Negotiating Representations of Toxic Masculinity on the Abbey Stage 2018

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In 2018, against the background of a growing public discussion of rape culture and toxic masculinity, the Abbey Theatre presented two plays that confronted issues of sex, rape and masculinity head on. In April, Caitríona McLaughlin directed a revival of Marina Carr's *On Raftery's Hill* (2000); while in November, Annabelle Comyn directed *Asking for It* in a co-production between the Abbey, Landmark Productions and the Everyman, Cork. *On Raftery's Hill* opened barely a month after the controversial conclusion of the Belfast rape trial and *Asking for It* opened a week after the acquittal of the defendant in a rape trial in Cork, following the production of the alleged victim's thong in court. In both plays presented at the Abbey, the rape of a young woman was central. The rape of Sorrell in *On Raftery's Hill* was graphically enacted on stage, while the rape of Emma in *Asking for It* was described in detail through voice overs and flashing images, which made it just as horrific. *On Raftery's Hill* was presented as the revival of a contemporary classic by one of our greatest Irish playwrights, with an age advisory of 16. *Asking for It* on the other hand was an adaptation of a well-known Young Adult novel and was heavily promoted as a production for schools including an accompanying study pack provided by the Abbey, although it too came with an advisory age limit of 16. Both plays struck the critical audience as entirely topical in light of contemporary events but reviews describe the plays variously as: "demanding and gritty", "striking and pummelling", "grim", "unsettling and alarming" (Hayes, May 6 2018; Crawley, May 2 2018; Keating, 18 November 2018; Crawley, June 18 2018). There is a suggestion that they contribute to a narrative of victimhood, merely talking to the converted, acting as imagined witness statements to a reality that is well documented in the media, and to which it seems impossible to bring the kind of toxic masculinity represented in these plays to a state of self-awareness. Looking at the critical reception and audience reaction to these two plays produced in 2018, this paper will interrogate how drama can engage with a discussion around redefining masculinity in contemporary Ireland.

Poststructuralist and postmodern redefinitions of identity have played an important role in challenging hegemonic ideas of masculinity. Judith Butler argued that sex is culturally constructed, and in fact performed (137). Kenneth Mackinnon states that: "at the very least, the awareness of gender as 'performative' suggests its instability – why else would it require constant reworking?"(5). This instability around definitions of gender pointed the way to Raewyn Connell's 1995 book, *Masculinities*, which defined the idea of "hegemonic masculinity" as "the set of assumptions and beliefs about masculinity that pass as common sense" (Mackinnion, 8). Connell suggests that both men and women have a role to play in the construction and maintenance of hegemonic masculinity, and in both plays under discussion, women and particularly mothers are key factors in helping to bolster and support ideas that would be more readily associated with "toxic" masculinity. Toxic masculinity is broadly defined by extreme forms of sexist behaviour practised by a small number of men but supported within society by deeply engrained discourses and practices. Since the 1980s, legislation in Ireland to support equality has radically redefined gender roles within society, and a combination of different factors, including an increasingly globalised world economy that privileges the softer skills traditionally favoured by women and the economic necessity of two working parents to support a family, have left hegemonic masculinity in a state of flux. Traditional male roles of provider, patriarch and privileged core of the household and society in general have been destabilised.

Traditional ideas of masculinity do not simply disappear, however, and in fact the normalisation of feminist practices creates a threat to certain ideas of masculinity – the more the patriarchal power is challenged the more some will resist. Since the early 2000s, with the introduction of the internet and then social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Youtube with their capacity for anonymous commentary, it appears that visible misogyny has been on the increase, with many high profile attacks on female politicians and media figures merely the tip of the iceberg. Laura Bates' "Everyday Sexism Project" launched in 2012, catalogues the stories of thousands of women who have experienced everything from verbal attacks and wolf whistles, to touching, on-line abuse, slut shaming, revenge porn, physical intimidation and violent assault. As part of the Abbey education pack that accompanied *Asking for It*, it was suggested that up to one in three people have experienced some form of sexual violence by the time they reached adulthood. Following a consent workshop run by Louise O'Neill, one 5th year student stated in the pack, that: "There wasn't a single girl in that room who had not experienced some sort of unwanted touching or derogatory comments, and not a single boy could say that he hadn't heard them coming from at least one family member or friend" (O Rourke).

Jewkes, Flood and Lang, in the *Lancet* in 2015, suggest that "men's perpetration of violence against women and girls is a constituent element of gender inequality, and men's use and experiences of violence are upheld by commonly held versions of manhood"(1580). They argue that programmes to prevent sexual violence need to look at multiple factors including societal and institutional as well as interpersonal and internal factors: "Ecological approaches […] are particularly important to understand what supports social norms within settings and, where relevant, institutions. […] Masculinities are embodied and reproduced across social ecology, and thus interventions must seek changes at multiple levels" (1586). Their survey of international research into violence prevention concludes that Y-chromosomes do not make men violent, but rather the "social values, roles, behaviours and attributes thought to be appropriate and expected for men and women", are far more important in continuing violent behaviour towards women and girls (1581). Men and women construct hegemonic masculinity, so both must be involved in efforts to change it. Violence is not inherent in masculinity, but it is very strongly linked to the performance of masculine gender identity in certain circumstances. Men who exhibit violent and controlling behaviour to women often have "notable victimisation histories" or "an exaggerated sense of entitlement" (1583). Interestingly, the perpetrators of sexual violence in both the plays examined in this essay exhibit at least one or both of these characteristics.

This paper will not analyse the two plays in detail as my focus here is on negotiating the representation of masculinity on the stage and in particular how it was received by the social as well as critical audience. In both plays the central protagonist is an 18 year old girl living in rural Ireland in the present. Carr's original description of the setting for *On Raftery's Hill* is simply a kitchen in the "Raftery household" with table, chairs, a landing and two doors – one to the yard and one to the pantry. The Raftery farm is a substantial holding of 300 acres at the top of a hill looking down on a valley and at one point Red Raftery offers 50 acres and a cheque for £20,000 to Sorrell's fiancé as a wedding gift. These are not poor people, though the farm has been run down and there is the carcass of a dead animal in every field creating a stink to which each new character refers as they enter the stage. Carr creates a mythic sense of location, as the land reflects the disease and horror at the heart of the Raftery household. In contrast to the original Druid/Royal Court production of 2000 where the farm house appeared dark and almost derelict, the Abbey Theatre production embraced the ascription of "the present" with an Ikea kitchen facing the audience including microwave and American style

fridge (Fitzpatrick, 115). This kitchen had been updated by Dermot Bannon at some point, however the setting deliberately disorientated the audience by surrounding the kitchen itself with a pool of standing water. As each character entered or exited they sloshed through a metre-wide shallow stagnant pool to get to the door to either the yard or the pantry. This sense of distance was increased by the use of screens at the back of the stage that reflected the faces of the three women drowning in pools of water at key moments in the play.

By contrast, the location for *Asking for It* felt entirely more realistic, though the direction and stage set were equally alienating for an audience. The play is set in the fictional generic Irish town of Ballinatoom, with its secondary school, football club and comfortable small-town life. Emma's father is the local bank manager, respectable and affluent, but still dependent on the local community. The setting for the play had to embrace multiple spaces, not least Emma's own head, as much of the novel is told through her own recollections and thoughts about the events that befall her. This was achieved exceptionally well in the first half of the play by the use of direct address to the audience, voice overs, and an impressive back wall of building blocks that reflected digital images and moved to create multiple locations. In the second half of the play, the blocks moved to create Emma's claustrophobic family home, as again a modern kitchen and table and chairs took centre stage. However, the second half of the play became a more conventionally realistic domestic drama, with little use of direct address to the audience, and as one critic put it: "there are a good 10-15 minutes that could be shaved off the running time, without affecting the story" (Winston). The total running time for *Asking for It* was two hours 55 minutes including an interval, while *On Raftery's Hill* ran for 2 hours 10 minutes with interval. Considering the O'Neill adaptation was promoted strongly for schools, there seemed to be little cognisance of the average attention span of a 16+ teenager, and I was not surprised to see the young people around me in the audience checking their phones a number of times as the second act dragged.

The two plays shared one other key similarity, other than a rural Irish setting, affluent fathers, and a teenage protagonist. The societies represented in both the plays share a deep level of misogyny and toxic masculinity which culminates in the rape of the two young protagonists. Sorrell in *On Raftery's Hill* is presented as a naïve love sick 18 year old who is about to be married to a neighbour, Dara Mood. She is blind, possibly deliberately, to the underlying poisonous atmosphere in the house. Her brother, Ded, lives in the barn and will not enter the house even to eat, unless his father is out. He is petrified of him, as is her older sister Dinah, though she manages their father, Red, by avoiding confrontation and giving him what he wants. Her grandmother, Shalome, keeps trying to run away from the house in order to return to her long dead father in Kinnegar, who seems to be the only person she ever loved. As the play progresses, it emerges that all the members of the Raftery household have experienced abuse of some kind in their lives. Red may be the son of Shalome's own father, and certainly lived in fear of her husband, Old Raftery. Dinah was sent into her father"s bed when she was twelve, and gave birth to Sorrel (who is her daughter, not her sister) on her own in the barn with no one but Ded to help her. Ded, traumatised by this event, is further alienated from the family when his doting mother rejects him before her death, thinking that he is the father of Dinah's child. Dinah has tried to keep Sorrel safe all these years by continuing her incestuous relationship with her father and giving up any hope of a life away from the hill for herself. She is bitter and lonely, and their relationship has become disturbingly familiar by this point. All of the family live in dread of Red, and when one night he decides to rape Sorrel after overhearing a conversation between her and her fiancé, not one of them comes to help her. At the conclusion of the play, three weeks after the rape, Sorrel is a different girl. She bathes constantly, dresses in baggy old clothes, and breaks off her

engagement, even defending her father against Dara Mood's criticisms and blaming Dara for the rape. When he asks her what he ruined, she replies: "I don't know. I don't know anything anymore…The world's gone ouh like a ligh and I can't see righ about anything anymore" (53).

As the play concludes, all three women of the Raftery family sit in the kitchen facing the audience with Shalome wearing Sorrel's ruined wedding dress. Her final lines, like many throughout the play, are both funny and deeply unsettling. When Red tries to tell her that her father died years ago, she replies: "Daddys never die, they just fake rigor mortis, and all the time they're throwing tantrums in the coffin, claw marks on the lid"(57). Fathers seem to be the chief source of misogyny within the play, not only within the Raftery family, but also in the tragic tale of the Brophy family discussed by Dara, Isaac and Red in Act One. Sarah Brophy and her illegitimate child die tragically, and her father goes insane admitting that it was his child. Red's response is telling, as he firstly blames Sarah, saying she "got whah was comin to her" and defending her father, saying "Ud's gossips like you destriys a man's good name and reputation" (23).

Toxic masculinity is presented in a much more obvious, even clichéd way, in *Asking for It.* Emma is a former town beauty queen, "princess" to her father, leader and bully of her group of friends. Louise O'Neill deliberately created a character who was not going to straightforwardly elicit our sympathy like Sorrel. Emma is ambitious, vain and vulnerable. She wants to be an adult but is still trapped in the world of school girl friends and the local rather cardboard cut-out Jocks. Rather than leaving the party to celebrate the win of the local football team with the gentle Connor, Emma goes off with Paul O'Brien, who is older and engaged, and is the son of the local leading entrepreneur. O'Neill's message is that young people will do stupid things against their own interests, but that Emma does not deserve what happens to her at the party. After taking a pill from Paul she goes into a bedroom where he rapes her while thinking he is having consensual sex. He even asks her, "Did you come?", much to the pained laughter of the audience the night that I saw the play (38). However, two other boys, Sean and Dylan, enter the bedroom and after Emma is dared into taking more drugs she loses consciousness. When she wakes the following morning it is outside her own home, and it is only over the following days that she realises that all three boys sexually assaulted her and took photos which appear on Facebook. The second half of the play revolves around the court case that Emma tries to pursue against the boys and the breakdown of her family as her father withdraws from her and her mother withdraws into alcohol. At the end of the play she offers to drop the case, and despite the protests of her brother, Bryan, her parents are only relieved. The audience gasped as Emma's mother said: "They're good boys really" (95).

The critical reception to both productions emphasised how important it was that the National Theatre, the Abbey, should be discussing such important issues at this time. In response to the difficulty of watching Sorrel's assault in *On Raftery's Hill* at the end of Act 1, Katy Hayes in the *Independent* said: "This is tough stuff [and] difficult to watch. But this is what a National Theatre at its best achieves" (6 May 2018). Emer O"Kelly in the *Sunday Independent* agreed: "This production ticks all the boxes for the Abbey: no gimmicks, but a triumphant revival of a serious play by an acclaimed author that is horribly relevant to what is sometimes called 'the national debate'" (7 May 2018). Despite the weaknesses of the play version of *Asking for It*, Frances Winston declared that it would: "probably go down as one of the most important pieces of social narrative every performed on the Abbey Stage" (15 November 2018).

The context for these productions at the Abbey in 2018 is important. In 2015, the Abbey Theatre's announcement of its programme of plays to commemorate 1916, which included 18 men and just two women in the line-up of writers and directors, resulted in a national and international campaign to tackle the lack of equal representation in the arts under the title #WakingtheFeminists. Sara Keating in *The Irish Times* argued that:

The National Theatre is built on a foundation of inclusion, on offering a reflection of Irish society, and the privileging of the male voice in a programme that purports to interrogate the foundation of the nation is especially troubling. The total exclusion of minority voices is no less egregious, but that is a separate issue: women are not a minority (7 November 2015).

In 2017 Brenda Donoghue et.al. published *Gender Counts*, commissioned by #WakingtheFeminists and funded by the Arts Council, which reveals empirical evidence of a systemic lack of gender equality in Irish theatre. For example, only 28% of authors produced in all funded theatre included in the study from 2006-2015 were female (25). At the same time there were a number of high-profile cases which became part of a wider media conversation around consent and rape which emerged after the #MeToo campaign went viral at the end of 2017, in particular the Belfast rape trial and the "thong" consent case, as well as allegations against Michael Colgan, Artistic Director of the Gate Theatre from 1983-2017. The systemic underrepresentation of women and women's work as valued within the public arena has been considered a contributory factor in not only the maintenance of hegemonic masculinities, but also the prevalence and persistence of sexual violence. Jewkes, Flood and Lang's research suggests that tackling male violence against women and girls is achieved through more than direct interventions with perpetrators or victims, but through redefining women's roles in wider society. They say:

A need exists to empower women not only economically, but also socially and individually, and to raise consciousness to enable critical thought on women's role in male gender socialisation and the maintenance of gender power hierarchies so they demand more equitable relationships (1585).

In the two plays examined in this essay, the mothers are key in facilitating behaviours and attitudes that excuse male behaviour. At one point, Dinah confronts her father about his attack on their daughter who is also her sister saying: "What we need here is the gaurds, the social workers, the whole shootin loh of them", and yet she also defends him when Sorrel suggests she won't lie to her fiancé, saying, "ya behher noh start tellin lies abouh us. We're a respectable family, we love wan another" (56). From the very beginning of *Asking for It*, Emma's mother privileges looks and respectable behaviour over really listening to her daughter. She accepts her husband's almost comical patriarchal views without question – when their son comes home from university with his washing Dad says: "Good man. Your mother will do that for you" (61). As the court case against the three boys begins to isolate them from the community. Mam's anger is as much at the loss of status and respectability as it is at the abuse of her daughter. When she is drunk Mam bemoans the loss of her perfect "gentleman's family", and accuses Emma of being selfish: "you don't care about your brother – or your poor father" (83). Peter Crawly describes her as a "toxic Mam", and she is key in defining and supporting the kinds of masculinity privileged in this culture. At one point she tells her husband "I'd like you to be a fucking man, for once", and he replies "What does that mean, to be a man?" (77).

It is difficult to get a true sense of the social audience's reaction to both plays. Twitter reviews and the critics described the audience quietly sobbing at the end of *Asking for It*, or sitting shell shocked, and then rising to a standing ovation (Landmark/Twitter). The critics used descriptions such as "spellbinding", "towering performances", "riveting", "striking and pummelling" to describe *On Raftery's Hill.* Certainly there was a palpable feeling of horror and revulsion at the interval of both productions as audiences ran to the bar following the brutal rape of the two young protagonists. Without post show interviews, our only access to the real audience reaction is through edited post-show vox pops or Twitter comments on the Abbey or Landmark websites. These inevitably use the same kind of descriptions of both plays as "incredible", "powerful", "intense", "amazing performances", "harrowing", "visceral", "devastating", but with the addition of the physical reactions of audience members, who sometimes appeared visibly shocked and upset (Abbey Theatre, Audience Reactions).

One interesting addition to this sense of the social audience reaction is the on-line comments where available. Following the Cork premiere of *Asking for It*, in June 2018, *The Journal.ie* published a number of comments that showed a very different decoding of the performance than the rather politically correct edited commentary. Few contributors had actually seen the play but reacted instead to the subject matter. For example, "Martin" wrote: "I saw a report on the Six One news re this "masterpiece". I was disturbed by the unashamed plugging of this divisive play […] The author of this play was interviewed and she […] used hateful language by suggesting that there was a rape culture in Ireland" (#Comments). It is not clear whether "Frank" had seen the production, but he concluded that it was: "A predictable story based on the feminist theory that all men are evil and all women are innocent victims who are condemned by society". He suggested that the production was promoted because there was "a feminist market for this type of anti-man propaganda". One man "Marty" had been to see the play with two friends, and thought the play was boring, and "simply awful as a theatre spectacle! […] Although it was intense!" There were significantly fewer responses from females on *The Journal.ie* site, and those that did comment clearly felt the anger of the male respondents was based on a denial of rape culture. "Carla" said: "As usual, lots of angry males on the journal in complete denial of rape culture and unsettled it's on stage reminding them of the truth." "Lucy" argued that the production sounded like, "a powerful piece of theatre", and that the reaction on-line indicated that the play was "hitting some kind of truth." (#Comments)

In conclusion, these two productions present difficult questions to the audience of the Abbey Theatre. As the national theatre, it represents key ideas about our national identity as well as a centre for excellence in the performing arts, which absorbs large amounts of tax payers' money through Arts Council funding. Following the #WakingtheFeminists controversy the National Theatre is clearly trying to increase the number of plays written and directed by women on the Abbey stage, but they must be careful that the plays do not become side lined as "women's issue" plays. Certainly the Abbey Theatre Programme for 2018, announced in November 2017, shows a significant increase in representation of women as both directors and writers, not just in the plays above. Other women included in the 2018 programme are Oona Doherty, Tara Flynn, Louise Lowe and ANU, Gina Moxley, Iseult Golden, and Margaret Perry. (Crawley, 29 November 2017) However, representation is not enough. The audience for the theatre needs to be addressed as well, in particular if plays with a very particular pedagogical message attempt to address issues of masculinity. Statistically more women than men attend the theatre, and but for the deliberate inclusion of schools" outreach, it is unclear whether many young men (the target demographic surely of *Asking for It)* would

have attended the performance. The online audience had already concluded it was a feminist agit-prop play, and the hype around the play did not help. The mainly female audience was certainly deeply affected if not enraged by Emma's treatment. However, the cartoonish representation of the perpetrators of the rape and the predictable reactions of the parents could easily have made audiences dismiss the play as simplistic or worse, unrealistic. A play must be worthy of being performed in its own right, not just a "worthy" play. *On Raftery's Hill* was an infinitely better play than *Asking for It*, with a powerful and challenging production, which left audiences shocked and angry. Peter Crawley concluded: "It drags you into the depths of dysfunction, without compromise or consolation, so that we might emerge, eventually, feeling lighter" (2 May). I am not sure catharsis was entirely possible with such a troubling conclusion, and the Abbey were clearly aware of the possible impact of the play as the auditorium and programme had information on support organisations like the Rape Crisis Centre prominently displayed. The same information was offered for *Asking for It* and the female audience members were offered the use of the Peacock toilets as a female only space. In an interview, Caitríona McLaughlin said that some people questioned why the Abbey was putting on *On Raftery's Hill* at this time, but she felt that the: "play looks at violence against women in a real human context, where nobody's a monster, everyone's a human being, and everybody's a complicated human being" (McLaughlin). If drama is to be used to challenge ideas of toxic masculinity within society then firstly audiences need to be diverse, both in gender, class and age profile – there is a value in validating victims' experiences by presenting them on the national stage but this is undermined if the audience are a monoculture of one gender, class, age and race. Secondly, plays must also represent the complexity of human existence not just cartoon characters. However, if we accept that women have an important role in shaping and changing men's attitudes to sexual behaviour and gender representation, these two productions may play an important role in disrupting hegemonic masculinity, not only because they were written and directed by women, but because the largely female audience at both productions will have been shocked and saddened by the role that their own gender took in both plays in perpetuating toxic masculinity.