

**“SPEAKING THROUGH ANOTHER CULTURE”:  
FRANK MCGUINNESS’S VERSION OF FEDERICO  
GARCÍA LORCA’S *THE HOUSE OF BERNARDA  
ALBA* (*LA CASA DE BERNARDA ALBA*)**

**“HABLANDO A TRAVÉS DE OTRA CULTURA”:  
LA VERSIÓN DE FRANK MCGUINNESS  
DE *LA CASA DE BERNARDA ALBA*,  
DE FEDERICO GARCÍA LORCA**

**MAR GONZÁLEZ CHACÓN**

Universidad de Oviedo  
gonzalezmar@uniovi.es

---

71

**Abstract**

Translation and adaptation play an essential role in Irish contemporary theatre. Irish playwrights have turned to continental writers, such as Federico García Lorca, to rewrite their culture through another culture. Frank McGuinness has followed this tradition but, while his rewritings of Euripides or Sophocles have been widely discussed by scholarship, his version of Lorca’s *The House of Bernarda Alba* (1991) remains an unpublished text and, consequently, has not been the object of critical attention. This article intends to engage in close analysis of the play, addressing the strategies used by McGuinness to accommodate Lorca in the Irish context, and how the Lorquian themes voice the situation of women in the Northern Ireland of the 1990s, where McGuinness’s play was first produced.

**Keywords:** Frank McGuinness, Federico García Lorca, *The House of Bernarda Alba*, Irish contemporary theatre, Irish woman.

**Resumen**

La traducción y la adaptación desempeñan un papel esencial en el teatro irlandés contemporáneo. Los dramaturgos y las dramaturgas han recurrido al teatro escrito en el continente por autores como Federico García Lorca para reescribir su cultura

a través de otra cultura. Frank McGuinness ha seguido esta tradición, aunque, si bien la crítica ha estudiado sus revisiones de clásicos como Eurípides o Sófocles, su versión de *La Casa de Bernarda Alba* no ha recibido demasiada atención académica porque aún no se ha publicado. En este artículo se analiza con detalle el manuscrito y se abordan las estrategias que utiliza McGuinness para contextualizar a Lorca en el nuevo espacio irlandés. Además se examina cómo los temas lorquianos se utilizan para hacer visible la situación de la mujer de los años 1990 en Irlanda del Norte, donde la obra se representó por primera vez.

**Palabras clave:** Frank McGuinness, Federico García Lorca, *La casa de Bernarda Alba*, teatro irlandés contemporáneo, mujer irlandesa.

## 1. Irish Contemporary Theatre, Frank McGuinness and Continental Drama

Irish contemporary theatre has been read by critics from different perspectives. In “Irish Theatre: The State of the Art” Fintan O’Toole identifies three main periods in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, differentiated by the diverse images of Irish society represented on stage. From his point of view, the first movement, headed by Yeats and Gregory, portrays an idea of Irishness related to Nationalism “patently bounded, close, sharing a common ground” (O’Toole 2000: 49). The second revival, from the 1950s onwards, visualizes an Irish society which includes other worlds, and represents the clash of cultures in Ireland at the hands of playwrights such as John B. Keane, Brian Friel and Tom Murphy. The third phase leaves aside conflict between tradition and modernity to get involved with the performance of isolated realities that can represent the whole story. A good example of this would be Frank McGuinness, an author for whom “singleness is a matter of gender, men and women existing in different zones whose borders cannot be crossed” (O’Toole 2000: 55), and he is well-known for his representation of women in Irish society, both in Northern Ireland and the Republic, who question stereotyped images.

On the other hand, Llewellyn-Jones in *Contemporary Irish Drama and Cultural Identity* approaches Irish theatre in relation to its cultural personality, and considers it as an expression of multiculturalism in terms of its interchange with other European contexts. Irish theatre has left behind the English influence to favor “a more egalitarian two-way traffic than the past imperial relationship between Britain and Ireland” (Llewellyn-Jones 2002: 143) in the plays of Becket, Friel, Murphy and McGuinness, who turn to continental drama through their versions, translations and cross-references. This abandonment of the local perspectives implies that “while the plays may have a realistic grounding, the language,

characters, action and form tend to invite a shift in register” (Jordan 2010: 7). Thus, different modes of representation appear and the relationship between the text and its context is made explicit by historical references, real events or the spaces used in the plays to contextualize the characters as well as the language used. As Irish plays have a readership outside the borders, the relationship between this theatre and European drama will make playwrights adopt different strategies to speak through other cultures. Within this scope, the theatre of McGuinness adds to the picture through his use of other cultures to speak about his own culture, writing forward, for instance, the plays of Lorca.

The most recent accounts of Irish theatre (Morse 2015) look back in time and acknowledge its malleability to adapt to the circumstances without losing its unique cultural identity despite its international expansion. These transitions can be seen in the changes that took place from the foundational Irish National Theatre of Yeats and Gregory to the contemporary Irish theatre. The result of this flashback is the notion that theatrical representations of the different changing realities in Irish society have been marked by the depiction of historical events, and different approaches adopted to achieve this include innovation and metatheatricality, but also turning to previous dramatists and looking for inspiration in European playwrights. Contemporary analysis of Irish drama recognize the 1990s, when McGuinness's *The House of Bernarda Alba* was first produced by Lyric Theatre in Northern Ireland, as a period of thriving transformations which affected theatre. From that decade, plays in Ireland have been innovative in “striking technological advances, revisions to the stage-audience relationship, the development of devised practices, and the staging of controversial topics” (Etienne and Dubost 2017: 2), and McGuinness has contributed to this process. His theatre of revision and translation involves the consideration of the new audience and the development of new techniques to adapt the text to the new space and time.

It is essential then to identify in Irish contemporary theatre multiculturalism and mutual influences between local and European theatre. Translation and adaptation, especially since the middle of the twentieth century, have been crucial in this attempt to negotiate cultural identity. This has taken two directions mainly. Firstly, there has been a considerable increase in interest in the Greek classics,<sup>1</sup> and secondly, and more relevant for the purpose of this article, Irish playwrights have turned to writers such as Henrik Ibsen, Anton Chekhov, Bertolt Brecht and Federico García Lorca to rewrite Irish tropes and Frank McGuinness has been one of the most prolific.

McGuinness (1953- ) was born in Buncrana, County Donegal and he currently lives in Dublin. He has been Professor of Creative Writing at University College Dublin since 2007 and has just retired. He is considered as one of the most

important Irish writers and his works have been produced and toured internationally. He has written extensively, 26 original plays and 22 adaptations or versions of Greek tragedies and European plays.<sup>2</sup> His theatre parallels the Irish society's transformations and he has placed women at the heart of his plays. This can be seen in his early works, *The Factory Girls* (1982), where five women from Donegal face the threat of losing their jobs, *Mary and Lizzie* (1989), about two Irish women and their relationship with Engels, or *Dolly West's Kitchen* (1999), which addresses the different points of view of the Irish conflict within the context of a family and with World War II raging in Europe.

McGuinness has reflected in his theatre the realities outside the Republic of Ireland. First, "as a native of Donegal, whose border location in the province of Ulster creates ties to Northern Ireland, he was close to a region that seemed [...] more mired in the past tensions and divisions than capable of moving into the modern, globalized world the Republic embraced" (Lojek 2015: 191), and he wrote about the political Irish conflict in *Borderlands* (1984), exploring the differences between Northern and Southern views, or in *Gatherers* (1985), where people meet around the religious events of the Eucharistic Congress (1932) and the Papal visit (1979). He has also depicted the conflict with the British Empire in *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching towards the Somme* (1985), a play recently acknowledged as "an established emblem of cross-cultural understanding" (Lojek 2015: 193), about those Irishmen from the Ulster Division who died in the Battle of the Somme fighting for the English Crown. In *Carthaginians* (1988) the crudest side of the social troubles in Northern Ireland is shown through characters from Derry who recall what happened after the Bloody Sunday events.

The interest in his plays has crossed borders and he is internationally known as a playwright who is able to transcend locality and present universal themes. In 1992 he wrote *Someone Who'll Watch Over Me* which presents three men, from Ireland, England and America, imprisoned together in Lebanon and they debate on survival, personal feelings and nationalism with a tone that mixes humor with insanity. After that, *The Bird Sanctuary* (1994) portrays three siblings who remember their childhood in an attempt to resolve the tensions of their present, and in *Mutabilitie* (1997) the writer goes back to the Ireland of the seventeenth century to explore the effects of myth, the poet and the playwright on reality: it is set in Munster and Edmund Spenser meets The File, a woman poet, and William (Shakespeare). *Speaking like Magpies* (2005) is about the Gunpowder Plot of 1605 and *There Came a Gypsy Riding* (2007) depicts the family meeting of the McKennas in the west of Ireland.

McGuinness's latest plays to date have been *The Match Box* (2012), which is the story of Sal, a damaged woman who retreats into her memories, and *The Hanging*

*Gardens* (2013), where Sam Grant, a novelist suffering from Alzheimer's, is looked after by his family who show an inability to understand each other. In 2016 he co-wrote *Signatories*—together with Emma Donoghue, Marina Carr, Joseph Connor, Thomas Kilroy, Éilis Ní Dhuibhne, Hugo Hamilton and Rachel Feehily— about the insights of those who signed the Proclamation of the Irish Republic during the Easter Rising which ended with the leaders sentenced to death. *Donegal* (2016) is a musical play telling the story of the Day family and their reencounter in Ireland after their son comes back from the States.

Apart from the original plays mentioned above, McGuinness is well known for his versions and adaptations of European dramas. He has rewritten Ibsen, as part of his 20-year project to translate his whole dramatic output, for example, *Rosmersholm* (1987), *Peer Gynt* (1988), *A Doll's House* (1996), *The Wild Duck* (2003), *Ghosts* (2007), and *John Gabriel Borkman* (2010). He has also taken on Chekhov in *Three Sisters* (1990) and Strindberg in *The Stronger* (1993) or *Miss Julie* (2006), and Italian playwrights such as Pirandello, in *The Man with the Flower in his Mouth* (1993), or the Spanish dramatists Federico García Lorca in *The House of Bernarda Alba* (1991) and Valle Inclán in *Barbaric Comedies* (2000) or Tirso de Molina's *Damned by Despair* (2012). He has also adapted Ostrovsky, Racine and many others and is currently adapting *Tartuffe*. Critics have acknowledged him as “the foremost Irish playwright of his generation” (Long and McGuinness 1999: 9), playing an essential role as a translator and becoming “one of the finest proponents of the theatrical adaptation working in the English language” (O'Mahony 2008).

There are some aspects of McGuinness's theatre that have been related by critics to Lorca. For instance, the use of spaces in *Gates of Gold* (2002) has been compared with *La Casa de Bernarda Alba* (1936) by Lojek (2011): both the Irish and the Spanish playwrights portray inside spaces to express the relationship between stage space, the home in this case, and confined interior worlds of the characters. Just as Lorca uses metaphors in his play to depict the struggle of the characters between their interior and exterior worlds, so McGuinness's theatre has made of the Irish stage a space “where a wide variety of individuals may belong and where ‘home’ has a complex meaning and a flexible meaning” (Lojek 2011: 126), which escapes traditional views. Lorca and McGuinness also share a special interest in women. They are the protagonists of Lorca's rural trilogy, *Blood Wedding* (1933), *Yerma* (1934) and *The House of Bernarda Alba* (1936). McGuinness's work has been included in a volume dedicated to women playwrights, *The Girls in the Big Picture. Gender in Contemporary Ulster Theatre* (2003), where his plays are acknowledged for their gendered nature and he is read as a writer who “championed the rights and lives of ordinary women and promoted the politics of gender as integral and homogeneous within social constructs” (Foley 2003: 110), as Lorca did.

76 A discussion of the strategies adopted by Irish playwrights to (re)write versions of continental drama helps focus McGuinness's craft. As mentioned above, the relationship between Irish and European theatre has been addressed by critics as a rapport born in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to escape the English influence, offer new Irish versions of the European texts and become more international. From this perspective, different categories have been established to describe the various approaches. According to Kosok (2004), for instance, translations such as McGuinness's *Peer Gynt* (1988) would constitute a first type, where no major changes are introduced in the new play; sometimes, Irish writers have local audiences in mind and, thus, they adapt their versions since they consider the English translations did not take this into account; in these cases the playwrights "employ Irish speech patterns and Irish expressions, sometimes even Gaelic words in order to place them in an Irish cultural context" (Kosok 2004: 43). Friel's *Three Sisters* (1981) would be an example of this technique, which is known as linguistic acculturation and tries to free the original play from the linguistic boundaries imposed by English translations. Thomas Kilroy's *The Seagull* (1981) is considered as a translocation to Ireland, where the playwright makes a "skillful and highly successful attempt at accommodating the play in Ireland which pervades the whole text" (Kosok 2004: 45); he does this for instance, by changing the original location to an Irish one, making references to the process of colonialism and using Irish words. Similarly, John Banville's *The Broken Jug* (1994) has an Irish location, evokes the Famine and uses Gaelic words. In addition, Banville changed the structure of the original play so his adaptation would also be an act of acculturation. Finally, when the process includes major changes, such as the use of the theme of the original play to evoke Irish social realities, or when it involves a reduction in the number of characters, critics consider the resulting text to be a new play, such would be McGahern's *The Power of Darkness* (1991).

Other translation scholars (Johnston 2013) who have looked at McGuinness's work have identified the relevance of the reception in the process of translating theatre. The practice adopted by the translator implies "in terms of performance, a re-making of the text" (Johnston 2013: 367). The translator for performance writes forward and this means that translation

is not just the act of re-producing a given text by shepherding it across the so-called third space; it is about infusing that re-production (no matter how that is conceived) with the richness of a process that is simultaneously alive to the contexts of the original text [...] and responsive to the cognitive and affective processing of a new audience. (373)

From this perspective, Johnston considers McGuinness's translation of Lorca as a play with a unique Irish tone acquired through the "coupling of Lorca's highly

imagistic style to a heightened Irish idiom” (Johnston 2013: 380). McGuinness’s play can be understood as an act of writing forward the Lorquian play as it travels in time and context.

McGuinness would be following other Irish playwrights who, before him, had shown interest in Lorca; this was the case of Aidan Mathews who rewrote *The House of Bernarda Alba* in 1989, or Dermot Healy who revisited *Blood Wedding* in the same year. After McGuinness’s version, Trevor Ó Clochartaigh and Ursula Rani Sarma rewrote *Yerma*, in 1991 and 2011 respectively, Lynne Parker and Sebastian Barry provided new versions of *The House of Bernarda Alba* in 1993 and 2003, and Brendan Kennelly adapted *Blood Wedding* to the Irish stage in 1996. Rewritings of Lorca in Ireland, especially during the decades of the 1980s and 1990s, have been focused on the rural trilogy, *The House of Bernarda Alba* being the play which has been most often adapted. Moreover, it should be highlighted that many of these texts remain unpublished, including McGuinness’s play.<sup>3</sup> In spite of this fact, some of them have been of interest for academics and journalists who have already established links between the two cultures. This has been the case of Brendan Kennelly’s version of *Blood Wedding*, read as resonating “with issues that have for long been central to Irish identity” (Persson 2009: 69), or Lynne Parker’s *The House of Bernarda Alba*, defined as “amazingly at home in Ireland” (Sullivan 1994: 137). The performance of Sebastian Barry’s new translation of the same play was reviewed as “replacing poetry with colloquial Irishisms” (Fricker 2003). In the case of McGuinness’s version, special attention must be paid to the situation of women in Northern Ireland in the 1990s, when the play was first performed, to understand why and how the Lorquian themes fit the new context.

## 2. Women’s Situation in the Northern Ireland of the 1990s

An analysis of the situation of women in both contexts of reception —Lorca’s Spain in the 1930s and McGuinness’s Belfast of the 1990s— contributes to highlighting the sense of affinity between the two plays. McGuinness’s version was first performed in Belfast, by the Lyric Theatre, in 1991 and announced in *The Belfast Telegraph* as a play that exposes the conflict fired by passion and jealousy at the lack of freedom that women suffer:

Lorca’s play of repressed passion and jealousy opened at the Lyric Theatre last night —the story of six women imprisoned by their sexuality— directed by Helena Kant-Hudson. Only the eldest daughter sees the possibility of escape from her mother’s blanket of oppression, as the village Romeo, money in mind, woos her through the

bars of her window at night. The other sisters can only dream, “starving for marriage, grinding their hearts to dust”, as passions soar and the drama unfolds. (McFadden 1991)

In the programme of the play, the artistic director at the Lyric, Rolland Jaquarello, makes reference to the similarities between the contexts of Lorca and McGuinness. He announces the performance as a major project which involved the revision of a text which had “so many affinities with Irish life” (Jaquarello in Lyric Theatre 1991: 6). McGuinness himself confirmed the universality of the play when he wrote for the occasion that repression should still be a topic of debate in Ireland:

Repression speaks the same language through the world for it lacks in its vocabulary the one word James Joyce recognized as the only universal— Love. *The House of Bernarda Alba* is a study of love, but love denied, love damaged, love silenced. To break the silence requires courage, and courage needs a voice. To do Lorca’s courage justice, that voice must be our own if we are to face the challenge of this play, and that challenge must be faced, for the subject is ourselves, alone, in pain. (McGuinness in Lyric Theatre 1991: 7)

78

Lorca’s *La Casa de Bernarda Alba* (1936) addresses the situation of women in the Spain of the 1930s from different perspectives; women and family, religion and power or politics are amongst the main topics. Lorca’s intention to write about the reality that surrounded him is clear when he indicated that “these three acts are intended as a photographic documentary” (García Lorca 1992: 118). He depicts family as an asphyxiating institution where long periods of mourning are an obligation for women, who are forced to wear black; this virtually makes them prisoners within the walls of their homes, where they become obedient domestic servants; religion, too, is another main force that clamps down on, for instance, sexual freedom; being a woman and having power are mutually exclusive opposites; women are expected to remain silent and, as a consequence, voiceless and unable to fight injustices. Lorca depicts the political situation he was living: the dictatorship of Primo de Rivera and the conservative government which followed drawn from the extreme right. This is reflected in the play mainly through the character of Bernarda, described as “the personification of repression” (Edwards 2003: 193). She is also understood as a classic example of the rich landowners who ruled and exploited farmers and exemplifies extreme Catholicism when she condemns and punishes her daughters’ instincts of blooming sexuality. McGuinness’s *The House of Bernarda Alba* appropriates these Lorquian themes to voice the situation of women in (Northern) Ireland in the 1990s.

McGuinness’s play transcends the locality of Belfast and can be read as a critique of the stereotypical images of women in Ireland. In order to understand this affinity, attention must be paid to the Irish political and cultural constructions of



iconic women to personify Ireland. From the Celtic goddesses Cailleach Bhéirre, Medb, Deirdre or Gráinne, mythological characters who symbolize the Irish land, Ireland has been a woman; in the *aisling* poems of the 18<sup>th</sup> century the *spéirbhean* or sky-woman was used to name Ireland under the harsh British oppression. After these, *Ibernia* was used in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, this time by the English colonizers, to (re)present Irish women as frail opposed to British masculinity. Irish Nationalism added to the picture, and brought the figures of Dark Rosaleen, who asked for freedom and embodied Catholic values, Cathleen Ní Houlihan, an old woman who keened and lamented the loss of her green fields and told young Irish men to recover their land by warfare, or the iconic Mother Ireland, used when Catholicism and Nationalism were closer in Ireland, as a mother ashamed of her children who had failed to defend her. It can then be concluded that this

iconografía femenina de la nación como madre genera un patrón de sacrificio —de la madre que ofrece el martirio de sus hijos por el bien de la nación y de los hijos que mueren por la “Madre Irlanda”— y crea un modelo de maternidad asexual imposible de alcanzar en la realidad, que atrapa a las mujeres irlandesas en unos determinados roles reduccionistas y opresores. (Rosende Pérez 2008: 264)

These oppressive Irish roles for women match Lorca's depiction of female imprisonment in Spain and can also be read in McGuinness's Irish *Bernarda* and her daughters.

Religion and politics continued to affect the situation of women in the Northern Ireland of the 1990s. After the Anglo-Irish Agreement, signed in 1985 to try to find an end to terrorism and *The Troubles*, laws related to women's rights were quite restrictive: abortion was illegal in all cases except when the mother's life was in danger, and divorce was difficult to obtain. Sociological approaches to the institution of family at that time indicate how it continued to be politicized: “If there is one element of life in Northern Ireland which is presumed to be common across the sectarian divide, it is the importance of family and kin relations, in both urban and rural settings” (McLaughlin 1993: 553). Households were formed by big families during the 1980s and 1990s and, while the role of women within these families seemed to have evolved in some senses towards a positive position, in so far as they shared responsibility with their partners as regards the earning of money, this was thrown out of kilter by the rise of unemployment in the 1980s. Marriage was still seen differently by men and women and whereas a young woman saw it as centrally related to love and sex, a married woman would probably think of having children as one of the most important reasons for getting married. In this context, contemporary social constructions of the identity of Irish women perpetuated previous stereotypes and figures like the *Derry Mother* appeared. The term was coined and defined by sociologists as a strong, silent woman, a strong influence on

the whole family and, evoking preceding iconic figures, a woman for whom “martyrdom [again] was a worthy goal in itself” (McLaughlin 1993: 560). In Belfast, the city where *The House of Bernarda Alba* was first released, a matrilineage was identified attached to the figure of the mother and its importance, while at the same time women’s independence continued to be obstructed by religion and notions of decorum and reputation which demanded the absence of sex “as ‘respectability’ involves nonsexual morality and qualities such as decency, cleanliness and thrift” (McLaughlin 1993: 562). In this context, moreover, female solidarity was problematic since the fight for individual freedom was compatible with it, as happened in Bernarda’s home.

The appearance of feminist groups in Belfast, such as the Women’s Liberation Group in 1974, the creation in 1975 of the Northern Ireland Women’s Right Movement, followed by the opening of the Women’s Centre, confirm their need for support. Regardless of their political identity, women shared “a basic sense of injustice” (Kilmurray 1987: 179) and, while their involvement in issues related to their culturally and politically imposed role as peacemakers was applauded, their attempts to gain more freedom in matters concerning abortion or divorce were condemned by the Catholic Church. Family values should be preserved at all costs and silence pervaded while “the harsh realities of female survival in the working class areas of the Province continued to be either a minority or a whispered concern” (Kilmurray 1987: 180), i.e., silenced by religious conservatism. Thus, women were located on the margins during The Troubles and Northern Ireland considered as a peripheral area, between Britain and the Irish Republic, where “the sectarian polarization of Catholic and Protestant communities, which is both the cause and the result of it, has had unpleasant consequences for women” (Roulston 1989: 219). In addition, some political campaigns continued to foster the image of women “as the guardians of family life and in the interests of the community rather than as fighters for women’s benefit alone” (Roulston 1989: 222) and, consequently, in political terms, it has been recognized that both the unionists or loyalists, mostly Protestant, and the nationalists/republicans, mainly Catholic “endorse the role of wives/mothers in furthering the cause of the community and political movement, thereby underscoring women’s association with the domestic sphere” (Stapleton and Wilson 2014: 2073) and with a cloistered existence which echoes Lorquian spaces.

These social realities were not invisible for theatre and both scholars and Northern Irish playwrights reflected them in their work. For Fiona Coffey, author of *Political Acts: Women in Northern Irish Theatre, 1921-2012*, the theatre produced in Northern Ireland during the Troubles (1968/9-1998) constituted an expression of social realism and “has played an important yet unrecognized role in the North

as a critical and creative voice for civic and social change” (Coffey 2016: 4). The works of Anne Devlin or Christina Reid respond to this intention and need to be acknowledged. Devlin wrote, for instance, plays about women such as *Ourselves Alone* (1985) where three sisters suffer the effects of the 1981 hunger strikes in Northern Ireland, or *After Easter* (1994) in which Greta confronts her identity in her home after being exiled from her country; *Titanic Town* (1998) by Devlin is set in the Belfast of the 1970s and tells the story of Bernie McPheliny, a mother who tries to protect her family from the violence of the region. This same interest is depicted in the plays of Reid. *Tea in a China Cup* (1983) tells the story of three generations of Protestant women who try to protect family and the community in Belfast, the city which is also the setting for *The Belle of the Belfast City* (1989) where women from the same family confront their realities and expose their conflicts within the context of the anniversary of the Anglo-Irish Agreement. In the same year *My Name, Shall I Tell you My Name?* uses the character of Andrea to remember Irish history through her stories with her grandfather. Other examples of playwrights from Northern Ireland who exposed the Troubles through Catholic/Protestant differences are Marie Jones in *Somewhere Over the Balcony* (1987) or *A Night in November* (1994) and Stewart Parker in *Pentecost* (1987). Frank McGuinness adds to the picture with his version of *The House of Bernarda Alba* where social realism that focuses on the (hi)stories of women can also be seen.

### 3. Frank McGuinness's Version of *The House of Bernarda Alba*

When interviewed about his intentions for turning to European dramatists, McGuinness refers to them as one of his greatest influences and as a possibility for Irish culture to “speak to other cultures and even through another culture” (McGuinness 1989: 270). Moreover, he makes reference to the process of rewriting their works as an essential part of his craft. Lorca is, for him, one of the writers that should be a familiar literary reference in Ireland, and McGuinness considers this cultural act of ventriloquism, of writing forward, as a commitment to escaping from the imposed English influence and understanding other traditions that could compare with his own and be used to rewrite contemporary Irish realities:

It's also a liberation. Irish literature has always been far too much defined in terms of its relationship with English literature. It's been a part of the taming of the Irish by the English to do that. But in fact if you look at our major authors of this century, O'Casey has much more in common with Brecht than he would with any other

playwright, particularly in English. Joyce and Beckett looked to the continent. Joyce was deeply in touch with Dante and the Greeks, and Beckett with both French and Italian literature. I remain at home and try to make these great European playwrights part of our vocabulary. That is definitely a cultural ambition. But the private ambition is there too, which is to learn more about writing plays, really. Because these authors, Ibsen more than anybody, and Lorca, Strindberg, Chekhov, they teach you more about your craft. We are dealing with an art form, unapologetically dealing with an art form, and we need to know more about it. A painter has to go and look at other traditions, you have to go and look at other theatres and know at least what you're rejecting. (McGuinness in Long and McGuinness 1999: 16)

Lorca's *La Casa de Bernarda Alba* tells the story of Bernarda and her five unmarried daughters, Angustias, Magdalena, Amelia, Martirio and Adela, whose ages range from thirty-nine to twenty. They live imprisoned in the family house where their mother Bernarda rules with a rod of iron. Set in a rural Spanish village of 1936, and significantly subtitled *A Drama about Women in the Villages of Spain*, it exposes the effects of different types of socially-imposed repression on women. After the death of their father, Bernarda decides her life, and that of her daughters, will be an eight years' mourning within the walls of their immaculately whitewashed house. However, the girls' passions and jealousies unfold and cause the final tragedy, when Adela, the youngest, hangs herself, as she is unable to live without love. After that, individual emotions are forbidden forever in the house and Bernarda announces a resumption of her rule and so a cloistered existence for women. Lorca's play has been read as a depiction of the situation of Spanish women who, as happened with Irish women, "For centuries [...] were idealized as willing saints and martyrs, passionately wishing to devote their entire lives to their Savior God; or they were envisaged, in diametrically opposite terms, as whores worthy of hell and damnation, torture and burning" (Knapp 1984: 383), and who were "a vessel, a container, and a procreating agent to be fertilized. [Thus,] Germination of the woman's individual personality, of no consequence, merits no consideration" (Knapp 1984: 383). Lorca was deeply concerned about social issues and he thought the playwright should put on stage issues people were afraid to face, such as the situation of women, depicted in his play as a suffocating existence strongly determined by a patriarchal society which did not accept any individuality or independence for mothers and wives.

McGuinness had already directed Lorca's play in the late 1970s, as a student in Coleraine, when he discovered the Spanish writer:

I was always very fond of Lorca's poetry when I was a student and in my second year at college I had seen a production of *The House of Bernarda Alba*. I loved it and *The House of Bernarda Alba* was the first play I directed when I went to Coleraine. Ian Gibson had just produced his book on the death of Lorca so for about a year I was very steeped in Lorca. (McGuinness in Hurtley 1998: 61)

When he rewrites the play in the 1990s he keeps the original plot and accommodates Lorca in Ireland through different strategies. First of all, by means of his particular use of language, characterized by a process of simplification and rewriting of the words of the original text in an attempt to reach their essence. He uses his characteristic short sentences which provide the new text with a “nervous energy” (Kosok 2004: 45) which fits modern times. McGuinness offers “a sense of language being pushed to the limit, almost beyond the limit” (McGuinness in Long 2001: 303). He explains the process he follows for his translations and adaptations, making reference to his use of the language: he starts from a first version which should be “the more basic the better, to get to the bare bones” (McGuinness in O’Byrne 1989: 14), and he continues writing subsequent drafts, up to four, before reaching the final text trying “to get familiar with the fabric of the text ... to see how the author has created individual characters and patterns of speech” (McGuinness in O’Byrne 1989: 14). As a result, a series of variations from the translation can be perceived. In order to understand this process of accommodating the text into the Irish context an English translation has been used, rather than the Spanish original play. This will allow me to propose McGuinness as a writer involved in the process of acculturation rather than as a translator.

McGuinness eliminates the original context of production, by replacing the subtitle “A Drama of Women in the Villages of Spain” by “A Version of Frank McGuinness”; and he lists the characters eliminating their ages and making reference only to their relationship with Bernarda. The initial stage directions are adapted to his style and, as a consequence, there is a necessary simplification of the language, an elimination of the ornaments and modernization of words:

A dazzlingly white room in Bernarda's house.  
Thick walls with arched doorways, hessian curtains with tassels and flounces.  
Rush chairs.  
Pictures of unlikely landscapes, populated by nymphs and legendary kings.  
It is summer.  
A gloomy silence pervades the scene.  
The curtain rises on an empty stage.  
Church bells are ringing.

A very white inner room in BERNARDA'S house. Thick walls. Arched doorways with jute curtains trimmed with black beads and ruffles. Rush-bottomed chairs. Pictures of nymphs or legendary kings in improbable landscapes. It is summer. A great, shady silence envelops the stage. When the curtain rises, the stage is empty. Church bells are tolling.

(García Lorca 1992:<sup>4</sup> 119)

(McGuinness 1991: 1)

The same technique is maintained throughout the play, and Act 3 starts with another stage direction where McGuinness uses the same verbal tense repeatedly, shorter sentences placed in different lines and, again, a renovation of English, creating a language which is, in the Irish version, more blatant, unconcealed and modernized:

ACT 3

Four white walls, faintly blue.  
The interior patio.  
It is night.  
The scenery has a perfect simplicity.  
Illuminated by the inside light the door lends a faint brilliance to the scene.  
Stage center is a table with a lamp where BERNARDA and her daughters eat.  
PONCIA serves them.  
PRUDENTIA sits apart.  
There is deep silence, broken only by the noise of plates and cutlery.

(McGuinness 1991: 65)

ACT THREE

The interior patio of Bernarda's house. It is night. Four white walls lightly bathed in blue. The décor must be one of perfect simplicity. The doors, illuminated by the light from inside, cast a delicate glow on the scene. At center, a table with an oil-lamp where Bernarda and her daughters are eating. Poncia is serving them. Prudencia is seated at one side. The curtain rises on total silence, interrupted only by the clatter of dishes and cutlery.

(García Lorca 1992: 155)

84

An additional significant variation in McGuinness' text is the presence of informal English or slang which can be seen, for instance, in the expressions used by Poncia to insult Bernarda, such as "Bossy bitch" (McGuinness 1991: 2), or "the big top? dog" (3), instead of the more neutral "Bossy! Tyrant!" (García Lorca 1992: 119) or "the most superior" (120), that are used in the English translation. McGuinness uses other techniques to make the text Irish. He changes some words that emphasize questions of social importance, mainly related to religion, in the new Irish context of reception. This is the case of expressions such as "Damn her" (García Lorca 1992: 120), used in the English translation by Poncia to refer to Bernarda, which become in McGuinness's text "God's curse on her" (McGuinness 1991: 3), or "God rest her soul" (5) instead of "may she rest in peace" (García Lorca 1992: 120).

With the same intention of emphasizing social realism, women's behavior and comments as regards certain controversial themes in Northern Ireland are made more explicit in McGuinness's text; this is the case of sexual comments about carnal desire; women who are "on the prowl for a man" (García Lorca 1992: 124) trying to reach "the heat" (124) in McGuinness's version are looking "for the warmth in the trousers" (McGuinness 1991: 10) or "for a man's water" (10). Some characters are especially affected by this attempt to find a sense of affinity

between the two cultures and McGuinness addresses Catholic/Protestant differences and sectarian division through Bernarda's discourse. Her violence and Catholicism are stressed in the new adaptation; when she criticizes the neighbors who arrive at her house during the wake for her dead husband: the "Go home and criticize everything you've seen! I hope many years go by before you cross my threshold again!" (García Lorca 1992: 125) from the translation becomes more violent in McGuinness and Bernarda animalizes her neighbors as follows: "Crawl back to your caves and criticize. God send it's many years before you're through my doors again" (McGuinness 1991: 11).

The rebellious and passionate Adela is transformed and made more of a rebel in the adaptation. This can be seen clearly in the language she uses to face her sisters; while in the translation she explains and complains that "I can't be locked up! I don't want my body to dry up like yours! I don't want to waste away and grow old in these rooms" (García Lorca 1992: 134), McGuinness rewrites her, adding strength and determination through a declaration that shows more determination: "I will not be locked up. I will not let my body turn like yours. I will not lose my life in these rooms" (McGuinness 1991: 28). Her suffering, moreover, is also reinforced and, after she has been told about Pepe el Romano's intentions to marry Angustias instead of herself, she enters the stage "with pains all over" (McGuinness 1991: 39), and not just feeling unwell as in the English version. The Irish writer does not use the term *curiosity* to refer to her sisters' interest in her state but "More like an inquisition" (40); she is referring to the lack of female solidarity that becomes apparent when each fights for her individual freedom. Her battle with Martirio is another example of how the Irish Adela uses transparent language:

ADELA: No joke. You don't play jokes. Something else burns you up and it wants to come out. Say it now, clearly.

(McGuinness 1991: 53)

ADELA [exploding with jealousy]: it was not a joke — you've never liked games, never! It was something else, exploding in your heart, wanting to come out! Admit it openly, once and for all!"

(García Lorca 1992: 148)

Finally, McGuinness's version contains some Irishisms such as *stór* (McGuinness 1991: 80) instead of *beloved*, used by María Josefa to refer to her imaginary child, or *tinker*, which is used as an insult hurled by Angustias at Adela, and evokes, in the play, the pejorative meaning of the word in Ireland: a tramp, an errant, a poor person who wanders without a proper sense of identity. *Tinker* can also be read in positive terms from a contemporary point of view as a member of a distinct ethnic group with a dissident identity.

The linguistic variations introduced by McGuinness are in consonance with the socio-cultural affinities that can be found between the Lorquian text and his own, specifically through the themes of family, marriage and religion. Bernarda's family is made up of women whose lives are marked by their lack of economic power, or, in the words of McGuinness's Poncia, "a house of women, five ugly daughters. They haven't a ha'penny. Apart from Angustias... The rest have their embroidered lace and plenty of good shifts" (McGuinness 1991: 4) and live in a "damned town where even the water won't flow" (12). Women are immobilized, their future marked by the socially imposed mourning, spending their time embroidering their bridal clothes, like Penelopes eternally waiting for a happy ending which will not come, doing what is expected of them by a society which assigns different obligations to men and to women: "Needle and thread for her, whip and mule for him" (13), as Bernarda says. They are expected to be silent and to keep within the domestic space, as mothers. They do not mix with men, who are the ones who have and control the money, are mourned for years, go to funerals to talk, look after each other and "care about land and cattle, and some silly bitch who feeds them" (22). However, women resent their lack of agency when "Even your eyes don't belong to you" (48). The figure of the Derry Mother as a contemporary representation of a Mother Ireland who perpetuates previous models finds a voice through Lorquian women, especially her tendency to embrace martyrdom as a necessary sacrifice for the common good. Traces of this personality can be read in McGuinness's Bernarda and the control she exercises over others, her position as the guardian of her kingdom and her statement that "I run my affairs and all of yours" (31).

Marriage, a problematic issue in (Northern) Ireland, due to controversies about abortion and divorce legislation, can also be read in the Irish version as having a negative effect on women. This is exemplified through the story of Adelaida, who was not allowed to go out of her house from the day she got married, or through Pepe's unemotional proposal to Angustias: "I need a good, obedient woman. That's you, if you want it" (McGuinness 1991: 36). McGuinness's play also fits into the 1990s new context through Lorquian references to religion and politics. Religious moral concerns such as purity are articulated, for instance, by means of the allusions to cleanliness in the play; from the very beginning Poncia states that everything in the house must be "shining like a new pin" (2), Bernarda orders the yard to be whitewashed, evoking Christian purity, and all the rooms inside the house are white. This is linked to the banning of sexual behavior or appetite, which are reprehensible and forbidden since they are seen as dirty. Bernarda accuses Angustias of hooking her "eyes into a man the day of your father's funeral" (15), wants to keep her daughters' bodies decent and the house is referred to as a convent. These women fear scandals and the all-too observant mob, ready to



punish female misbehavior in the name of decency with death. The inquisitive community, who watch behind their curtains, fit the Northern Ireland of the times where the Troubles and sectarian division cause social mistrust and suspicion. In the Irish version they make the women of the house feel they are rotting "in fear about what people say" (23).

For McGuinness, Lorca's play was mainly about love as the force that triggered the tragic ending. Love and passion explain the lack of solidarity among the women in the play, and when they hear that Angustias will marry Pepe el Romano she is seen as "ancient, sickly, the least woman of us all" (McGuinness 1991: 25). These feelings will also unleash Angustias' answer: "I'm all right, and if anyone doesn't like it they can go to hell" (33), and Adela's demand for freedom and her rights over her body, "I give my body to whoever I choose" (41), together with her openness on sexual desire: "I'd put down my mother to feed this fire burning between my legs" (43). Consequently, explosions of jealousy cause Martirio's anxiety for revenge and her fight with Adela, whose final attempt to find light and voice is silenced by Bernarda, McGuinness's cruel mother (Ireland).

#### 4. Conclusion

When asked what attracted him to Lorca in the first place McGuinness referred to the similarities between the two cultures:

I think that as an Irish writer you're very much aware of his Catholicism and of his rituals, and the immense debt that he has to liturgy, and his imagery, and his dialogue, and his crystallization, if you like, of peasant society, which wasn't that far removed from my own immediate background. (McGuinness in Hurttley 1998: 61)

The examination of the play by McGuinness has proved that literary criticism of his version of *La Casa de Bernarda Alba* throws light on the craft of the writer and on the universality of Lorquian themes, which closely fit the (Northern) Ireland of the 1990s. An analysis of the strategies used by the playwright to revive Lorca show that Irish women can express their realities through Lorquian voices. The fact that Lorca's play feels at home in Ireland could be a confirmation that the effects of Catholicism, politics, traditions and male dominance constitute key concepts that affect the processes of negotiation of identity for women at that time, in that place. Frank McGuinness's *The House of Bernarda Alba* continues the tradition of Irish theatre of addressing Irish tropes that voice, in this case, the situation of women, but also the issues of social division and life within communities. Moreover, his play confirms Irish dramatists' interest in continental drama and Lorca in particular, which was especially productive during the 1980s and 1990s, when questions

related to Irish identity were being renegotiated after the important changes that were taking place in society. *The House of Bernarda Alba* in the hands of McGuinness can be understood as an adaptation, an act of acculturation conceived as an act of writing forward the English version, taking into account the new context of reception, so that the Irish audience identifies the meanings from the original play and the playwright talks through another culture.

## Notas

---

<sup>1</sup>. See, for a comprehensive list of Irish plays based on Greek tragedies, McDonald 2002. Also, more recently, a full study in Arkins 2010.

<sup>2</sup>. See, for updated details on McGuinness's plays and adaptations, Irish Theatre Institute 2019.

<sup>3</sup>. I take the opportunity here to express gratitude to Frank McGuinness and

his editor for giving permission to use the unpublished manuscript of *The House of Bernarda Alba* for academic purposes.

<sup>4</sup>. All the quotations given in this article from García Lorca's play have been taken from the translation by Michael Dewell and Carmen Zapata for the Penguin edition of *The House of Bernarda Alba* (1992).

88

## Works Cited

---

ARKINS, Brian. 2010. *Irish Appropriation of Greek Tragedy*. Dublin: Carysfort Press.

COFFEY, Fiona Coleman. 2016. *Political Acts: Women in Northern Irish Theatre, 1921-2012*. Syracuse: Syracuse U.P.

EDWARDS, Gwynne. 2003. *Lorca: Living in the Theatre*. London: Peter Owen.

ETIENNE, Anne and Thierry DUBOST. (eds.) 2017. *Perspectives on Contemporary Irish Theatre*. Switzerland: Palgrave Mcmillan.

FOLEY, Imelda. 2003. *The Girls in the Big Picture. Gender in Contemporary Ulster Theatre*. Belfast: The Blackstaff Press.

FRICKER, Karen. 2003. "The House of Bernarda Alba." *The Guardian* (April 16). <<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2003/apr/16/theatre.artsfeatures1>>. Accessed May 30, 2018.

GARCÍA LORCA, Federico. (1946) 1992. *The House of Bernarda Alba and Other Plays*. Trans. M. Dewell and C. Zapata. London: Penguin.

HURTLEY, Jacqueline. 1998. "Frank McGuinness Interviewed by Jacqueline Hurtley." In Hurtley, Jacqueline, Rosa González, Inés Praga and Esther Aliaga. *Ireland in Writing: Interviews with Writers and Academics*. Amsterdam: Rodopi: 51-71.

IRISH THEATRE INSTITUTE. 2019. "Frank McGuinness". *Playography Ireland*. <<http://www.irishplayography.com/search-simple.aspx?playtitle=&authorfirstnames=fra&authorsurname=mcguinness&includeirishlanguage=true>>. Accessed October 20, 2019.

JOHNSTON, David. 2013. "Professing Translation." *Target. International Journal of Translation Studies* 25 (3): 365-384.

JORDAN, Eamonn. 2010. *Dissident Dramaturgies. Contemporary Irish Theatre*. Dublin: Irish Academic Press.

KILMURRAY, Avila. 1987. "Women in the Community in Northern Ireland: Struggling

- for Their Half of the Sky": *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review* 76 (302): 177-184.
- KNAPP, Bettina. 1984. "Federico Garcia Lorca's *The House of Bernarda Alba*: A Hermaphroditic Matriarchate." *Modern Drama* 27 (3): 382-394.
- KOSOK, Heing. 2004. "Translation, Adaptation, Translocation, Acculturation, Appropriation: Contemporary Irish Playwrights and Continental Drama." *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies* 10 (1/2): 41-50.
- LLEWELLYN-JONES, Margaret. 2002. *Contemporary Irish Drama and Cultural Identity*. Bristol: Intellect.
- LOJEK, Helen Heusner. 2011. *The Spaces of Irish Drama. Stage and Place in Contemporary Plays*. New York: Palgrave McMillan.
- LOJEK, Helen Heusner. 2015. "The Diverse Dramatic Contributions of Frank McGuinness." In Morse, Donald E. (ed.) *Irish Theatre in Transition: From the Late Nineteenth to the Early Twenty-First Century*. London: Palgrave: 191-204.
- LONG, Joseph. 2001. "Interview with Frank McGuinness." In Chambers, Lilian, Ger FitzGibbon and Eamonn Jordan (eds.) *Theatre Talk: Voices of Irish Theatre Practitioners*. Dublin: Carysfort Press: 298-308.
- LONG, Joseph and Frank McGuinness. 1999. "New Voices in Irish Theatre: An Interview with Frank McGuinness." *Études irlandaises* 24 (1): 9-19.
- LYRIC THEATRE. 1991. "The *House of Bernarda Alba*, T4/342, Programme". Lyric Theatre Archive. NUI Galway: James Hardiman Library.
- MCDONALD, Marianne. 2002. "The Irish and Greek Tragedy." In McDonald, Marianne (ed.) *Amid Our Troubles Irish Versions of Greek Tragedy*. London: Methuen: 37-87.
- McFADDEN, Grania. 1991. "House Where Widow Alba Rules with Rod of Iron." *Belfast Telegraph* (8 March). Lyric Theatre Archive. NUI Galway: James Hardiman Library.
- McGUINNESS, Frank. 1989. "Interview with Frank McGuinness." *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review* 87 (347): 269-273.
- McGUINNESS, Frank. 1991. *The House of Bernarda Alba*. Unpublished manuscript.
- McLAUGHLIN, Eithne. 1993. "Women and the Family in Northern Ireland: A Review." *Women's Studies International Forum* 16 (6): 553-568.
- MORSE, Donald. (ed.) 2015. *Irish Theatre in Transition: From the Late Nineteenth to the Early Twenty-First Century*. London: Palgrave.
- O'BYRNE, Robert. 1989. "Coming to Terms with Translating." *The Irish Times* 21 (December): 14.
- O'MAHONY, John. 2008. "A Happy Marriage. Interview with Frank McGuinness." *The Guardian* (April 24). <<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2008/apr/24/theatre1>>. Accessed May 25, 2018.
- O'TOOLE, Fintan. 2000. "Irish Theatre: The State of the Art." In Jordan, Eamonn (ed.) *Theatre Stuff: Critical Essays on Contemporary Irish Theatre*. Dublin: Carysfort Press: 47-59.
- PERSSON, Åke. 2009. "'Where Love can Have its Way': Conformity versus Resistance in Brendan Kennelly's Version of Federico García Lorca's *Bodas de Sangre*." *Estudios Irlandeses* 4: 69-81.
- ROSENDE PÉREZ, Aída. 2008. "La iconografía femenina de Irlanda. Creación y re/construcción de una nación en femenino." *Lectora: revista de dones i textualitat* 14: 251-267.
- ROULSTON, Carmen. 1989. "Women on the Margin: The Women's Movement in Northern Ireland, 1973-1988." *Science and Society* 53 (2): 219-236.
- STAPLETON, Karyn and John Wilson. 2014. "Conflicting Categories? Women, Conflict and Identity in Northern Ireland." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 37 (11): 2071-2091.
- SULLIVAN, Esther Beth. 1994. "Review. *The House of Bernarda Alba*. By Federico García Lorca. Adapted by Lynne Parker." *Theatre Review* 46 (1): 137-138.