequently rehearse their lines, but John is also repeatedly praised for his creative ability as a writer. This gestures away from the authenticity of his story and towards a literary treatment of facts which, incidentally, is testified also by John’s vivid depiction of his experience as a new-born infant (21), memories of which must necessarily be mostly imagined. As in Walsh’s previous work, the fundamental importance of authentic narrative to individual identity is thus qualified by highlighting its constructed nature. Moreover, Walsh has repeatedly zoomed in on the manipulative ends to which such stories may be used (*The Walworth Farce*, *The New Electric Ballroom*),²³ or has relegated them to a mere means of passing the time (*Ballyturk*, *Arlington*). *Medicine* develops these concerns further, letting John’s story be usurped for the purpose of a tear-jerking spectacle by musical actors, the practical results of which threaten to equal those of a futile pastime for the author/subject of the narrative.

Despite their dominance over John, the actors are not in complete control of the performance themselves. Mary 2 repeatedly reports on progress to “producers” (45) who seem to be overseeing the show, somewhat like the enigmatic Supervisor does in the dystopian *Arlington*. Moreover, as in *Arlington* and *Ballyturk*, some metaphysical power appears to be acting from beyond: the sound board operates of its own accord at times and disembodied voices speak unprompted, and even the drum kit starts playing by itself. As mysteriously, John is embodied as a young man but details of his story indicate that he was born in the 1940s; indeed, the final replay of his conversation with the Interviewer features John as “a much older man in his eighties” (56) while the reality of the performance

²² Waugh, “Medicine, Edinburgh International Festival, Review.”

²³ For details, see Pilný, “Life in a Box: Enda Walsh” 88-89.

which includes mobile phones and numerous topical references, is very much contemporary. Beside generating further puzzlement, these enigmas contribute to the perception of the play as more abstract, making *Medicine* speak not only of a specific situation but also a general predicament as, after all, John's surname indicates in its homophony with the biblical, banished Cain.

The put-upon lost soul ultimately reasserts himself, however. Mary 2's aggression and violence cause the script to derail and send John spiralling into a frantic, fragmented, and by degrees inarticulate monologue during which he places himself firmly back in the centre of the performance. Whereas the culprit dispassionately films him on her mobile, presumably as evidence of his insanity, the other Mary's compassion peaks and she comes to substitute Valerie, John's beloved lost fellow inmate, seating herself next to John and offering to "stay as long as I can" (59). The ambivalence of the ending is considerable nonetheless, as testified by the response of the reviewers, some of whom have viewed it as hopeful while others as extremely bleak: has Mary fallen in love with John who had just poured his heart out in front of her, or is she only offering temporary comfort? And what to make of the devastating emotional impact of the raging chaos, closely followed by a replay of John's interrogation by the Interviewer? How to interpret the accomplished poem that John composed and now recites to Mary, with its echoes of high Romantic musings about nature and existence (58)? Finally, what does the lengthy final tableau indicate, in which the light eventually goes out on John and Mary, motionless but holding hands?

Theatre as Medicine?

The basic level on which Walsh's *Medicine* interpellates its audience is apparent: it puts on display the injustice perpetrated by society on those who are deemed abnormal, ending up confined in mental institutions, and invites the spectators to witness. The absence of love and care for fellow human beings has indeed increasingly become a major theme in Walsh's work, from *The Walworth Farce* and *The New Electric Ballroom* through to *Arlington*; in the programme note to *Medicine*, Walsh speaks of "a call for understanding and listening – and with that – our responsibility to care properly for one another and particularly for those who are vulnerable."²⁴ In this context, it is hardly surprising that since covid was still raging strong when the play was performed in Edinburgh, Galway, and New York, multiple commentators have associated it specifically with the contemporary time of social distancing and lockdowns, a period "in which care homes and society's

²⁴ Walsh, "Programme Note" 5.

approach to the vulnerable have been in the spotlight,” as Sarah Weal has underlined²⁵ – although the association has turned out to be inadvertent, since Walsh had completed the play before the pandemic.²⁶ However, *Medicine* is theatre about theatre as much as it deals with social injustice, and it is on this level that the interpellation becomes more opaque.

In her latest book, *Political Dramaturgies and Theatre Spectatorship*, Liz Tomlin discusses the eminent threat of commodification to theatre due to its growing “obsession with the spectator-consumer”;²⁷ precisely the same issue is targeted by Walsh when he has the Marys perform John’s life as some sort of a musical which is to make “people [...] happy and impressed” (25) rather than truly concerned about the suffering other. Tomlin’s main subject in the book is the efficacy of political theatre, and admittedly, it is doubtful whether Walsh’s intent in *Medicine* may be adequately described merely in terms of political critique: due to the relentlessly self-aware nature of the play, the question about what role theatre can play in relation to the suffering of human beings abandoned in institutional confinement is posed in very broad terms. Still, the terrain that *Medicine* explores remains remarkably similar to that examined by Tomlin as far as spectatorship is concerned. A central point in Tomlin’s examination of contemporary theatre – following the observations of many recent scholars²⁸ – is its turn from “effect” to “affect,”²⁹ and indeed, Enda Walsh would hardly be the only contemporary playwright to produce work which, as he has advised, audiences should “feel out” rather than strive to “understand.”³⁰ The affect generated by his brand of the grotesque is all except singular though, as vividly testified – yet again – by the radically divergent emotional response to the ending of *Medicine*. Apart from

²⁵ Weal, “Playwright Enda Walsh.” See also Simon Thompson, “*Medicine* at the Traverse Theatre – Review,” *WhatsOnStage.com*, 9 August 2021, https://www.whatsonstage.com/edinburgh-theatre/reviews/medicine-traverse-domnhall-gleeson_54654.html; Neil Cooper, “Edinburgh International Festival Review: Theatre, *Medicine*, Traverse, Four Stars,” *The Herald*, 9 August 2021, <https://www.heraldscotland.com/news/19500698.edinburgh-international-festival-review-theatre-medicine-traverse-four-stars/>.

²⁶ See Fisher, “Enda Walsh: ‘All my plays are about people who haven’t been loved or looked after;’” Weal, “Playwright Enda Walsh.” Walsh has confirmed this also in the IASIL plenary session, “Enda Walsh in Conversation with Ian R. Walsh.”

²⁷ Liz Tomlin, *Political Dramaturgies and Theatre Spectatorship: Provocations for Change* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2019) 23, 30.

²⁸ See Tomlin, *Political Dramaturgies and Theatre Spectatorship* 39.

²⁹ Tomlin, *Political Dramaturgies and Theatre Spectatorship* 61.

³⁰ Tadhg Hoey, “This Broken, Jarring Thing: Enda Walsh Interviewed by Tadhg Hoey,” *BOMB Magazine*, 7 May 2019, <https://bombmagazine.org/articles/this-broken-jarring-thing-enda-walsh-interviewed/>.

flagging the urgent need for empathy, Walsh's play ultimately centres on positing broader, open questions about theatre and its relation to humanity. The efficacy of its interpellation may consequently be seen to rely on the individual response of the spectator to an original aesthetic experience. Watching *Medicine* may thus make the spectator emancipated in Jacques Rancière's sense, opening up "passages towards new forms of subjectivation"³¹ – however, as Tomlin cogently argues throughout her book, such emancipation might be happening at the expense of theatre's political intervention being diffused.³²

Enda Walsh's *Medicine* presents theatre as a curious sort of *pharmakon*.³³ It clearly shows its poisonous effects whenever theatre seeks to please the "spectator-consumer" in relation to injustice and suffering, instrumentalising the victims in the process.³⁴ As for theatre's curative powers, these might be related to Walsh's emphasis on introspection: "For me, theatre is a way of having a good look at myself and saying, 'Am I still a human being? What sort of a human being am I? How do I rate my humanity?' [*Medicine*] is a play about that."³⁵ However, the affective ambiguity of *Medicine* prevents for such a cure to be posited in terms of actual effect rather than merely tentative potential.

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³¹ Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2009) 82.

³² See, in particular, Tomlin, *Political Dramaturgies and Theatre Spectatorship* 36-51.

³³ As will be well-known, the radical ambiguity of the Greek word entered general critical discourse via Jacques Derrida's discussion of Plato's *Phaedrus* in "Plato's Pharmacy" (1968, or rather the English translation thereof, published in 1981), often moving away from the context of Derrida's argument, which is also the case here.

³⁴ Incidentally, these effects are shown to apply to the actors as well, as demonstrated by Mary 2 turning into a tyrannical monster.

³⁵ Fisher, "Enda Walsh: 'All my plays are about people who haven't been loved or looked after.'"

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