

# THE BEAUTY QUEEN OF LEENANE

By Martin McDonagh

EDUCATION NOTES



# Martin McDonagh

## BIOGRAPHY

Martin McDonagh is something of a marvel in contemporary theatre. Although his work is concerned with both unthinking and more calculating violence of our times, his work has been recognized with numerous critical awards and achieved popularity with the theatre-going public.

Rejecting traditional education, McDonagh left school at the age of sixteen and spent five years writing radio scripts and collecting rejection notices until two scripts were taken by stations in Australia. But it was not until he turned his hand to playwriting which was by his own admission the only medium left, that he found success. He spent eight days writing his first play, *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* (1996). By the time that play was first produced in London in 1997, McDonagh was twenty-seven and had four plays showing simultaneously in London. This is something few, if any, writers his age have ever accomplished. Moreover, while nearly all his plays have been set in the west of Ireland, he has spent summers but never lived there. He and his brother were born in Camberwell, London, but his parents, who are from Galway, returned to Ireland and left Martin and his brother to live in the London flat.

McDonagh watched a great deal of television and movies while he was beginning to write. He found himself essentially bored by theater in London—calling it "dull." His favorite play is said to be David Mamet's short excursion into the world of petty thieves called *American Buffalo*. After that, he claims to have been influenced by the films of David Lynch, Martin Scorsese, Terence Malick, and Quentin Tarentino.

Judging from the plays he has written, this training was exactly right for him. After the huge success of his first plays, Martin McDonagh was immediately cast alongside British writers such as Sarah Kane or Mark Ravenhill, because his plays tapped into a sensibility often referred to as "In-Yer-Face Theatre", a style which is aggressively violent and uncompromising in its exploration of the human condition. But his work differs from such plays in that it also refers to a very specific Irish tradition. McDonagh himself claims to have little knowledge of classic English or Irish plays, although he has been frequently compared with John Millington Synge and Sean O'Casey, two of the most renowned Irish playwrights of the twentieth century. His use of language in *Beauty Queen* and related plays is very much in the same vein as the language that Synge created for *The Playboy of the Western World* and his other "peasant dramas." McDonagh also employs the theme of exile from Ireland, motives constantly used by Synge or Brian Friel. Like Synge, McDonagh did not live in the west but as a visitor listened to the daily speech of people remote from the city. From his Anglo-Irish position, McDonagh is able to work within the genre of rural Irish drama while infusing it with new aggression and vitality.

Once media-hyped and famous in the tabloid press for insulting Sean Connery at an awards ceremony, Martin McDonagh is now a more elusive character, refusing requests for interviews. His previously brash media persona - he once remarked of his work "It's brilliant and if you don't like it, you're wrong" - marks him out as a celebrity-savvy character, fully conscious of media manipulation and well able to subvert for his own ends. It is said that his uncompromising style and refusal to back away from harsh or brutal subjects has invigorated Irish theatre traditions and challenged British audiences.

## HIS PLAYS

### *The Galway Trilogy*

*The Beauty Queen of Leenane* is the first play in *The Galway Trilogy*, which is set in a remote small town in Connemara, County Galway, north of the Aran Islands, where some of the people still speak Irish. The second play is *A Skull in Connemara* (1997), a dark play about death and guilt. The last play in the trilogy, *The Lonesome West* (1997), also set in Leenane, examines the emotion between two brothers, Coleman and Valene. These three plays are set in a town so blighted by rancor, ignorance, and spite that, as the local priest complains, God Himself seems to have no jurisdiction there.

*The Beauty Queen of Leenane* portrays ancient, manipulative Mag and her virginal daughter, Maureen, who are bound together in painfully mean patterns of attack and counterattack, each act of meanness eliciting even greater meanness in response. The cycle of domestic abuse is broken briefly when by the arrival of Pato Dooley who intends to emigrate to America and taking Maureen with him. The play climaxes when the message Pato leaves for Maureen through his brother Ray is burned by Mag and Maureen believes he never wrote to her. When she discovers the truth, she murders her mother with a poker. In *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*, McDonagh mixes old patterns of the so-called "kitchen-sink drama" with new influences. What is new about it is his ability to capture the true nature of a dismal village which offers none of life's social and emotional amenities. It is a study people who are dislocated from themselves and their society. Maureen, for example, is desperately eager to escape, dreaming of "anything other than this". Her mother has long since lost any meaningful connection with the outside world, constantly staring at the television, immersed in foreign soaps. The characters have no real

connection with the local community, their own country and or cultural past and no real outlet for their hopes for the future. Moreover, they express no ability to articulate their situation, or the intelligence or humility to escape it. In this claustrophobic environment, McDonagh skillfully shows that violence is the norm, and that brutality is the only way the characters can express themselves. Therefore, bloody conclusion is the only possible outcome for characters so isolated, emotionally, intellectually and morally. But not unimportantly, McDonagh adds to this otherwise completely depressing environment enough black humor.

In *A Skull in Connemara*, Mick Dowd is hired to dig up the bones in the town churchyard, some of which belong to his late and oddly unlamented wife. And the brothers of *The Lonesome West* have no sooner buried their father than they are resuming the vicious and utterly trivial quarrel that has been the chief activity of their lives.

McDonagh has developed yet another trilogy, this time set on the Aran Islands. In the first play, *The Cripple of Inishmaan* (1996), Cripple Billy claims he has tuberculosis to meet Robert Flaherty, the filmmaker who is making the documentary film *Man of Aran* (1934). Cripple Billy goes to Hollywood but returns to Inishmaan because he cannot tolerate the stupid lines he is given to say in American films. At that point he learns he really does have tuberculosis and contemplates an early death. The other two plays in this trilogy are *The Lieutenant of Inishmore* and *The Banshees of Inisherin*.

His most recent play, *The Pillowman*, opened at the National Theatre In November 2003 and immediately announced itself as a break from McDonagh's tradition: Instead of Ireland, it is set in Eastern Europe. The play explores the importance of storytelling, something McDonagh argues is the most important aspect of writing. But *The Pillowman* explores many of his earlier themes such as the corrupting influence of a violent society and of

dysfunctional family relationships. When asked whether he will always explore despair and violence in his plays, McDonagh has said that someday "I'll write a romantic comedy where hardly anyone gets murdered at all."

**Some information about the New York production**

## **The Beauty Queen of Leenane**

[Walter Kerr Theatre](#), (4/23/1998 - 3/14/1999)

**Preview:**

Apr 14, 1998

**Total Previews:**

19

**Opening:**

Apr 23, 1998

**Closing:**

Mar 14, 1999

**Total Performances:**

365

**Category:** Play, Drama, Original, Broadway

**Setting:** Leenane, a small town in Connemara, County Galway.

[Awards and nominations](#)

**Opening Night Production Credits**

Theatre Owned / Operated by [Jujamcyn Theaters](#) (James H. Binger: Chairman; Rocco Landesman: President; Paul Libin: Producing Director; Jack Viertel: Creative Director)

Produced by [Atlantic Theater Company](#), [Randall L. Wrehitt](#), [Chase Mishkin](#), [Steven M. Levy](#) and [Leonard Soloway](#); Produced in association with [Julian Schlossberg](#) and [Norma Langworthy](#); Associate Producer: [Charles Whitehead](#)

A production by [The Druid Theatre Company](#) and [The Royal Court Theatre](#)

Written by [Martin McDonagh](#); Incidental music by [Paddy Cunneen](#)

Directed by [Garry Hynes](#)

Scenic Design by [Francis O'Connor](#); Costume Design by [Francis O'Connor](#); Lighting Design by [Ben Ormerod](#); Sound Design by [David Murphy](#) and [Peter J. Fitzgerald](#); Associate Lighting Design: [Neil Austin](#)

General Manager: [Soloway / Levy](#) and [Steven M. Levy](#); Company Manager: [Victoria Stevenson](#)

Production Manager: [Arthur Siccardi](#); Production Stage Manager: [Matthew Silver](#); Stage Manager: [Darcy Stephens](#)

Special Effects by [Gregory Meeh](#)

Press Representative: [Boneau / Bryan-Brown](#); Marketing: [Pro-Marketing](#); U.S. Casting by [Bernard Telsey Casting, Inc.](#); Advertising: [Grey Advertising](#)

### **Opening Night Cast**

[Anna Manahan](#)  
**Mag Folan**

[Marie Mullen](#)  
**Maureen Folan**

[Tom Murphy](#)  
**Ray Dooley**

[Brían F. O'Byrne](#)  
**Pato Dooley**

### **SOME VIEWS HERE ABOUT MARTIN McDONAGH**

"[McDonagh is] the most wickedly funny, brilliantly abrasive young dramatist on either side of the Irish Sea.... He is a born storyteller."--New York Times

I have just seen the Beauty Queen of Leenane by McDonagh. It took a few viewings to actually understand the piece. But i wanted to know what other people's views were on this writer. His work seems very understated and subtle. Irish Tarantino???



## Topic **Martin McDonagh - Overrated or Genius**

Posted by Trev on 18-Oct-04 11:39

How about in between? A very good playwright who has written some very good plays - "Beauty Queen of Leenane", "Pillow Man" but who has also written some crap - "Cripple of Inishmaan". and some average "Lt of Inishmore" etc.

## Topic **Martin McDonagh - Overrated or Genius**

Posted by jitters on 18-Oct-04 11:53

perhaps. was the lieutenant of inishmore the latest one at the national?

i kind of got the impression that the beauty queen was a cross between, say Ken Loach and Tarantino. subtle kitchen sink drama mixed with high octane violence on an extreme level.

the scenes did drag on a bit. it was hit and miss with a lot of the audience. some said he was brilliant. others said he was crap. love him or hate him, i suppose.

## Topic **Martin McDonagh - Overrated or Genius**

Posted by Lee W on 18-Oct-04 12:07

I love his work... a great mixture of the brutally horrific and brutally funny.

## Topic **Martin McDonagh - Overrated or Genius**

Posted by Job on 18-Oct-04 12:18

He's neither a genius nor overrated, but he has simply, as the old cliché goes, caught the theatrical zeitgeist of our time. He's far from being my own favourite contemporary playwright, but I don't half admire his ability to reclaim non-musical, non-avant-garde drama for the theatre. McDonagh makes David Hare and Howard Brenton look like Terence Rattigan and J M Barrie.

Job

## Topic **Martin McDonagh - Overrated or Genius**

Posted by theatresquirrel on **18-Oct-04 12:38**

I thought Pillowman was bordering on genius - the stories within it certainly were.

## Topic **Martin McDonagh - Overrated or Genius**

Posted by Lynette on **19-Oct-04 15:28**

I thought Pillowman was over rated and over long. But his other stuff is very, very good. A strong body of work indeed. Pillowman has inspired Paula Rego's new work, soon to be seen at Tate Britain I believe. Interesting cross fertilisation.

## Topic **Martin McDonagh - Overrated or Genius**

Posted by jitters on **21-Oct-04 14:30**

judging by the lack of responses on this forum, is it safe to say that most people couldn't really care less about martin mcdonut?

## Topic **Martin McDonagh - Overrated or Genius**

Posted by betty boo on **22-Oct-04 15:16**

The Pillowman (the last one he did at the National) was simply fantastic! I loved it! I have to agree though that others (Lieu of Innishmore being one) are some of the rare plays that I've fallen asleep at!

## Topic **Martin McDonagh - Overrated or Genius**

Posted by jitters on **22-Oct-04 15:50**

when i first read/saw the Beauty Queen i was so bored. but after a few viewings i really liked it. (I staged managed a production once and was forced to watch it a thousand times) i could probably recite the whole play if i wanted to.

## Topic **Martin McDonagh - Overrated or Genius**

Posted by SteveB on 23-Oct-04 19:08

I saw Lieutenant.. at the Barbican and thoroughly enjoyed it.

## Topic **Martin McDonagh - Overrated or Genius**

Posted by Leighton on 23-Oct-04 23:36

I saw Not The National Theatre tour Beauty Queen a year or so ago and really liked it - was a bit difficult going to start, but when it got going it was really wonderful. I'm afraid I'm not familiar with his other work.

## Topic **Martin McDonagh - Overrated or Genius**

Posted by James on 24-Oct-04 15:07

Genius - Full Stop.

## Topic **Martin McDonagh - Overrated or Genius**

Posted by Malcolm on 25-Oct-04 10:03

I did see Pillowman at the National, an exceptional play with an amazing cast. Every play however must stand on its own merit and only time will tell if McDonagh joins the list of playwrights recognised for a complete body of work, maybe!

## Topic **Martin McDonagh - Overrated or Genius**

Posted by jitters on 25-Oct-04 10:43

which venue did you see it at Leighton? that's the production i worked on.

## Topic **Martin McDonagh - Overrated or Genius**

Posted by Leighton on 25-Oct-04 22:03

The Borough Theatre, Abergavenny. I really enjoyed it, but true, the scenes did drag

sometimes. Thought the mother and daughter were excellent, however.

"It's awful lumpy, Maureen" has become a catchphrase with the few mates of mine who saw the show.

## **Topic Martin McDonagh - Overrated or Genius**

Posted by jitters on **26-Oct-04 10:41**

yes. i remember abergavenny. the very last show we did and may i add the best show as far as lighting went. the staff were on top form and there were no glitches which was more than i could say than some of the theatres. one lighting board op didn't even know how to program the board so we had to ditch all lighting cues and just go manual with washes. glad you enjoyed it.

## **Topic Martin McDonagh - Overrated or Genius**

Posted by Leighton on **26-Oct-04 13:40**

Did you meet Ioan that night then? He's the Technical Manager for the Borough, and a good mate of mine.

## **Topic Martin McDonagh - Overrated or Genius**

Posted by jitters on **26-Oct-04 13:58**

Which one was he? i remember talking to the kid about snooker a lot and then there was a younger kid about nineteen. i was the guy who told him that if you believed you were jesus then you were jesus.

## **Topic Martin McDonagh - Overrated or Genius**

Posted by Leighton on **26-Oct-04 19:39**

Ioan is mid-thirties, very tall - sounds slightly scouseish. He's in charge of all the Borough technical shtick. Might have had the night off when you were in, though

I was actually seeing it with a friend and an older couple I know - Charles Way (a scripwriter) and his wife, an actress. I remember she loved it, and I think Charlie did, too.

## Topic **Martin McDonagh - Overrated or Genius**

Posted by jitters on **27-Oct-04 10:12**

i really don't remember. i just remember the young lads who were very helpful. they even provided us with sandwiches and drinks which no other theatre did. the only hassle was getting the huge set from the van through the busy market, into the lift and up to the theatre.

## Topic **Martin McDonagh - Overrated or Genius**

Posted by ?????? on **27-Oct-04 12:20**

What do you think of Martin McDonagh - Overrated or Genius?

I think he is brilliant. It's about time we had a great new talent to write about.