



Department of Anglophone Literatures and Cultures

Supervisor's Report:

Eliška Šmídlová Bc. "Spirituality in the Drama of Tom Murphy" MA Thesis

The selected topic of this thesis is one of much relevance to an understanding of Tom Murphy's plays and their significance in the canon of modern Irish theatre. The hypothesis, such as it is articulated, is largely borrowed from Fintan O'Toole's interpretation of Murphy's work as a kind of "bridge between the culture of Catholic Ireland and the modern atheist culture of contemporary civilisation." Ms Šmídlová's stated aim is to produce an analysis of "the spiritual journeys of the main characters" in three major plays: *The Sanctuary Lamp*, *The Gigli Concert* and *Bailegangaire* "against the background of the modern, postreligious world [...]" (10). One wonders whether the rather vague term "spiritual" really captures what is at stake in Murphy's dissection of faith and religious belief. Some discussion of Roman Catholicism, Eucharistic sacrifice and the seven sacraments might have provided a more adequate and productive context for a comprehension of what Murphy is deconstructing.

The work is simply organised, with no major theoretical, social or historical context provided, either in a specific chapter or in the brief introduction. There would certainly have been room for development in this regard as the work is short for an MA dissertation, totalling only 64 pages of which a mere 53 are text. With regard to research the project draws on valid sources and shows some intellectual initiative. A recognition of context and consideration of the implications of context is not particularly manifest. Given that the role of the Church and public discourse around religious belief and values in Ireland has been major territory of disagreement and debate, it would have been interesting to position Murphy in that context more fully. For the most part sources are used descriptively, Ms Šmídlová seems more confident in synthesising the opinions of others, rather than assessing them or challenging them. Some more complex ideas concerning Christian theology, faith and belief appear belatedly via Richard Kearney as well as some brief indirect mention of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche – more might have been made of these angles. The conclusions drawn by the analysis remain quite mundane: faith in God is replaced with a belief in self, or perhaps even the self as god.

Sources have been consistently cited, sometimes a little awkwardly, (for example see the beginning of chapter 2 where a first person pronoun in the quote is prominent but no speaker is identified) but on the whole source use is competent, attribution phrases have been well used and footnotes and bibliography are formally correct. Overall the linguistic level of the thesis is in the range weak to acceptable. Among the problems that appear regularly are errors in conjunction use, word choice, invented words ("oxymoron-like" 10) and weak sentence structure.

With regard to the development of the analysis I would suggest the following questions for discussion at the defence.

1. Viz. the aim of the thesis stated in chapter 1 -- Is the Ireland from which these plays emerge and in which they are set post-religious? In what ways could you support this



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claim with reference to social history, statistics, political discourse in the 1970s and 1980s?

2. Page 10 “It is as if in Murphy’ s dramatic world of contradicting powers, one could not exist without the other, like two halves making one whole or like two sides of one coin.” Do you mean dialectic here? What are the opposing powers at work in each of the three selected plays?
3. In chapter 1 (and elsewhere) you make reference to Christopher Murray’s assertion that Murphy’s theatre “rough” and “holy”. What do you think he means by this?
4. How would you distinguish between religion and spirituality in Murphy’s drama generally, and in *The Sanctuary Lamp* in particular?
5. You suggest that *The Sanctuary Lamp* and *The Gigli Concert* share “a general reference to religion” (24). Could you be more specific in what you mean here?
6. Applying the Faust myth to *The Gigli Concert* seems to involve considerable contortion. To what extent do you find O’Toole’s interpretation works? Or does it? What about the potential role of transubstantiation in the play?
7. Magic and spiritual journeys do not seem to have a great deal in common – could you explain the rationale for combining them in chapter 3?
8. Arguably the main Christian motif in *Bailegangaire* is confession, yet you do not discuss this to a great extent. What kind of spiritual journey is undertaken here? Sacrament of Penance? Does it apply to all the characters or just Momo?

I recommend the thesis for defence and propose to grade the work “good”/3 or “very good” / 2 depending on the result of the defence.

30.8.2014

Doc. Clare Wallace, PhD