

In Bruges: neither especially fresh nor insightful

David Walsh
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Written and directed by Martin McDonagh

London-born Martin McDonagh (born 1970) made his name in the mid-1990s as one of the “In-er-face” playwrights. This trend, according to one of its advocates, represented “a revolution” in British theater. “Out went all those boring politically correct plays with tiny casts portraying self-pitying victims; overthrown were all those pale imitations of European directors’ theatre; brushed aside were all those shreds of self-regarding physical theatre and long-winded, baggy state-of-the-nation plays.” (www.inerface-theatre.com)

This group of disparate playwrights presented material on stage intended to be shocking and disturbing: murder, rape, torture, suicide, cannibalism, along with massive quantities of social backwardness. The writers, according to another generally sympathetic commentator, sought to “explore the possibilities of cruelty and nihilism as a means of countering cynicism and challenging mainstream morality’s interpretation of the world” (Ken Urban, *Towards a Theory of Cruel Britannia: Coolness, Cruelty, and the 'Nineties*).

Whether they accomplished either of those tasks is highly questionable. Sarah Kane’s *Blasted* (1995) was perhaps exemplary. The *Literary Encyclopedia*: “Ian, a racist middle-aged journalist with lung cancer, takes twenty-something Cate, a shy family friend, to a Leeds hotel room. His first line—‘I’ve shat in better places than this’—gives a flavour of the gritty realism of the dialogue. Lonely and afraid, he tries to seduce Cate, then rapes her during the night. In the morning, she leaves, and a nameless Soldier suddenly bursts into the room, demanding food. The room is then hit by a mortar bomb. As both men recover, the Soldier tells Ian about the agonies of civil war. Then he rapes Ian, sucks out his eyes and shoots himself. Cate returns with a baby that’s been given to her by a victim of the war raging outside. It dies, and Ian tries to eat it. Now blind and hungry, Ian hides under the floorboards.”

Dumping one’s horror about reality on the stage in a relatively unmediated fashion has a limited impact psychologically, aside from the momentary fear and alarm it

creates, and no impact socially. The world goes on as before, and no one understands it any better.

Representing cruelty and brutality, in other words, is not the same thing as making them comprehensible and thus *alterable*; for that, one has to know something about society and possess, at least to a certain degree, a historical perspective.

Some of the despair of the writers, while wildly disoriented, was no doubt genuine. Britain had undergone 15 years of Tory rule by the mid-1990s, and the population had experienced massive social attacks, while the official labor movement had proven utterly worthless in preventing them. In fact, “New Labour” was about to take over the reins of power and deepen the attacks on living standards and conditions. The US had launched its first predatory assault on the Persian Gulf, and brutal civil war conditions had once again erupted—in the former Yugoslavia—on European soil.

Plagued by depression, Sarah Kane hung herself in 1999.

Less generously, one might say that others, demoralized or overwhelmed by the changes in British and global society, were finding ways—like their counterparts among the group of painters and sculptors known as the “Young British Artists”—to accommodate themselves to the new, harsh realities and, in some cases, make a comfortable living in the process (See: “Some issues raised by the Brooklyn Museum exhibit David Walsh reviews Sensation”).

Writing about the Young British Artists of the day, whose most prominent figure was Damien Hirst, artist and critic Matthew Collings commented that “the aim was not to buck the system but to get into it as soon as possible by showing how utterly system-friendly your art was.”

The British dramatists of the mid-1990s were perhaps not so cynical on the whole. Nonetheless, using the inadequacies or even fatal flaws of a previous generation’s left-wing film and theater efforts as a pretext, they threw the baby out with the bathwater and not merely announced their social indifference, but turned it into a virtue and a program. There was no shortage of critics and commentators within the political and media establishment to cheer them on.

The most serious indictment one might make is this: that instead of making sense of the transformation of British and European society in all its dimensions, and consciously siding with the victims of the process, the members of this trend merely registered and reflected the changes, rather coolly and calculatingly (and also quite superficially), in their own way becoming part of the social phenomenon they should have been rejecting with outrage and artistry.

McDonagh was one of this crowd, more or less. Born to Irish parents, he came to prominence in 1996 with his *The Leenane Trilogy* (*The Beauty Queen of Leenane*, *A Skull in Connemara*, *The Lonesome West*) and *The Aran Islands Trilogy* (*The Cripple of Inishmaan*, *The Lieutenant of Inishmore*, *The Banshees of Inisher*—the last of which has not been performed), set in western Ireland.

A synopsis of *The Lieutenant of Inishmore*, one of McDonagh's more successful plays, first performed in 2001, reads: "Set in 1993 in County Galway on the rocky island of Inishmore, off the coast of Ireland. Padraic is a terrorist with no feeling for those he kills, yet has an obsessive attachment to Thomas, his beloved cat. But someone has murdered poor wee Thomas. Was it an accident or an execution? Either way, the death must be concealed before 'Mad Padraic' returns from a stint of torture and bombing. Otherwise the recriminations will be horrifying."

Each performance of the 'black comedy,' which included torture and point-blank shootings, apparently required stage hands to distribute several gallons of fake blood, along with severed limbs and dead animals (fake too, of course).

McDonagh made a short film, *Six Shooter*, in 2004, and now has directed his first feature film, *In Bruges*. It is an occasionally amusing, but essentially pointless film, whose subject matter and sensibility seem oddly dated.

Two Irish hitmen (of course!), whose base of operations is London, have been sent to Bruges, the medieval city in Belgium, after one of their jobs has gone terribly wrong. Ray (Colin Farrell), out on his first assignment, killed the intended victim, a priest, but accidentally shot a young boy as well. He and Ken (Brendan Gleeson) sit in a quiet, quaint Bruges hotel, awaiting a call from their boss, Harry (Ralph Fiennes).

Ray is bored to tears by Bruges, while Ken advocates having "culture and fun." They sightsee, over Ray's protests. The latter finally meets a girl on a film set and arranges a date. Things go dreadfully wrong, however, and Ray makes new enemies. A racist American dwarf, a Canadian couple, a Dutch prostitute and a Belgian skinhead enter the fray. Quirkiness abounds; one unlikely and falsely "surreal" encounter after another takes place. Meanwhile, Harry gives Ken his orders, which strike too close to home and bloody mayhem ensues.

The acting is generally fine. Farrell, irritating in so many films, is actually quite charming here, as the relatively guileless Ray. He gets most of the best lines, shooting his eyebrows up in perplexity and irritation at the peculiarity of his situation. When Ken suggests that they will strike a balance between seeing the medieval city's sights and enjoying themselves, Ray replies acerbically, "Somehow, I believe, Ken, the balance will tip in the favor of culture."

In any event, the central conceit of the film, that Ray is racked by guilt and wants to put an end to his life, is not especially believable, and the events that occur once Harry sets foot on Belgian soil are not credible in the least. The ending of the film is simply absurd. The presence of the dwarf in the film turns out to be nothing more than a cheap plot device.

All in all, there's not much here, despite McDonagh's obvious gift for gab. The Tarantino-Scorsese-Lynch influences are entirely detrimental, as they must inevitably be. One wants to ask: why? Why make such a film at this point in time? There's a good deal going on in the world, why this? Does anyone care about a pair of dreamed-up assassins?

McDonagh has made a film to impress and exercise his wit, little more. The ideas and sentiments expressed here are essentially banal. The director has made a film about other films and various pop culture influences, not about life. He doesn't know anything about hitmen, any more than Quentin Tarantino does. In any event, McDonagh wants to have his cake and eat it too: he wants the "black humor" of a film about loquacious killers, then turn it into a serious meditation on their sense of guilt and sin.

The amusing elements are real, but they have nothing to do with thugs or how real thugs talk or think. One or the other element is simply tacked on. The film comes across as dated—the mood suggests some time circa 1994-1996—and without purpose. Popular moods, and even moods within the film industry, have changed. Serious things are going on. The flippancy, the annoying and self-conscious "playfulness," as well as the gratuitous and contrived violence, of *In Bruges* seem largely beside the point. McDonagh could probably do something better; perhaps he should try a hand at it.



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