

*Dramaturgical Precedence: Music Space and the Story
in Conor McPherson's The Night Alive and Girl from
the North Country*

*Predecência dramaturgica: Espaço musical e a história em
The Night Alive e Girl from the North Country de
Conor McPherson*

Maha Alatawi

Abstract: *The spatial and musical cultures in The Night Alive and Girl from the North Country are complex and rich with meaning. Space and songs are integral components of both plays. While both plays have similar contexts in terms of being set within a great financial downturn, space and music are used differently to serve the narrative. The Night Alive relies on the creation of the space and setting to allow the audience a greater understanding of the characters and their backgrounds, whereas Girl from the North Country is a musical and therefore relies more on the music of Bob Dylan to help do something similar. This essay suggests that important aspects of Conor McPherson's composition of space and music have been overlooked and that further examination is needed of the Irish experience concerning the significance of space and music used to advance a play's narrative. Both plays deploy music in a way that assists the audience to become familiar with the space and in turn this creates a place, one in which the narrative of the play can sit comfortably.*

Keywords: *Space; Music; Narrative; Irish Theatre.*

Resumo: *É notável a complexidade e a riqueza de significados na cultura do espacial e musical em The Night Alive e Girl from the North Country. O espaço e as canções são componentes estruturais de ambas as peças. Embora ambas apresentem contextos semelhantes, ambientadas durante uma grande recessão financeira, o espaço e as canções são utilizados de maneira distinta de acordo com as necessidades de cada narrativa. The Night Alive se baseia na criação do espaço e do ambiente para permitir ao público conhecer mais profundamente as personagens e seus contextos, enquanto Girl from the North Country é um musical e, por isso, necessita ainda mais das canções de Bob Dylan para realizar algo semelhante. Este ensaio sugere que aspectos relevantes da composição de Conor McPherson em relação ao espaço e à música foram negligenciados; além disso, é necessária uma análise mais aprofundada da experiência irlandesa sobre a importância do espaço e da música para a progressão da narrativa de uma peça teatral. Ambas as peças utilizam canções com o objetivo de tornar o espaço familiar ao público e, por consequência, essa escolha cria um lugar onde a narrativa da peça possa acomodar-se confortavelmente.*

Palavras-chave: *Espaço; Canção; Narrativa; Teatro irlandês.*

Introduction

Both music and space have increasingly occupied a place within Irish theatre, particularly from the 1990s to the present day. Music and space can add to the narrative of a play and provide clarity and context for the audience's benefit. According to Gay McAuley, space is an "active agent" rather than an "empty container" (41). Similarly, according to Solga, much of the academic understanding surrounding space and place at the theatre reads space as "one of several theatrical languages" (10). The role of music within a play can be enriched by the theatrical dimension of the surrounding silent space, on which the story itself relies for conveying key narrative details in profound ways.¹ Music and space are audio and visual forms of narrative and thematic communication in theatrical contexts and, when staged, they exert their own impact. Music does audibly what space does visually, both being a way in which the context and narrative of the play can be effectively communicated to an audience in a more implicit way rather than the need for explicitly communicating this to the audience.

Traditionally, the word "space" was understood as referring to simply an empty area; however, over time, the concept of space has expanded to incorporate broader dimensions

in theatre, including mental and social spaces. The concept of a social space relates it to the politics of space and the idea that space orders our “social relationships; it structures our relations of power (economic, political, gendered, and more)” (Solga). It is the framework that enables all human interaction, grounding us within space and not simply occupying it. Space can concern our immediate surroundings, the objects within our reach and the place where we live at that moment, but also referring to the wider world. The politics and the community in which a play is set also occupy space just as much as the set design and scenography. The spaces in theatre are layered and complex, underscoring the multi-faceted nature of theatrical environments. At the core, the physical space is perceived as the primary element, representing tangibility that can be manipulated. Tompkins refers to this concept as theatre’s “geographies”, noting that they “incorporate architectural, narrative, and more abstract interpretations of spatiality” (537). For most, the theory of theatrical space goes back to Marxist Henri Lefebvre, who implores that space is socially “produced” and in fact an effect of social and political interactions. The theatre itself is an instrument used to create a place out of space, the actor can enter the space of the stage even if not empty in any meaningful sense, the process of their inhabiting the stage creates the place itself (Morash and Richards 27).

When looking at music in connection with space, their interaction is noticeable. Undoubtedly, space and the creation of place are important for not only setting the immediate scene on stage but also for creating an understanding of the wider world in which a play is set. Music has the potential to be a major part in this interaction, not only setting the scene in an emotional sense but also having the ability to help create space and aiding in the familiarisation of the space, which is what seems to move us from a space into a place. The unique ability of music to set the scene emotionally and enhance the creation of space is what transforms an undifferentiated space into a place: “as soon as we get to know it better and endow it with value. When space feels thoroughly familiar to us, it has become place” (Morash and Richards 35).

Music itself is synonymous with Irish culture, tradition and history; it has always been thought of as a defining element reflecting the essence of Irishness. A close study of the Irish plays reveals that music has always been essential. It plays a variety of roles in Irish theatre, supporting underscoring dramatic themes, moods, surroundings, and narratives. Indeed, music is embedded into the heart and mind of plays in which it helps the story move forward. Songs have played a major role in the dramatic experience of Irish theatre, in plays such as those by Sean O’Casey, Tom Murphy and Brian Friel as well as younger playwrights like Mark O’Rowe and Marina Carr. Harry White, Joseph Greenwood and

Ciara Fleming are some critics that have written extensively about music in the Irish theatre. White has examined the various roles of music in the articulation of plays, while Greenwood explores the malleability of songs and their significance over time. Focusing on the use of the “language of music” rather than on the musicality of words or the “music of language,” Fleming outlines the phases through which the use of music has developed in Irish theatre and investigates how playwrights use music to represent themes of identity.

Both of Conor McPherson’s plays have been carefully selected to shed light on the significance of music and space used to advance a play’s narrative. The context of *The Night Alive* lies in the aftermath of the Celtic Tiger, while for *Girl from the North Country*, the historical context originates in the Great Depression; both can, therefore, be considered as falling within the context of financial troubles. This context is amplified by heightened expressions of space and music and their dramaturgical functions. The aim of this essay is to examine these two plays by Conor McPherson, looking at the important aspects of the composition of music and space that have been overlooked by previous research. Examining the significance of music and space in the above-mentioned plays, and the ways in which music and space intersect to create further insight into the Irish experience through exploration of the diegetic function and the representation of contexts, issues and dilemmas.

The first play to be explored is *The Night Alive*, which combines reality and dream, good and evil, science and religion, despair and hope.² In his 50s and separated from his wife and children, Tommy lives in a cluttered bedsit in his uncle Maurice’s house, which forms the backdrop of the play. Doc, Tommy’s “disabled” friend and business partner, finds himself constantly thrown out of his sister’s house by her boyfriend and finds shelter on Tommy’s camp bed. Aimee is a prostitute, beaten by an apparently abusive boyfriend, Kenneth, and our first introduction to Aimee finds her covered in blood, being led by Tommy into his living space. Maurice, Tommy’s uncle who lives upstairs, continually judges Tommy’s life and behaviour. Set in Dublin, the play centres on Tommy’s chaotic life and the trouble he faces due to his helping Aimee. Most noticeably we see throughout *The Night Alive* how incidental music is used to create a strong effect.

Following this, *Girl from the North Country*, however, is a very different piece of work, and was described as the best musical of 2018 by *The Washington Post*.³ It tells the story of Nick Laine, the owner of a guesthouse, and his family in 1934 America. Nick’s wife, Elizabeth, has dementia, while their son, Gene, is unemployed and writes stories. Nick and Elizabeth’s adopted black girl, Marianne, is pregnant, and Nick tries to marry her off to a cobbler, Mr Perry. Among their guests are Mrs Neilsen, a widow in love with

Nick; Mr and Mrs Burke, and their son Elias, who is a grown man with the mental age of a four-year-old; a black boxer named Scott; and Marlowe, a preacher. Dr Walker, Elizabeth's doctor, narrates the play. Bob Dylan's songs are performed throughout by Charlie Brow, Pete Callard and Don Richardson and some cast members. Characters sing along with the live band revealing the different emotional states of the characters who are facing a hopeless future. While similar in space to *The Night Alive*, the different approaches to music are what really differentiate these two plays.

It is important to point out that the focus of music and space within this article is highly dependent upon how space and music function within each play. With the analysis of each play, the aim here is to recognise and explore how the language of music and space within the plays of Conor McPherson can inform the narrative and provide appropriate context and clarity to an audience. *Girl from the North Country* is a musical, this therefore lends itself to an analysis weighted more towards the musical aspects. However, as aforementioned, the musical elements can be of significance to the space and the creating of place.

The Night Alive

With the play set in an Edwardian house in Dublin, that has now been converted to bedsits amongst the economic downturn, the space in which the play itself occupies is one of depravity and loss. The space surrounding the play, and the greater context for *The Night Alive*, aligns with the Celtic Tiger consciousness, “a sudden increase in wealth driven by employment, by social mobility and by property boom” (Jordan 35). A modern-day Dublin experiencing the aftermath of an economic downturn, that shapes the play's narrative as well as the character's lives, communications and destiny. The space in which the play is set is shaped by the economic situation, the lives of these characters formed from the hardships they face. The economic context of the play therefore provides clarity as to the very space in which these characters inhabit. As Jordan puts it, “The play's ending marks a distortion of time, space, and causality, shattering the notion of economics as being the singularly governing frame” (Jordan 26).

Tommy's place is marked by chaos, untidiness, shabby furniture and filthy kitchen utensils. In stark contrast to his current economic chaos, Tommy recalls how the bank “threw the money at me” to buy two outdoor live gig rigs (McPherson 75). During the boom, almost anyone could receive a loan; in Tommy's words, leading to a “legal nightmare” (McPherson 75). During a moment of honesty and revelation, Maurice judges

Tommy's irresponsible conduct within the difficult situation the country is going through, saying "the country is a shambles and we're crying out for people like you. That can lead us into the light" (McPherson 80). Moreover, characters desperately seek means to make and save money: Tommy hides his cash under the floorboards; Aimee makes money through prostitution and her boyfriend Kenneth through pimping for her; Maurice rents the bedsit in his house to Tommy; while Doc and Tommy, as mentioned earlier, are business partners doing odd jobs and selling expired goods.

Fundamental to McPherson's theatrical experiences is the dark ambiance of space through scenic design and its implication of the mysterious and the infinite.⁴ This infinity of the universe and relativity of time can be found across McPherson's work. In *Dublin Carol*, for example, Mark's prospects "lie ahead of him, and what the world has in store," while he listens to John's past reminiscences (McPherson, *Dublin Carol* 93); in *The Seafarer*, Sharky "stares into his bleak eternal fate" as Lockhart describes life in hell (McPherson, *Seafarer* 128); and in *The Veil*, Hannah looks beyond "into somewhere else" after Berkeley's séance (McPherson, *The Veil* 268). Time also slows down in hell and during a card game (*The Seafarer*) as well as in a black hole.

This interaction between imaginative and real spaces finds expression in *The Night Alive* in many instances. Towards the end of the play, time is problematised and distorted through the incompatible and often perplexing use of time periods. This last scene thus lacks temporal seamlessness with the other scenes, with their logical temporal progression. This change of pace could represent eternity by revealing the life of the characters after their death. The title *The Night Alive* also suggests a dream in which this night is the only time when the characters feel fully alive, engaging with family and celebrating Christmas. The disjointed ending could then suggest a conflation of waking and dreaming, reality and fantasy, and the logically possible and impossible.

The character of Kenneth facilitates the space operating at times between the imaginative and the real. Peter Crawley suggests that Kenneth is an otherworldly menace, described as a demon of destruction. He is seen as "the physical manifestation of evil incarnate" (Shanley). Kenneth, therefore, reflects the supernatural presence that marks the entirety of McPherson's oeuvre. Kenneth stands for the evil residing generally in the play's characters. Tommy tends to "forget a devil life inside" him (McPherson, *The Night Alive* 81). Kenneth, through his otherworldly link, is there to remind him.

The Night Alive is packed with spatial knowledge (at the mimetic level, which relates to what the audience sees on the stage), which is directly connected to significant moments in the story (on the diegetic level, or what the audience hears from the characters).

When it comes to theatre, it is more than just the occupation of a space. Instead, when an actor uses that performance space, they create a memory and association for the audience through the creation of place (Morash and Richards 176). This created place is not somewhere that simply exists, but it is rather a place that is curated and produced into existence. (Morash and Richards 176) Tommy's bedsit, for example, contains a poster of Steve McQueen on his motorbike from the film *The Great Escape*, a poster of Marvin Gaye's album cover *What's Going On* and two posters advertising Finland as a holiday destination (McPherson 70). The three posters here "offer an alternative sensibility in terms of escape and possibility" (Jordan 43). The living space that Tommy inhabits, seems to juxtapose itself, illustrating both this irresponsible behaviour towards himself but also the idea of freedom and movement, making the space have both creative and destructive potential. (Jordan 43) McQueen's *Great Escape* Character Hilts represents the embodiment of masculinity, particularly when he jumps over the Swiss border on his stolen motorbike to escape the Nazis. It is this brand of masculinity that Tommy tries to demonstrate throughout the play; first, by helping and providing sanctuary to Aimee and, towards the end of the play, by planning to escape with her. Later in the play, Tommy, Aimee and Doc are seen "grooving around" to Gaye's song *What's Going On*. Maurice's banging on the ceiling from upstairs disturbs the fun of the dance and serves as a reminder of Maurice's control over Tommy's life and his position in his uncle's house.

While the use and context of the space itself is a contributing factor to the narrative of the play, music within *The Night Alive* does not convey the narrative, but rather contributes to the interpretation and the audience's experience. In this instance, the use of song is one of further articulating important feelings or sentiments beyond the ability that words have.

When asked about McPherson's music choices, Gregory Clarke, the sound designer of the 2015 production at The Gaiety, explains that "those pieces are part of the DNA of the show" and that they "inform the whole feel" of the performance. Tommy, Aimee and Doc dance to Gaye's song *What's Going On*. The song's question, "What's Going On" takes on an existential stance, as when Tommy contemplates "What's going on? That is the question" (McPherson 77), reflecting the chaotic and aimless lives of the play's characters. The whole play, then, circles around the question "What is going on?" Two of the songs in this production are Talk Talk's *Myrrhman* and *Ascension Day* played during scenes 2, 3, 5 and 6. The songs reflect the religious motives and implications that underpin the play. Reference is made in these songs to Christ, his birth and the wise men who brought gold, frankincense and myrrh as gifts. Implicit reference can therefore be

linked to one of the three wise men who appeared to Doc in a dream and told him about the scientific concept of black holes. In the original Biblical story, the wise men, or Magi, follow a star that leads them to the Messiah, the saviour, yet in the play, the star collapses to form a black hole, denoting darkness, death and endless time. Jordan argues, therefore, that *The Night Alive* is a modern nativity play examining issues of “eviction, homelessness, sanctuary, generosity, and communal sharing” (33).

The final sequence features Father John Misty’s *Fun Times in Babylon*, which offers potential redemption by the end of the play. The final moments of the play have been interpreted in many ways, including the survival and exoneration of the main characters or the demise of life and death themselves. The latter is a more realistic proposal, based on Doc’s statement at the close of the play: “Yeah, apparently, when you die, you won’t even know you’re dead! It’ll just feel like everything has suddenly... come right, in your life. Like everything has just clicked into place and off you go.” (McPherson, *The Night Alive* 84). The show ends with the song *Courage* by Villagers which points at the lives of characters, mainly Tommy, who seems to finally find the courage to make things right after the mistakes he has made. Songs, therefore, play a major role in the theatrical experience of the play and serve a specific analytical function.

Girl from the North Country

Much like *The Night Alive*, the wider context of an economic downturn is integral to the creation of space in which the play situates itself, and therefore also integral to the space directly represented on stage. A word about the Great Depression is necessary in order to contextualise the financial and other difficulties the characters encounter in *Girl from the North Country*. The play is set in 1934 in Duluth, Minnesota. In the period between 1920 and 1929, the country’s economy had experienced a rapid expansion, echoed by the later Celtic Tiger period in Ireland, albeit on a very different scale. Through storytelling, music and space, the hardships faced during the Great Depression are explicitly staged in *Girl from the North Country*.

Narration, dance, music and specific historical time periods feature in several Irish plays such as the production of *Dancing at Lughnasa* in 2015 and recent adaptations such as *Jimmy’s Hall* (2017) and *Ulysses* (2017). However, *Girl from the North Country* is distinguished from the output of other playwrights through the presence of Bob Dylan’s songs. In this play, the songs fully interrelate with the dialogue in the narrative construction

of the play, deepening the experience of the audience and providing further support for the play's central themes.

As in *The Night Alive* and others of McPherson's plays, the collision of alternative realities is evident in *Girl from the North Country*. *The Seafarer*, for example, witnesses the embodiment of the devil arising from hell. The devil, Mr Lockhart within this play, wants to take Sharky through what he describes as 'the hole in the wall' to eternity – his definition of life in hell. In *Girl from the North Country*, on the other hand, the ghost-like space and the use of songs from different periods of Dylan's life offer a similar disjointedness.

The end of *Girl from the North Country* suggests the illusion of an alternative space. In one of Dr Walker's last narrated parts, Nick appears relieved at having made up his mind about a subject. We are told this by Dr Walker, following the conversation between Nick and his son Gene, in which Nick insinuates ending both his life and his wife Elizabeth's. This piece of narration serves as a confirmation of Nick's decision to arrange joint suicide. However, something appears to have changed in Nick's plans as he and Elizabeth remain alive. It is clarified by Dr Walker that they lost their house during the Depression and that Nick took Elizabeth and moved south. Elizabeth ended up in a house for women on the banks of the Missouri, while Nick lived in a hostel nearby and visited her every day until the morning she passed away. Dr Walker is unsure where Nick went after that point, but he claimed to have heard that Nick had headed to Oklahoma. About Nick and Elizabeth's son, Gene, Dr Walker says that local man Perry offered him a job at his store and a place to stay. Gene later tried working as a reporter for a local newspaper before heading to New York in search of further work. He met a girl in New York, but the relationship did not work out. When the war started, he was recruited as a marine and was reported missing in June 1945. To end this part of the narrative, Dr Walker tells the audience about his own death on Christmas Eve in 1934, which is the first intimation that Dr Walker is narrating from beyond the grave. He describes the experience thus: "[I]t was just like stepping through a glass wall. I could still see everything." (McPherson, *Girl from the North Country* 102). He was able to see Marianne, her baby and Joseph visiting Nick, Elizabeth and Gene the following winter. Well, dressed, he watched them outside the old inn walking away: "I looked out on the water. Then I closed my eyes." (McPherson 102). The tragic way in which Walker describes this moment contradicts the action as described and staged in the background, since the image presented to the audience is that of a happy family getting together. As Dr Walker is narrating the last part of this scene, the stage directions say, "*We see NICK and ELIZABETH having dinner – happy and healthy. GENE joins them . . . MARIANNE comes and sits. The family are happy together*" (McPherson 101).

An alternative world is created on the stage that contrasts the tragedy of the final piece of narration to portray a happy family who have survived the hardships of the Depression era, with their own house and fine clothing and food. The audience thus encounter a conflict between the narrated story and the action taking place on the stage, which has power over their own understanding of the denouement of the play. Other examples of the interplay of such varying temporalities are: Elias's ghost appearing "*free of pain, worry or limitations*" singing *Duquesne Whistle* after we are told he is dead (McPherson 83-84); Marianne telling Perry that she has been impregnated by someone "deeper than a man, [and] older than a man" (McPherson 73), suggesting the story of the Virgin Mary and the Holy Spirit; Elizabeth hearing the sound of a girl down a hole, which apparently alludes to a childhood story about Nick and his sister; and finally the narrator Dr Walker standing before us recalling his own death. The sound Elizabeth says she hears early in Act 1 is precursory to the later narrative about Nick's sister. In Act 2, Elizabeth and Nick fight over this as Elizabeth again speaks of the voice she hears, assuming this time that Nick can also hear it. It is implied that this sound could belong to the baby girl they lost at birth; Elizabeth mentions that they lost a baby girl, and she leaves it at that (McPherson 22). This unnatural voice, therefore, is presumably employed to provoke a sense of guilt in Nick.

This notion is clearly elevated by the photographs used by Rae Smith in her set designs for the production in 2017/18. A short while before Mr Burke announces to Marlowe his fishing trip with Elias, a photograph on a canvas of Lake Superior (or what appears to be a projection of it) is slowly dropped down to the stage and Elizabeth dons sunglasses during the scene. It is in this lake that Elias goes on to lose his life, appearing to be mercy-killed by his father despite his father's claim that his death was an accident. The lake in *Girl from the North Country* recalls Cummings's design in McPherson's adaptation of Franz Xaver Kroetz's *The Nest* (1975) in which the lake, represented by bedrock around the stage as the auditorium stands for the lake itself, is also a source of harm to the family. Cummings remarks, "I was interested in the idea that no matter how we try to control everything we cannot live in a hermetically sealed and controllable environment. We must exist within the world and within society" (Alatawi). Cummings' comment on the convergence of the mimetic and the diegetic, the public and the private also applies to *Girl from the North Country*.

Songs and music also take on an integral role in a wider sense, in the dramaturgy and dramatic composition of *Girl from the North Country*. It was Dylan's record company who originally approached McPherson with the idea of using Dylan's music in a play.

However, McPherson dismissed the idea at first because none of his previous plays had been musicals and he could not picture Dylan's songs having a place in a musical. However, when McPherson later had the idea of a play set during the Depression in Duluth, Minnesota, where Dylan was born, he sent an outline to Dylan's record company to which, after a few days, Dylan gave his approval. The record company sent McPherson forty albums, with a note that he was free to select any song he required for his play.

In McPherson's work, music and songs are woven together with the narrative to interfere with the character's lives and stories and have their own key dramaturgical functions through their unique expressiveness of the characters' situations that cannot be simply voiced through dialogue. This echoes the constitutive undertone of music in Friel's *Philadelphia, Here I Come!* (1964). Music has a diegetic function in most of Friel's work as the music in his plays directly originates from the narrative (White 210). The Irish emigrant ballad *Off to Philadelphia* is blended in Friel's play with the American popular song *California, Here I Come* to show the influence of a foreign culture (Ireland) over the country (the US). Gar in Friel's play dreams of the assumed range of economic opportunities in the US which are unavailable to him in Donegal. The lyrics of both songs are referenced and sung in the play.

The function of McPherson's music is not dissimilar from that of Friel in *Philadelphia, Here I come!* McPherson shares some traits with other Irish playwrights but also differs in his use of music. The songs and musical interludes that feature in many of McPherson's theatrical works should be viewed as invaluable in view of their thematic and structural significance to the overall narrative. For example, *The Seafarer* ends with John Martyn's *Sweet Little Mystery*, while music composed by Neil Young features throughout *Shining City* and characters in *The Night Alive* dance to Marvin Gaye's *What's Going On*, which has been described as a fleetingly transcendent moment performed by "four whacked-out wastrels" (Brantley). Mentioned earlier, Father John Misty's *Fun Times in Babylon* is chosen to end *The Night Alive*. McPherson has also used music in his theatrical adaptations – *The Nest* featured an original score by the singer-songwriter and poet P.J. Harvey. McPherson integrates music into the action on stage in order to heighten the dramatic potency of the theatrical performances, as well as to aid the progression of the narrative.

One can recognise Brechtian aspects in McPherson's presentation and integration of the songs in *Girl from the North Country*. Brecht, in his drama, integrates songs to create a distancing effect between characters and audiences. The purpose of songs in Brecht's plays is not to deepen the emotions of the scenes, but rather to comment and narrate,

offering a direct commentary on the action onstage, rarely using music for emotional effect. In other words, in Brechtian theatre, the attention and reaction of the audience is deliberately designed to heighten and bring to light the different levels of the spoken and musical narrative. Music is understood in this context as a device for distancing the audience, in order to prevent them from getting lost in the drama and instead allow them to use their rational faculties to question the social issues behind the play. (Saleem and Resshid 247). Despite McPherson not holding Brecht's materialist view of the world, his use of music has similar objectives to comment and to separate, but not always to alienate. Emotion, in *Girl from the North Country*, is not outlawed but embraced. Songs in the play bring to the audience the experiences of performances which take place in public houses in which, in this case, characters are brought together by external circumstances. They create powerful communal and emotional effects on the audience.

As a method for achieving a similar effect in *Girl from the North Country*, McPherson uses the following techniques: a large cello placed in the centre of the stage opens the play along with a piano and drum kit to the side; the band is positioned on the stage and is visible to the audience; and the narrator talks and actors sing directly to the audience through microphones. These techniques clearly illustrate the theatrical and performative quality of narration accentuated by drama narratologists. McPherson was also clearly writing the dialogue of the play with Dylan's songs in mind, knowing which song each character would sing.

Despite the claims of Brantley and Bryan Appleyard that songs are not linked to the action in *Girl from the North Country*, McPherson, in his introduction to *Girl from the North Country*, confirms that the songs "always fit somehow" (McPherson 7). When asked about the relationship between songs and story during the rehearsals of the American premiere, McPherson states, "Dylan will do it for us" (Marks). As to why the play was set before Dylan was born, McPherson claims that he wanted to "free the songs from the burden of relevance for our generation and make them timeless" (Curtis 1). For McPherson, Dylan's songs resonate with any time, place, and person. The universality of the songs implies the universality of the play itself. The same is said about *The Veil*, which has received a great deal of criticism regarding resonance. McPherson states that *The Veil* is set in the 1820s but still echoes "the big economic crash following the Napoleonic wars" and the recent crash of the Celtic Tiger (Costa).

In *Girl from the North Country*, the performances are used as a method of interrogating the narrative and are therefore simultaneously separate and discrete elements of the action taking place on the stage. This view is affirmed by key figures who have served

in creating the performances. Matthew Warchus, the artistic director of the Old Vic, where the play was first performed in London, points out that the “text and songs [are] assertively independent of each other – a deliberate collision sometimes, and sometimes an embrace – yet somehow soulmates and walking in step” (Warchus 1). McPherson has also confirmed this by pointing out in his Introduction to *Girl from the North Country* that “many of Mr Dylan’s songs can be sung at any time, by anyone in any situation, and still make sense and resonate with that particular place and person and time” (McPherson 6). McPherson goes on to point out that Dylan’s songs are comparable to more traditional forms of literature because they contain “images and conceits, . . . creating a new inner world” (McPherson 7). Simon Hale, the orchestrator, arranger and musical supervisor for the play, has also noted how songs in the classic West End musical “drive the plot”, whereas in *Girl from the North Country*, they become a “conversation between the songs and the story” (Curtis 1). The songs are re-worked, and their inclusion explores the new meanings implicit in the songs. The audience and readers are sometimes left to infer connections and relationships among the songs, action and narrative and come to realise that the integration of songs is never subtle. This is also evident in the choice of new songs such as *Duquesene Whistle* (2012) for a play set in the 1930s. Therefore, Dylan’s songs in the play are used to create an ‘additional’ narrative element that is both separate to as well as an integral part of the play.

As Fergus Morgan in *The Stage* has pointed out, *Girl from the North Country* is “not a ‘Bob Dylan musical’ [or] a jukebox compilation of classic tracks” (Morgan). Instead, Dylan’s songs and music form an integral element of the narrative construction of the play and inform the characters’ stories and situations. McPherson’s use of Bob Dylan’s songs and music clearly represents an intrinsic element of the dramatic structure of *Girl from the North Country*. I would argue that the songs in the play tell a story which cannot be alienated from the play’s comprehensive narrative. Furthermore, there is a clear delineation between the songs, as acts of narration, and the dialogues which take place before and after each song, in a way that contradicts Brantley’s view of the songs as not extensions or substitutions of dialogues. *Slow Train* (1979), which was written following Dylan’s born-again Christian period, is sung by Marlowe, a preacher, and Scott, a boxer. Marlowe’s observation that a “Big storm’s coming . . . Here. Europe. Everywhere”, serves to reinforce the sentiments of the song:

Sometimes I feel so low-down and disgusted
Can’t help but wonder what’s happening’ to my companions
Are they lost or are they found?

Have they counted the cost it'll take to bring down?
(Bob Dylan, *Slow Train*, 1979)

Went to See the Gypsy (1970) is sung by Mrs Neilson and echoes a similar situation to that of her and Nick. *True Love Tends to Forget* (1978) is again performed by Mrs Neilson and forms a completion to her conversation with Nick in which she reveals her love to him. Marianne sings *Tight Connections to My Heart*:

You're the one I've been looking for
You're the one that's got the key
Has anybody seen my love?
Has anybody seen my love?
(Bob Dylan, *Tight Connections to My Heart*, 1985)

This song seems to signal Scott's arrival after Marianne talks to Perry, the man her father wants her to marry. In the dialogue between Elizabeth and Marlowe, Elizabeth says, "Day's gonna come we all gotta blow" and "Everybody gotta go a different door" (McPherson, *Girl from the North Country*), followed by a rendition of *Like a Rolling Stone* (1965). The song is reminiscent of the characters' stories; we know that they are all staying in Nick's guesthouse which will be foreclosed soon by the bank.

In terms of the effect of the music on the narrative, songs such as *I Want You* (1966), which is sung by Gene and his girlfriend Kate, are intended to underpin the feelings they have for each other. Furthermore, their emotions are made increasingly poignant by the knowledge that Kate is about to leave town and to marry someone else. Their yearning for each other is made more explicit by the chorus:

I want you; I want you
I want you so bad
Honey, I want you.
(Bob Dylan, *I Want You*, 1:09-17)

Additional parallels between Dylan's songs and the narrative can be made throughout the play, as when Nick refers to his financial state: "I don't find that money, the banker gonna take everything. We'll be like dust in the wind here." (McPherson, 2015: 67). This statement is reinforced in lyrics such as "Freedom just around the corner for you, but with the truth so far off, what good will it do?" which is from the song *Jokerman* (1983).

Hurricane (1976) is sung by Scott and appears to tell his own story, “Put in a prison cell, but one time he could-a been the champion of the world” (McPherson, *Girl from the North Country* 76). Throughout the play, Dylan’s songs are used to reinforce, as well as offer an additional narrative strand, and in this respect, the songs become an integral element of the narrative progression of *Girl from the North Country*.

Conclusion

The spatial and musical cultures in *The Night Alive* and *Girl from the North Country* are complex and rich with meaning. Space and songs are integral components of both plays. However, while *The Night Alive* explores the representational function of stage space, *Girl from the North Country* delves into the narrative induced by the role of songs. In relation to music in particular, the songs in *Girl from the North Country* merge with dialogue in the text and the performance and are sung directly to the audience, which is not the case in *The Night Alive*.

Like in *The Night Alive* and *Girl from the North Country*, the ideas of the infinite, the transcendental and the mysterious characterise McPherson’s other work and take precedence in the ways in which space is described and designed and music is implemented. Details of space and music weave rampantly across all of McPherson’s plays. The church bells and the associated festive music alongside the unpacking of Christmas decorations are the impetus to the promised change in John’s life in *Dublin Carol* (2001). The same idea of Christmas-oriented renewal and hope is evoked by John Martyn’s ‘Sweet Little Mystery’ played by Sharky after the light under the sacred heart blinks on in *The Seafarer* (2006). There is also the double significance of the music of the ice cream van and the uncanny presence of Mari’s ghost in Ian’s office to the life of both John and Ian in *Shining City* (2004). Considering the combination of songs and design, McPherson offers a dimensional perspective and posits the narrative engagement of music and space.

While both *The Night Alive* and *Girl from the North Country* use music, they utilise it in extremely different ways. While this is the case, the music used in both plays act as an extra layer to the setting of the scene, and while this could be seen as an emotional element to create the mood for the scene, it also enhances our familiarity with the space. Thus, creating a place in which the audience is emotionally invested. In *Girl from the North Country* creates familiarity by using the music of Bob Dylan, almost embodying where the play itself is set, establishing the wider off stage setting as Duluth, Minnesota (Dylan’s birthplace). On the other hand, *The Night Alive* uses music in a similar fashion, with the

familiar song by Marvin Gaye that enhances the creation of place. As is discussed by Lojek about McGuinness, McPherson too has chosen to use music that contains lyrics which creates a dialogic relationship between the play and another time and place (262). The various layers of space are only enhanced using music, and this interplay between the two is integral to the audience's experience. An experience that has the potential to transport you from your regular existence and into the world of Conor McPherson, filled with the transcendental and mysterious.

Notes

- 1 See *The Spaces of Irish Drama: Stage and Place in Contemporary Plays* in which Helen Lojek provides a study of space in selected Irish plays and its relation to themes of land and belonging.
- 2 *The Night Alive* opened at The Donmar Warehouse in London in 2013 and transferred to Off-Broadway at The Atlantic Theatre Company in 2013. The play also opened the Dublin Theatre Festival at The Gaiety in a co-production with the Lyric Theatre Belfast in 2015.
- 3 The play was first performed in London at the Old Vic in the summer of 2017. After a successful run, the play was transferred to the Noël Coward Theatre in the West End in early 2018, and then to New York at The Public Theatre with a new American cast.
- 4 Ian Walsh talks about Elinor Fuchs's notion of the *mysterium* and use of darkness on stage in *Dublin Carol*.

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