CHARACTERIZATION AND STRUCTURE IN THE PLAYWRITING
OF BRENDAH BEHAN

THESIS

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The problem with which this investigation is concerned is that of determining a stylistic relationship between the playwriting techniques of Brendan Behan and those of accepted models, both traditional and modern. The approach is divided into two avenues of research. The first is that of establishing a historical perspective for the style of Behan's dramaturgy; the second is that of comparing the reactions to Behan's work by his contemporary critics.

The purpose of this study is to analyze the playwriting techniques of Brendan Behan, giving particular emphasis to his methods of characterization and structure. This analysis is not an attempt to evaluate Behan's effectiveness or skill as a playwright. It is, instead, in the form of a comparison-and-contrast report which attempts to present antithetical ideas of playwriting and to arrive, finally, at a synthesis of critical opinion concerning Behan's methods of play construction.

The study is divided into four parts, the first of which is a brief discussion of traditional approaches to
playwriting and an overview of theories of characterization and structure, beginning with the Poetics and including several modern responses to Aristotle. Chapter One touches on the Renaissance expansion of classic modes, the formula plays of Scribe and Sardou, the realistic theatre and Ibsenism, the didactic theories of Shaw and Brecht; and it ends with mentioning the evolution of modern eclectic playwriting.

The second chapter begins with a closer look at the modern innovations in theatre, especially Shaw's social comedy and the beginnings of the "epic theatre" of Brecht. To formulate a background for Behan's work, three twentieth-century developments are discussed as possible inspirations for Behan's style: (1) the Irish struggle of independence, (2) the concept of "epic" political theatre, and (3) the postwar re-examination of the meaning of existence. Evidence of these three influences is shown in the characterizations and structure of Behan's two major plays, with most of the chapter being an analysis of The Quare Fellow, Behan's first successful drama.

Chapter Three is a discussion of The Hostage, the second of Behan's two plays. The content of the analysis is parallel to that of the second chapter, with the addition of a discussion of Joan Littlewood's influence on Brendan Behan. The uniqueness of The Hostage is revealed through the responses it received, with emphasis again placed on
Behan's characterizations and structure. Some evidence is given that Behan is considered, along with John Osborne, as having brought about the revitalization of the British stage in 1956.


This report reaches no conclusions regarding Behan's talents or contributions. It does suggest, however, that his small volume of work, through not profound, was both timely and influential and could not be ignored.
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In late November, 1958, Brendan Behan's first major play, The Quare Fellow, opened in New York's off-Broadway Circle-in-the-Square Theatre; in the early months of 1959, his autobiography was published under the title, Borstal Boy; and in September, 1960, came the New York production of Behan's second play, The Hostage. Three literary works in three years made Brendan Behan seem to be Ireland's most promising new playwright since O'Casey. They also made him one of the most controversial literary figures of the day. Subsequent reviews and criticisms of his work and his personal life expressed varied opinions that seemed to agree on only one point: Behan was a rebel.

Borstal Boy gave good evidence that Behan's life was hardly calm, for by the time he was thirty-five, he had spent eight years in prison for treasonous activities with the Irish Republican Army. The Quare Fellow drew from these prison experiences for its setting, characters, and theme. This, in itself, would seem to indicate nothing extraordinary, but the critics discovered The Quare Fellow to be unique in all three of those aspects. The setting was a pleasant one, for Behan found prison a rather nice place to live; the
characters were human, without the artificial values and melodramatic backgrounds most often written into such stories; and the theme did not deal with the good-and-evil conflict represented by a man imprisoned by a society he had offended. Behan's play was a comedy. It was also a bitter satire, far more universal in its ideas than it might seem at first glance.

Behan's second play, The Hostage, takes its substance from a different part of the author's life -- his political convictions and experiences with the Irish Republican Army. Another comedy, The Hostage is, nevertheless, concerned with serious (perhaps even "tragic") ideas. But it is the structure of this play that caused the greatest amount of comment. Some critics condemned Behan as a lazy lout who lacked the discipline to learn his craft, while others praised him for his freshness and originality.

Behan himself was always interested in critical reaction to his work, but, unfortunately, was never able to profit from constructive criticism. His addiction to the "gargle" was his constant nemesis, leaving him seldom completely sober and gradually diminishing his abilities to concentrate and devote himself to his art. He died in 1964 at the age of forty-one -- a victim of his immoderate habits (8).

The purpose of this study is to analyze the play-writing techniques of Brendan Behan, giving particular emphasis to his methods of characterization and structure. This analysis will not be an attempt to evaluate Behan's
effectiveness or skill as a playwright. It will, instead, take the form of a comparison-and-contrast report, drawing substance from an investigation of both traditional and modern approaches to playwriting and comparing Behan's methods of characterization and structure to those methods established as traditional models.

It seems right that a discussion of traditional approaches to playwriting should begin with a respectful concession to Aristotle, the father of dramatic criticism. The extant fragments of his statement of the fundamentals of drama, most commonly known as the Poetics, have at once both dominated and divided the field of thought called dramatic theory for more than two thousand years. Scholars, critics, literary historians, and theorists have exhausted both themselves and their readers in the enthusiastic pursuit of new translations and re-interpretations of the Poetics in order to define, once and for all, just what Aristotle meant by such words as "action," "hamartia," or "catharsis." But in spite of the endless controversy, or perhaps because of it, the Poetics remains as something of a Bible in dramatic criticism and playwriting technique.

Although Aristotle deals mainly with tragedy, his definitions may be applied to drama as a whole. On the subjects of structure and characterization he says:

Tragedy is the imitation of an action that is complete, and whole, and of a certain magnitude . . . . a whole is that which has a beginning, a middle, and
and an action implies personal agents, who necessarily possess certain distinctive qualities both of character and thought; for it is by these that we qualify actions themselves, and these -- thought and character -- are the two natural causes from which actions spring, and on actions again all success or failure depends. Hence, plot is the imitation of the action: for by plot I here mean the arrangement of the incidents . . . . most important of all is the structure of the incidents. For Tragedy is an imitation, not of men, but of an action and of life, and life consists in action, and its end is a mode of action, not a quality. Now character determines men's qualities, but it is by their actions that they are happy or the reverse. Dramatic action, therefore, is not with a view to the representation of character: character comes in as a subsidiary to the actions. Hence the incidents and the plot are the end of a tragedy; and the end is the chief thing of all (2, pp. 62-64).

Then, after mentioning a few negative examples of "rendering character" by two Greek poets, Aristotle begins a summary of his six elements of tragedy by placing them in what he considered the order of their importance.

The Plot, then is the first principle, and as it were, the soul of tragedy: character holds the second place. A similar fact is seen in painting. The most beautiful colors, laid on confusedly, will not give as much pleasure as the chalk outline of a portrait. Thus Tragedy is the imitation of an action, and of the agents mainly with a view to the action (2, p. 63).

Thus, Aristotle began his general descriptions of both character and dramatic structure, using as his inspiration the popular plays of the Greek playwrights.

It should be noted that in the Poetics the term "character" does not mean the same thing as the present-day term "characterization." Aristotle was concerned with ethos, or the moral elements of the tragedy's protagonist
which would become the motivating force for his eventual and inevitable choice. The word "characterization" connotes a broader, individual disposition or will, which is in a state of flux or change.

John Howard Lawson begins his book, Theory and Technique of Playwriting, with a discussion of this difference between the classical and the modern concepts of character. He does not deny that Aristotle was correct in saying that action was the essence of drama, but Lawson contends that Aristotle's definitions were too exclusive to be applied to modern playwriting. He states that since the nineteenth century the drama has recognized that character and action are not "opposite sides of a theoretical fence," and that "the interdependence of character and action has been clarified by the conception of drama as a conflict of will. (8, p. 5)." Since Aristotle had only limited knowledge of psychology, says Lawson, he was unable to see character, thought and action as inseparable elements in a drama.

From a modern point of view, this mechanical way of treating the subject is valueless, and must be attributed to Aristotle's limited knowledge of psychology and sociology. Psychologists have long been aware that character must be studied in terms of activity -- the action of stimuli upon the sense organs and the resulting action of ideas, feelings, volitions. This inner action is a part of the whole action, which includes the individual and the totality of his environment . . . . Aristotle was unable to understand character as itself a mode of action which is subsidiary to the whole action because it is a living part of the whole (7, p. 6).

In general agreement with all that the Poetics has to
say about character and action, Lawson underscores Aristotle's perceptiveness on the subject by declaring: "If we describe a play as an action, it is evident that this is a useful description; but a play cannot be defined as a character. . ." (7, p. 6). Then in contrasting the Greek's evaluation of Attic drama with modern dramatic criticism, Lawson states that Aristotle is unique for having made his analysis "in conjunction with a comprehensive system of scientific thought" (7, p. 7). But he also points out that although Aristotle studied theatre logically, it was impossible for him to study it sociologically." He made no mention of the social or moral problems which were dealt with by the Greek poets. It never occurred to him that a writer's technique might be affected by his social orientation" (7, p. 7).

Thus, without contradicting Aristotle's theory of action, Lawson "amends" it by suggesting that what seems to be two elements of drama -- character and action -- are in reality only one, and that together they make up the entire structure of the drama. Character equals action equals structure.

Aristotle's observations were based on plays which were exclusively linear in form, horizontal and causal in structure -- plays which had a beginning, a middle, and an end, and which progressed logically from one event to the next. This was the accepted style of writing, and the
plots were organized in the form of a story.

For two thousand years since that time, this basic, structural form which depends so much upon "discursive suspense" (4, pp. 207-210), has dominated the art of playwriting. The nature of a story structure which has a carefully chosen beginning, demands automatically that the story teller fulfill implied promises, and that he control all the variables in order to direct the audience to the story's predictable and/or necessary end. Such a discursive method of organization in playwriting has been the torch and the target for critics since Aristotle himself discussed plot.

Kenneth Cameron and Theodore Hoffman, in analyzing audience response to narrative forms have said,

Suspense of plot is the attempted prediction of future events or incidents . . . . It is typically rather disdainful by most critics, because it is easily understood by a mass audience and is easily contrived or manipulated by its maker to give the greatest possible enjoyment to a puzzle-solving audience. It is rather a paradox, therefore, that the same critical attitude that will condemn "plot-heavy" works still relies almost totally on Aristotle, who stated very clearly that plot is the most important element in tragedy; in addition, the lack of plot suspense is reason enough to condemn a work from this point of view. Beckett's Endgame, for example, has been attacked because of its "lack of plot," by which was meant, almost certainly, Beckett's refusal to create plot suspense in an audience. As a description of Endgame, a statement that it "lacks suspense of plot" is probably accurate enough. The conclusion, however, that it is therefore "not a play," or even "not a good play," is a non sequitur. Although it is generally true that most plays of the past have relied upon some suspense of plot, and that Aristotelian criticism has considered suspense of plot
necessary, to make suspense of plot the touchstone of theater is patently ridiculous (4, pp. 209-210).

This suspense of plot which has seemed so necessary to those who recognize only horizontal structure as worthy of a drama, is nonetheless present in those plays which are structurally vertical. This playwriting form, which is but one of the relatively recent developments in dramaturgy, veers away from a causal structure of action toward an arrangement of dramatic units which is more adventitious. Vertical structure becomes difficult to reconcile with Aristotle's observation that a play must have a beginning, a middle, and an end. Instead, these non-horizontal, non-story plays move not logically from one event to the next, but intermittently. They possess, as Sam Smiley says, "a start, a center, and a stop." In a lucid essay on structure, he wrote,

Connections in horizontal plays are conceived imaginatively and executed logically and objectively. The characters' motivations are important in order for the causality to be probable and clear. . . . The emphasis in such a play's action is on progression, extension, and distance. The activities, taken together, tend to be egressive. The movement from one action to another is connected, continual, consecutive, and sustained. And the peak of interest is the climax.

In contrast, a play that moves vertically usually has a structure that is far less causal. . . . One event occurs for its own sake, rather than as an antecedent to a succeeding one or as a consequence of a preceding one. . . . Connections in vertical plays are conceived imaginatively and executed imaginatively and subjectively. . . . The suspense in horizontal dramas usually comes from conflict, but in vertical ones it most often arises from tension. Conflict is a clash of forces, and tension is stress, anxiety, dread, or anguish within
characters. The emphasis in a vertical play's action is on convergence, not progression; penetration, not extension; and depth, not distance. Direction is important in a horizontal play, and deviation in a vertical one. The activities in a vertical play are usually fewer and, taken together, are introgressive. . . . the peak of interest is more often convulsion, convolution, or pause rather than climax. . . . (10, pp. 73-74)

Thus, there is no difficulty in finding adequate evidence that the formula prescribed by Aristotle has not been utilized in all of history's great plays. And, of course, the modern dramatists were not the first to prove this. The principles of Aristotle were lost in medieval Europe, because the drama had become an unplotted ceremony. But the Renaissance rediscovered Aristotle, and the play became, once again, a relatively structural form.

However, the theatre of Shakespeare and Lope de Vega and Calderon had a scope and freedom of movement that transcended the Aristotelian formula. The drama reflected the awakening of a new faith in the power of science and reason and the creative will of man. The development of capitalist society brought an increasing emphasis on the human personality, and the rights and obligations of the individual in a comparatively fluid and expanding social system. The drama focussed attention on psychological conflict, on the struggle of men and women to fulfill their destiny, to realize conscious aims and desires (7, p. 160).

Shakespeare's Hamlet can be cited as a clear example of the Renaissance achievement in expanding the "exposition-development-climax" structure of the classic horizontal technique, for the first act of Hamlet bears no structural resemblance to the first parts of the plays of Sophocles.

Perhaps the most skillful playwright in the craft of
writing formula plays was Eugene Scribe, whose "well-made plays" dominated the theatre for a period in the early eighteenth century. To Scribe, the linear, horizontal, causal structure was the primary artistic purpose for writing. His mechanical mastery of such theatrical devices as "inciting incident," "rising action," "dramatic reversal," "climax," and "denouement," resulted in a literary genre from which the world of dramatic literature has not yet completely evolved. Even today audiences go to the theatre often expecting the well-made play, and they are confused when the structure of the action does not satisfy their expectation. Cameron and Hoffman state that this type of audience (the type that attended Scribe's plays) would be puzzled, annoyed, or bored by Hamlet before the first curtain fell (4, p. 211). These two authors also suggest that many knowledgeable critics and reviewers still judge new plays by the old standards of the well-made play with its suspensefully-awaited scene a faire, or as William Archer called it, the "obligatory scene" (7, p. 53). Mr. Cameron says that when a reviewer writes, for example, "The second act of M__'s new play is flawed by an irrelevant comic scene that detracts from the even flow of the story," or something like, "J__'s vicious satire is exciting moment by moment, but the whole is less than the sum of its parts," that reviewer is admitting that he expects a well-made play and perhaps a scene a faire (4, p. 213).
After Hugo had cried out against artificial theatre in 1830, and after Zola had called for a natural structure in playwriting, after Ibsen had produced *A Doll's House*, even after this new realism had created a backlash of neo-romanticism, the "well-made plays" controlled the European audience with their deceptively realistic dramas of intrigue. Indeed, the formula which Scribe introduced and Sardou later perfected, lived to become the mainstay in the movie entertainment business. Nevertheless, Hugo's argument for literary freedom in the preface to his play *Cromwell* (5, pp. 368-381) did not serve an empty purpose. It was the seed for the future theatre's growth, even though his ideas were somewhat slow in taking root. Hugo was demanding artistic freedom in the area of subject matter and content, but John Gassner points out that

... although this freedom of content is obviously important, it has not been the major factor in the development of specifically modern modes of drama. That development has been a matter of form rather than content, except, of course, in so far as the struggle for form has been motivated by the need for a special means of expression. ... It is the effect of the idea of freedom on form that is of primary interest. ... (6, p. 311)

Because of Hugo's ideas, a theatre arose that was free enough to experiment, first with realism, then with symbolism, expressionism, theatricalism, constructivism, surrealism, and finally a modern eclecticism unknown in any previous historical period.
George Bernard Shaw, in his intense admiration of Ibsen, proclaimed a need for something of an Ibsenite religion to be established. Shaw had derisively labelled the well-made plays of Scribe and Sardou as "Sardoudledum," (7, p. 25) and lauded Ibsen for inventing a new dramatic element which Shaw identified as "discussion" (10, pp. 159-169). Added to Ibsen's talent for making the social problem palatable through his use of bittersweet jest, this direct and realistic element of sociological discussion which Shaw admired, became one of the most influential forces in modern theatre. The public acceptance of such a frank and non-romantic technique was conditioned by the emergence of a more scientific, sociological, and materialistic outlook (6, p. 18). In his *Quintessence of Ibsenism*, Shaw attempted to summarize Ibsen's contributions to the theatre.

Formerly you had in what was called a well made play an exposition in the first act, a situation in the second, and unravelling in the third. Now you have exposition, situation, and discussion; and the discussion is the test of the playwright. The critics protest in vain. They declare that discussions are not dramatic, and that art should not be didactic. Neither the playwrights nor the public take the smallest notice of them. The discussion conquered Europe in Ibsen's Doll's House. . . . the play in which there is no argument and no case no longer counts as serious drama (10, pp. 171-176).

In addition to this declaration of a new structure in playwriting, Shaw also credits Ibsen and his immediate followers (including Shaw himself) with new ideas in subject matter and character.
In the new plays, the drama arises through a conflict of unsettled ideals rather than through vulgur attachments, rapacities, generosities, resentments, ambitions, misunderstandings, oddities and so forth as to which no moral question is raised. The conflict is not between clear right and wrong; the villain is as conscientious as the hero, if not more so: in fact, the question which makes the play interesting... is which is the villain and which the hero. Or, to put it another way, there are no villains and no heroes...

When Ibsen began to make plays, the art of the dramatist had shrunk into the act of contriving a situation. And it was held that the stranger the situation, the better the play. Ibsen saw that, on the contrary, the more familiar the situation, the more interesting the play. Shakespeare had put ourselves on the stage but not our situations... Ibsen supplies the want left by Shakespeare. He gives us not only ourselves, but ourselves in our own situations... The technical novelties of the Ibsen and post-Ibsen plays are, then: first, the introduction of the discussion and its development... and second, as a consequence of making the spectators themselves the persons of the drama, and the incidents of their own lives its incidents, the disuse of the old stage tricks by which audiences had to be induced to take an interest in unreal people and improbable circumstances...

Thus, Shaw became a leading spokesman for the drama of the early twentieth century, arguing strongly and persuasively for a theatre of realism which was didactic and dedicated to effecting a greater social awareness (1, p. 241). And, indeed, the twentieth century theatre has been one devoted more to realistic plays than to any other type. But that is not to say that the realistic plays of Ibsen and Shaw eclipsed all other plays of different genres. The later nonrealistic plays of Ibsen, in fact, had almost as pronounced an influence on world theatre as his early works did (3, p. 291). Auguste Strindberg, Ibsen's Swedish
contemporary, was also a playwright of both realistic and anti-realistic dramas which were equally meritorious. Shaw himself paid little attention to the realistic or representational style when some other device would best emphasize his message (1, p. 242). Obviously then, the freedom of dramatic expression became the most outstanding concept, ignoring the naturalistic style which had originally been the cause for the fight for freedom. In the same year that the ultra-naturalistic Moscow Art Theatre was founded by Constantin Stanislavsky, (1898), one of the world's most admired romantic tragicomedies was also introduced: *Cyrano de Bergerac* by Edmond Rostand.

The last decade of the nineteenth century saw two of the most diverse and innovative developments in theatre that have ever been experienced: the establishment of independent theatres for the purpose of experimentation and greater artistic license and the emergence of a philosophy that each play demands its own distinctive stage treatment, which resulted in a theatre of eclecticism (3, pp. 302-305). Since the turn of the century, the theatre has been characterized by a "live-and-let-live" eclecticism unmatched in any earlier period of theatre (6, p. 12).

The rapidity with which the theatre evolved from the illusionistic mode of Antoine in the 1890's through the nonillusionistic works of Meyerhold, to the presentational didacticism of Piscator and Brecht in the 1930's gives
clear evidence of the wide scope of experimentation done in those four decades. Socially, culturally, and economically, the countries of Europe and the United States made drastic changes, and the revolutions of socio-political theories gained speed until all the Victorian codes they encountered were uprooted and displaced; and the popular acceptance of such new concepts as Freud's psychoanalytic theory opened totally new avenues of expression to all artists (3, p. 309).

In the following chapter, some of the playwriting concepts already mentioned will be called into closer focus along with their more recent practices, in order to help place Brendan Behan's plays in some sort of historical, stylistic perspective.
CHAPTER BIBLIOGRAPHY


CHAPTER II

THE BEGINNING OF BEHAN

Beginning with Ibsen's invention of dramatic "discussion" a genealogy of literary influences might be traced to the birth of Brecht's theatre and the eventual rebirth of the English stage in 1956. Shaw implied in his *Quintessence of Ibsenism* that societies' sense of humor concerning major moral and social issues evolved in a rather circular pattern, so that the remarks made in jest by one generation may well become the pious platitudes of the following generation. Thus, Shaw decided, the sources of humor in the works of Dickens and Shakespeare had, by the time of Ibsen, revealed their serious faces and could, therefore, be treated in earnest in the discussions of Ibsen's social plays (23, pp. 159-169). Perhaps Shaw unconsciously criticized Ibsen's methods, however, in speaking of Ibsenism as a "bitter tonic" which "affected the public very unpleasantly" (23, p. 167). Perhaps he was also formulating the design of his own social plays which were to follow, for although Shaw's plays dealt with social questions, they seldom have a bitter taste. It is hard to know how much of Ibsen's wit and humor was spoiled by translation into English, but his reputation as
a gruff and somber miscreant seems to have been undeserved (16). In comparison, the English-speaking audience of Shaw's plays have remembered him as a writer of High Comedy and appreciated him as a witty intellectual who did more than make us laugh. In his dedication to Ibsen's kind of theatre and his determination to further its cause, Shaw adopted Ibsen's premise of social discussion, but he also added an element of humor which helped to make his message sound like jest. He hoped, perhaps, that the audience would hold on to the message and that time would turn its other face.

Following Shaw's most productive years, which ended in 1923 (6, p. 115), the English stage virtually slept.

The interwar theatre and drama of the British Isles was mixed in quality. Not till the 1930s did the commercial theatre begin to accept approaches that had been widely practiced on the Continent since before the war. Even then, the triumphs were for the most part restricted to selective realism, for the English and Irish were unreceptive to other modes. Similarly they shied away from new techniques in writing. A few dramatists dabbled in expressionism, but the majority remained in traditional paths (6, p. 484).

Most of the inspired innovations in theatre before the end of World War II were coming from Germany in the works of Piscator and Brecht and from Meyerhold in Russia. Their experiments with different forms of expressionism were short-lived, but they left indelible marks on the neo-realism that was to follow; thus, the realism that dominated theatre from around 1924 until 1950 was considerably different from that
which had preceded World War I.

During the first half of the twentieth century there were three developments that, taken in combination, would serve as inspiration for a Dubliner with a literary bent who would revitalize the Irish Theatre. The Gaelic writer appeared with his play in 1956. He was Brendan Francis Behan and his play was called *The Quare Fellow*. The three developments that influenced his work were these:

(1) The struggle for Irish independence early in the twentieth century which culminated in a civil war in 1916 and again in 1919. Along with the feeling of independence there also developed a strong, nationalistic spirit in Irish literature. The Abbey Theatre of Dublin, directed by W. B. Yeats, Lady Gregory and others, was established in 1904, and a concerted effort was made to develop a strong Celtic identity in the local literature, while denying all English heritage (6, p. 160). Although Yeats was of the symbolist school, for the most part the Abbey's success was in the production of naturalistic plays such as those by Lady Gregory and J. M. Synge (6, pp. 160-170).

(2) The conception of "epic" theatre by Erwin Piscator in Germany in the 1920s. Inspired by Karlheinz Martin during the previous decade, Piscator developed a theatre in Berlin which was proletarian and which made innovative use of modern technology by combining films, projections, and electronic gadgetry with live action. His scripts were
strongly dialectic and revolutionary, as his avowed purpose was to make political and social comments on contemporary world affairs (6, pp. 406-413; 5, pp. 334-343).

(3) The fundamental questions concerning man's existence which arose after the end of the Second World War, Combined with parts of Nietzsche's philosophy of the nineteenth century (6, pp. 143-145), the philosophy of existentialism gained popular support, if not as a movement then as a mood, due to the writings of Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus. It was not their work that created the mood of the era; it was the reverse. World War II, with its unequaled horrors, had left most of Europe with serious searching questions about all the things man had once thought absolute. It was these questions and their presumed answers that became the subjects for a new dramatic genre which finally became labelled "Absurd", a term borrowed from Camus (6, pp. 584-587).

The first of these influences, the nationalistic Irish spirit, was with Brendan Behan from the time of his birth. His family were Catholics, who made up the lower social order in Ireland; and his mother was descended from Gaelic-speaking heroes of the Irish working class. She taught her children Ireland's folk history, innumerable ballads, and a deep hatred for England (18, p. 15). All of these became, in time, the source and foundation for Brendan Behan's writings. During his early years Brendan's family
lived in a tenement house which his grandmother owned in an unfashionable district of Dublin. Stephan Behan, Brendan's father, was intellectual but unambitious. He lived off his mother's generosity and occasionally supplemented the family income by practicing his trade as a house-painter. His major contributions to Brendan's future seem to have been the practical skill of house-painting and an appreciation of literature (18, pp. 13-15).

In the block where the Behans lived, a wide assortment of other characters also rented quarters: clerks, tradesmen, civil servants, a fortune teller and at least one prostitute (18, p. 14). This microcosm of the Irish working class was Brendan's childhood environment, and it served later on, as the inspiration for his play, The Hostage (18, p. 192).

It was the deep-rooted love for Ireland and the bitter hatred of England that forced Brendan to become involved with the illegal revolutionary organization called the Irish Republican Army, popularly known as the I. R. A. As a result of his activities with this group, Behan spent his life, from the age of sixteen to twenty-two, in prisons of some kind. For almost two years he was detained in a reform school (which the British call a "borstal") in Suffolk, England, after being arrested in Liverpool for possessing a quantity of explosives with which he had planned to blow up the shipyard. His two year stay in Suffolk supplied the
title and much of the material for his partial autobiography, *Borstal Boy*, which he wrote in 1956-57. And during his four years in other prisons (from 1942-1946) he wrote his first play, "The Landlady," a one-act account of his grandmother's peculiarities. It was during these four years, too, that Behan drafted a rough sketch of another one-act play titled *The Twisting of Another Rope*, which later became the basis for *The Quare Fellow*, the play that eventually brought him worldwide fame (18, pp. 51-85).

Of the three major developments mentioned earlier which influenced Behan's work, the second, Erwin Piscator's "epic" theatre, is the least pervasive. It is somewhat incorrect, in fact, to imply that Piscator had anything at all to do with Brendan Behan, for there is no evidence that Behan ever saw a production of any epic play. And if he did, it was a play of Brecht's, most likely, and not Piscator's. The influence of the epic style, then, is an oblique one, coming into Behan's second major play, *The Hostage*, through the production methods of its director, Joan Littlewood. "Of all English directors, Miss Littlewood has been the one most addicted to Brechtian techniques, although these have been considerably altered in her usage by other influences, perhaps above all that of the music hall"(6, p. 620). Littlewood's techniques may be described as Brechtian, but Behan's intentions in *The Hostage* (and *The Quare Fellow*) more nearly parallel those of Brecht's mentor, Erwin Piscactor.
Brockett and Findlay have observed that there were significant differences between the two playwright/directors:

First, unlike Brecht, who sought to "historify" his subjects, Piscator made all plays immediately contemporaneous. . . . Second, Piscator wished to involve his audience empathetically in the action. He sought to place them at the center of world events and to make them respond emotionally to what was going on around them . . . . It is the immediacy and empathic qualities of Piscator's work that most distinguish it from Brecht's (6, p. 412).

Behan never would have wanted to "alienate" his audience emotionally. On the contrary, he, like Piscator, made deliberate efforts to establish a close rapport with them, and to enliven his performances by adding improvised comments on daily news items (19).

The only other claims that can be made for epic influences are based on the fact that both the epic dramas and Behan's plays were of a "theatre of social action" (5, pp. 331-332), and that the production styles used in both Brecht's plays and The Hostage reflect non-Aristotelian structure and some of the ideas of Antonin Artaud and his "total theatre." The multisensory stimulation that Artaud advocated, and the "shock" techniques in production, which he proclaimed valuable and necessary, were incorporated by Bertolt Brecht as well as by Behan and Littlewood in The Hostage (5, pp. 371-373; 7, p 21).

The post-war re-examination of the meaning of existence has been mentioned as a third major influence on Behan's playwriting. A reading of Ulick O'Connor's biography,
Brendan, reveals a personal philosophy of Behan's that is not emphasized in his writings, although it is not hidden. In both The Quare Fellow and The Hostage, he has his characters comment on the meaning of life as opposed to the mystery of death, and several references are made to the futility of mankind's struggles. Echoes of Absurdism are felt in the empty and endless waiting of the prisoners of The Quare Fellow and in the hollow decadence of the people in The Hostage. In both plays, death is waiting for an unknown character who never appears on stage, and it is the tension and uncertainty created by the death that reveals the nature of the visible characters (12, p. 628; 14, p. 119). But also in both plays, the eventual death is treated lightly, almost irreverently, as if to say that to live or to die is, after all, unimportant. Perhaps one of the most disturbing thoughts in Behan's plays is that "freedom" and "happiness" might become antipodal if our hopes for happiness extend beyond our mutual humaneness.

To live happily in prison and unhappily in freedom is an "absurdity" which Behan experienced and of which his plays speak. Unlike the absurdist dramas of most of the Europeans, however, Behan's plays do not exhibit an attitude of depression and tragic despair (13, p. 321).

An impressive amount of modern writing, whether or not in every case myth and experience are made coordinate, centers around a "descent into hell" -- a drop from one level of hopelessness to another until, in a writer like Beckett for example, the
final drop is through language itself into despairing silence. Not so with Behan. He reverses the process and... spirals upwards, beginning at the very bottom of a pit of despair and ill-treatment and ending in the sunshine (24, pp. 285-286).

In the late forties, when Behan was living in Paris, he became friends with Albert Camus and Samuel Beckett at the time Beckett was writing *Waiting for Godot*. The social atmosphere and literary interests which they shared in post-war France helped to give Behan a new perspective on both his violent activities as a youth and on his artistic future (18, pp. 135-141). He learned in Paris how to discipline himself to writing, and he became gradually disenchanted with revolutionary Irishmen. Although he had had occasional short pieces published in Ireland and France before 1950, it wasn't until 1951, when a small Parisian avant garde magazine called *Points* published a story which later became part of his book *Borstal Boy*, that Behan began to attract any attention from the literary world. This story, titled "Bridewell Revisited" revealed Behan's special talents for writing vivid regional dialog and creating lively characters.

In 1953 a publication known as the *Standard* printed "The Confirmation Suit," a short story by Behan that has since become admired as perhaps his best single piece of work (18, pp. 138-151). In this story Behan draws the pathetic character of an old and lonely woman who lives among strangers and makes her living by sewing habits for the dead. The story is written in the first person told by a young boy who lives
in the same tenement house (1). These two characteriza-
tions, the failing old lady and the innocent lad, became
favorite personages for Behan; they reappear in several
of his plays and stories, and they reveal two of the more
gentle sides of the author: his childlike innocence and
his compassion for the elderly Irish mother. As early as
1943, while Brendan was a prisoner in Mountjoy, he had
written a one-act play, "The Landlady," in which he re-
called three vivid ladies of his childhood, including his
own grandmother, and several of his stories, as well as
Borstal Boy and The Hostage, have as their main character
a young boy portrayed as naive and guiltless.

"From 1950 onwards, Brendan made his living by wri-
ting. His two regular sources of income were from Radio
Eireann and the Irish Press. . ." (18, p. 152). It was for
these two patrons that he wrote the prose sketches later
compiled and published as the book Hold Your Hour and Have
Another, as well as two radio playlets, "Moving Out" and
"The Garden Party," which will be discussed in a later chap-
ter along with Behan's other minor plays.

By 1954 Brendan had a reputation in Dublin, but
he was quite well aware that it did not extend out-
side the city. With his flair as a publicist, he
knew instinctively that he could launch himself on
the international scene if he got the right platform.
A play or a novel would do it and in that year he
completed the work which was to make his name known
outside Ireland (18, p. 166).

The work was a play which he called The Twisting of
Another Rope, and which he had begun writing as early as 1946 while imprisoned in England. "The Twisting of Another Rope was based on Behan's prison experiences at Mountjoy, and it dealt with reactions of the inhabitants of a prison -- wardens, governors and prisoners -- to the hanging of a condemned man in their midst" (18, p. 166). A man who was awaiting execution was referred to as "the quare fellow" by other prisoners; consequently, after Behan had submitted his play to the Pike Theatre in Dublin, one of the Pike's directors suggested that the title be changed to The Quare Fellow. Behan agreed. Both the Abbey Theatre and the Gate had turned down Behan's script, but the Pike accepted it with the understanding that Behan would work with the directors in making extensive changes. Brendan's talents for sketching vivid characters and supplying them with rich, musical dialog were evident, but his knowledge of dramatic structure seemed lacking (18, p. 167; 24).

The Quare Fellow is a three-act "grim comedy" (14) which has neither "plot" nor "climax" in the traditional sense. Analyzed from the Aristotelian viewpoint it would not even be a play, for it has no "beginning, middle, or end." It does have, however, a "start, a center, and a stop." Using Sam Smiley's criteria, the structure of The Quare Fellow would be labelled as vertical, non-causal, convergent, non-linear. Donald Malcolm of New Yorker Magazine, in his review of the New York production in 1958,
described the playwriting accurately:

Behan approaches his theme by indirection. The condemned man... never appears onstage. We see him only by reflection, so to speak, in the altered behavior of other convicts and the prison guards as the hour of his execution draws closer. This roundabout procedure allows the author to sketch an astonishing number of mordantly funny portraits of prisoners and their warders, but it also deprives the play of focus. Because of it, the first act seems a succession of false starts (14, pp. 119-120).

Malcolm praises Behan for his characterizations and dialog, but he accuses him of failing to recognize the difference between the elements of a novel and those of a play, saying that Behan is "extremely wasteful of the drama's invisible but crucial dimension, which is time" (14, p. 120). Several other critics and reviewers share Malcolm's feelings toward *The Quare Fellow*, but Cameron and Hoffman would find them all to be narrowly exclusive in their appreciation for drama if those reviewers said as Malcolm did: "The Quare Fellow amounts, finally, to something less than the sum of its parts" (14, p. 120). The play, after all, is not a "well-made play" and it has no scene a faire (8, p. 212).

The first act of *The Quare Fellow* is no more than an introduction of an interesting group of prisoners. Each of them has his own, distinctive personality, however, and it becomes obvious that these characters are based on first-hand observation. The details of their conversations and of their daily activities have a strangely "undramatic" quality, making them seem more real than staged. Although it is revealed very early in the first scene that someone is to be
executed, the mood of the action grows increasingly more com-
ical. The dialog between the prisoners alternates abruptly
between idle banter and harsh vulgarity, and the emotions of
the scenes are equally changeable. Behan's spirited Irish
wit finds appropriate outlet in such quips as "Ah, thanks,
butty, your blood's worth bottling" (2, p. 19) and through
such pub-house exchanges as this excerpt from Act I:

NEIGHBOUR: ... Many's the time the Bible was a
consolation to a fellow all alone in the old cell.
The lovely thin paper with a bit of mattress coir in
it, if you could get a match or a bit of tinder or
any class of light, was as good a smoke as ever I
tasted. Am I right, Dunlavin?

DUNLAVIN: Damn the lie, Neighbour. The first
twelve months I done, I smoked my way half-way through
the book of Genesis and three inches of my mattress.
When the Free State came in we were afraid of our life
they were going to change the mattresses for feather
beds. And you couldn't smoke feathers, not be God, if
they were rolled in the Song of Solomon itself (2, p. 21).

Act II changes the location to the prison yard and
introduces still more characters, but, just as in the first
act, nothing really happens. Nevertheless, tension mounts
as conversations become more focused in the impending exe-
cution. One of the older criminals, Neighbour, speaks of
the younger inmate to be hanged:

I saw the quare fellow in here a couple of years
ago. He was a young hard chaw like you in all the pride
of his strength and impudence. He was kicking a ball
about over in A yard and I was walking around with poor
old Mockridge, neither of us minding no one. All of a
sudden I gets such a wallop on the head it knocks the
legs from under me and very nigh cuts off my ear. "You
headed that well," says he, and I deaf for three days
after it! Who's got the best of it now, young as he
is and strong as he is? How will his own ear feel
tomorrow morning, with the washer under it, and whose legs will be the weakest when the trap goes down and he's slung into the pit? And what use is the young heart? (2, pp. 43-44)

It is in Act II that the play begins to focus on one of the prison warders, Regan, a compassionate guard whose duty is to accompany the quare fellow to the gallows. Behan uses the character of Regan to make two of his major points in the play: one is that often a criminal's most vicious condemnation comes from his fellow prisoners, rather than from his guardians; the other is Behan's deep moral conviction that capital punishment is inhumane and ultimately ineffective.

In spite of all the "savagely hilarious commentary on the idiocy, the moral hypocrisy of capital punishment in a society which prides itself ... on its moral refinement" (24, p. 284), Behan never allows his play to moralize. And when he does need to approach his themes, he often does it through indirection by using a technique of counter-focus, allowing his audience to see his point by reflection in the casual words or actions of characters outside the center of controversy. Near the end of Act I of The Quare Fellow one of the more explicit moments in Behan's writing occurs.

HEALEY: Well we have one consolation, Regan, the condemned man gets the priest and the sacraments, more than his victim got maybe. I venture to suggest that some of them die holier deaths than if they had finished their natural span.

WARDER REGAN: We can't advertize "Commit murder and die a happy death," sir. We'd have them all at it. They take religion very seriously in this country.

HEALEY: Quite, quite so! (2, p. 29)
Throughout the second Act as in the entire play, the prisoners and the warders move in and out of focus in a rather random fashion, creating an atmosphere which might be described as desperate casualness; for their increasing concern is with an imminent execution which they must discuss but cannot prevent. The Warder Regan is shown to be the most sentimental and sympathetic of all the men, and his character is possibly based on Behan's memory of one of his own warders at Mountjoy. Regan's concern is in sharp contrast with the callous obscenities that continually errupt from the prisoners themselves, and all together the characters and their abrasive intermingling help to create an intolerable tension which reaches its peak during a scene in Act III. In the prison courtyard the night before the hanging, the Hangman audibly computes the amount of weight and rope required to accomplish the execution as his assistant sings a hymn about divine mercy and pardon. Then, in the next scene, the prisoners are again betting their Sunday bacon on whether or not the "quare fellow" will indeed be hanged.

The third Act of the play is divided into two scenes. The first takes place the evening before the execution of the "quare fellow," and is set in the prison courtyard under the stars. The warders are business-like and emotionless (except for Regan) in their preparations for the morning's business, and their dialog concerns a variety of subjects,
most of which reveal a selfish indifference of the living
ward toward the quiet agony of the dying. Scene two opens on
the morning of the hanging with the restless prisoners
shouting from their cells to mark the unseen final moment
of the "quare fellow," and the loud voices of the guards
who try to quiet their rebellious words. Then, as the play
ends with the prisoners standing in the open grave prepar-
ing to fill it, they are arguing over the dead man's final
personal letters. Each wants to sell them to the Sunday
papers.

The structure of the play, especially the third Act,
has been lauded by some critics as a successful experiment
(12, p. 627), but Behan's characterizations have met with
less than unanimous approval. Comparing the responses to
The Quare Fellow, one might conclude that the wide range of
extreme opinions could result only from an equally diverse
range of personal tastes. Those critics who favor the hori-
zontal structure might find Behan's play lacking in plot;
those who are not so averse to non-linear playwriting might
consider Behan a genius. Although very little background
information is supplied for each character, Behan's skill
in writing pungent dialog that has an authentic ring makes
each of his characters seem alive. After The Quare Fellow
opened in New York in 1958, Theatre Arts praised Behan for
his "excellence of characterization," stating that "every
one of his inmates and warders is a three-dimensional
figure" with "their anxieties, prejudices, minor joys and despair. . . all caught with remarkable insight"(21, p. 66). But in the same article the author disappointedly acknowledges that Behan's structure is "slack" and that the play, therefore, is somewhat less than one hopes it will be (21, p. 66).

Four years earlier, when The Quare Fellow first opened at the Pike Theatre in Dublin on November 9, 1954, the critical reactions were similar. Behan's biographer, Ulick O'Connor, sums up the subjects of characterization and structure in The Quare Fellow:

As a play, The Quare Fellow lacks climax. The hanging of the condemned man which takes place off stage in the last few seconds of the play, fails to sustain the atmosphere of horror which has been built up before it. Some of the minor roles are more caricatures than characters, such as the prison visitor and the middle-class prisoner convicted of sex crimes. But the main characters, the two lags, Dunlavin and Neighbour, and Warder Regan, are well observed and have the richness of personality which is found in O'Casey, Lady Gregory and Synge (18, pp. 167-68).

The directors of both the Abbey Theatre and the Gate Theatre had turned down The Quare Fellow finding it too long and in need of revisions, so it was natural that Alan Simpson at the Pike was somewhat worried about the initial response to the play. In addition to the risks involved in introducing any new playwright, they faced the special problems of introducing Brendan Behan to an audience. Behan was notorious for his drinking, and more than once he had created havoc during rehearsals. Simpson and his company were afraid that Brendan might interrupt the opening performance
by taking the stage, shouting at the actors, cursing the audience or singing Gaelic ballads, as none of these were unlikely.

They need not have worried. The Quare Fellow got a tremendous reception. After the final curtain, Brendan came to the front of the stage, made an excellent speech and sang a few ballads. Then he was brought away by the Simpsons to a restaurant to wait for the morning papers. The critics could hardly have been more enthusiastic for a first play. Gabriel Fallon (a director of the Abbey) wrote in the Evening Press that:

When Mr. Behan finds himself technically, the Irish Theatre will have found another and, I think, greater O'Casey.

The Irish Independent said:

It could well be the first essay of a great playwright, still fumbling with the mechanics of his art.

While the Irish Times critic wrote:

It produces in retrospect something horribly true to life in its apparent pointlessness (18, p. 169).

Before The Quare Fellow closed at the Pike six months later, Joan Littlewood of the Theatre Royal, Stratford East, London, inquired about getting the play at her theatre. Miss Littlewood was already quite well known in London for her experimental productions, and to become associated with her theatre would be advantageous to Behan's career, so he readily sold her the London rights, and soon the plans were made for the London production. Joan Littlewood insisted always on tailoring every play both to the middle class audience and to her own semi-Brechtian techniques. Her
influences on Brendan Behan's playwriting were to prove financially fortunate but, at the same time, they may have stifled Behan's best playwriting impulses (18, pp. 176-188).

For more than four months Behan and Littlewood worked together to adapt *The Quare Fellow* to the English theatre audience, which had not yet fully appreciated Pirandello or O'Neill or Brecht and was generally out of touch with the developments of Continental theatre since World War II. It wasn't until 1955 that Beckett and Ionesco had been produced in London, and for the most part the English theatre still consisted of intellectual Shavian discussions and revivals of sophisticated comedies such as those of Noel Coward. The fact that the theatre was not the voice of the populace became suddenly apparent when a close series of events transpired in 1956, only one of which was the opening of *The Quare Fellow*.

In 1956 the English Stage Company headed by George Devine was founded. Devine hoped to revitalize the English stage by offering new plays to his audiences, so he advertised for playwrights to submit unpublished works for production. In response to Devine's advertisement, the unknown dramatist, John Osborne, submitted *Look Back in Anger*. Its subsequent production in March, 1956, took London by storm and marked a turning point in the English theatre as it ushered in a new generation of playwrights (6, p. 614; 18, p. 177).
The play was not an instant hit, but within a few months it had found its audience. It came at a crucial time just when a number of novelists were voicing similar dissatisfactions. Furthermore, the Hungarian uprising, with which it almost coincided, and the Suez crisis, which followed shortly, forcefully directed attention to the kind of social and political realities against which Osborne objected but which had been wholly ignored by such popular dramatists as Rattigan and Priestley (6, p. 615).

*Look Back in Anger*, with its bitter realism and its middle-class anti-hero spoke directly to the conscience of its audience, and it offered them an acceptable modification of the Absurdist philosophy so prevalent in Continental dramas of the middle 'fifties. The enthusiastic following which Osborne's play created was perhaps the most fortunate coincidence that Behan could have hoped for, because "it was Brendan Behan who was to get carried along on the first wave of Osborne's success" (18, p. 177).

Ulick O'Connor points out that there is at least one other fortunate coincidence:

Curiously enough, the social realism of *The Quare Fellow*, while it had a novel quality in the London scene, was in the tradition of Irish playwriting since before the First World War. The Abbey Theatre directors had encouraged Irish dramatists to write about their own lives and situations and a large output of realistic works had appeared on the Abbey stage in the 'twenties and 'thirties. While the acting techniques required for a realistic play of this kind therefore would have caused no problem in Dublin, there were a limited number of companies in England who could have given it an adequate production in the 'fifties (18, p. 177).

The fortunate coincidence, then, is that it was Joan Littlewood and her Theatre Workshop Group with whom Behan had come in contact. Since 1945, when Littlewood had founded the
Workshop in order to produce plays relevant to working-class audiences, she and her group had won international recognition for their individualistic production style. Joan Littlewood "had been a pioneer in trying to free the English stage from the destructive effects of drama schools and R. A. D. A. accents and bring it in contact with the techniques... developed in the European theatre since the 'twenties" (18, p. 177).

By 1956 the company's style and working methods were well established. Of all English directors, Littlewood has been the one most addicted to Brechtian techniques, although these have been considerably altered in her usage by other influences, perhaps above all that of the music hall... She made extensive use of improvisations as well. While keeping objectives and through line of action in mind, the actors were encouraged to seek ways of improving scenes through cooperative improvisations... She wished her productions to be "grand, vulgar, simple, pathetic -- but not genteel, not poetical" (6, p. 621).

Littlewood was one of the first postwar directors to collaborate with dramatists on developing scripts, and she often reshaped a play to add social or political slants in the hope of creating total immediate communication between the actors and the audience. Her influence and style were so dynamic that everything, including a play's theme, became subordinate to her purpose of presenting "electric" entertainment to the working class. In the case of The Quare Fellow, Littlewood's touch was advantageous, for she managed to generate electricity from a play which had little plot or action (6, pp. 620-621; 18, p. 178).
The Quare Fellow opened at the Stratford on May 24, 1956, and it aroused almost as much excitement as had Look Back in Anger, "in part because of its subject matter but even more for outlook and vitality" (6, p. 621). Its setting and subject matter were particularly topical since it came at a time when Parliament was in the midst of a prolonged debate over the abolition of capital punishment" (3, p. 38), and its outlook was one to which the English audience was unaccustomed -- irreverent, ribald, rough comedy which speaks of grimness and tragedy and social crime.

Critics immediately compared Behan's work with that of such diverse artists as O'Casey, Wilde, Dylan Thomas, Brecht, Gorki, Sheridan, and Shaw, and his fame was quick to spread across Europe. In the true Irish form of his predecessors such as Yeats and Wilde, Behan grasped his moment of attention to capture the eye of his public. Soon after The Quare Fellow opened in London, Brendan was invited to appear on the B. B. C. television program "Panorama," to be interviewed by Malcolm Muggeridge, the editor of Punch. His subsequent appearance on that program proved to be, for better or worse, his guarantee for international recognition. Between the time Behan arrived at the studio for the interview and the time he appeared on camera, he was forced to wait for five hours in the company's hospitality room, where someone offered him a bottle of whisky -- a generous but unwise gesture. Brendan was hopelessly drunk when Muggeridge
finally questioned him.

The sobriety of "Panorama" was rudely, perhaps irreparably, disturbed last week by the wearer of a furred Irish brogue. After presenting two brief excerpts from the current London stage hit, "Quare Fellow," its cameras panned to a disheveled 220-pounder with wild black hair. He was identified as the play's Irish author, Brendan Behan. ... according to several million eyewitnesses, acknowledged his introduction with "a frightful cackle."

Behan's replies to Muggeridge's anxious questions, ... were unintelligible mumbles, interspersed with further animal crowings and chortles. After an offkey and thick-tongued chorus of a song from his play, the irrepressible Behan, momentarily coherent, said: "I learnt lots of funny words in prison, would you like to hear them?" (26)

It was in this Newsweek article of 1956 that many Americans first learned of Brendan Behan, and although a number of citizens on both sides of the Atlantic were offended by his antics, he quickly became a folk hero to the less conservative. His notoriety as a personality became, in fact, his major calling card, and the press became more interested in reporting his daily activities than appraising his work. Insofar as his American success was concerned, however, nothing could have been more to his advantage. The theatre public was eager to meet the man by the time his play arrived in New York.

After the three-month run at the Stratford, The Quare Fellow transferred to the Comedy Theatre in the West End, making Behan the first Irish playwright to have a success there (18, p. 182). If there were any uncertainties among the elite concerning the merits of the play, Kenneth Tynan's
review in the Observer probably set them to rest. Tynan had nothing but praise for Behan's drama:

The English hoard words like misers, the Irish spend them like sailors, and in Brendan Behan's tremendous new play language is out on a spree, ribald, dauntless, and spoiling for a fight. In a sense of course this is scarcely amazing. It is Ireland's sacred duty to send over every few years a playwright who will save the English theatre from inarticulate dumbness. And Irish dialog almost invariably sparkles (18, p. 183).

Tynan praised Behan's language, and he also was enthusiastic about the dramatic skills of the author. He was impressed by the "intolerable" tension Behan created in the play, and he complimented Brendan for the "superb dramatic tact" with which he had concealed the tragedy "beneath layer after layer of rough comedy" (18, p. 183).

Perhaps the most eloquent and favorable notice Brendan Behan ever received from the British came from Harold Hobson, critic for the London Sunday Times:

Brendan Behan takes a place in that long line of Irishmen from Goldsmith to Beckett who have added honour to the drama of a nation which they have often hated.

Mr. Behan has one of the finest qualities of the polemical dramatist -- the quality that Shaw had in abundance. He is generous to his opponents. Detail by detail he reveals the ritual to us -- the digging of the grave, the holy oils with which are anointed the feet of a condemned Catholic, the bacon and eggs on the day before the execution, the calculations about the height of the drop, the thickness of the victim's neck, and his weight, his ration of cigarettes, the avoidance of telling him the time, . . . the euphemisms whereby he is called always the quare fellow and the hangman only "himself," the slitting of the hood, the weights under the ears, and, finally, the processional march to the execution shed.
This thing that is taking place in the prison may be wrong, it may be barbaric, but that is not what Mr. Behan is primarily thinking of. It is its enormity and the solemnity that oppress and inspire him, like the ritual of a religion or of the killing of the bull or the matador.

*The Quare Fellow*... is a ritual elegy written in a prison yard. There is nothing else like it in London (18, p. 184).

*The Quare Fellow* was successful enough, especially for an author's first work, and together with Behan's new-found reputation as a Rabelaisian buffoon, the play's success catapulted Behan into almost overnight stardom. He was suddenly in demand, and by the time he reached New York in 1960 the press was calling him Europe's public pet (3, p. 37).

Carried away by such whirlwind success, Behan became somewhat careless with himself and his talents. In permitting Joan Littlewood to rewrite his play to fit her own needs, he sacrificed some of his most admirable scenes and characterizations. Littlewood believed that *The Quare Fellow* was less international than she wanted it to be, so she made several drastic changes in order of its scenes, its characterizations (especially that of Warder Regan), and its local atmosphere. Consequently, the harsh reviews Behan received from some of the New York critics concerning his stereotyped and shallow characters might have been avoided had Behan been less permissive with Joan Littlewood (18, pp. 186-188).

Notwithstanding any negative criticism, Behan's New York debut was not a disappointment for those who had
waited The Quare Fellow. On November 27, 1958, The Quare Fellow opened at The Circle in the Square, directed by Jose Quintero, and although it didn't have the reception it received in London, the reviews were generally enthusiastic. The following morning Brooks Atkinson wrote in the New York Times,

At last Brendan Behan's The Quare Fellow has reached the stage of Circle in the Square, where it opened last evening. It turns out to have been worth waiting for.

A loose, sprawling, loquacious play, it is redeemed by the grimness of its subject, by the intimacy of the author's knowledge of the strange, dark manners of prison life, and by the rude exuberance of the dialogue... In the first act Behan introduces characters chiefly in dialog. Since the talk is unbridled and the personalities vigorous and amusing, the first act is entertaining, though formless. The play doesn't seem to be going in any direction... Since most of the characters are sketches, it is difficult to identify with them... As a craftsman, Mr. Behan is no great shakes. He has an uncertain command of the theatre medium. But he has virtually unique knowledge of men shut away from society and the abnormal pressures that surround them. Best of all, he has a robust sense of independence. No one has tamed him yet. And his "comedy-drama," as he labels it, is original, boisterous and perceptive. Beyond the petty affairs of his people, he is aware of an impersonal authority that beggars all.(17).

After the play's first week in New York, Time magazine published two articles concerning Behan in the same issue. The first was a brief biographical sketch accompanied by a photograph of Brendan, stein in hand, which played heavily on the more sensational parts of Behan's life: his I. R. A. activities, his prison years, his alcoholism, his public brawls, his television appearance, his dirty stories, and
his newly-published autobiography, *Borstal Boy* (4). The second article was a review of *The Quare Fellow*:

In Behan's play, as atmospheric pressure mounts, the need for outlets intensifies. Voices are raised, and fists; a half-brutal, half-compulsive humor dominates; the hangman gets drunk; officials get edgy; one warder carries out his job, but in a cold sweat of horror and guilt.

With an expressive off-Broadway arena-staging by Jose Quintero, *The Quare Fellow* is sprawlingly uncertain in design and graphically unflinching in detail...It avoids being strident but is only fitfully trenchant. Where it comes off well is as a tragedy of manners... (22, p. 80).

*The New Yorker*, in its review, expressed a similar reaction to Brendan's play. As was mentioned earlier, the reviewer criticized Behan for his indirect approach to his theme, saying that such an approach in playwriting was wasteful of drama's "crucial dimension, which is time" (14, p. 120). But the review was not all bad. The characters of Regan and Dunlavin were cited as excellent achievements, the final scenes were called "powerful," and the play was described as being "something less than the sum of its parts" with "many of these parts... excellent" (14, p. 120). Thus, Donald Malcolm of *The New Yorker* would agree with *Time* magazine's final statement on Behan's characterization and structure in *The Quare Fellow*:

As a full-scale muralist, Behan lacks concentration and power; as a thumbnail etcher he is at his vividest first rate (22, p. 80).

Before *The Quare Fellow* finished its three-month run off-Broadway it had rated impressive notices in such
additional publications as The Nation, The Commonweal, and Theatre Arts. Theatre Arts, February, 1959, called Behan's characterizations "excellent," saying, "Every one of the inmates and warders is a three-dimensional figure. Their anxieties, prejudices, minor joys and despair are all caught with remarkable insight . . ." (21). But on the subject of structure the same article states,

At the conclusion of Act I, we are convinced of Behan's rare gift for characterization and atmosphere, and we are content to wait for him to get down to the business of providing a dramatic theme in his own leisurely way. By the end of Act II we are still waiting, and soon thereafter we are aware that our hope is in vain. The playwright's perceptive eye and his ear for pungent dialog sustain us for a remarkably long time, but they are not quite enough. After the midway point there is a sense of slackness (21).

The review goes on to say that Behan's decision to dispense with both scenery and story in order to avoid stereotypes was a resourceful solution but a dubious one. And although the play is criticized for lacking a focal point, the article closes by restating its admiration for "the wealth of playable roles" in The Quare Fellow (21).

W. S. Merwin, in The Nation, had little to say concerning Behan's characters other than that the author was never quite invisible behind them, but he spoke vividly about the Irish use of language and about the form of Behan's work:

Anyone acquainted with either of Brendan Behan's plays knows that he can write dialog. The talk conjures up a resounding impression of reality and does it without recourse to naturalism. In this respect,
Behan has been compared to O'Casey, but his lines have a ring to them which could belong to no one but Behan. The language manages to be flat-footed and high-flown at the same time -- a thoroughly Irish mixture. It seems to have been sired by exuberance and born of exaggeration, but it's shrewd and sharp, and perfect for the stage, where the virtue of any rhetoric is measured first of all by the vitality and magnetism and immediacy of the illusion it creates.

At the same time, Mr. Behan's weakness would seem to be a tendency toward easy-going shapelessness. There is an argument which would say that Behan evinces a perfectly good sense of form, but that it's a Celtic variety which puts elaboration of the entire texture above the abstract structure of the work. This view is fairly plausible when one is talking about poetry, but it is not much use when it comes to plays. And for that matter Synge's plays, and those of the young O'Casey, are Celtic enough, yet their organization certainly requires no special apologies (15, p. 190).

Whereas Merwin concedes that "The Quare Fellow's peculiar power seems to take hold in spite of the play's scanty dramatic structure rather than because of it" (15, p. 190), Sam Hynes of The Commonweal is more unyielding in his disapproval of the play. After admitting Behan's talent for writing dialog, Hynes declares that The Quare Fellow is not a good play. "And it is not good because action is still the essence of drama, and in The Quare Fellow the characters, for all their apparent vitality and busy-ness, don't do anything" (12, p. 627). Continuing his observations of character, Hynes adds,

We look in the drama for the effects of changing circumstances upon character; only in the lowest dramatic forms, farce and melodrama, are we content with change in circumstances alone. This lesser form of drama is what Behan offers us, and in this sense
"The Quare Fellow" is a capital-punishment farce; circumstances change, the quare fellow is hanged, but the characters, as defined in the early scenes, are not discernibly changed by the event, and the play ends as it began, a world eternally divided into prisoners and wardens, the lags and the screws (12, p. 628).

Hynes' insistence upon such a melodramatic resolution in a drama may seem somewhat dated and may be, therefore, dismissed; but his contention that Irish speech, since Yeats, is "virtually unsuitable for the serious writer" is still arresting, as well as the following summarization of Behan's work, which seems to have expressed many Americans' opinion toward it until Behan died four years later:

Behan is a serious writer, a writer of enormous vitality and force, and of more promise than any to come out of Ireland in a long time. But thus far he is only promising, and the lesson of his work is simply this -- that vitality without form is not enough, and that in the end we seek the informing mind, playing upon the uproar of experience, and giving to it discipline and order. In Behan's work we look for it in vain (12, p. 629).

The worst review Behan ever received, however, was not that of Sam Hynes, but the one written by critic Friedrich Luft in Die Welt a year earlier, when The Quare Fellow opened in Berlin. Luft's notice began, "This is a report of a flop, the notification of a complete artistic washout." And those were among the kindest words in what must be one of the most vicious notices ever written about a play (18, p. 219). Nevertheless, at the same time that he met defeat in Berlin, Behan was scoring simultaneous successes in Paris and back home in London with both his autobiography, Borstal
Bo, and his second work for the stage, The Hostage; and he could, for now, ignore Berlin in favor of his new-found following in New York, for although America had not proclaimed him a true dramatist, it had found reason to consider him a literary talent and with the exception of only a few critics, to offer him the encouragement to return.

Richard Hayes of The Commonweal was unimpressed by The Quare Fellow. He contended that its theme was "not available to dramatic treatment," quoting Joyce on the "improper arts (pornographic and didactic) which excite the kinetic responses of desire and loathing" (10, p. 438).

Henry Hewes, writing in The Saturday Review, described the play as a "rough-finished piece of work... with unforgettable afterglows" (11, p. 28), and Vogue's reviewer metaphorically observed, "Behan sloshes around in words, enjoying himself" (25, p. 95). Soon after The Quare Fellow closed on March 8, 1959, Otto Friedrich of The Reporter, in a scathing attack on Behan's indecorous behavior and lack of dramatic skills, claimed that The Quare Fellow was good only in print and charged that Behan was obscene, immature and verbose. Friedrich further stated that Behan abused his material, but he admitted that trying to ignore Behan is like ignoring a pneumatic drill; for who can ignore the Irish talent for "verbal pyrotechnics" that allows Behan to describe a chamber pot as a "covered dish of disgust" (9, p. 45).
It was recognizing this talent, so peculiarly Irish, that prompted most of New York's theatre critics to agree with *Newsweek's* first impressions of Behan's first work:

The drama is almost without incident. . . . Otherwise Behan has filled three acts brimful with wildly churning talk which in the end becomes a compelling testament to hope, to the addled milk of human kindness, and to desperation as well. He has a gift for observation, and if he has yet to learn how to make a play, this one will do nicely until the next (20, pp. 66-67).
CHAPTER BIBLIOGRAPHY


CHAPTER III

BEHAN'S SECOND PLAY

The publisher of a Gaelic magazine suggested to Behan in March, 1957, that he write a play for the Gaelic-speaking theatre in Dublin. Behan agreed to write it and was given an advance. In discussing the project with the publisher at a Dublin bar, Brendan outlined the play by telling two incidents he had heard about, both concerning war activities. One of the incidents involved the capture by the I. R. A. of a young British soldier during a routine raid in County Down in 1955, and the other was a story about a bloody I. R. A. ambush on a trainload of young and unsuspecting British troops, during the War of Independence in 1921. Behan determined that his play would be about the futility of war, realizing the irony of that fact. His life had been one of prison terms resulting from his own war activities, but he had slowly turned toward renouncing all acts of inhumanity, especially those of the I. R. A., whom he now considered a group of misled and pathetic cause-worshippers whose fanatic nationalism was outdated and even dangerous to Ireland (14, pp. 191-192; 1, p. 42).

In one of his books of tape-recorded memoirs, Brendan Behan's Island, the playwright related what impressions the
two separate incidents had made on him. In the capture of the British Tommy, Behan was moved and amused by the fact that the unfortunate youth was "stuck in Northern Ireland... with his cute face and bowler hat," and that he had later said that he had spent the best four days of his life in the hands of the I. R. A. The youth was not shot. He was not even held hostage.

Behan describes the ambush incident this way:

This man told me how he found out about a train that was traveling from one place to another somewhere in County Kerry along a stretch of railway where there were no arches or bridges. It was a warm summer's day, and the troops -- boys of seventeen and eighteen -- sat out on top of the train as they went along. Suddenly they ran into my friend's ambush. He told me it was like as if they were on holiday. They were singing away, and all of a sudden they found themselves in the midst of a war. At the time I heard this story, I thought it was tragic, and I still think so. I mean, the fellows who shot them had nothing against them, and they had nothing in particular against the people that were shooting them. But that's war. It's only the generals and the politicians that are actively interested in it (1, p. 42).

Using these two incidents as his plot source, Behan then used as his physical background a house in North Dublin near where he had lived. The house belonged to an old woman who hated Saxons and gave shelter to anyone outside the law; thus her house was often filled with a raffish crew of rakes who had won her sympathy. Later, Brendan modified this setting somewhat by blending into it some of the atmosphere of Kitty Mulvey's nearby "hotel" where the men who were brought in by the girls "were admitted by two homosexual doormen,
Fonsey and Freddy" (14, p. 192). The literary result of these unlikely inspirations was An Giall, a play in Irish which Behan says he wrote in twelve days. Translated into English a few months later, it became his most famous work, The Hostage.

When An Giall opened on June 16, 1958, the critics were much impressed (those who were able to understand Gaelic), and they wrote in their reviews of the youthfulness and beauty of the play. One admitted to having been moved to tears, and an Abbey producer said: "Though the action of the play took place in a brothel, there was an extraordinary air of innocence about it. At the end I felt as if there had been a falling of flower petals through the air. I could almost smell them. It was uncanny" (14, p. 194).

Joan Littlewood became interested in the play and asked Behan to translate it for production in London, and he agreed to do it. Brendan was dazzled by the attention he was receiving world-wide, however, and his procrastination, carelessness and mounting pressures resulted in an imperfect and shoddy translation full of gaps in the dialog and plot. Littlewood and her actors filled in the gaps, and what emerged was a production quite unlike its Gaelic source. The characters of Rio Rita, Princess Grace, Miss Gilchrist and Mr. Mulleady were all added during semi-improvisational rehearsals, making The Hostage more British than Irish and less tightly structured. But Behan didn't mind; he compared
Frank Dermody, the Dublin director, to Joan Littlewood and came to this conclusion:

I saw the rehearsals of the Irish version in Dublin, and while I admire the producer, Frank Dermody, tremendously, his idea of a play is not my idea of a play. I don't say that his is inferior to mine or that mine is inferior to his; it just so happens that I don't agree with him. He's of the school of Abbey Theatre naturalism, of which I'm not a pupil. Joan Littlewood, I found, suited my requirements exactly. She has the same views on the theatre that I have, which is that the music hall is the thing to aim at for to amuse people, and anytime they get bored divert them with a song or a dance. I've always thought T. S. Eliot wasn't far wrong when he said that the main problem of the dramatist today was to keep his audience amused; and that while they were laughing their heads off, you could be up to any bloody thing behind their backs; and it was what you were doing behind their bloody backs that made your play great (1, p. 42).

Joan Littlewood's directing method was quite successful at keeping an audience's attention, regardless of how damaging it was to a writer's script. It wasn't unnatural, therefore, that some playwrights disliked her techniques. Wolf Mankowitz, an English playwright who had a bad experience with Littlewood, claimed that any writer could take the credit or blame for only about half of a Littlewood production, and that Behan's easy compliance with her demands was due to his being frequently drunk while changes were being made. Nevertheless, the financial success of Littlewood's work cannot be denied. "In the early 1960's, she had three plays running in the West End. Shelagh Delaney's Taste of Honey, The Hostage, and Fings Ain't Wot They Used t'Be" (14, pp. 196-197).
The Hostage opened in London on October 14, 1958, and ran for some months before it was transferred to the West End. Within a year the play had become an international success with productions either in progress or in preparation from Amsterdam to Broadway. What Behan had originally written as a favor for a small Gaelic organization became, with Littlewood's collaboration, a theatre piece that stirred up critics wherever it played and assured Behan of more than a footnote in future theatre histories. Coming as it did so soon after The Quare Fellow and Look Back in Anger had reawakened the British theatre, The Hostage could be expected to be somewhat unconventional, or at least experimental. And so it was.

The procession of characters that fill the stage in The Hostage is quite unexpected. The cast consists of whores, homosexuals, soldiers and social workers as well as the major roles of Pat and Meg, a nearly married pair who run the brothel which serves as the location for the action. Much like The Quare Fellow, The Hostage depends little on characterizations for its advancement of plot. In fact, plot is of minor importance in The Hostage, serving only as a thin thread with which to give some thematic unity to an otherwise chaotic vaudevillian revue. It has been this unorthodox structure that has drawn the most complaint from Behan's critics. No one denies his talents for writing excellent dialog or for sustaining a high level of audience interest through a parade of amusing, if shallow, characters. But few critics or theatre
sailors in praising Behan's work have failed to mention his shortcomings in the matter of play construction.

The content of The Hostage is easy to summarize. In a disreputable Dublin lodging house an unlikely assortment of young "Irish tarts and old rebels, pimps, perverts and counter-spies, religious crackpots and preposterous patriots" (16, p. 285) find their regular routine interrupted when the I. R. A. brings in a young cockney soldier to be held captive as a hostage for one of its own soldiers whom the British have captured and plan to execute the following morning. The young British soldier proves likable to all the lodgers, and particularly to Teresa, a young chambermaid. Throughout the long night's wait the characters discuss and joke and sing about the whole history of the Irish-English troubles, and it seems evident that the young soldier, Leslie, is in no real danger of being harmed. But when morning comes the place is raided, and Leslie is accidentally shot and killed. Almost as soon as he falls, however, he jumps to his feet to lead the entire cast in a song which seems to carry the message of the play: "The bells of hell go ting-a-ling-a-ling for you but not for me; Oh death where is thy sting-a-ling-a-ling, oh grave thy victory?" (2, p. 182)

In Act I each of the brothel's inhabitants is introduced, and each one is comical in spite of any pathetic shadings that may surround him. Behan seems to have no serious theme in mind as he brings the characters on stage in pairs in a
sequence that resembles a series of two-man comedy routines. Many of the brief exchanges of dialog are in the form of set-up questions and punch-line answers, often flavored with bawdy innuendoes and outright blasphemy. In spite of the non-causal progression of scenes, however, several points are made early in the play. Behan obviously intended to satirize a number of things, not the least of which was his own youthful Irish nationalism. Brendan's strong attachment to the working-class Dubliner and his love of Hibernian ballads are spread throughout the play; in the first Act alone there are a half dozen folk songs and two scenes in which the characters dance Irish jigs. The plot of the play is advanced no further than the fact that a hostage will be brought into the brothel, and just before the first Act ends an I. R. A. officer arrives bringing an unidentified British soldier. The young hostage enters and begins immediately to sing his own song as the curtain falls.

Act II introduces Leslie and reveals Behan's understanding for both sides of the political and religious questions through another series of comic exchanges between the officers and the inhabitants and between Leslie and Monsewer, a senile Irish convert who fought during "the Troubles." Teresa and Leslie come together, admitting their mutual feelings; seven more songs are sung to the audience illustrating a variety of political philosophies; and the play begins to turn obviously toward a purely presentational style
with several lines delivered directly to the audience and a fifteen-line gag about Brendan Behan himself just after Meg finishes singing an anti-British song:

MEG: The author should have sung that one.

PAT: That is if the bleeding thing has an author.

SOLDIER: He doesn't mind coming over here and taking our money.

OFFICER: Be Jesus, wait till he comes home. We'll give him making fun of the movement.

SOLDIER: He's too bleeding anti-British.

OFFICER: Too anti-Irish you mean.

MEG: Ah, he'd sell his country for a pint.

PAT: And put up his hands and thank the almighty God that he had a country to sell.

SOLDIER: Author, author.

MONSEWER: Author!

PAT: He might as well show up; it's his only bleeding chance of getting a curtain call. A lot he cares (2, p. 155).

Immediately following these lines, there is rock and roll music, and everyone dances. Then, just as suddenly, someone arrives with a newspaper to read aloud that the young hostage will definitely be shot if the Irish soldier held in Belfast is hanged. As the mood changes to a serious one, Leslie ends the Act by singing "I am a Happy English Lad."

More than half of the third Act is spent in pointless conversation between Pat, Meg and Miss Evangelina Gilchrist, the "sociable worker" who is only a part-time whore. As
Miss Gilchrist drinks stout and babbles about her religion, her speeches become twisted around malapropisms and broken up with incoherent hymns; and nothing happens at all until very late in the Act. Princess Grace and his prize-fighter friend, Rio Rita, make a late entrance for the purpose of attempting to seduce the soldier and to sing a plain-spoken song about the sexual preferences of Shakespeare, Swinburne and Socrates. As in Act II, the mood changes abruptly then, from the comic to the serious, as Teresa and Leslie discuss a plan to help him escape his captors. Teresa informs the police and the house is raided to free Leslie, but in the shuffle he is accidentally shot. Without much transition, the play comes quickly to an end as Teresa makes a simple grieving statement over Leslie's body; but as she turns away the soldier rises and sings a final death-defying song to the audience.

For many critics (and audiences, too) The Hostage was a bit confusing in 1958. The reviews and criticisms gave evidence that they did not know exactly what to think of the play or even how to express precisely their reactions to it. Ulick O'Conner, Behan's biographer, reported that on opening night in London the audience responded to the performance with "thunderous applause," and that Behan stood before them to say that the play was "a comment on Anglo-Irish relations. As to what it is about, you will find out from the critics in the morning" (14, p. 198).
The following morning, the London Times critic made no attempt to explain the play, but he did comment on the unusual structure:

The main substance of the rollicking fun is the outrageous fun poked at Irish types. The Hostage is an extravaganza with songs and dances. It is as formless as if it were being improvised on the spur of the occasion, but it is full of brawling energy and it treats past and present Anglo-Irish relations with a laughing impartiality which is almost anarchic. . . . It is a curious entertainment which has the vitality that excuses a multitude of shamelessly loose touches (14, p. 199).

Harold Hobson, in the Sunday Times, praised The Hostage without restraint in saying that "nothing finer in this kind has been written for 2000 years" (14, p. 197). Superlative as such a compliment may be, an American theatre scholar expressed a similar judgment of the play several years later, when he contrasted Behan with other European dramatists of the fifties:

Only an Irishman was able to make a real comedy out of the absurd 'human condition.' In The Hostage Brendan Behan uses extravagant fantasies and delightful ballads to satirize warfare, group living, and Irish nationalism. Not since Aristophanes lashed out at the Athenians for not living up to their ideals has satire been so strong and racy. Behan has something very rare among the absurdist: a sense of humor about himself. He triumphs over the grim anguish of his generation with a gay song. . . . (10, pp. 322-323).

The Hostage transferred to the West End and Wyndham's Theatre on July 11, 1959, and again the critical reaction was overwhelmingly complimentary. The Times critic wrote that Behan's irreverence for society's rules went deeper than Osborne's but that Behan was the inferior playwright, and the
Manchester Guardian, commenting on the interpolations and ad-libs inserted each week by the director and cast, said,

The show is directed by Joan Littlewood and it would be beyond the power of the most expert exegetist to decide where Brendan ends and Joan begins. Most of the songs . . . were written by the author, some of them by his uncle. Others are . . . from the music-hall. Together they make the evening something less than the ordinary musical and something much more than the ordinary play (14, p. 228).

Another critic had high praise for the play but added that

More than half the time it turns into undisguised cabaret; speaking and singing straight to the audience the cast gets splendid fun out of Irish traditions, English snobbery, Holy Church, racial intolerance, sex in all its forms, the H-bomb and whatever else you can think of. It's magnificent, but it isn't drama (14, p. 228).

Regardless of how it was classified, The Hostage stayed in London for more than a year. Only a few days after it opened, Brendan Behan's autobiography, Borstal Boy, was published and its first printing sold out immediately. Four months later it sold twenty thousand copies in one month in New York (14, p. 210). These events combined to bring Behan both literary fame and a public reputation that would outlive him.

America had not yet met him, but in November, 1959, it got its first television glimpse of the Irish Laughing Boy. Brendan appeared with John Mason Brown and Jackie Gleason on Edward R. Murrow's television program, Small World, in a segment called "The Art of Conversation." The show was transmitted via trans-Atlantic cable, and after only fifteen minutes Brendan's image disappeared from the screen without
adequate explanation from the host. He had been cut off because, as Jackie Gleason commented, "Behan came over one hundred proof. It was not an act of God, but an act of Guinness" (14, p. 231). It was a repeat performance of Behan's interview with Malcolm Muggeridge on B. B. C., and it received similar response from the viewers in America. By the time The Hostage was staged the following September in New York, the American public was impatient to meet the author who had such a rowdy reputation.

The Hostage opened at the Cort Theatre in New York on September 20, 1960, and Broadway's initial response was summarized by Howard Taubman's review in the New York Times the following morning:

The Hostage is a grab bag of wonderful and dreadful prizes. Brendan Behan's theatrical concoction, which opened last night at the Cort, mixes irreverent hilarity with tasteless rubbish. Organized chaos is the handiest description for The Hostage. . . .

Mr. Behan is a man of immense talent, but in The Hostage he seems to spew on it more often than use it with purpose. If he were really not serious about anything, he might be excused for being so cavalier with his gifts. But even in this undisciplined invention, he reveals a flair for drama and a determination to communicate something. . . .

Mr. Behan refuses to be confined within the bounds of traditional dramaturgy. That is his privilege. He wishes his stage to erupt in unexpected ways, and it does. He likes the performers to express enjoyment, and they do. But there is a limit to being uninhibited; one can overlook bad taste but not flat gibes. . . . He tries to keep the buffoonery going like a whirligig, and not even he can manage it for three acts.

Mr. Behan is an original and so is The Hostage. If you are willing to shuttle madly between delight and distaste, you might try dancing to Mr. Behan's Irish jig (13).
The Quare Fellow's New York production had been directed by José Quintero, therefore The Hostage was Broadway's first glimpse of Joan Littlewood's directing formula. For the New York production the director had added a few topical references to the script, ad-libbed comments about Khrushchev's recent visit to America and other such gags taken from the daily newspapers. Consequently, the reaction to The Hostage became rather equally divided between attention to the author and to the production style. Henry Hewes took notice of the Littlewood formula and sensed a potential danger for Behan's future:

...the production formula director Joan Littlewood has evolved and successfully repeated in three London hits with slight plots ... seems to consist of de-emphasizing plot and playing color, impertinence, and audaciousness with great speed. When a song is sung it is almost always followed by a distraction that relieves the number of the burden of being judged ... and the performers appear remarkably uninhibited, as if the whole business had been invented in rehearsal and changed whenever they felt like it.

For some The Hostage will seem a wild spree and a joyous release from the sobriety of most conventional theatre. But to those of us who were deeply moved and excited by ... The Quare Fellow, it can only seem by comparison badly organized and half-baked Behan. Brendan is a lot better than he shows himself to be in The Hostage, but there is the danger that he will allow his talent to take the easy way to false fruition, by continuing to feed notions, dialogue, and scraps of irony to Miss Littlewood and her mad kitchen (6).

Alan Pryce-Jones, in Theatre Arts, had the opposite reaction to that of Hewes. Pryce-Jones described the play as "ribald, meaty, uproarious, blasphemous, dirty, hilarious talk," and had high praise for Joan Littlewood; but of
Behan's characters and structure he wrote:

If you thrill to stage Oirish, and have an exceptionally quick ear, this play is for you .... If you feel, as I do, that practically all stage Oirish characters are interchangeable, bandying the same jokes, drinking the same Guinness, getting plastered with clockwork regularity and -- whatever the period of the play -- hopelessly stuck in the problems and attitudes of 1885, you will be exasperated that Brendan Behan has not taken more trouble to organize his gifts (15, p. 9).

Pryce-Jones was disappointed that Behan had neither constructed a "watertight fable" nor "gone the whole Brecht," and he credited Joan Littlewood and Alfred Lynch, the actor who played Leslie, for whatever success The Hostage might enjoy.

Sam Hynes condemned The Quare Fellow, saying that the characters didn't do anything. Writing in Commonweal, he also found little to admire about Behan's second play. Hynes observed that the two plays were essentially the same, both dealing with the hours before an execution, and both organized around groups of attitudes toward death:

The whole play oscillates between irony and pity: irony without purpose and pity without focus. But purposeless irony is finally a denial of values, and unfocussed pity is sentimentality. This is most evident in the linking of death and farce which is Behan's most characteristic device; it is the tough con's protective refusal to expose himself through emotion, but it is also a failure of humanity, and ultimately of creative intelligence, since it determines the form of the plays (8, p. 628).

Although Hynes could not accuse the characters in The Hostage of not doing anything, he did not like what they were doing:

The intellectual and formal shoddiness of The Hostage is somewhat obscured for its audiences (though not for its readers) by the amount of strenuous and
entertaining activity that goes on on the stage. Characters sing Irish ballads and comic songs, dance, fight, and play on the bagpipe, and there is a great deal of headlong rushing about. The effect is vigorous and compelling, and the whole affair is great fun, but the turmoil of the play had led some reviewers to confuse uproar with art, and to take energy for genius. ... But serious drama must embody thought in its action. ... Behan has not yet reached this level, ... he has not demonstrated that he has any ideas as vigorous as his stage effects (8, p. 628).

If Hynes could find no thought in the play's action, he must have been either less or more perceptive than virtually every other reviewer, for his is the only article that does not mention at least one possible theme found in the play.

A reader of Commonweal responded to Hyne's essay by defending Behan's writing, especially the ending of the play in which the dead soldier sings:

It is the ridiculous, tragic situation in Ireland which has made him a corpse that sings. The unstated but continually implied criticism that Behan makes throughout the play is that neither side is possessed of common humanity or common sense. ... At the end of the play, then, the statement of the song is to be taken literally, and St. Paul's words apply to the soldier. Both he and the boy in the Belfast jail are dead, and where is the victory for either side?

Behan's feelings about the lack of sense and humanity are typical of much Irish writing about the revolution -- several pieces of O'Casey appear similar to me (although much better done) and something of the same attitude is in Yeats' later poems (7).

In further support of Behan's talents, critics writing in The Reporter, Time, Nation, The Atlantic Monthly, The New Yorker and The New Republic found a variety of points to praise, even though none of them were quick to hail Behan as the new O'Casey. Robert Brustein, in The New Republic, was
excited by The Hostage, and although he pointed out its faults, he predicted that the play would survive the decade. Being eager to witness new experiments, Brustein compared Behan's fresh, new style to that of O'Casey and concluded that although the two authors write on the same subjects, there was an important difference between them:

But while Behan has turned to O'Casey for his plot outline, he does not share O'Casey's weakness for adolescent sexuality or utopian social communities. In his illogical, irresponsible view of society, in fact, he comes much closer to Ionesco; in his technique and treatment of low life, closer to the early Brecht (3, p. 20).

In listing and describing each of the characters in The Hostage, Brustein said that "they are on stage primarily for what they can contribute to the general mayhem," and he concluded that Behan's theme is found in one of the songs of Act II, "Nobody Loves You Like Yourself (3, p. 21). Brustein also stated that the brothel was in some ways symbolic of Behan's desire for a refuge from the "gathering forces" that have circumscribed our private world and can no longer be ignored. The article, entitled "Libido at Large," suggested that Behan's anarchistic comedy was "waging total war on all social institutions excepting brothels and distilleries," and ended by saying that even though The Hostage may not belong on the legitimate stage at all, it is a "wholesome antidote to what Orwell called 'the smelly little orthodoxies that are now contending for our souls'" (3, p. 21).
much better than it does when it is expected to conform to any of the traditional playwriting criteria. If one is looking for plots and characterizations as complete as those of Hedda Gabler, he is sure to find The Hostage lacking. If, on the other hand, one is willing to consider the entire play as an attempt to blend form and content, characterization and structure, theme and format, he might agree with Sean Cronin of Nation magazine that "The Hostage was among the plays that sparked the 'new theatre' of the 1950's" (5, p. 487). In such a context as the fifties, The Hostage can be seen as a forerunner of such later successes as Hair and any number of semi-Brechtian stage creations of the 'sixties and early 'seventies.

The question of Behan's undeveloped characters loses much of its importance in the light of more recent playwriting, but even before The Hostage reached New York, Alfred Kazin wrote in The Atlantic Monthly,

There are no developed characters in Behan's ... plays, wonderfully dramatic as they are. It is typical of Behan's generation that his sense of other people is hurried and sardonic; people, though they are given names, are passing Englishmen, warders, laborers, convicts, and the rest. This dense sociological crowd, this mass and mess of people -- this is how a truly contemporary eye often does see human beings today. And given the Irish sense of fun, which creates in mimicry the parody of one's outworn but unaltered cultural role, the result is a yeasty mixture: deflation of the pompous, a slightly hysterical reaching after the obscene, and what is most solid in Behan's work, the Irish workingman's sense of what life is really like (9, p. 66).

This strong identification with the Irish workingman was the
source for much of Behan's social philosophy as well as for his style of writing (1). The years he spent in prison as a youth had purged him of hatred for any race or nationality and taught him that a fellow Irishman could be vindictive and that a British guard could be a friend. He had learned to find comfort in a song and in the realization "that human decency is a quality of persons" unrelated to politics, parties, or beliefs (11; 16, p. 285). If some of Behan's friends found The Hostage insulting to Ireland's past, therefore, others knew that he was making a desperate plea for greater compassion among his fellowmen. Perhaps the brothel is a microcosmic universe with Monsewer as a vision of God, parading, saluting and singing of "the captains and the kings" (4, p. 643).

With such a point of view, one can think of The Hostage as either "Ireland's rowdiest contribution to the theatre of the absurd" or as "a parody of the absurd itself" (16, p. 285). Kevin Sullivan described the sudden jolts from scenes of folly and farce into scenes of shock and death as "a glimpse into an absurd and unthinkable dark where grin and grimace are one" (16, p. 285). He asserted that Behan used the stage as Shaw did, as a pulpit from which to preach that in a world of political posturing, only the victims of such madness can enter a plea of innocence (16, p. 285).

Leveling out the balance of pros and cons and avoiding any strong commitment on the values of The Hostage, Time
magazine's review, published after the New York opening, saw the man behind the work:

The Hostage seems much less a play than a dramatization of its playwright: sprawling, shocking, howlingly off-key, marvelously in tune, humane and hilarious. . . . It's easy to make too little of The Hostage, to call it mere tongue-in-cheekiness, a jolly but self-indulgent romp. And as, amid shenanigans, there comes a sudden stab to the heart or a surface shot that plumbs the depths, it is perhaps easy to make too much of it, to find its anarchic flings an essay of an ill-governed world, its rancid taste an assault on respectability. Less than a philosopher and more than a buffoon, Behan is chiefly an insatiable human being (12).

It was ironic that the success that The Hostage brought to Behan was the thing that put him out of touch with the common man for whom he wrote. He could not enjoy fame and remain a craftsman; so it happened that The Hostage marked both a beginning and a decline that continued until his death in 1964 (4; 5).
CHAPTER BIBLIOGRAPHY


CHAPTER IV

BEHAN'S MINOR PLAYS

Brendan Behan's literary reputation rests on his two plays, *The Quare Fellow* and *The Hostage*, and on one autobiographical novel, *Borstal Boy*, published in 1958 only four days after the premier of *The Hostage*. The controversial nature of his plays and of his public personality helped to make *Borstal Boy* an immediate best-seller both in Europe and New York, but the book was more than just a financial success. It received almost unanimous critical acclaim throughout the world. Of all Behan's works, *Borstal Boy* might be called "the quintessential Behan," for it comes close to being the synthesis of his artistry. There are three facets of Behan's short life that served as his major subjects: his thorough intermingling with Dublin's undesirables, his years of illegal involvement with the Irish Republican Army, and the eight years which he spent in prison. In *Borstal Boy*, more than in either of his plays, Behan revealed his talent for drawing from his experiences to create characters and dialog and for recalling scenes that make all his writing unforgettably comic and sad.

*Borstal Boy* is a sprawling, irreverent account of the young Brendan's first three years in an English reform school called a "borstal." From its opening, as Brendan is arrested
in Liverpool, to its end, as he is released from prison to return to Dublin, the novel is an unvarnished collection of malodorous characters who swear and sing cacophonous ballads with such an Irish air that the overall impression is less one of a prison than of a New Year's party in a brothel. The young boy, full of liberal zeal for the Irish Cause, is forced to grow up without privacy among a half-world of society's bad children. The book is full of laughs, but for all its joking and loud profanity, it fails to hide a certain desperateness that lies below the surface -- an innocent and pathetic plea masquerading in adolescent obscenities.

In *Borstal Boy* can be found the seeds of both *The Quare Fellow*, which also deals with prison life, and *The Hostage*, which is the older Behan's sardonic comment on the overpious diehards of the I. R. A. If *Borstal Boy* survives as Behan's representative work, it may be, therefore, because his peculiar talents were best utilized in the novel rather than in the drama. It has been noted by more than one literary analyst that Behan's writing consists mainly of speech. Each reminiscence is written in the form of dialog; each characterization is a semantic-phonetic creation. And the vividest character of all, perhaps the only well-developed one, is Behan himself. His autobiography is a masterfully controlled procession of character-shadows as seen through the eyes (and ears) of a semi-authentic Brendan Behan. The rambling, undisciplined form of this character parade, interrupted by bawdy songs and
lengthy, narrative asides, is an asset to *Borstal Boy*. But the same structure proved to be a weakness in both plays, especially *The Quare Fellow* which, ironically, is the one most similar to *Borstal Boy* in theme and content. *The Hostage*, by virtue of its honest presentationalism, is more easily able to succeed in ignoring theatrical conventions. Whatever the criticisms may be, however, Behan became recognized by 1960 as one of our true contemporaries, who wrote of despair with gaiety and managed to retain a sense of humor in the face of human loss. *The Quare Fellow, Borstal Boy*, and *The Hostage* were his trilogy on the theme of complete freedom, the freedom that comes to a spirit unrestrained by politics, religions, social obligations, or inherited prejudices -- to say nothing of prison.

I respect kindness to human beings first of all, and kindness to animals. I don't respect the law; I have a total irreverence for anything connected with society except that which makes the roads safer, the beer stronger, the food cheaper, and old men and old women warmer in the winter and happier in the summer (1, p. 354).

In addition to *Borstal Boy*, Behan had three other novels published before his death in 1964: *The Scarperer*, which had originally appeared as a serial in the *Irish Times*; *Hold Your Hour and Have Another*, a compilation of brief articles published by the *Irish Press*; and *Brendan Behan's Island*, a collection of vivid sketches of Ireland, which was chosen as Book-of-the-Month in October, 1962 (18, p. 237). *Brendan Behan's Island* received critical acclaim upon its publication,
especially for one of the interludes it contained, a short story titled "The Confirmation Suit." The book also contained a brief one-act play, "The Big House," which Behan had written for radio broadcast in 1957, but the responses to it were unanimously unfavorable. "The play concerns the looting of an Irish country house just after the Troubles, and is dullish and more than a little incoherent, though it is too slight to draw any conclusions from"(22, pp. 101-108). "It proved to be below standard with a number of stock characters who were bad caricatures of the Anglo-Irish"(18, p. 191).

"The Big House" is not the only one-act play that Behan wrote. As early as 1943, while he was incarcerated in Mountjoy, he completed a play which he called "The Landlady." Although Behan's letters indicate that he submitted a three-act script to the Abbey Theatre, only a one-act form of "The Landlady" is extant. Supposedly, the play, which was based on Behan's grandmother's boarding house in Dublin, was given a performance by the inmates, but it provoked a riot among the political prisoners who thought the play blasphemous and obscene.

In a letter to one of his friends who had read the play, Behan wrote,

The Landlady is, or was, a very genuine person to me... I don't mean to say that any of them are exactly and in every detail as I described them (and I have painted them, didn't photograph them). But I do claim to have taken nine real Dublin slummmies and stuck them on paper. I even go so far as to claim that they are as genuine as any of O'Casey's battalion --
maybe more so, because O'Casey was born a Protestant and that seems a big lot (18, p. 77).

Although Behan claimed that the characters and situations of his first play were based on fact, he did not hesitate to admit that his knowledge of playwriting was limited.

I've a good idea of the faults of the piece, and the principal one is that altho' one section of my family were then and are, immersed in the theatre, I myself never went to a play except to be entertained and sometimes even left the theatre then before the third act had got under way in the pursuit of drink. Therefore I know little of the art of stagecraft and, until I had the idea of writing plays, cared less. And I can safely say that the plays of which I've seen two thirds left me with the idea that any literate person could do that sort of thing, which is, I discovered, a bad way to approach anything (18, p. 77).

Perhaps the chief value of "The Landlady" is the insight it affords to Behan's future style of dramaturgy. He was only twenty years old when he wrote the play, but he already showed an exceptional skill for writing dialog and a sharp, perceptive wit in drawing character sketches. One of the women of the play, Mrs. Kane, sounds a little like Neighbor or Dunlavin in The Quare Fellow, with her Irish temper:

MRS. KANE: Married to Mickser Morgan, is it. I'd sooner see my daughter in the Liffey. I cursed him -- and 'twas a great curse -- that he mightn't have luck the longest day he lived -- that he'd die galloping like O'Mara's ass, calling out for mercy and the priest deaf -- that he'd be sent for the time his sins were blackest. I know, Mrs. Cleary, it's not right to give anyone the cross word, and I wouldn't wish too much harm, only that he'd fall down the stairs some night he'd drink taken and break his dirty neck (18, p. 75).

Those who have read the one act of "The Landlady" in the Abbey archives find it to be less of a play than a short
story, but even in this early drama some comparison with O'Casey is found.

"The Landlady" has some of the qualities of O'Casey's dramas; the savage sarcasm of the dialogue, the humorous delight in the hypocrisy and change of mood of the characters as they suit their words to different occasions; the poetry underlying their everyday speech. This was not because Brendan was copying O'Casey, but because he was reproducing the same world that O'Casey did (18, p. 75).

The comparisons with O'Casey were inevitable and they continued to reappear throughout Behan's productive years. As each of his works came off the press, reviewers and critics were seemingly eager to find new evidence that the Irish had succeeded or failed in producing a new O'Casey. The comparisons had begun with "The Landlady," and they were seldom completely to Behan's credit.

Mr. Behan is no tongue-in-groove playwright; his style is ramshackle, and he never lets any concern with his plot, such as it is, prevent him from going off on wildly irrelevant tangents whenever it suits his fancy. . . . While Mr. Behan would seem to be the hope of the Irish theatre at the moment, he is hardly, from the evidence presented, a budding O'Casey (11).

Whereas John Russell Brown credited the Irish with the welcome "emergence of workingclass drama," he is less complimentary toward Behan's "low-life drama," and Brown describes Behan as a "contrast with Synge and O'Casey, not a continuation of them" (3, p. 33).

Records show that at Easter, 1947, during one of Behan's brief periods of freedom from prison, he had a tiny one-act play produced as part of an I. R. A. commemoration in
Dublin. The little play was called "Winston Green," and it "depicted the scene outside the prison walls on the morning of an execution. It had a good reception from an admittedly partisan audience" (19, p. 132), but scripts of the one-act did not survive.

In 1952, Behan agreed to write a series of sketches for Michael ChAodha of Radio Eireann. The result of this agreement was a very short series -- two brief radio sketches, "Moving Out" and "The Garden Party." Both plays are based on humorous incidents in the life of the Behan family at the time they moved from the Russell Street slums of Dublin to a new housing district in Crumlin.

In "Moving Out" the Behans, alias the Hannigans are introduced. Chris, the mother, is eager to move from the tenement, and the breakfast conversation is a family argument about the advantages of moving to another district. As head of the household, employed by a brewery, Jim Hannigan loudly asserts his authority in refusing to consider a change in location. He does not want to give up his familiar surroundings, especially the neighborhood pub, but his two teenage children prove themselves able and witty debaters.

**EILEEN:** Dirty filthy holes. Without proper light or anything. I wish we had a new house. I wouldn't care if it was on the top of old Smoky.

**NOEL:** We'd get a bit of air, anyway, not like here. With a laundry throwing out smoke all day and the brewery taking over to gas us in our sleep. It's a wonder we're not all choked to death years ago.
JIM: It's a wonder is it? Well, let me tell you, son, that better men nor you'll ever be came out of this ould street.

EILEEN: A pity you wouldn't turn the record, da. You might get Elvis Presley on the other side.

JIM: You're all terrible smart. Yourself and your Mickey Dazzler of a brother here. I'm not in love with these houses, if you want to know, though there was good men reared in them, but I want to stay somewhere near to where I was born and reared and not shoved out to Siberia.

EILEEN: You'd have some way of keeping yourself decent with a bath and everything.

JIM: I don't care if they were giving television sets with them. I'm not going out to the Bog of Allen for a bath. Not if they filled it with asses' milk, like Pharoah's daughter.

NOEL: Maybe if they filled it with porter it might tempt you.

JIM: You're terrible witty this morning. Are you taking anything for it? (2, p. 9).

If Jim had any reason at all to agree to the move, it should be to escape the constant, whining interruptions of an elderly, pesky neighbor, Mrs. Carmody. But he is spared her presence by his ability to leave the tenement. The rest of the family, however, is forced to tolerate the old lady's inconvenience because of her age and deafness and because she is comical. Mrs. Carmody comes visiting at breakfast time each day, and it is evident by the Hannigans' reactions that she has told them all her stories many times. Scene two of "Moving Out" opens with Mrs. Carmody finishing one of her anecdotes:
MRS. CARMODY: Says I, says I, it’s a while now since we had a pig’s cheek and himself was always partial to a bit, especially the ear, but there’s pig’s cheeks and pig’s cheeks in it. The one old Daly handed me was the most ugly looking object you ever put an eye to. It was after being shoved up again the side of a barrel by all the other cheeks and was all twisted. A class of cock-eyed, ma’am, if you follow my meaning. “God bless us and save us,” says I in my own mind, “if I put that up to him with the bit of cabbage, and that twisty look in his eye, when he goes to put a knife in it, he’ll throw me out.” So I says to old Daly, says I, “but that’s a very peculiar looking pig’s cheek.” And says he, “what do you want for two shillings,” says he, “Mee-hawl MacLillimore?” The impudent ould dog. Says he, “Hold on a minute, and I’ll see if I can get you one that died with a smile” (2, p. 10).

After Jim Hannigan leaves for work, Chris announces to the children that she has rented a house in the new district, and the four of them quickly gather the family belongings and move out, leaving a note for Jim saying that his tea will be served to him at 38 Ardee Road. Jim takes his troubles to the pub where he receives the sympathy of both the bartender and a female boozer named Mrs. Hanratty, an early sketch on which the character of Evangelina Gilchrist in The Hostage was based. Forced to take a bus to the suburbs in order to find his family, Hannigan gets lost in the dark, intrudes into a poor widow’s apartment, and is besieged, finally by a loquacious gentleman of enormous pretenses, Mr. Gabble Gibbon, who it turns out, is Hannigan’s new neighbor. When he eventually locates his house and is welcomed in to the hot tea, Mrs. Carmody follows him in. She has rented the house to one side of him, and Gabble Gibbon is on the other.
In "The Garden Party," Jim Hannigan is once again the victim of his family's schemes. He returns home from work to find his tiny back yard piled high with manure. His first impulse is to call in a noisey complaint to the Housing Authority, until he realizes that his wife, Chris, bought the manure and had it delivered, planning to have Jim and his son Noel dig up the lawn for a vegetable garden. The ensuing family argument brings Mrs. Carmody into the house to investigate; she is so over-excited by the row that she faints, and Jim takes the opportunity to run out of the house in order to get her a sup of brandy at the neighborhood bar.

In the security of the pub, Jim learns that Gabble Gibbon is facing the same predicament, and the two of them, along with Mrs. Hanratty, drown their sorrows. When the daily newspaper is delivered, Gibbon reads aloud a report that ten gold bracelets have been stolen from the Queen's royal treasure, and during a discussion of what the thieves might do with such bounty, Gibbon has an idea. He fakes a foreign accent and calls the police station:

(The light comes up on Gibbon at the telephone, and across the stage on a policeman on the telephone.)

GIBBON (with a heavy accent): ... and at der moment der gold ornaments are lying in her garden, either front or back of either 37 or 38 Ardee Road.

GUARD: And what did you say the name was?

GIBBON: Ardee Road. In der new houses. Take der course by der Pole Star, Northeast by eastsouth a half west.
GUARD: No, there's a reward for this. Your own name.

GIBBON: Poppocoppolis. Ivan Giuseppe Mahomed Poppocoppolis. Mahomed is mine confirmation name.

GUARD: Poppocoppolis. Thank you, Mr. Poppocoppolis, there will be a squad car up there in five minutes (2, p. 26).

The police arrive, of course, and after several hours of back-breaking labor the three obese officers have neatly and painstakingly tilled the soil for two vegetable gardens while Hannigan and Gibbon sit inside the kitchen finishing a case of cold ale.

The richness of the dialog in both short plays is early evidence of Behan's most engaging quality as a writer, his childlike joy in making sounds with the human voice. Without pronouncements or judgments he writes a narrative that is less a progression of events than a "rackety procession of characters"(10, p. 72). In his sharpest satires there is still an innocence. "He tempers his cynicism with good humor, his mockery with tolerance, and obscenity with occasional tenderness"(14, p. 37). His ability to write as if he were chatting at a bar was a unique talent which confused those critics who felt that only "colorless, ponderous writing" could be serious, and this talent represented an important change in Irish literature (12). Behan's writing was full of good humor. "Brendan Behan never moaned and groaned about what he had suffered.... And he did a great deal to take the whine out of Irish literature"(2, p. 6).
Other than the books and plays already mentioned, Behan completed only two other works, neither of which was truly "written" and both of which suffer from a lack of discipline, since Behan dictated them into a microphone and never bothered to revise them. The two works are novels in the form of episodic reminiscences or newspaper articles like those which comprise *Hold Your Hour and Have Another*. The first is titled *Brendan Behan's New York* and the other, which was actually written down by Rae Jeffs, is called *Confessions of An Irish Rebel*. The latter, which was billed as a sequel to *Borstal Boy*, deals with Behan's life from the time he was released from borstal to the production of *The Quare Fellow* in Dublin in 1954. From a biographical standpoint it is interesting if not factual, but as a contribution to Behan's stature as a writer, the book fails altogether. His poor health and inability to follow the rigorous schedule necessary for writing well resulted in a work more rambling and incoherent than any critic could tolerate.

Brendan Behan's last play may well have been the most talked-about play never written. As early as 1957 he was talking publicly about a play he was writing called *Richard's Cork Leg* (20), but when he died in 1964, no one had seen the finished script. The first part of this unfinished play had been originally dictated on tape in Irish and titled *A Fine Day In the Graveyard*; and in 1961 he completed a second act
and added part of a third after visiting Forest Lawn Cemetery in California (19, pp. 270-271). By early 1963, the play Behan had promised for so long was becoming the subject of jokes among the literary circle. Knowing of his failing health and hopeless addiction to "the gargle," those who awaited his play were saying that he would never complete it and accusing him of living on his past performances.

That Behan was a spent force was, indeed, sadly true. Richard's Cork Leg was the last piece of written work that he did, and it "is marred by his obvious desire to reproduce the formula which had made The Hostage a success" (19, p. 271). Even though Joan Littlewood had made The Hostage into a success, the script contained strong characters and a semblance of plot. In Richard's Cork Leg the plot is virtually non-existent. Behan was hoping to arrange a series of music-hall gags interspersed with melodic obscenities and let Littlewood reorganize them into an acceptable plot. When she came to Ireland to see the script, however, Joan Littlewood was disappointed (19, p. 275). The idea of the play was amusing, and some of the dialog and characters were typical of Brendan's best work, but its absolute lack of direction and overlong political discussions prompted Littlewood to reject the script.

The four main characters in Richard's Cork Leg are two prostitutes named after saints, Rose of Lima and Maria Concepta, and two blind men, Hero Hogan and Deper Cronin. The
action of the play begins in a graveyard where the two prostitutes meet each year to pray and sing in memory of Crystal Clear, a colleague who was murdered twenty years previously. The two men arrive to break up a suspected meeting of Irish Fascists and all four are joined by the graveyard caretaker, Bonnie Prince Charlie, a Negro Prince who wants to convert the cemetery to another Forest Lawn by playing recordings of the voices of the dead for the mourners. Prince Charlie wears a silk gown with "Harlem Globe Trotters" sewn on the back, and he guards a special corpse that wears blue rinse and lipstick.

Tired topical jokes are pasted in the script like postage stamps and the humor of the lines often degenerates to such jokes as,

MARIA: Me French gentlemen friends did everything be numbers, Swassawnt nuff.

ROSE: What's that?

MARIA: Heads and heels... it's very complicated.

Or even to this old music-hall gag:

ROSE: She's around behind.

MARIA: I know she has, but where is she? (19, p. 271).

When Brendan learned of Littlewood's refusal to take his script, he offered the Irish version of it to Gael Linn, an Irish cultural organization. Riobard McGorain, executive, also rejected the play "not because of its bawdy quality, but
because it did not stand up to the test of good drama (18, p. 276)." In his anger and sorrow, Behan spent himself on the town, drinking, brawling and landing in jail half dead after taking a severe beating by an innocent bystander whom he had attacked in a bar. He was never able to control himself again, and for the next eighteen months he made only half-hearted attempts to dictate anything at all, much less to put a sentence in writing.

Brendan Behan and Oscar Wilde in their decline were surrendering to the impulse to luxuriate in failure, an instinct rooted in the Irish psyche. The Irish are suspicious of success, believing that there is more of the infinite in its opposite. Failure they can offer up to God. . . . Caught in the sensual music of decline, Brendan assuaged his agony at not being able to create, by dramatizing himself in a tale of sordid and desperate collapse (19, p. 300).

Behan died on March 20, 1964, at the age of forty-one, leaving only two major plays to the world's theatre, but both of those plays have fared quite well without him. The Hostage has had numerous productions throughout the world, and has been included in the seasons of several American university theatres. It seems that as each year passes since the Broadway debut of The Hostage, the critical acclaim has grown. Whereas, the critics had had reservations in 1960, Harold Clurman spoke of Behan's play without negative undertones when he reviewed a production of it by the Center City Acting Company in New York in 1972:

There are tears in O'Casey but laughter predominates in The Hostage. The immanent tears are largely suppressed. O'Casey for a time began to hope for re-
mission from the Irish torment in some measure of
Communism; but Behan, immersed in alcohol, succumbed
to hopeless mockery, which is a kind of anarchism.
Anarchy is finally saddening; The Hostage is essentially
a sorrowful play.

Parts of it are actor's improvisations. The ad lib
quips, devil-may-care songs, precipitous plunges into
clowning, topical jibes, . . . are part of the play's
meaning. The proceedings are a miniature of "revolu-
tionary" folly and human perversity. One is convulsed
by the dunderheadedilocality and wrenched by sudden
anguish and disgust, yet one cannot help but be moved.
The very raggedness of the play's method and speech are
eloquent of a society in total disarray. Despite, or
is it because of, the farrago of farce and violence,
The Hostage is one of the key pieces of our era (6).

Ten years earlier, in 1962, when The Hostage was re-
vived off-Broadway, Richard Gilman may have expressed the
reason that the play would remain popular for many years to
come. Gilman said that The Hostage was not a play but an
"At Home With Brendan Behan," and then explained,

Behan satisfies our perennial need for someone
brasher, bawdier and more irreverent than ourselves,
a public figure to express our private itches and out-
rages. As such, he is something of a scapegoat; one
can unpleasantly imagine him dying in front of an
audience that slaps its thighs and howls, "Old Behan,
he sure doesn't give a damn, not a single, solitary
damn." Except that his crude, desperately honest,
half-self-mocking persona somehow seems to speak,
through cracked lips, of salvation (8).

In 1967, Frank McMahon adapted Borstal Boy to a stage
play, and although Behan's novel had been banned in Ireland
since its publication, there is no censorship of plays, so
McMahon's adaptation opened in Dublin at the Abbey Theatre
on the tenth of October and received nothing but accolades
from all critics and the public alike. Behan's autobio-
graphical novel was condensed considerably, and the action of the play was staged in unconfined space to allow a maximum of fluidity in the progression of scenes. Long narrative passages in the book were handled by designing the play so that the older Behan is cast as a narrator who comments on the stage enactments of the young Brendan's escapades. In Dublin and in New York, the actors who portrayed the two Brendan Behans were given superior notices for their acting, and in New York, *Borstal Boy* won the "Tony" Award for Best Play of the 1969-70 season (13, 15, 16, 17, 24).

In December, 1971, the *New York Times* reported that Behan's widow, Beatrice, at the request of impresario Alan Simpson, had searched the South Dublin house where she and Brendan had lived, hoping to find any unpublished fragments of Behan's last plays. Twenty pages of manuscript were discovered in a briefcase, and according to Simpson, they completed *Richard's Cork Leg*, although the manuscript was part of a work Behan had originally titled "The Catacombs." Reports of the patched-together play indicated that the two prostitutes in *Richard's Cork Leg* had been changed to a sort of chorus of old women and that the play's message became strongly philosophical with the addition of the discovered pages. "It is Brendan's farewell and testament," said Simpson (18). *Richard's Cork Leg* was scheduled for its first performance as part of the 1972 Dublin Festival.
More recently, an Irish actor, Shay Duffin, composed for himself a one-man show of selections from Behan's writing and performed both at the Abbey and in New York. Reviewing his act, which he called simply "Shay Duffin as Brendan Behan," Edith Oliver labelled Duffin as not much more than adequate as an actor, but excellent as a selector. His act was made up of Behan's monologs, scenes from his plays and novels, poems and short stories. Duffin presented his show by moving on the stage from a bar to a lectern and from prison cells back to bars. He sang many of Behan's profane limericks and ended the evening with a scene showing Behan, drunk and dying, despising the fame that had separated him from his true identity (21). Shay Duffin's one-man show closed in New York in mid-March, 1973.

It is impossible to assess the contributions that Brendan Behan made to literature, but it is hard to overlook such statements by scholars and critics as: "Behan helped to change Irish literature;" or "Behan and Osborne revitalized the English theatre in 1956;" or "He was the precursor of the individualists of our age." Behan wanted, as much as he wanted anything, to cut through the artificiality and hypocrisy of our times in order to share with his audience and the world the warmth of the honest simplicity of his beginnings. He thought that one effective way of getting attention was to shock, and he was talented at it. But as Joan Littlewood
observed, "There was no bitterness or lechery in Behan; all
his lavatory doors have little hearts cut in them"(22, p. 27).

Long before he died, Behan had changed drastically from
the radical youth he had been in the I. R. A. He had come to
realize that bomb-throwings destroy the innocent and ideologies
kill fanatics. In 1970 Sean Callery wrote that these were
Behan's themes:

Isn't that part of what he said in The Hostage,
to my way of thinking his masterpiece? The singular
achievement of the play is the creation of a wildly
funny story about politics, sex, religion, bogus piety
and jingoism and almost everything else, with no heroes
and no villains... only an indictment of the serpent
in all of us that devours the world. In short, Brendan
... shifted from hidebound partisan politics, to love
of all humanity and hated only those things in people
that make them less true to their most charitable
instincts (4, p. 88).

In a time when the best men were timid, said Emile
Capouya, Brendan Behan was sociable; he dared to thumb his
nose at the everlasting, said Henry Hewes; and numerous
reviewers echoed the thought that although Behan's was not
a great mind, he did possess a noble character. He was a
common man who wrote uncommonly well (5, 7, 9). Behan's
characters, his stories, his poems and songs, his books and
even his jokes, were only his means of spreading his philos-
ophy of life which is fittingly summarized in this tribute:

Our death in life is human injustice -- injustice
was his theme. He tried first of all to defeat it in
himself, and in his writing he was a wonderfully fair-
minded man. His conviction was that the dirty end of
the stick is reserved for all of us, so that it's no
good using knees and elbows to get there first. If men persisted in pushing, he would try to find it funny.

In Behan we seem to have a minor author who belongs nevertheless in the company of the great. Is it absurd to mention him in the same breath with Montaigne and Rabelais? I think not. He was a brave man in an age of ninnies, and courage is what great men have most in common. When we say, then, that the task of this generation is to reconstitute the shattered humanistic tradition, that cleverness availeth not, that desperation availeth not, that self-contempt -- however well-founded -- will get you nowhere, it is in the work of Brendan Behan that we catch a hint of "What Is to Be Done"(5, p 36).


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