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## **Christy Mahon Comes to Athens, Tennessee: *The Playboy of the Western World* in Appalachia**

C. Austin Hill

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In November 2013, I directed a production of Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World* as part of the main stage season at Tennessee Wesleyan College. This production marked a number of firsts—my first production as head of the theatre program; my first production in the state of Tennessee, or indeed in the American Appalachian South; my students' first encounter with an Irish play and playwright; and the first time in (at least) recent memory that audiences in our small town have been treated to Synge's play. This production stayed true to Synge's original, with the idiomatic language and Irish setting kept intact, and it sought to find cultural parallels organically.<sup>1</sup>

In keeping with this issue's theme of exploring the Irish in the South, this paper examines the production as an instance of teaching students, audiences, and a community about Irish culture through artistic practice. Here, I consider this production as an intersection between early-twentieth century Irish culture and early-twenty-first century American culture. I suggest that theatrical production can be an effective tool for the teaching of Irish Studies.

### Production Context

Athens is the largest city in McMinn County in southeast Tennessee. Founded in 1822 on land sold to the United States by the Cherokee, the town is equidistant—45 miles—from Knoxville and Chattanooga, which are mid-sized cities. Athens sits in the rolling foothills of the Great Smoky Mountains and has a population of around 13,000. Like the rest of the Smoky Mountains—indeed, like the bulk of Appalachia itself—Athens and the surrounding area were heavily settled by Irish and Scots-Irish immigrants. 2013 US Census data for Athens and McMinn County indicate that between ten and twenty percent of the population claim Irish or Scots-Irish ancestry.<sup>2</sup> However, the actual figure may be considerably higher than that, for the census responses include a large number of “unreported” ancestries. Also making this report seem suspiciously low is the 1990 US Census, which reports that “Irish” was the single largest ancestral identity in Tennessee, with over 875,000 responses. Scots-Irish added roughly another 200,000.<sup>3</sup> In conversation with long-time residents, claims of Irish heritage, both from Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, are very common.<sup>4</sup>

In socio-economic terms, Athens is rather blue-collar with a strong agricultural base; a dairy is one of the largest employers in the town. The people are quite conservative, both politically and

philosophically, with over 70 percent of the population claiming membership at a protestant church—the majority Southern Baptist and less than two percent Roman Catholic.<sup>5</sup>

Tennessee Wesleyan College, is a small liberal-arts college with a student population of around 1,100. The school is affiliated with the United Methodist Church—thus the Wesleyan moniker—but the student population is more diverse than that might imply, religiously speaking. The college is located in the heart of Athens.

### Echoes from the Holler

Many of the ideas, themes, and characters in *The Playboy of the Western World* easily resonated with the actors and audiences in Athens. Much is said, for example, in Synge's play, about the stories told by, and told of, the people surrounding the Flaherty public house. Near the beginning of *Playboy*, Pegeen Mike expresses her distaste for her corner of Mayo. Why, she wonders, should the Pope “bother with this place where you'll meet none but Red Linahan, has a squint in his eye, and Patcheen is lame in his heel, or the mad Mulrannies were driven from California and they lost in their wits”?<sup>6</sup> Upon Shawn Keogh's insistence that Pegeen's neighbors are as good as anyone anywhere else, Pegeen explodes:

As good, is it? Where now will you meet the like of Daneen Sullivan knocked the eye from a peeler, or Marcus Quin, God rest him, got six months for maiming ewes, and he a great warrant to tell stories of holy Ireland till he'd have the old women shedding down tears about their feet. Where will you find the like of them, I'm saying?<sup>7</sup>

Of course, with the benefit of distance, of travel, of media, and of time, audiences understand that odd as these stories are, similar tales can be found in every community on earth. My students had no trouble whatsoever accepting the truths in these peripheral stories, as they “found the like of them” in their own back yards.

Local historian R. Frank McKinney has written about a tradition of “tall tale” competitions in McMinn County. This tradition, McKinney says, grew out of horse-swapping conventions that occurred frequently from the county's inception in 1819 into the first half of the twentieth century. The conventions, and consequently the tall tale contests, drew people from all around the area. McKinney goes so far as to say that local politicians were loathe to skip these events, or to “bother the men for drinking, because if they did, the people wouldn't vote for them in the election.”<sup>8</sup>

McKinney's account of the tall tale gatherings rather invokes Henry Glassie's description of a Northern Irish ceili and the stories that regularly occur therein. McKinney says, “It was during the night when the men gathered around the campfire and told their tales.”<sup>9</sup> Glassie's ceili stories also take place around a fire, and also involve stories that intermingle elaborate fiction with

fundamental truth.<sup>10</sup> In particular, the tall tales McKinney recounts fall close to the genre of the “yarn,” which Glassie describes as “a mock myth.”<sup>11</sup> In all cases, wit rules the day.

Frequently, like the stories recounted in *The Playboy of the Western World*, the stories collected by McKinney (and those collected by Glassie, for that matter) tell of odd local characters. Stories of this sort include tales of Mason Evans, “The Hermit of Starr Mountain” (also called the Wildman of Chilhowee), who fled to the woods for 40 years after being spurned by his lover.<sup>12</sup> This tale appears to be true, and is noted in the works of a number of local historians.

In Athens, Tennessee, and the surrounding area, many local folktales resonate greatly with the world that Synge created in *The Playboy of the Western World*. While Synge’s characters and plot devices may have been controversial in 1907 Ireland—or 1911 Philadelphia, Boston, and New York—in Southeast Tennessee, similar stories abound. Of particular interest, given the theme of this issue of *Irish Studies South*: many of these stories carry some ties to Ireland. McKinney tells of the suicide death of local farmer S. A. McCroskey, whose son insisted that his body not be cut down, as the plowline he had used to hang himself was new.<sup>13</sup> Another prolific local historian, Joe Guy (who is currently the Sheriff of McMinn County) has written of William “Buster” Duggan, a celebrity outlaw, whose exploits terrorized (and delighted) Athens residents in the early twentieth century.<sup>14</sup> The fact that Christy Mahon’s story and the legends of others as recounted in *Playboy* are so similar to the local tales and legends of Athens eased the bridging of the cultural chasm between Athens and Mayo. This rendering of the strange familiar aided in the efficacy of using the text as a pedagogical tool.

### The Legend of Nocatula and Conestoga

On Tennessee Wesleyan College’s campus, and well known to students here, are a pair of statues and a plaque commemorating the story of Nocatula and Conestoga. While the Irish connections here are tenuous, the ways in which this story echoes the plot of *The Playboy of the Western World* are striking. As the story goes, in 1780, a Cherokee Chief named Atta-kulla-kulla stumbled across an English officer who had been badly injured in the Battle of Kings Mountain. He brought this officer back to his village, where he was nursed by the Chief’s daughter Nocatula. The two inevitably fell in love and were married, with the English officer being given the name Conestoga—the oak. A short time later, Nocatula’s former suitor Mocking Crow ambushed Conestoga and killed him. Upon learning of her husband’s death, Nocatula committed suicide. According to the version of the story told on the Tennessee State Library and Archives website,

Atta-kulla-kulla ordered their bodies to be buried together where they died and placed an acorn in Conestoga’s right hand and a hackberry seed in Nocatula’s. The following year sprouts of an oak tree and a hackberry tree marked the graves where the two lovers were buried.<sup>15</sup>

These trees remained strong and deeply intertwined until, in 1945, the hackberry elm began to die. The tree was removed, and nearly immediately, the oak died as well.

The Nocatula legend has been told and retold a number of times, and in various ways, and it holds a central significance at Tennessee Wesleyan College. The college's yearbook has been named *Nocatula* since at least 1919. There is a student leadership organization on campus called "Hackberry and Oak," named after the trees that figure in the legend. In 1957, for the College's centennial celebration, several faculty members collaborated on a theatrical production entitled *The Legend of Nocatula*—the production was revived in 1986.

Nearly every version of the story indicates that the English officer was wounded in the Battle of King's Mountain—including the version found on the Tennessee State Library Archive's website. This information, if accurate, puts the officer under the command of (Scottish) Major Patrick Ferguson. While I could find no exact record of Irish soldiers fighting under Ferguson in the battle—sadly, though Ferguson was known to keep excellent records, most of them were lost after this particular battle—the Scots-Irish connections in this story begin with the battle itself.

The Battle of King's Mountain has been well documented.<sup>16</sup> On October 7, 1780, Ferguson's Tory encampment was set upon by 900 "Overmountain Men," the majority of whom were Scots-Irish. These Ulster-Scots

defied King George III's 1763 proclamation that prohibited private settlements west of the mountains. They claimed the forbidden wilderness for their own, felling trees to clear the land for small farms, building dirt-floor log cabins, growing what they needed and living as they pleased—a people apart.<sup>17</sup>

Ferguson's detachment lost over 200 men in less than an hour—the Overmountain militia only 29. The latter led off over 700 prisoners. According to historian Thomas B. Allen, "General Sir Henry Clinton, commander in chief of British forces in North America, later referred to the Battle of Kings Mountain as "the first link of a chain of evils" that ended in "the total loss of America."<sup>18</sup>

The other Irish connection in the Nocatula legend comes directly from the 1957 theatrical production, written by Tennessee Wesleyan College faculty members Harry Coble, Mary Greenhoe, and Jack Houts. Exclusive to this version of the legend, the English soldier that would become Conestoga gets a name. Though the fictional officer reminisces about his childhood in England, the authors named him Hugh Driscoll—a decidedly Irish name.<sup>19</sup> I could find no record of Hugh Driscoll, either directly attached to the Nocatula myth or in any record of the British military at Fort Loudon (where Ferguson's men would have been assigned). It is entirely possible that the name is an invention, but it is also possible that the authors had access to a source that I could not find in the archives. Either way, the name Driscoll caught my attention; it

comes from O'Driscoll (Ó hEidirsceoil), and is particularly associated with Co. Cork in Munster, Ireland's southern province. Christy Mahon—the Playboy himself—came from Munster. The origin of the fictionalized name of a character isn't the only, or even the most interesting, parallel between *The Playboy of the Western World* and the Nocatula legend. When read side by side, the two stories have much in common.

Both stories feature a character who is out of place, far from home, and decidedly an outsider. In *The Playboy*, Christy Mahon has arrived at the Flaherty's shebeen after a long journey. He has fled his home after—we are led to believe—killing his father. Michael Flaherty brings him in, allowing him to stay for Flaherty's own reasons (primarily so that he can pacify his daughter's complaints about his leaving for the night). Similarly, Nocatula's father invited Conestoga (Driscoll?) into their home, though it was because he had some sympathies for the British and an otherwise kind heart.<sup>20</sup>

While in their respective new homes, both men took on a bit of local celebrity, in no small part because of their outsider status. Furthermore, both Christy and Conestoga fall in love with the daughters of their hosts. Both love affairs are sanctioned by the patriarchs, and both appear headed for marriage (though the wedding is ill-fated in *Playboy*). And finally, both stories feature a jilted former suitor of the female protagonist, though in *Playboy* Shawn Keogh is unable to successfully come between Pegeen and Christy. And so, in the shadow of the Hackberry and the Oak, I led fifteen students into the world of Christy Mahon and Pegeen Mike.

### Performing Irishness and Scots-Irishness in Southeast Tennessee

My 2013 production of *The Playboy of the Western World* was the first production of the play in Athens in recent memory. Archival searches seem to indicate that the play had never been performed in the town, either by students at Tennessee Wesleyan College or by either of two long-standing community theatre organizations. In fact, Athens has seen very little Irish theatre.

The closest regional professional theatre—Clarence Brown Theatre in Knoxville, affiliated with the University of Tennessee—has presented only a handful of Irish plays in its forty-year history, including a 1974 production of *Playboy* (the only professional production of the play in the area that turned up in available archives), a 1998 production of *Dancing at Lughnasa* (Brian Friel), and a 2006 production of *Stones in His Pockets* (Marie Jones).<sup>21</sup> The lack of Irish drama in the production history of the only major theatre company in Knoxville—a city with a metropolitan population over one million—is striking.

While Irish drama may be oddly lacking on regional stages, performances of Irish culture and of Scots-Irish culture are more visible. *Riverdance*, *Lord of the Dance*, and similar shows have toured to Knoxville and Chattanooga.<sup>22</sup> Additionally, both cities have annual Irish festivals.

Knoxville's Immaculate Conception Catholic Church hosts "Irish Fest on the Hill" in August, and popular tourist location Rock City in Chattanooga holds "Shamrock City" each Saint Patrick's Day.<sup>23</sup> Both Knoxville and Chattanooga have multiple Irish dance schools (Athens does not), though neither city hosts a significant feis (the closest major feis to Athens is held in Franklin, Tennessee—180 miles away).

Approximately 90 miles from Athens, the town of Dandridge, Tennessee hosts one of the largest Scots-Irish festivals in America. This festival, in fact, is significant enough to have drawn the attention of the BBC, who visited the town and festival for a segment in 2010.<sup>24</sup> The festival features a mix of Scottish, Irish, Ulster-Scots, and Appalachian music and dance.

Irish and Scots-Irish cultures are not unfamiliar, then, in Athens. The challenge for our production was to create a version of Irish culture that was as authentic as possible, and to do so in such a way as to avoid caricature or judgment in our representation of the Irish—and, indeed, the Catholic—characters in Synge's play.

### The Production

When we began working on *The Playboy of the Western World* we knew immediately that we faced certain challenges. The play is complicated, has a controversial past, and (perhaps the biggest challenge of all) is a comedy. Could our cast handle the material? How would all of this come across to our audience? How could we make sure that this very idiomatic play—some 107 years old and 3,500 miles from home—would speak to our audience in Athens, Tennessee?

We were lucky to benefit from a century-old production history in the US, a history that has helped to depoliticize the play and, in the words of John P. Harrington, transform it "in American perception from incendiary to poetic."<sup>25</sup> In his essay, "The Playboy IN the Western World," Harrington notes that as of the 1930s, American productions of the play had become notable for the "lyricism" of the language and for "beautiful sound without content."<sup>26</sup> We quickly found that most of our audience had never heard of the play, and those that had only knew of it as a "classic" that had some vague connection to a riot. The specifics of that riot were entirely unknown.

One of the primary challenges that this production had to overcome was that very lyricism, the language of the play. As one student, Nicole Avans, explained: "I had never heard of the piece, or even the playwright, John Millington Synge, prior to the announcement. During my initial read-through for the audition, I barely understood the text. For the most part, the language was familiar, but the sentence structure and slang completely threw me."<sup>27</sup> While these students were relatively well-read, and several of them had had preparation in theatre history and dramatic literature, Irish theatre was not familiar, and Synge's particular idiom less so.

My initial plan was to leave the play linguistically intact, but to see if it could be done without attempting an Irish dialect. While I knew that that would sound odd, I wanted to avoid the trap into which many American productions of the play falls—attempts at dialect overcoming the story of the play. This challenging intersection of dialect and content has plagued American productions since at least 1946.<sup>28</sup> I desperately wished to avoid the characters' becoming "Oirish"—that is to say, Stage Irish. This tactic was also designed to address the fact that I didn't yet know the student actors and their skillsets. While I had coached dialect in a number of productions previously and had had some decent successes with novice actors, I had never attempted to coach the (frequently thick) local accent into a convincing Connacht dialect. During auditions, I began to understand that these students were very talented, and I came to the realization that they would be up to the challenge of the dialect work, and that that work would help them to understand Synge's language.

Katie Smith, who played Pegeen Mike, said of the process:

This was my first experience with any type of Irish theatre. While it was definitely one of the challenges I faced with this show, it was also one of the things I grew to love about it. I won't ever forget being told that we were going to do Irish accents. I can barely speak correct English...If the accent wasn't already hard enough, the prose itself was hard to grasp. Some of my lines were so wordy and had names I had never heard of, places I had never seen on map, and words that didn't make any sense.<sup>29</sup>

Katie certainly was not alone in these struggles. In the interest of avoiding the "Oirish," I put together my own program of dialect training for the show—avoiding the available "Irish dialect" recordings. These recordings, in my experience, tend to result in a very false-sounding, overly thick, sing-songy lilt. Even the suggestion that there is one singular "Irish accent" is, of course, problematic. Instead, I focused our attention on the Connacht dialect mandated by the Mayo setting of the play. We determined to err on the side of subtlety, if authenticity were elusive. I took a phonemic approach, concentrating on the replication of sound-parts through repetition. I also directed my cast to recordings of Connacht natives on the International Dialects of English Archive and to my favorite resource for regional dialect—local radio stations (Mayo's Ocean FM became a cast favorite). To overcome the syntactical concerns inherent in the play, we spent considerable time glossing the meaning of words, considering connotation, and seeking assistance on proper emphasis.

The next major hurdle we had to face was the onus of developing a contextual understanding of the play in its own right: what was a "peeler" in this context, for example, and why was it important to know that these ones were "decent droughty poor fellows who wouldn't touch a cur dog and not give warning in the dead of night?"<sup>30</sup> To this end, I spent time discussing the socio-political history of rural Ireland at the turn into the twentieth century. As Katie Smith explains it:



Night after night I was learning something new. Each night brought a new Irish history lesson and dialect training. I was watching videos and listening to radio podcasts, all to improve my dialect and learn something new. We were constantly being introduced to new terminology. It wasn't rare to spend the first half hour of rehearsal asking for clarification on the lines. It was in this learning process that I started to really love this show and all the Irish history that it had attached to it.<sup>31</sup>

It was in these discussions that the process moved from being production only to being an exercise in Irish Studies.

Some of the topics that we discussed in preparation for the show were unfamiliar to my students. It took them some effort to understand the politics of tenant farming or the economics of commercial fishing, or why those matters permeate the language of *Widow Quin*. As Declan Kiberd explains,

The society depicted in *The Playboy of the Western World* is a colony in the throes of a land war, as the last phase of the campaign against feudalism in Ireland is enacted. Pegeen Mike refers with excitement as well as fear to the thousand militia then crossing County Mayo, scene of so many evictions which have left so many vagrants in the streets. Syngé did not suppress the ugliness of colonialism—"the loosed khaki cut-throats," "the broken harvest," or the rigged juries "selling judgments of the English law" are all mentioned.<sup>32</sup>

None of my students had direct life experience in a colonial environment and, thus, each had to work to imagine what life in an occupied country would be like—though depending on familial heritage and politics, many of them may, as southerners, be better positioned for such an understanding than northerners like me. In Athens, as in much of the American South, some residents feel at odds with the federal American government, a holdover attitude from the Civil War. Here, there is a proclivity for the Confederate flag amongst a small—but very loud—minority. In his official history of Athens (as included on the city's website), Bill Akins explains:

The Civil War period was an extremely difficult time for Athenians. While no major battles were fought in or around Athens, the town was occupied by both Confederate and Union forces. Like other East Tennesseans, Athenians were divided in their loyalties, which resulted in hostilities between family members and friends that lasted for years in some cases. Many Athenians fought for both North and South. Economically the town suffered tremendously and it would be years before it fully recovered, but through hard work and perseverance the region eventually overcame the devastation caused by the war.<sup>33</sup>

These divisions in loyalty and complexities of identity still exist in the region, a fact that—while not a cognate, per se—may help my students to understand the colonial discourse in the play.

Other thematic elements of the play were much easier for my cast to understand, including (and I'll take them one at a time) religiosity, cultural insularity, and celebrity culture.

### Religiosity

Synge's play has, as did Synge himself, a complex relationship with religion. *Playboy* contains what Declan Kiberd calls an "undeniable mockery" of religious themes and a "savage handling of sacred Catholic references."<sup>34</sup> From the symbolism of Christy on an ass (where Kiberd finds an evocation of Palm Sunday) to the nearly constant invocation of God and the Virgin Mary in the most irreverent times (such as the implication that Christy killed his father "with the help of God"), Synge's discourse on religion is rampant in the play. With his avowed fear of Father Reilly (and notably *not* the morality dictated by his Catholic upbringing) being the only thing that keeps him from perceived sin, Shawn Keogh is openly mocked for his hypocritical religiosity throughout the play. While Catholicism is ever-present in the world of the play, pious and moral behavior is scarce, and when present, is frequently ridiculed.<sup>35</sup>

Most of the students in my production were raised in close proximity to Athens, Tennessee. All of them have chosen to attend a college that is affiliated with the United Methodist Church. It is very common for students to describe Tennessee in general and Athens in particular as being the "buckle of the Bible Belt." Religion and the ways in which religiosity is performed are a large part of daily life in town. Questions of church membership are frequent in conversations between strangers, as there are certain socio-politico-economic assumptions that can be made about a person on the basis of her or his identification as a Baptist, a Methodist, or a Presbyterian. In Athens, as in many places in the South, the phrase "bless her/his heart" is frequently used in connection with a moral judgment, as opposed to a legitimate call for a blessing. Dennis Long explains that in some areas in the South "this idiom can suggest that a person has done something wrong, unacceptable, or undesirable, or that behavior is viewed as inappropriate."<sup>36</sup>

While Athens has a very small Catholic population, these students easily recognized the characters in *Playboy* as similar to themselves. All of them seemed to know a Shawn Keogh—a seemingly devout person who cares more about the perception of her or his piousness than about theology. All of them knew a Widow Quin, the "black sheep" with a controversial past and questionable present who still holds the ear of the priest and a position of influence in town. All of them knew a Michael James, a person who enjoyed the social elements of her or his religion, but not so much the moral teachings. There seemed to be no judgment made by our audiences—and there certainly were none made by the cast of the production—about "Catholic" Ireland. Instead, these students easily identified with a place where the hegemonic forces of religion inform nearly every aspect of life.

### Cultural Insularity

Michael James' shebeen, the setting of *The Playboy* is, by his own assertion, isolated, with "not a decent house within four miles, the way every living Christian is a bona fide, saving one widow alone."<sup>37</sup> Though we later learn that that four-mile radius is applicable only to travel by road, the insularity of the setting of the play is clear. Outsiders, like Christy, are regarded with skepticism and curiosity, trusted perhaps as a means to an end (as with Michael James employing Christy as a means to appease Pegeen into allowing him to leave for a wake), but never fully accepted. This is a group for whom blow-ins are suspect and in the end are easily turned upon.

Athens is much the same. A colleague recently told me that when she moved to town from California, she was called "the Californian"—and now, some six years later, she still is. Merrick Gray, a student who played Shawn Keogh, describes the similarities between the social interactions in the play and those in Decatur, Tennessee—a town a short distance from Athens. He says of Decatur,

All of my mother's family lives there and has lived there since the 1800s. It's also very quiet and extremely tiny....If you ask anyone that has been to Decatur, they will tell you that it is nothing more than a road and a Piggly Wiggly, a grocery store. Much like the bar in the play, the Pig, as they call it, is the only real social setting offered in that town. As a result, it becomes the location where people go to both mellow out to some degree and to swap stories with one another, especially since everyone seems to know each other. I believe that if you stand around in the Pig long enough, you would eventually hear a story as crazy as someone running around killing horses up until they ate the insides of a clock and died.<sup>38</sup>

As Merrick suggests, there was no real difficulty in understanding this element of the play.

Katie Smith also finds connections between the story of the play and the circumstances of my own arrival in Athens:

This show was essentially about a new guy rolling into a small town and shaking things up. How much more relatable can it get to a theatre group in small town Athens, who just got a new theatre professor and director? No one likes change, especially in a small town. Pegeen had no idea what to expect, and neither did I.<sup>39</sup>

Fortunately for me, Katie insists that my narrative will end "much happier" than Christy's.

### Celebrity Culture

The theme of the play that seemed to resonate most strongly with my cast centers on Christy's status as a celebrity in the town. Upon Christy's arrival in Michael James' shebeen, the suspicion I mentioned before was quickly overcome by curiosity. As Christy's story is told (and re-told),

and as the news of his deeds spread, the locals flock to see him, to chat to him, and to celebrate his uncanny victories in the local races.

Aaron Martel, a student who served as the assistant director on our production, said:

In a small town like Athens, a new kid on the block means mystery and new experiences. Many small-towners are very used to the environment they grew up in and do not want to be adventurous or experience anything outside of their...bubble. This means that when they meet someone that they did not attend elementary school with, they get excited to know what life is like elsewhere. They live vicariously through others. I think this happened in the show.<sup>40</sup>

For Aaron, there is a very real comparison between the reception of Christy by the Mayoites in the play and the ways in which the residents of Athens regard blow-ins. But there are other factors at work here too—some that resonate all too well with 2013 America.

As a scholar of Irish theatre, I am always concerned about the representation of the Irish on stage. Many critics of *The Playboy of the Western World* have been very critical of Synge's portrayal of the rural Irish, a critique that dates back to the premiere of the play and may have played a role in the ensuing riots that occurred when the play opened. Irish politician Arthur Griffith, was a loud opponent of Synge's dramaturgy, which he saw as anti-Catholic and counter to the idealized and romanticized view of Ireland that his Sinn Fein party had helped advocate<sup>41</sup> After all, what type of backward people would be so caught up with the celebrity of a new voice in town that they would fall over themselves to do his bidding? What type of yokel would flock to fawn over a criminal with questionable morals? How uncivilized must one be to render someone like Christy Mahon, who freely admits to having killed his own father, a hero? As I considered these questions, I decided that I am certainly alarmed by what Synge seems to be saying about his countrymen (and women) in his play. I am equally alarmed, and perhaps more so, by the relevance of this play in 2013 America, where celebrity is so frequently defined by questionable behavior—just ask Miley Cyrus, Justin Bieber, and so many others. With this relevance in mind, I determined that a production of *The Playboy of the Western World* was important, so long as we remained willing to critically discuss the representations of Irishness in the play.

### Outcomes

If we are to consider this production as an instance of teaching Irish Studies through theatrical production, then asking broad questions about the pedagogical returns is key. To a person, every member of the cast and crew reported an increased awareness of Irish history, literature, and theatre, and an increased interest in Irish culture in general. Perhaps Katie Smith summarizes this experience best:

This show has definitely peaked my interest for Irish culture. I learned so much during our production...It literally feels like I was enrolled in an Irish history class and I loved every minute of it. I think we all delved so deep into this show because it was so interesting.<sup>42</sup>

Katie, in fact, was so inspired by her Irish studies experience in the production that she has treated herself to a trip to Ireland as a graduation present, a destination she had never considered seriously before. Audiences, too, were deeply engaged by the production. While a number of them expressed difficulties in understanding some of the language, all that I surveyed easily understood and enjoyed the major themes in the play, and there had been increased interest in visiting Ireland to “study abroad.”

From a phonemic approach to Hiberno-English to contextual discussions on Irish history, literature, geography, politics, economics, and colonialist concerns, students were exposed to a broad array of topics—many of which are discussed in every Irish Studies conference and journal. Three-Quarters of the fifteen students in the cast and crew of my production of *The Playboy* reported some Irish familial heritage, and this production helped many of them to connect and identify with their ancestors. The production spurred interest in Ireland and in Irish culture, and we have begun planning a study-abroad tour for 2016. For us, then, at Tennessee Wesleyan College, our production of *The Playboy of the Western World* was a successful means of teaching Irish Studies in an international context, and for helping our broader audiences to better understand Irish culture in the South.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For production photos and credits, visit [twctheatre.com](http://twctheatre.com), accessed Dec. 10, 2015

<sup>2</sup> US Census Bureau, “American FactFinder—Results,” [http://factfinder.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?pid=ACS\\_13\\_5YR\\_B04001&prodType=table](http://factfinder.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?pid=ACS_13_5YR_B04001&prodType=table), accessed December 4, 2015.

<sup>3</sup> US Census Bureau, “1990 Census of Population; Detailed Ancestry Groups for States,” September 18, 1992, 24.

<sup>4</sup> Some of the difficulty in pinpointing the numbers of residents with Irish and Scots-Irish ancestry has to do with what Kerby A. Miller describes as a “mutability” in early Irish-American identities. See his “‘Scotch-Irish’ Myths and ‘Irish’ Identities in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century America,” in Charles Fanning, ed., *New Perspectives on the Irish Diaspora*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2000).

<sup>5</sup> “Religion in Athens, Tennessee,” <http://www.bestplaces.net/religion/city/tennessee/athens>, accessed December 10, 2015.

<sup>6</sup> J.M. Synge, *The Playboy of the Western World: A Comedy in Three Acts* (Champaign, IL: Project Gutenberg, n.d.), 3.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> R. Frank McKinney, *Tall Tales and Unusual Happenings of McMinn County, Tennessee*, ed. Bill Akins (Etowah, TN: McMinn County Historical Society, 1988), 17-18.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 18.

<sup>10</sup> Henry Glassie, *The Stars of Ballymenone* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 229-30.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 230.

<sup>12</sup> McKinney, *Tall Tales*, 96-99.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 101-102.

<sup>14</sup> Joe D. Guy, *The Hidden History of McMinn County: Tales from Eastern Tennessee* (Mount Pleasant, SC: The History Press, 2007), 36-38.

<sup>15</sup> "TSLA: 'Tennessee Myths and Legends'," *The Oak and Hackberry Trees in Athens, Tennessee: The Legend of Nocatula and Conestoga*, <http://tn.gov/tsla/exhibits/myth/index.htm>, accessed May 19, 2015.

<sup>16</sup> See John Buchanan, *The Road to Guilford Courthouse: The American Revolution in the Carolinas*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1999); Dave J. Dameron, *Kings Mountain: The Defeat of the Loyalists, October 7, 1780* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2003).

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<sup>19</sup> Harry Coble, Mary Greenhoe, and Jack Houts, *The Legend of Nocatula* (Athens, TN: Tennessee Wesleyan College, 1957).

<sup>20</sup> Claudius Meade Capps, *Indian Legends and Poems* (Whitefish, MT: Kessinger, 2007), 16-22.

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<sup>22</sup> "Young Dancer Thrives on Hard Work in Lord of the Dance," February 26, 2010, <http://www.knoxnews.com/knoxville/events/young-dancer-thrives-on-hard-work.>; "Lord of the Dance Created by Michael Flatley Returns to Chattanooga," <http://www.chattanooga.com/2013/2/5/243765/Lord-Of-The-Dance-Created-By-Michael.aspx>, accessed December 3, 2015.

<sup>23</sup> "Rock City," <http://www.seerockcity.com/events/entry/shamrock-city>, accessed May 30, 2015.

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 52.

<sup>27</sup> Nicole Avans, "Practicum Journal" (Student Paper, Tennessee Wesleyan College, November 22, 2013).

<sup>28</sup> Harrington, "Playboy," 53.

<sup>29</sup> Katie Smith, "Practicum Journal" (Student Paper, Tennessee Wesleyan College, December 6, 2013).

<sup>30</sup> Synge, *Playboy*, 10.

<sup>31</sup> Smith, "Practicum Journal."

<sup>32</sup> Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 166.

<sup>33</sup> Bill Akins, "City of Athens, Tennessee, History." <http://www.cityofathensstn.com/history.html>, accessed December 4, 2015.

<sup>34</sup> Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland*, 423.

<sup>35</sup> For more on Synge and religion, see Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland*, 423; Shaun Richards, "The Playboy of the Western World," in *The Cambridge Companion to J.M. Synge*, ed. P.J. Matthews (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 28-41.

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<sup>41</sup> Christopher Morash, *A History of Irish Theatre, 1601-2000*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 119, 132.

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