

# Chapter 31

## Staging Theatrical Child-Centric Violence: Aesthetic Ownership in *The Pillowman*

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### ABSTRACT

*Prolific and controversial British-Irish playwright Martin McDonagh has built a prominent career on genre-bending works that combine irreverent humor and aggressive violence. His award-winning black comedy play *The Pillowman*, which premiered in 2003 at London's renowned National Theatre, is one of the playwright's most well-known and divisive pieces of theatre. Arguably, the play's most memorable moments involve segments reenacting original twisted fairy tale-esque stories. The majority of McDonagh's dark tales center on children characters enduring acts of violence and cruelty, ultimately concluding with disturbing endings. The *Pillowman* script offers few instructions in its storytelling scenes, allowing—even demanding—artistic ownership of each production's unique aesthetic approach to the unsettling material. This chapter discusses the divisiveness of McDonagh's work, his inspiration from violence in historical fairy tales, and the sensitive considerations and controversies theatre leadership teams must ponder when staging fictionalized child-centric violence.*

### INTRODUCTION

Highly acclaimed Irish playwright Martin McDonagh is well-known for his controversial black comedy narratives consisting of irreverent humor, disturbing content, and aggressive shock values. His plays have been described by theater critics as “grotesque,” “unsettling,” “intense,” “provocative,” “overwhelming,” “brutal,” “uncomfortable,” “harsh,” “nauseating,” “disturbing,” “draining,” and “challenging,” even within praise-filled reviews (Moore, 2007; Wolf, 2003; Crawley, 2015; Clarke, 2019; Newmark, 2015; Bochicchio, 2016; Schkloven, 2015; Kenah, 2007; Stuhlberg, 2006). Considered “one of the most distinguished living playwrights,” McDonagh's writing frequently tells narratives involving amoral characters,

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sharp naturalistic dialogue, and cruel acts (Mohammed, 2014: p. 22; Hodges, 2003). The playwright's meteoric rise began in 1996 with the premiere of his provocative play *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*, a black comedy depicting a toxic co-dependent relationship between a mother and daughter that ends with the daughter torturing her mother with hot oil before aggressively bashing in her head with a fire poker. McDonagh rejects the notion that he attempts pure shock for its own sake, instead crediting his writing style with a refusal to censor his imagination, stating, "I'm more worried about boring people than offending them" (Pacheco, 2005). The black comedy playwright also puts equal importance on the humor in his violent stories, explaining, "The jokes are as important to me as the violence and the sadness" (Crawley, 2016).

McDonagh's award-winning black comedy play *The Pillowman*, which premiered in 2003 at London's renowned National Theatre before transferring to New York City's Broadway in 2005, is considered a peak example of the playwright's irreverent sensibilities. During its initial tenures in New York City and London, the divisive play earned both high praise and deep criticism—even outrage—from critics and audiences, including walkouts during its Broadway run (Pacheco, 2005; Shalom, 2015: p. 1). The play's reputation successfully survived the controversy, earning financial profits and esteemed recognition from theatre's highest awarding institutions, including winning the 2004 'Best New Play' Olivier Award and the 2005 'Best Foreign Play' New York Drama Critic's Circle Award, and being nominated for the 2005 'Best Play' Tony Award and the 2005 'Outstanding Play' Drama Desk Award (Gans and Simonson, 2005; Brantley, 2005; Olivier Awards, n.d.; Tony Awards, n.d.). Additionally, the play won specific awards for its actors and technical designs, including the 2005 'Outstanding Featured Actor in a Play' and 'Outstanding Sound Design' Drama Desk Awards, the 2005 'Outstanding Featured Actor in a Play' Outer Critics Circle Award, and the 2005 'Best Scenic Design of a Play' and 'Best Lighting Design of a Play' Tony Awards (Olivier Awards, n.d.; Tony Awards, n.d.). The successful London and Broadway runs of the play placed McDonagh's controversial work at a foreground of theatre conversations, earning him descriptors ranging from "prestigiously talented" and "brilliant" to "upsetting" and "a sick mind" (Rooney, 2005; Stuhlbarg, 2006; Pacheco, 2005).

The organization and methodology of this chapter explore the evolution of violence in aesthetic on-stage performance, summarizes *The Pillowman* and its specific controversies, explores McDonagh's inspiration in historical fairy tales, and discusses interviews between this chapter's author and three directors of recent productions of *The Pillowman* who detail their aesthetic visions and ownerships for the violent piece of theatre. These explorations further necessary discussions of the perceived merits of violence in modern theatre by navigating McDonagh's *The Pillowman*—one of the most controversial and violent plays offered to modern audiences in 21<sup>st</sup>-century commercial theatre.

## **THEATRE ART: AESTHETIC PERFORMANCE AND VIOLENCE**

Since theatre is traditionally a physical, live presentation in front of spectators, theatrical aesthetics can be defined through various fragmented or collective perspectives. Philosophy, sociology, psychology, and even semiology can all own rightful claim in the shared aesthetics of performance art, leading some contemporary philosophers to "put forward an analytical aesthetics that no longer seeks to define art, but to establish how the spectator and the context decide that they are looking at art" (Pavis, 2016: pp. 4-5). Contemporary theatre is inherently interactive and collaborative artistry that is simultaneously experienced and witnessed. Subsequently, those who define the existence and value of staged aesthetics

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