



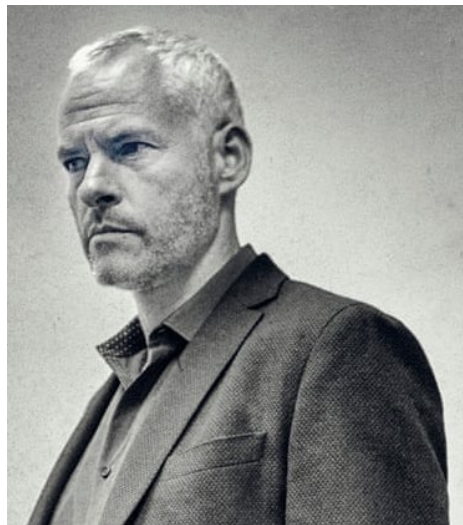
## “Monstrous Children”

The Plays and Films of Martin McDonagh

By Jerry James

*I suppose I walk that line between comedy and cruelty because I think one illuminates the other... I hope the overall view isn't just that though, or I've failed in my writing. There have to be moments when you glimpse something decent, something life-affirming even in the most twisted character. That's where the real art lies.*

—Martin McDonagh



*Martin McDonagh*

In the late 1990s, Martin McDonagh—a school dropout with no formal training who had rarely even *seen* a play—exploded onto the British theatre scene like a petrol bomb, writing like J. M. Synge re-imagined by some unholy combination of David Mamet and Harold Pinter. Where had he come from? And where would he go?

### **South London Irish**

Martin McDonagh was born to Irish émigré parents in the South London neighborhood of Elephant and Castle on March 26, 1970. His father was a



construction worker; his mother, a part-time housecleaner. But six weeks every summer were spent in Ireland, split between his

mother's family in County Sligo and his father's in County Galway. McDonagh also had a brother, John Michael, two years older, who became his trailblazer. They grew up South London Irish—Irish with bloody smart mouths.

John Michael listened to punk rock—the Sex Pistols, the Clash, the Pogues. He watched movies—Martin Scorsese, Quentin Tarantino, Terence Malick. And he dropped out of school at 16 and went on the dole, working only when absolutely necessary. So did his admiring younger brother. But John Michael also read books and wrote. So McDonagh began first to read—Vladimir Nabokov and Jose Luis Borges—and then to write. “Here was a job where all you had was your head, a pencil and a piece of paper. That's the coolest kind of job there is.”

### Writing



*Al Pacino, “Scarface”*

McDonagh didn't see his first play—David Mamet's *American Buffalo*—until he was 14, and then only because his idol, Al Pacino, was the star. His first attempts at writing were bizarre folk tales that he'd show only to his brother. Then he acquired a writer's handbook and began sending his stories off. The BBC rejected 22 of them.

In 1992, the McDonagh parents retired to Ireland, leaving their sons a small house. As Fintan O'Toole tells it, “The brothers bought a videocassette recorder and watched films

like *Taxi Driver*, *Mean Streets*, and *Goodfellas*. They also watched television indiscriminately—everything from soap operas to BBC productions of plays, including Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party* and *The Dumb Waiter*.”

But in 1994, John Michael won a screen-writing fellowship at USC and moved to Los Angeles. (He is now a successful screen-writer-director.) Left alone, McDonagh turned to the next chapter in his writer's handbook: Plays. His first efforts were clumsy copies of Mamet and Pinter. They didn't work, and he knew it. Then it came to him. What if he set these plays, plays filled with in-your-face violence and savage humor—“the kind of plays I'd like to see, if I went to plays”—in his parents' Ireland? “Putting that into an Irish context freed everything for me.”

McDonagh took the conventions of Irish melodrama and reworked them as Synge and Sean O'Casey had done, writing in a heightened Hiberno-English that sat perfectly in his characters' mouths—but with a lot more swearing.

In only ten months (1994-95) McDonagh wrote seven plays and began sending them out. (He would rewrite every play before its production.) In Galway, Garry Hynes, director of the Druid Theatre, plucked a couple out of the slush pile, laughed out loud and calling his characters “monstrous children” and chose one for production.

### *Enfant Terrible*

*The Beauty Queen of Leenane* opened at the Druid in February 1996 and transferred to the Royal Court in London later that month. Not since Shelagh Delaney's *A Taste of Honey* (1958) had a working-class playwright made such a debut.

For the first time, McDonagh had the power to say anything he wanted to “his betters.” Did he actually mean everything he said? Yes or no, it was *very* punk rock.

“Humble? I don’t like humble. If you think you’re good, then it’s a lie to pretend you’re not... To be in this position is strange, because I’m coming to theatre with a disrespect for it... I was reduced to going into theater. Now it’s a leg up to get into films.”



*McDonagh in 1998*

This attitude climaxed at the 1996 Evening Standard Awards, where McDonagh was named Most Promising Playwright. He showed up drunk, refused to toast the Queen and nearly got into a fistfight with Sean Connery. His mother was so annoyed she wouldn’t speak to him for a week.

*Beauty Queen* returned to the Royal Court in the summer of 1997, playing there along with *A Skull in Connemara* (title from Samuel Beckett) and *The Lonesome West* (title from Synge) as The Leenane Trilogy. These were joined in November 1997 by the National Theatre’s production of *The Cripple of Inishmann*, the first play in The Aran Islands Trilogy. Martin McDonagh, the 27-year-old South London Irish school dropout, was now hailed (incorrectly) as the first playwright to have four plays simultaneously running in London since William Shakespeare.

*Beauty Queen* and *Cripple* opened in New York in April 1998. McDonagh had anticipated them by modestly stating, “New York is sort of ripe for the picking. I mean, it’s not like there are lots of really good

plays over here right now.” *Beauty Queen* won four Tony Awards—but not one for him.

The Financial Times called him, “The Quentin Tarantino of Ireland,” a place where his reputation was spotty at best. He was accused not only of catering to every slanderous stereotype the Irish had had to endure since the days of Cromwell, but of doing so as an Englishman. That his scathing, scabrous satires came from the Irish Diaspora was of no consequence. Synge and O’Casey, neither of them English, had endured similar criticisms.

Then came the contretemps over the second play in The Aran Islands Trilogy, *The Lieutenant of Inishmore*. (McDonagh has never allowed a production of the third play.) The political process was in place that would produce the Good Friday Agreement (1998), ending Irish paramilitary terror in the British Isles. No producing organization was willing to upset that delicate mechanism by producing a black comedy filled with torture and murder committed by an Irish psychopath too extreme for even the most militant branch of the IRA.

In a fury, McDonagh called the theatres “gutless” and refused to submit any new plays until *Lieutenant* was produced. Moreover, he stopped giving interviews. It has been suggested he did this because he had no more plays to offer. Indeed, after *Lieutenant* was finally staged in 2001, his next play, *The Pillowman* (2003), would be a rewritten version of the last of his 1994 efforts. (McDonagh moved the setting from Ireland to an unspecified Eastern European authoritarian country.) It won the 2004 Olivier Award for Best Play and was later successfully produced on Broadway.

### Success

Five years later, McDonagh broke his silence. He announced—calmly, finally discarding his Roaring Boy persona—he

was giving up writing plays. (Not true, as it turned out.) This followed hard upon his film debut, the 27-minute *Six Shooter* (2004), which was his last work set in Ireland. As writer-director, he won the 2006 Academy Award for Best Live Action Short Film, even though he knew little about the filmmaking process. Brendan Gleeson, who starred, said, “He’s such a genius he won an Oscar without having a clue!”



*Sam Rockwell & Frances McDormand  
“Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri”*

By 2008, when McDonagh wrote and directed *In Bruges*, he had learned a great deal. The film garnered an AA nomination for Best Original Screenplay. In 2010, he returned to the stage with *A Behanding in Spokane*, his first work to be set in the USA. It premiered on Broadway, not in Britain. In 2012, he wrote, directed and produced *Seven Psychopaths*. The film flopped. He finally returned to England with a play, *Hangmen* (2015), that won him another Olivier Award. It will open in New York this spring.

The 2017 smash hit *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri* made McDonagh a Hollywood player. The film received seven AA nominations, including Best Picture and Best Original Screenplay. Acting Oscars were won by Frances

McDormand and Sam Rockwell. It was said McDonagh had done for Missouri what he had done for Ireland.

For all his devotion to film, McDonagh has never sold one of his plays to the movies. “I think unless you write for the art form and have it be its own endgame, then you’ll never get it perfect. It would feel like selling out, to do that for money.”

Since then, McDonagh has produced only the play *A Very Very Very Dark Matter* (London, 2018). It posits that the stories of Hans Christian Andersen were actually written by a pygmy woman he kept in a cage. That same year, McDonagh began a relationship with Phoebe Waller-Bridge (*Fleabag*), upper-middle class and 15 years his junior. They are that showbiz cliché—a power couple.

“Sadly, it feels like I’m the old establishment now. I’m everybody I set out to destroy when I was younger. I feel like I’ve found some kind of peace with being a playwright these days. It’s okay. I still don’t see many plays that I really like. But that’s all right.”



*McDonagh & Phoebe Waller-Bridge*

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*Jerry James has been working in the theatre for over fifty years. For forty of those years, he lived in New York City, where he was an award-winning writer and director.*