

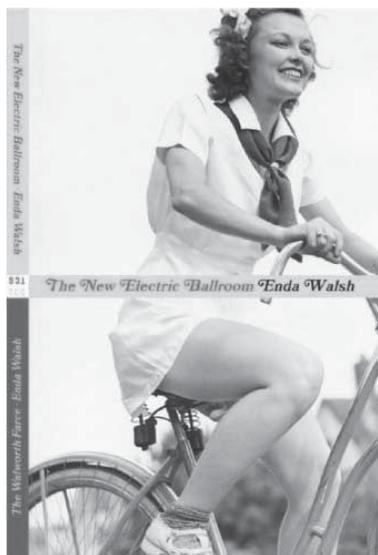
BOOK REVIEW

ENDA WALSH
THE WALWORTH FARCE
& *THE NEW ELECTRIC*
BALLROOM
NEW YORK: THEATRE
COMMUNICATIONS
GROUP, 2009

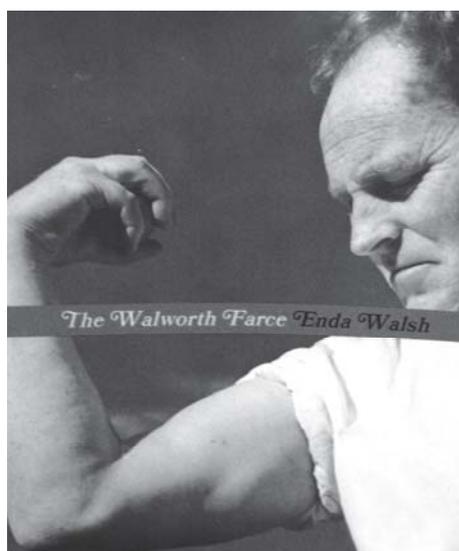
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These two recent and acclaimed plays by Enda Walsh are meant to be a tandem billboard featuring a set of idiosyncratic issues, or as we may allow ourselves to call them, by now, “Walshian obsessions.” Namely, the vicious need to replay the darkest pitfalls of one’s own family past; the ritualistic, cyclic and punctilious nature of the paraphernalia and wording involved within this performative procedure; together with the exploration of its dubious range of loyalty to reality, and the limits of its transfigurative and therapeutic effects. This characteristically Walshian cosmos of the suffocating and alienating familiar reverberates in each play with particular parallel thematic echoes of wide repercussion within the Irish modern and contemporary dramatic tradition, such as the exploration of the development of national and postcolonial adulthood, as well as its ensuing gender identitarian specifications.

The present Theatre Communications Group edition is well aware of the companion nature of *The Walworth Farce* and *The New Electric Ballroom*, and thus offers a reversible double front-cover (featuring two prototypical images of muscle-flexing masculinity –in the case of *The Walworth Farce*– and gazelle-cycling femininity in the case of *The New Electric Ballroom*), as well as independent pagination for each play.



Front-cover to Enda Walsh's *The New Electric Ballroom*. New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2009.



Front-cover to Enda Walsh's *The Walworth Farce*. New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2009.

The New Electric Ballroom was premiered at the Kammerspiel Theatre in Munich, Germany, on September 30, 2004, under the direction of Stephan Kimmig. It received its English-language premiere by The Druid Theatre in Galway, Ireland, on July 14, 2008, under the direction of Enda Walsh himself. This latter production was brought to the 2008 Edinburgh Festival Fringe and was later revived for a national and international tour (performed throughout Ireland, at the Perth International Arts Festival in Australia, at Riverside Studios in London and at St. Ann's Warehouse in Brooklyn, New York).

Clara and Breda, two aging sisters in their sixties, lead a secluded life inside their house in a small fishing village in the west of Ireland. With their nightly re-enactment of their common first and only heart-break experience on an evening in the early '60s at the New Electric Ballroom they have also dragged their younger sister, Ada, 40 years old, to a numbed and distrustful existence. Patsy, a local fishmonger, the only visitor to the three sisters, and the only carrier of news from the outside, even if it is monothematic news –the latest novelties from the local hyper seniors– is in fact Ada's only chance for love.

Whether it is direct, indirect, active or passive, all four characters have a part to play within the old story of the New Electric Ballroom. Clara and Breda were both seduced and abandoned by the then local rock-and-roll superstar Roller Royle. Ada, as its nightly recipient, is the victim of its legacy of isolation and prolonged disability for love. Patsy, on his turn, is the son of that third one-night-stand Roller Royle had with his mother, the Doris Day-like one, in the car park of the New Electric Ballroom, after having dated, pawed and dumped Clara and Breda in a row. The story of the New Electric Ballroom has stamped, branded, marked, scarred, boxed, mocked and chased Clara, Breda, Ada and Patsy for years on. Its phagocytic effect is even more conspicuous within the small fishing community where they live, with its sewn-up cobblestone streets and receding cliffs, where it is highly frustrating for anyone to grow up autonomously without the sanction and approval of the others, not to speak of daydreaming of it. Each of the four characters undergoes a performative scrutiny of their past and present frustrations through a recurrent, ritual paraphernalia of undressing, dressing-up, precise wording of past evocations –with mutual supervision of cues, narrative tempo, speech volume, breath, etc.– accompanied recorded soundtrack, and final climatic solo performance under the spotlight.

The play delves into both the miserable achievements of human gossip, verbal spinning and concocting, together with the mesmerising power of scheduled, ritual, story-time. Interestingly enough, by the end of the four-fold accounts of daydreams, hearsay, first-and-third-person testimonies and wrecked memories, there is as much an air of silent consciousness and pervading surrender as of the expected level of therapeutic transfiguration. In this sense, the final quiet tableau of communal tea and coffee cake leaves the audience with a blended feeling of satisfaction and some kind of resignation to live with.

The isolating and symbiotic sisterhood featuring *The New Electric Ballroom* bears concomitant echoes with other Irish and Hispanic dramatic communities of pent-up yearning sisters, such as those in Brian Friel's adaptation of Chekhov's *Three Sisters* (1981), as well as his acclaimed five Mundy sisters in *Dancing at Lughnasa* (1990), Beckett's cryptic and evocative female triangle from *Come and Go* (1966), Lorca's all-women household in *La Casa de Bernarda Alba* (1936), and the three suicidal sisters in *Las Brutas* (1980), by Chilean playwright Juan Radrigán.

The Walworth Farce was first produced by The Druid Theatre in Galway in 2006. In 2007 it won the Edinburgh Fringe First Award. In 2008 it received its U.S. premiere at St. Ann's Warehouse in Brooklyn and was part of the regular programme of the National Theatre of London.

Blake and Sean, two young Irishmen in their mid twenties, live with their father, Dinny, in South London, in a decaying council flat on Walworth Road. So far so good, were it not for the sickening dynamic of re-enacting a supposed tale from the family's past in Ireland Dinny has been orchestrating and dictating upon his sons everyday for the last nineteen years. Dinny, far from encouraging Blake and Sean to leave the flat, socialise in town and lead their own path in life, has confined and tormented his sons to insanity with this 24-hour absorbing performative routine, entailing a certain particular set of ritual paraphernalia, such as the daily shopping of sliced bread cooked chicken and two packets of pink wafers at the nearest Tesco; the playing of a fixed soundtrack featuring two well-known traditional Irish melodies, "An Irish Lullaby" and "A Nation Once Again;" a verbatim wording under penalty of losing the promised acting trophy at the end of the "show" –which Dinny invariably awards himself after all; the impersonation of multiple relatives' roles, together with some extravagant cross dressing– especially in the case of Blake, who is in charge of impersonating all the female roles in the cast, namely his mother, his aunt, Vera and Mrs. Cotter. The irruption of Haley, the Tesco girl, within the three-men stifling rehearse-flat will inexorably expose Sean to the traps and lies of his hijacked adulthood.

The Walworth Farce participates of an interesting modern Irish dramatic tradition exploring immigrant masculinity in dire straits, father-son convulsive relationships, as well as the deep waters running between brothers, starting with Tom Murphy's devastating *A Whistle in the Dark* (1961), continuing with Brian Friel's milestone *Philadelphia, Here I Come!* (1964) and more recently with Enda Walsh's *Delirium* (2008), the playwright's caustic free adaptation of Turgenev's *The Brothers Karamazov*.

There is another dramatic tradition conspiring behind the play's brilliant and exhilarating blend of the hilarious and surreal with the horrifying and uncanny, and that is the Irish comic and farce tradition of merry wakes, resurrecting dead –among other bustling and absurd plots– disguised and mistaken identities, cuckoldry, word play, colourful story-telling, and general disarray, that goes back to the times of the Restoration comedy and continues down to the late nineteenth-century melodrama and its bombastic scenographic display. During this wide period the London theatre houses would sell out every night thanks largely to the noteworthy flight of Irish indigenous comic and dramatic talent of the highest calibre, such as George Farquhar, Oliver Goldsmith, Richard Brinsley Sheridan, Dion Boucicault, Bernard Shaw and Oscar Wilde. During the 20th century this tradition undergoes further developments with the addition of tragic overtones, vaudeville elements, as well as political, social and philosophical innuendoes. Examples of 20th-century Irish

tragicomedy and farce may be found in the following examples: *In the Shadow of the Glen* (1903) and *The Playboy of the Western World* (1907) by J.M. Synge, *The Green Helmet* (1910) by W.B. Yeats, *Juno and the Peacock* (1924) by Sean O'Casey, *Waiting for Godot* (1953) by Samuel Beckett, *The Quare Fellow* (1954) and *The Hostage* (1958) by Brendan Behan, *The Communication Cord* (1982) by Brian Friel.

The Walworth Farce revives the Irish comic and farce tradition impelling the act of performance with caustic metatheatrical associations which reflect upon the insanity of becoming trapped in the stories we tell about ourselves and the additional perversity of trapping our nearest within the recurrent rehearsal of a supposed family genealogy.

The play ends with the most conformist of the two sons (Blake) stabbing the father, and the most conscious of the sons (Sean) stabbing his brother to stay on his own in the dismal flat and perpetuate the father's sick performative tradition, so as to impersonate Hayley and her story. A dark cul-de-sac perspective for the development of Sean's yearned autonomous adulthood.

Both plays are the epitome of Mr Walsh's highly original and bold imagination, which certainly shines within the Irish Modern and Contemporary Dramatic tradition and well beyond it. The double bill of *The New Electric Ballroom* and *The Walworth Farce* achieves to strengthen the Walshian dramatic cosmos of uncompromising story-tellers and self-performers, as well as to consolidate it within a national dramatic tradition, providing a further turn of the screw to issues such as the question of the (il)legitimacy to refashion one's past and the disputable authority of language for representation and reference.

The sisters from *The New Electric Ballroom* and the brothers from *The Walworth Farce* have equally put at bay the natural maturity of their respective adult femininity and masculinity in the common interests of the obsessive re-enactment of one dubious episode of the family's past: Roller Royle's double seduction of Clara and Brenda in the case of *The New Electric Ballroom*, and the murderous circumstances accompanying Dinny's sudden flight to London, in the case of *The Walworth Farce*. The rituals of impersonation and rehearsing entailed within the process of theatre-making and story-telling –such as make-up, (un)dressing, exact wording, intonation, arrangement of props, etc.– serve Walsh to explore the thick bonds between the past and the present, as well as the tug of war between familiar and individual interests.

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