

MTC Education Teachers' Notes 2015

THE WEIR

by Conor McPherson



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Arts Centre Melbourne,
Fairfax Studio

Notes prepared by Meg Upton

MTC MELBOURNE
THEATRE
COMPANY

EDUCATION
2015

BEFORE SEEING THE PERFORMANCE...

The Experience

In the theatre we share stories that differ from TV, DVD, film, books, magazines, podcasts and other media. In the theatre, stories are told by real people, in real time before a real and live audience. Each performance of a play is different to any other as it is dependent upon the time, the actors, the technical equipment and, very importantly, the audience. You can't re-read a live theatre performance or copy it to see again and again. Each performance exists only once. The performance you will see of *The Weir* will differ from the one performed before and the one performed after, which makes it special and unique. Your role as an audience ensures its uniqueness. As students of theatre, you are advised to carefully prepare to see the production so that you can capture that unique, one-off experience and be able to reflect on it in detail and consider how it comments on a contemporary world.

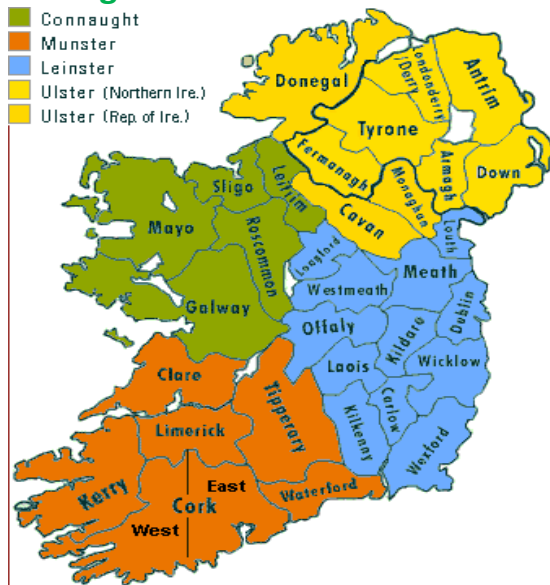
About *The Weir*

Theatre's power as an arena for storytelling meets the great Irish tradition of the bar room tale in Conor McPherson's brilliant play about loss and the consolations of connection. In a small rural pub in the northwest of Ireland, the regulars and their host fall into swapping ghost stories, the sort of local legends and anecdotes that over the years get stretched in the telling. It's not their usual entertainment for a weeknight. They're just showing off, throwing around a little blarney for the benefit of an attractive stranger in their midst. And Valerie, who has just moved from Dublin into town seems to be enjoying the stories. What's the harm in it? Who could know how deeply these stories strike home and that the most powerful story is waiting to be told? There's nothing more revealing than the tales we choose to tell.

Cast and Characters

Nadine Garner	Valerie, 30's, a Dublin woman
Peter Kowitz	Jack, 50s, a mechanic and garage owner
Ian Meadows	Brendan Byrne, 30s, the owner of the pub in which the play is set
Robert Menzies	Jim, late 40s, the local handyman
Greg Stone	Finbar Mack, late 40s, a local businessman

Setting:



Sligo (Irish: *Sligeach*, meaning "abounding in shells")

The play was first performed in 1997 at the Royal Court Theatre, London. It is set in an Irish country pub known as The Weir in a northwest rural part of Ireland, County Sligo, in the present day. In the play, the smaller local town is called Carrick, a fictional place but one that could indeed exist.

More on County Sligo:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/County_Sligo

The Weir: Plot Summary

The play opens in a rural Irish pub with Brendan, the publican and Jack, a car mechanic and garage owner. These two begin to discuss their respective days and are soon joined by Jim. The three then discuss Valerie, a pretty young woman from Dublin who has just rented an old house in the area.

Finbar, a businessman, newly returned to the area, arrives with Valerie, and the play revolves around reminiscence and the kind of banter that only comes about amongst men who have a shared upbringing. After a few drinks, the group begin telling stories with a supernatural slant, related to their own experience or those of others in the area, and which arise out of the popular preoccupations of Irish folklore: ghosts, fairies and mysterious happenings.

After each man (with the exception of Brendan) has told a story, Valerie tells her own: the reason why she has left Dublin. Valerie's story is melancholic and undoubtedly true, with a ghostly twist that echoes the earlier tales, and shocks the men.

Finbar and Jim leave, and in the last part of the play, Jack's final monologue is his own story of personal loss which, he comments, is at least not a ghostly tale but in some ways is nonetheless about a haunting. The play is as much about lack of close relationships and missed connections as it is about anything else. The weir of the title is the name of the pub, named for a hydroelectric dam on a nearby waterway that is mentioned only in passing as Finbar describes the local attractions to Valerie and as the men point out photos of the local area that sit on the pub's walls. It anticipates and symbolises the flow of the stories into and around each other, and how they have all collected together in one place to be recounted together.

The play's themes derive from the meaning of its title, a weir being a boundary on a river that can function as a dam. The weir prevents flooding and allows the flow of water to be regulated. The weir of the title is also a local dam built in 1951 to regulate water and generate power – functions as the major symbol in the play, linking the past and changes of the 20th Century to the natural world, as well as providing a figurative barrier between old folklore and contemporary Irish life.

The Performance Space

The Fairfax at Arts Centre Melbourne is a contemporary studio theatre that offers an intimate playing space with a raked auditorium. The auditorium wraps around the playing space offering a range of perspectives for an audience, and a range of challenges for a director and a designer. For this production of *The Weir*, the set is a detailed interior of an Irish rural pub that plays with the notion of a fourth wall. An actor-audience relationship is established accordingly. The director plays with the actor-audience relationship by exploring the possibilities within the playing space, the edges of the playing space, the off-stage, and understandings of the theatrical "fourth wall".

Furthermore, where you sit in the theatre may determine your experience of the performance. It may be useful to consider the "director's gaze". What choices has the director made that impact upon your experience of the performance?

Watch: An excerpt from The Irish Repertory Company's 2011 production:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9hbK5tOuvrA>

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXTUAL INFORMATION

Two Irelands: the Republic and the North

The Irish Free State was created in 1922 as a result of the Anglo-Irish Treaty. It effectively became a republic, the Republic of Ireland, with an elected president, under the constitution of 1937, in which it was named "Ireland". It was officially declared a republic in 1949. Ireland became a member

of the United Nations in December 1955. It joined the European Economic Community (EEC), predecessor of the European Union, in 1973.

The state had no formal relations with Northern Ireland for most of the twentieth century, but during the 1980s and 1990s the British and Irish governments worked with the Northern Ireland parties towards a resolution to the "Troubles". Since the signing of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998, the Irish government and Northern Ireland executive have co-operated on a number of policy areas under the North-South Ministerial Council created by the Agreement.

The Weir is set in the Republic of Ireland, not far from the borders of Northern Ireland.

Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Republic_of_Ireland

The Troubles refers to a violent thirty-year conflict framed by a civil rights march in Londonderry on 5 October 1968 and the Good Friday Agreement on 10 April 1998. At the heart of the conflict lay the constitutional status of Northern Ireland.

The goal of the unionist and overwhelmingly Protestant majority was to remain part of the United Kingdom. The goal of the nationalist and republican, almost exclusively Catholic, minority was to become part of the Republic of Ireland.

This was a territorial conflict, not a religious one. At its heart lay two mutually exclusive visions of national identity and national belonging. The principal difference between 1968 and 1998 is that the people and organisations pursuing these rival futures eventually resolved to do so through peaceful and democratic means. This ascendancy of politics over violence was not easily achieved.

During the Troubles, the scale of the killings perpetrated by all sides - republican and loyalist paramilitaries and the security forces - eventually exceeded 3,600. As many as 50,000 people were physically maimed or injured, with countless others psychologically damaged by the conflict, a legacy that continues to shape the post-1998 period.

Source: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/troubles>

IRISH FOLKLORE AND “FAERIE”

Folklore of Sligo, the region where the play is set:

<http://www.paranormaldatabase.com/ireland/sligo.php>

Irish Folkloric Tales

THE DULLAHAN: The dullahan is one of the most spectacular creatures in the Irish fairy realm and one which is particularly active in the more remote parts of counties Sligo and Down. Around midnight on certain Irish festivals or feast days, this wild and black-robed horseman may be observed riding a dark and snorting steed across the countryside.

CHANGELINGS: It appears that fairy women all over Ireland find birth a difficult experience. Many fairy children die before birth and those that do survive are often stunted or deformed creatures. The adult fairies, who are aesthetic beings, are repelled by these infants and have no wish to keep them. They will try to swap them with healthy children who they steal from the mortal world. The wizened, ill-tempered creature left in place of the human child is generally known as a changeling and possesses the power to work evil in a household. Any child who is not baptised or who is overly admired is especially at risk of being exchanged.

THE BANSHEE: The bean-sidhe (woman of the fairy) may be an ancestral spirit appointed to forewarn members of certain ancient Irish families of their time of death. According to tradition, the banshee can only cry for five major Irish families: the O'Neills, the O'Briens, the O'Connors, the O'Gradys and the Kavanaghs.

Whatever her origins, the banshee chiefly appears in one of three guises: a young woman, a stately matron or a raddled old hag. These represent the triple aspects of the Celtic goddess of war and death, namely Badhbh, Macha and Mor-Rioghain. She usually wears either a grey, hooded cloak or the winding sheet or grave robe of the unshriven dead. She may also appear as a washer-woman, and is seen apparently washing the blood stained clothes of those who are about to die. In this guise she is known as the bean-nighe (washing woman).

Source: <http://www.irelandseye.com/animation/intro.html>

THEATRICAL TRADITIONS AND THEATRICAL STYLES

Realism and Naturalism in the Theatre

French novelist and literary theoretician, Emile Zola's term for naturalism is *la nouvelle formule*. The three primary principles of naturalism (*faire vrai, faire grand and faire simple*) are first, that the play should be realistic, and the result of a careful study of human behaviour and psychology. The characters should be flesh and blood; their motivations and actions should be grounded in their heredity and environment. The presentation of a naturalistic play, in terms of the setting and performances, should be realistic and not flamboyant or theatrical. The single setting of *Miss Julie*, for example, is a kitchen. Second, the conflicts in the play should be issues of meaningful, life-altering significance — not small or petty. And third, the play should be simple — not cluttered with complicated sub-plots or lengthy exposition

Hyper reality is the world that most people seem to think we inhabit – the world perpetuated by film and theatre. It is over saturated, over emotional, incredibly dramatic and gorgeous to look at. There are so many things, so many conventions that people seem to think is 'real life' and yet never happen in reality.

Source: <https://oliverstheatre.wordpress.com/2014/05/21/naturalism-vs-hyper-realism/>

DISCUSS

Read the two descriptions above of naturalism and realism in the theatre. Your research may uncover other descriptions about these traditions. One way of considering these two terms – and this is contestable – is that naturalism is aligned with the interpretation of character and the acting style, and realism is the hyper reality of the world that is created on stage. But, as previously stated, this is only one view.

- Analyse and discuss the following terms: naturalism, realism, hyper-realism
- Which aspects of the descriptions above do you agree with?
- After seeing the performance compare these descriptions to the production. Was there evidence in the performed work of naturalism, realism, hyper-realism?

Irish Theatre Traditions and Theatrical Styles

As a play, *The Weir* sits within the modern Irish classical style. It uses long-form story telling replete with ghostly tales and the presence of traditional faerie folk to locate its 'Irishness'. The following links and excerpts are offered as background information about the playwright and the theatrical traditions and styles *The Weir* draws on as a performed play.

Book: *Mapping Irish Theatre: Theories of Space and Place*

The following Google Book excerpts offer rich insight into the development of Irish Theatre - https://books.google.com.au/books?id=IfxGAgAAQBAJ&pg=PA139&lpg=PA139&dq=Irish+pastoral+theatre&source=bl&ots=zK61xEGjDt&sig=8ZiZ3_X-3K15SNn9mmVfN4Y7gBQ&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0CCAQ6AEwAWoVChMI4pGhx6CPxwIVYSmmCh3DxQrM#v=onepage&q=Irish%20pastoral%20theatre&f=false

Excerpt - *The Methuen Drama Guide to Contemporary Irish Playwrights*

In their tales, McPherson’s ambivalent storytellers lay claim to no monumental significance, mythic references or universal applicability...in each play realism is constructed in a discursive manner privileging linguistic over physical elements. It is, as McPherson himself puts it, the words that are to do the work rather than the spectacle of the stage design or the characters’ actions...Undoubtedly, his monologue plays disrupt the pretense of a naturalistic theatre of illusion, but crucially other fundamentally naturalistic elements remain firmly in place – language never spirals off into modernist or postmodernist free fall...

Source:

https://books.google.com.au/books?id=5V1NzJtuloQC&pg=PT244&lpg=PT244&dq=Irish+pastoral+theatre&source=bl&ots=WVaRCOr8M6&sig=cCeF-B_k1R4-sxSe36KX2nFLY9E&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0CDAQ6AEwBmoVChMI4pGhx6CPxwIVYSmmCh3DxQrM#v=onepage&q=Irish%20pastoral%20theatre&f=false

Excerpt - *Supernaturalism: Femininity and form in Conor McPherson’s Paranormal Plays*

Patrick Lonergan argues in *Theatre and Globalization: Irish Drama in the Celtic Tiger Era* that during the 1990s and early 2000s, “mobility” was a necessary criterion for an Irish play’s success in a globalized marketplace which was characterized first and foremost by the speed with which commodities circulate across national and continental borders. According to Lonergan’s formula for international success, the key to a play’s “mobility,” apart from its being cheap to produce and easy to transfer from theater to theater, is what Lonergan calls its “reflexive quality”—the ease with which spectators in the world outside Ireland can “relate [the] experience” of the play “to their own preoccupations.”

Source: <http://breac.nd.edu/articles/48939-supernaturalism-femininity-and-form-in-conor-mcphersons-paranormal-plays/>

Excerpt - *The structural elegance of Conor McPherson’s The Weir*

McPherson himself claimed to be baffled by all the fanfare. "It was just people talking," he said, "so it shouldn't have worked—it should have been boring." At one level, his point is correct: *The Weir* includes little physical action, and its major events occur in the past, being recalled by the characters. But the same observation would apply to great Greek tragedies. And like those tragedies, *The Weir* observes the unities of time and place—unfolding without intermission in real time, about one hundred minutes, within the frame of a simple set: a small pub in the West of Ireland that becomes a site of both conflict and bonding. This compression is only one of the basic principles of dramatic construction in *The Weir*. McPherson's script also balances six other structural principles of drama—climactic order, reversal, synthesis, cause and effect, internalised action, and circularity—and the deft handling of these elements helps to explain why the play has been acclaimed so widely and so quickly as a modern classic.

These elemental plot premises generate strong emotions while conveying a subtle and compassionate sense of human life. Each element can be traced back to masterworks of Western drama, from the Greeks to Shakespeare to the modern realists. But they are also prominent in such major Irish plays as *The Playboy of the Western World*, *Endgame*, *Translations*, and *Pentecost*. In this

respect, the "classic" design of *The Weir* also highlights distinctly Irish features of drama, and, most especially, the integration of tragedy and comedy.

The Weir's structural elegance rests upon a unique rhythm of action, alternating between casual bar talk and a series of stories told by four of the five characters. McPherson began his theatrical career by scripting monologues—first for university and fringe groups in Dublin, and later for the Bush Theatre in London. He achieved early recognition for dramas of dissipation, especially *Rum and Vodka* (1994) and *St. Nicholas* (1997), in which a single character delivers a long confessional narrative. Even as each tale becomes more convoluted, the telling remains simple: instead of trying to act out the episodes or to assume the voices of other characters, McPherson's narrator tells a story. When McPherson was commissioned to write a play for the Royal Court Theatre in 1997, the artistic director, Stephen Daldry, attached a condition: the new drama could not be another monologue. Scott T. Cummings describes the resulting script as "McPherson's characteristically cheeky response to the call for him to write characters who talk to each other instead of the audience. He has them tell stories."

Source: <https://muse.jhu.edu/journals/nhr/summary/v010/10.4kerrane.html>

Excerpt: Conor McPherson's *The Weir* - New master of Irish storytelling

Irish folklore, which is full of versatile, witty and inventive stories, provides great resources for McPherson's plays. He makes use of monologues and storytelling technique in his plays, which have mostly linear narratives. One needs to bear in mind that, on one hand, the contemporary Irish playwrights are fostered by Celtic folk tales and are nourished by the values and stories of the old days; on the other hand, they have inherited a very different Ireland from their predecessors.

The Weir makes a lively case for the spirit of that tradition and for the important value of telling stories. In this respect, this study will begin with 'storytelling', which is an inseparable part of McPherson's writing presented in the form of monologues and uninterrupted speeches. Then *The Weir* will be interpreted in the light of storytelling, dramatic monologue and the "pub play" genre.

Storytelling and monologue have a significant status in narratology. Narratology deals with uninterrupted speech mostly in the form of monologues. In reality-based drama, monologue may theatricalise what Doritt Cohn has described as the "transparent mind, allowing audiences entry into the characters' consciousness; their motivations, history, or point of view" (Cohn, 1978: p.5). McPherson's plays are based on narratology. In this respect, his monologues reveal his characters' consciousness and their moments of epiphany powerfully especially when sharpened by lighting and staging effects.

Many critics have explored McPherson's "magical" fantastic world of theatre, featuring storytelling and demons in his plays. Rawson accounts that storytelling is the only therapy Ireland believes in as it helps to deal with the demons (Rawson, 2009). Likewise for Machray, the audiences, like the characters, are slowly drawn into the world of the afterlife in this land of storytellers (Machray, 2011)...The supernatural stories have a close affiliation with drinking, which is another notable characteristic of Irish culture...*The Weir*, in which the inner lives of five characters in a country pub setting are exposed...

McPherson embodies accurately the human condition, especially of men who are trapped and secluded in their inner lives. This sense of privacy and entrapment actually has been designating Irish literature for many years. The playwright has spoken with certainty about what distinguishes Irish drama from other English-speaking drama. He believes that Irish playwrights, hurt by poverty,

pessimism and Catholic guilt, get “stuck in an inner life”, hardly ever moving their dramas outside one room, while Brits put the world on stage (Clapp, 2004).

The characters’ casual bar joking and friendly local talk and gossip, in fact reveal the characters’ isolation. Soon it is clear that the characters are seekers of refuge from the bluster of the outside world. As they familiarise Valerie to the area, we learn that the place is unsheltered with harsh winds. It is a grand spot all along for going for a walk all down the cliffs with amazing views. We learn about the “country ways” and that this town land used to be quite important back a few hundred years ago. It was like the capital of the county. Finbar tells Valerie not to mind these “country fellas”. He says: “They’re only jealous Valerie because I went to town to seek my fortune. And they all stayed out here on the bog picking their holes” (*The Weir*, p. 13).

Source: <http://dergipark.ulakbim.gov.tr/tad/article/viewFile/5000069690/5000064433>

DISCUSS:

What insights do these excerpts offer you re the theatrical styles present in *The Weir*?

What do these excerpts offer you with regard to the greater world of the play?

What are some key words, phrases or descriptions used that you are curious about?

What are you imagining you will see, hear and feel when you experience this play?

Interview with Sam Strong, director of *The Weir*

Sam, why this play?

The Weir is yet another of my bucket-list plays. I am in the fortunate position of being able to propose a range of plays to Artistic Director Brett Sheehy and happily this one was programmed. The reason I wanted to direct *The Weir* is because it is one of the most beautifully structured plays I have ever encountered. Conor McPherson effortlessly and elegantly shapes an audience’s experience over the course of a night (a shaping which requires an extraordinary craft as a writer). Over the real-time timeframe during which the events of the play occur, Conor McPherson does everything that you want done to you in a theatre – he makes you laugh, he makes you cringe, he gives you a fright, he devastates you, and then he gives you a hug before he sends you on your way. The play is so beautifully structured as a whole, but it also structured in a very nuanced way, moment by moment.

Another thing that attracted me to the play was the chance to work on a naturalistic piece that was all about exquisitely drawn characters and beautiful acting. With that in mind, I put together a team of actors I knew well and had existing working relationships with.

When the character of Valerie, from Dublin, arrives at the pub with former resident Finbar, you have the great action of throwing a stranger or a fish-out-of-water into a known environment. The male characters – Jack, Jim, Finbar and Brendan - compete for Valerie’s attention. This process - played out for an audience and for Valerie - manifests itself in long-form stories. I think it is important to note that in this production we have called them stories rather than monologues. The difference is that in *The Weir* the characters tell these long-form stories for specific people, in a specific place and for a particular purpose.

As a playwright, Conor McPherson has written many monologues but this play is not a series of monologues. Rather, it is a succession of quite different stories told by the regular inhabitants of the local pub. The first few stories take on the form of the traditional Irish ghost story. What is interesting is that the stories reveal a lot about the teller as well as being quite distinct from each other. Jack's story about the fairy road that intersects with the house that Valerie has purchased is quite self-consciously told and is quite performative. Finbar's story about the Walsh family and the Ouija board is more reluctantly performed. It isn't set up or as well structured as Jack's. Jim's story about the graveyard goes further along the spectrum. He seems to tell it as a memory that he has discovered and is told in the moment.

Valerie's story is prompted by the others' stories, but her story is a very personal one, about what has happened to her daughter and why she has come to the area. Jack's final story, a story he has never told before, is also a very personal story one that seems to be in response to Valerie's. It too is a story of loss.

What is the world the audience are invited to enter in *The Weir*?

Stylistically the play is hyper-naturalistic¹. By this I mean that *The Weir* is set in a very real, painfully ordinary, world. This is not a work that you can abstract or stage in a white box and still enable it to sing. As a production it depends on creating a world that has a rich and cinematic level of detail. There is business written into the script but what that is are cues as to the detail the work requires – in both its mise en scene and in its performance. One of our approaches has been to make this realism appear as effortless as possible - not forced or acted or performed or staged as if on display. Further it is a very Irish world and a very male world. What Conor McPherson does well is to capture the kind of loneliness contemporary men may experience, how they communicate lost hopes and thwarted dreams. They either over-share or they miscommunicate.

What does this play offer contemporary young Australians?

In terms of theatrical form it offers them a great example of hyper-naturalism. *The Weir* is set in one space, in real time and is so detailed in its staging. It could be seen as slightly conventional but it is exquisitely realised as a style. As a director and as a cast it is our job to realise it as closely as possible. Sometimes the job of the director is to turn a script or production on its head but for this one the challenge is to realise that exquisiteness.

In terms of what the play's content offers its audience, it offers an exploration of grief, an explanation of how humans deal with the world, and how these conditions are explored through emotions and personal experience. It offers an exploration of how some people are able to talk about it and some aren't. It deals with the gap between hopes and dreams and the reality of people's lives. Conor McPherson wedges himself into this space. It is kind of Chekhovian in its exploration of that gap - who characters wanted to be and how they ended up. Therefore, the play is timeless in the way that Chekhov is timeless.

Would you talk about the language?

The language is lyrical but, unlike that of other writers, McPherson's writing is more internally lyrical. The storytellers colour the language in order to give it effect but of itself, the language isn't self consciously poetic.

¹ *The Theatre of Naturalism: Disappearing Act*, Peter Lang Publishing. In this text, Phillip Beitchmann (2011) states that naturalism in the theatre was "real in a way that it had never been before thus catching up to the other arts (novels, painting)" (p. 12)

It is impossible to stage *The Weir* without using Irish accents. The language is written in that way, it's vital to the rhythms, and it doesn't make sense not to use Irish accents. To abstract or shift the location using other accents would be problematic; *The Weir* has universality through its specificity.

How closely have you adhered to the stage direction?

Conor McPherson's thinking is to share the characters around the room and thus to share them to the audience. Part of the design challenge is to create a believable and authentic Irish country pub – one that is both functional and authentic. There are some very particular design challenges we have set up for ourselves. For instance, we wanted to achieve Guinness on tap and a working peat fire. The realising of both those set pieces is important to the script.

We have also extrapolated or extended some elements of the stage directions. We have created a long entrance to maximize the arrivals and exits as well as a back room to the pub that can be occasionally inhabited and assist in creating atmosphere, especially via lighting through the back windows. We also wanted to make the work at a cinematic human scale – so that wherever someone is positioned, they are completely framed by detailed naturalistic set. We joked that the production photos should look like the show is in an actual pub, never a theatre.

Finally, Dale Ferguson, the designer, and I have worked at creating a room that can be inhabited like a one room pub, but with an eye to how the characters can share stories with each other and the audience. There is a defined fourth wall. In fact we will be creating a part of that fourth wall. The work is designed for programming in the Arts Centre Melbourne, Fairfax Studio, which is an intimate venue, neither a proscenium nor an end on space, and an auditorium that slightly wraps around the playing space, removing the need for a presentational style.

Dale's design blurs the lines between the Fairfax auditorium and the set of the pub but with some subtlety. The set seems to carve out and be carved out of the Fairfax and to architecturally extend the auditorium around the pub setting in a way that you will *feel* rather than obviously notice. In staging the play we began by creating a room and treating it like we didn't care where the audience was, then my job was to find ways to invite the audience in to share these stories.

In Conversation with the cast of *The Weir*, and with Leith MacPherson

Peter Kowitz – Jack

Ian Meadows – Brendan

Nadine Garner – Valerie

Greg Stone – Finbar

Robert Menzies – Jim

Leith MacPherson – Dialect Coach and Assistant Director

Would you briefly describe or say a few words about your character and your approach to interpretation

IAN: Brendan Byrne runs a pub called The Weir outside the town of Carrick in Sligo, Ireland. His parents are conspicuously absent so I assume they have passed away. He has two married sisters who live in the city and who are trying to sell off the top field, which is the farm part of the pub. He is battling with clinging to the history of the place and keeping it all intact or whether he sells it off in order for his brothers-in-law to buy new cars.

I draw Brendan from what's in the text and then extrapolate, for instance the idea that his parents have passed away. They are absent from the text and aren't spoken about. Their absence is something that I think is meaningful in the play but it isn't necessarily present in the text. I don't want to impose anything too extraneous but it informs the way Brendan talks about his sisters, about the history of his pub, The Weir, or whether he keeps it. That then informs the decisions you make and the attitudes you have to the other characters in the piece. For instance Finbar who I know has probably been speaking to my sisters about selling part of the land that the pub stands on. Whether Jim or Jack will have any influence on his decision. Then there is the loneliness he feels in living in the pub by himself without family and without a partner. These all inform his sense of family and then inform his response to Valerie and her arrival in his pub. So in my approach I consider how all these things that sit just outside of it can actively inform how you actively engage with the characters around you is very helpfully.

PETER: Jack has lived in the area all his life and is the owner of a garage that was handed over to him by his Father when he was a young man. We know from the text that Jack had a girlfriend when he was around twenty or so who wanted to go to Dublin (the big city) but he had "an irrational fear" of leaving and lost his girl after she went to the city and ended up marrying a guard (police officer). Things that might have been and things he should have done is the central loss of Jack's life. Jack has been threatened by the larger world all his life and tries to hold onto the small community of the pub for his need of love and companionship, but is also aware that the young man Brendan should not make the same mistakes he did and lead a lonely life. Finbar as the local who left and made good is Jack's nemesis, hence the friction.

I approach the role by reading and re-reading the text; letting ideas absorb, what sounds right in my own mouth, what I understand. Then as a way into the world of the play I will investigate via Stanislavski's questions. Who am I? Where am I? When is it? What do I want? Why do I want it? How do I get it? What are the obstacles preventing me from getting what I want? If you can answer these questions then you have the beginning of an idea of who you might be able to bring to life in the world of this play.

GREG: I play Finbar. He has been born and bred in the town. His father was Big Finbar, a larger than life figure in the area. Finbar left when he was about 23 and moved to a larger town to make his fortune now he has returned and bought up quite a bit of property. I think he tries to see himself as a local but there is a bit of resentment from the others about his motives. He comes back on this night to visit the young woman, Valerie, who has bought one of his properties. He's taken it upon himself to show her around the area and look after her. Some people think he is "looking after" her in that sense, but the way I am approaching it is I am taking it on face value and he is just looking after her, being very neighbourly.

NADINE: Valerie is a woman who has come to the area from Dublin in order to find a slice of peace after a great trauma in her life. We meet her at the beginning of her new beginning. What I love about the play is that the audience is coached through life by Valerie and the other characters. What the playwright says is that life is hard, life is painful, there is death everywhere but there is still potential and there is still capacity for great unity. I think it is a very moving play. Even at the beginning where it may seem a little Valerie's loss and then Jack's regret, we understand that Valerie as a character is symptomatic of the themes of this play: that life is both precious and fleeting. While Valerie is a very real character, I also think she is a conduit or a tool or a device to assist the playwright to comment on these ideas.

What is the relationship between these characters? Why do they gather at the pub?

Peter: The essential relationship is that they meet up fairly regularly and drink at this small Irish pub, The Weir. I imagine each time they meet they have similar conversations except on this night. An unusual incident occurs that changes the rhythm of the night and that is the arrival of Valerie, probably very rare in the town.

Do you suspect they have all grown up together?

Peter: That is probably a decision we have made but I am not sure that it is in the text, although there is a reference to the photograph of building the weir where several of the characters appear as young boys. This suggests they have known each other for a long time and suggests a history that allows them a certain leeway in their behaviour with each other, and also constrains their behaviour.

Rob, would you please talk about the stories and story-telling aspects in the play?

Rob: Two of the stories in the play are similar in that they are stories presented to Valerie. My character, Jim, tells a story that isn't necessarily focused on an audience, but is rather a meandering account of something that happened to me years ago but in a fairly startling manner. There are two more stories with much more self-revealing endings. Valerie has a story that is quite shocking and Jack tells a story about his own past, revealing and very moving.

Would you agree that this play cannot be done without Irish accents?

Peter: It is essential to the play. It is through the play's bones and Leith is so important to the room to enable us to get the accent into our metabolism.

Leith, what is the process of working with the actors to find an Irish accent?

There is a basic foundation that we want to achieve with everyone. When you are working with accent you want to break it down into component parts and enable actors to hear the shift from where they would make that sound to where this character makes that sound. That is universal. Another part of the process is helping something stick for an individual actor and this concerns their mind in a place, with those actors, with certain pressures at a point in the rehearsal process. This is the individual part of working with accent.

There are patterns in approaching accent, but what makes something stick for an actor may be kinaesthetic or visual or by spelling a word differently on the page or adding a movement to a word as it is said. This is technical but you also need to recognise that different modes of learning are part of a creative process. As a dialect coach you have to respect that there are times to push for something and times when it is not the most important thing for an actor to be thinking about. It is a balance between having a clear technical agenda and being part of an ensemble, and being part of a creative team. It is an interesting process over the rehearsal period but also into performance where an audience adds a whole new dimension to the story telling, and in the sharing of those stories.

Leith, are you working with the actors on a particular Irish accent?

Yes, we are. I visited the area where Conor McPherson has located the play a couple of months ago and tried to pin down the accent but it was very difficult. The playwright has located the pub somewhere in Leitrim or Sligo. We have chosen a North Sligo accent. Valerie is from Dublin and she speaks in a slightly well-spoken Dublin accent, which is helpful for the audience.

What are the challenges of using accent?

Nadine: I think it is like cleaving your brain into two parts and then over the process of the rehearsal period trying to meld it together so the accent becomes part of your metabolism. The idea is to not "do" the accent but that the accent comes through you. We hope every day somehow our mouth

will form the correct shape and we won't need to be teaching ourselves the accent as we are doing it.

Rob: I think that is why it is so exhausting to rehearse and why we are so tired by the end of the day. I think that is the reason.

Nadine: I think that maybe it is. I think we underestimate the intellectual rigour of learning to form new sounds. I personally love it as a process. I find it incredibly stimulating and I'm sated intellectually when I'm trying to learn a new dialect. I find it delicious. But it is very taxing on the brain.

Greg: It is so different from our own Australian accent. That is why I believe you could never do this play without an Irish accent because it is tied in with the music of the text. It is like a song. The whole play is like a song. We, as Australians like to sit back on sounds and words but this is so forward in the mouth.

Students have the option of using an accent in their performance work. They often ask questions about how to approach accent, whether to locate it particularly or just generalise.

Greg: Some plays you don't need an accent. There are certain American or English plays where I believe you can get away with not using an accent and using a natural voice. But I think that some really need to be performed with accent such as Tennessee Williams. It's in the writing.

Rob: Sometimes the tension of *not* using an accent is quite interesting. I performed in a David Mamet play at STC a few years ago and we decided to not use accents. With Mamet you generally have a Chicago idiom and some people may say that you can't not use it, but I found it quite interesting not to and for me it worked.

Greg: There was a production of *Death of a Salesman* a few years ago (directed by Simon Stone) that didn't use American accents but I know there was some controversy or interest around that. Nadine, did you use an accent when you performed in *Private Lives*?

Nadine: We did English accents!

Sam was saying that the set design is hyper-realistic in keeping with the naturalism of the play, that this is very important to the play. How does working with this set and in that style challenge you as performers?

Ian: We were just talking about this recently. I love naturalism. I love watching characters exist as human beings in a theatrical world, but you have to interpret the story and convey the important narrative points right to the back of the auditorium. So, while it is great to have a realistic set and physically engage with it there are performance realities; keeping out and open, being heard, being clear.

Peter: Ian has particular challenges because he has so much business to do, pouring drinks and an enormous amount of prop work to consider.

Ian: Which is why my job now is to work that into the role so that it assists and doesn't diminish the clarity of the story and the moments and shifts within the piece.

Brendan doesn't tell a story. Why do you think that is?

Ian: He has a story in him but he is somewhat interrupted by other characters. There is a sense that his story is to come. Being younger, and these characters being much older brother figures to him. The stories are around him and he absorbs them. They give a sense of what his life is or could be. The future is for him and these are perhaps lessons, absorbing them rather than doing them out.

Rob: You can bet that when he takes Jack and Valerie home, Jack gets dropped off first!

Do you have any particular insights you could offer about into interpreting characters?

Ian: I would say just be consistent. Whatever you choose stick to it. When we were talking about accents earlier, there will always be people in the audience who will say, oh no that's not what it sounds like. But as an actor you just need to be consistent. I always like to go through a text and to mark it, ensure that the beats are marked, the shifts are marked, and if you are using accent you ensure you have marked it so that you can be consistent.

Peter: I would suggest that if you draw on Stanislavski's 'who, what, where, when and how' (the given circumstances); who am I, where and I, what do I want, how do I get what I want? They are a very good way to start looking at any text from an actor's point of view.

Rob: I have never had any consistent approach except to say your words and then get off. For me, performing is always triggered by words or a glance or a movement.

Greg: I agree with all those approaches. I would add that I try to own up to everything that is in the text and say it as if it is real and if it is true.

Nadine: I don't really have a method either. I try to find a simpatico between myself and the character but sometimes that isn't a good place to hang around. I was talking to Greg about this the other day. The entry point for me to a text may be the very thing I need to leave behind in order to free myself in the performance. Making an emotional connection to a text is important if you want to engage with it. It costs something to perform and I think that is probably right but you don't necessarily need to stay in that place. It can just be a starting point to the understanding of your character.

ANALYSIS, EVALUATION AND DISCUSSION

The following section focuses specifically on the requirements of performance analysis for VCE Theatre Studies Unit 4. The questions and analysis act as a guide and a springboard for responding to the production

VCE Theatre Studies, Unit 4, Outcome 3

Key knowledge of

- The character/s in the production including status, motivation and characteristics
- Interpretation by actor/s of a playscript in performance
- Expressive skills including facial expression, voice, gesture, movement, stillness and silence used by the actor/s to realise character/s
- The use of focus and the acting space
- The use of language to convey the intended meanings of the play
- The interrelationships between acting, direction and design
- The establishment and maintenance of the actor–audience relationship
- The interrelationships between acting and theatrical style/s utilised in the production
- Understanding of theatrical terminology and expressions to analyse and evaluate a theatrical production

The world of the play

The world of a play could be considered as being the world we witness on stage through the dialogue, action, subtext, direction, and stagecraft/design elements. As an audience, we enter the world of a play at a particular point in characters' lives and exit at a particular point. The world may be a realistic world, a fantastical world, an absurd world, or any number of combinations and permutations of these and others.

The setting for the production is the pub known as The Weir, owned by Brendan Byrne and his sisters and located in a rural Irish town in Sligo, Ireland. The action takes place solely in the main bar of the pub.

- How did the design of the pub and its location and position within the Fairfax Studio assist in creating the world of the play?

Director, Sam Strong, talks about the world of the play as being: *The Weir is set in a very real, painfully ordinary, world. This is not a work that you can abstract or stage in a white box and still enable it to sing. As a production it depends on creating a world that has a rich and cinematic level of detail.*

- What elements or conventions of the theatre did you first notice or experience when you entered the auditorium of the Fairfax?
- Were these elements and conventions recognisable? Had you experienced them before?
- What were your first impressions prior to the performance beginning?
- Do you agree with the director's statement that *this is not a play that can be abstracted*?
- What was particularly 'cinematic' about the production?

The beginning of the performance includes the character of Brendan, the publican, setting about readying the pub for the evening shift

- What did this evoke for you?
- What did you expect or anticipate when you witnessed it?
- At what point did you feel the play had begun?

The Weir is set in the late 1990s in rural Ireland. What references to the 1990s did you see or hear in the performance? Consider language, set, costume, properties, music etc.

- Do you feel there were any contemporary references in the performance?
- Could you set the play in a different time/era? What might change as a result?

The Weir is set in a very real, painfully ordinary, world. This is not a work that you can abstract or stage in a white box and still enable it to sing - Sam Strong, Director

- Do you agree with this statement?
- Could you recontextualise *The Weir*?
- Consider where else it could be set, who the characters would be in that new setting, what the stakes are, the status play, the motivations and intentions
- How would *you* describe the world of *The Weir*?

The structure of the play

The classical unities, the Aristotelian unities, or three unities that are the rules for drama are derived from a passage in Aristotle's *Poetics*. In their neoclassical form they are as follows:

- *Unity of action*: a play should have one action that it follows, with minimal subplots.
- *Unity of time*: the action in a play should occur over a period of no more than 24 hours.
- *Unity of place*: a play should exist in a single physical space and should not attempt to compress geography, nor should the stage represent more than one place.

Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Classical_unities

The Weir is a scripted play. It borrows from the classical unities in that; it has one action (the impact of the arrival of Valerie in the local pub), the action is played out in real time (about two hours across one evening) and the play is set in one location or physical place (a rural Irish pub). The play is written in one act for five characters. It uses rich dialogue and individual story telling as structural devices to present its themes and ideas.

The Weir includes **little physical action, and its major events occur in the past, being recalled by the characters**. But the **same observation would apply to great Greek tragedies**. And like those tragedies, The Weir observes **the unities of time and place**—unfolding without intermission in real time, about one hundred minutes, within the frame of a simple set: a small pub in the West of Ireland that **becomes a site of both conflict and bonding**. This **compression is only one of the basic principles of dramatic construction** in The Weir. McPherson's script also balances six other structural principles of drama—**climactic order, reversal, synthesis, cause and effect, internalised action, and circularity**.

In reality-based drama, monologue may theatricalise what Doritt Cohn has described as the “transparent mind, allowing audiences entry into the characters’ consciousness; their motivations, history, or point of view” (Cohn, 1978: p.5). **McPherson’s plays are based on narratology**. In this respect, **his monologues reveal his characters’ consciousness and their moments of epiphany powerfully especially when sharpened by lighting and staging effects**.

Read and discuss the two descriptions of the structure of *The Weir*. In particular pay attention to the bolded terms.

- What insights do these two excerpts offer in terms of the dramatic/written structure of the play?
- What insights do the excerpts offer in terms of the role that monologue plays in revealing a character’s consciousness?

Director, Sam Strong states ... *because as a piece of writing it is so beautifully structured. Conor McPherson shapes an audience’s experience over the course of a night and this requires an extraordinary craft, one that McPherson has. The Weir is one of the most elegant and effortless experiences for an audiences. The play is so beautifully structured as a whole, but it also structured in a very nuanced way, moment by moment.*

- Analyse this description of the structure of the play
- What do you think the director means by “in a very nuanced way”?
- When you saw the play did you find the story easy to follow and understand?
- If you did find it easy to follow, do you think this is because of the way the play is structured? Perhaps compare it to other plays you have studied, performed or seen.

I think it is important to note that in this production we have called them stories rather than monologues. The difference is that in The Weir the characters tell these long-form stories for specific people, in a specific place and for a particular purpose – Sam Strong, Director

- Why do you think the director draws a distinction between monologues and long-form stories? Do you agree with it?
- How does your experience of seeing the play inform the discussion?

Language

The language is lyrical but, unlike that of other writers, McPherson’s writing is more internally lyrical. The storytellers colour the language in order to give it effect but of itself, the language isn’t self-consciously poetic – Sam Strong, Director

- How would you describe the language of the play? Lyrical, poetic?
- What do you think the director means by the language being “internally lyrical”?
- Do the story tellers “colour” their language to create effect?

It is impossible to stage The Weir without using Irish accents. The language is written in that way and it doesn't make sense not to. To abstract or shift the location using other accents would be problematic; it has universality through its specificity – Sam Strong, Director

- Discuss the relationship between written text and performed text
- Can an accent be *written into* a script? How?
- Having seen the play, can you imagine it being performed without an accent?

It is essential to the play. It is through the play's bones and Leith is so important to the room to enable us to get the accent into our metabolism – Peter Kowitz, performer

- Discuss this comment. What do you think Peter means?
- Dialect/Accent Coach, Leith MacPherson, worked on the production alongside Sam. Did you find yourself noticing the Irish accents? What did you observe?

*...in each play realism is constructed in a discursive manner privileging linguistic over physical elements. It is, as McPherson himself puts it, **the words that are to do the work rather than the spectacle of the stage design or the characters' actions*** - Methuen Book of Irish Theatre

- Analyse and discuss the emphasis on spoken language in the performance
- Discuss the bolded statement above. Do you agree?
- What physical languages were present in the performance? Were these as apparent/evident?

Theatrical styles

The director, Sam Strong, and many of the scholarly articles included in this resource believe that *The Weir* is naturalistic in style with a hyper-realistic world. There are aspects of comedy and the structure of the work is built around long form story-telling.

Chekhov has been described as being a master of the 'realist' school of literature. Director, Sam Strong, references Chekhov in his interview stating that *It is kind of Chekhovian in its exploration of that gap - who characters wanted to be and how they ended up. Therefore, the play is timeless in the way that Chekhov is timeless.*

- Discuss how *The Weir* uses naturalism in order to explore who the characters want to be and how they end up being
- Is this the end of their stories?
- Discuss what might happen in the characters' lives in the 24 hours following the action of the play.

There are many comic moments in *The Weir*. Discuss and consider particular moments in the performance that were comic. For instance:

- The moment when Valerie orders a 'white wine'
- The ongoing banter about whether Brendan will have a drink or not
- Jim and his betting on the horses
- The chips that are passed around by Brendan
- How are these and other moments comic? Verbally? Physically? Timing?

Some of the commentary about the play mentions the sense of habit and almost ritual behind meeting up at the pub, particularly for these men. How does this sense of long term familiarity contribute to amusing or comic moments?

McPherson embodies accurately the human condition, especially of men who are trapped and secluded in their inner lives. This sense of privacy and entrapment actually has been designating Irish literature for many years. The playwright has spoken with certainty about what distinguishes Irish drama from other English-speaking drama. He believes that Irish playwrights, hurt by poverty, pessimism and Catholic guilt, get “stuck in an inner life”, hardly ever moving their dramas outside one room, while Brits put the world on stage (Clapp, 2004)

- Analyse and discuss this comment
- Consider in particular the first couple of sentences in relation to *The Weir*
- Are there some moments in the play that highlight this more than others?

Direction: including subtext, use of space, actor-audience relationship

Conor McPherson has written many monologues but this play is not a series of monologues. Rather, it is a succession of quite different stories told by the regular inhabitants of the local pub. The first few stories take on the form of the traditional Irish ghost story. What is interesting is that the stories reveal a lot about the teller as well as being quite distinct from each other – Sam Strong, Director.

- Discuss this comment
- What does the content of each story reveal about the character telling it?
- How do the directorial choices make each story unique?

After Valerie has finished telling her story, the dynamic between the characters appears to shift.

- How do we read this moment? How do the other characters feel about Valerie? What did you notice?
- Comment on the direction of this moment and its impact on the mood of the play

Towards the end of the play, the remaining characters gravitate to the peat fire.

- Discuss the directorial decisions in this scene
- How does the direction work to create the world of the play in this moment?
- How does the direction create a sense of time passing?

Subtext

Subtext is generally recognised to be what is *not* said but is implicit in the scene or conversation and is often considered to be what the characters really mean or really want.

In terms of what the play’s content offers its audience, it offers an exploration of grief, an explanation of how humans deal with the world, and how these conditions are explored through emotions and personal experience. It offers an exploration of how some people are able to talk about it and some aren’t. It deals with the gap between hopes and dreams and the reality of people’s lives. Conor McPherson wedges himself into this space – Sam Strong, Director.

- Discuss this comment by Sam Strong. What do you think he means?
- Choose a scene or moment from the performance you saw -
 - Discuss in detail what you believe the subtext to be. What was said and what was unsaid? What was really meant? What did the characters want?
 - How do you know? How important were expressive skills, pause, silence?
 - Evaluate the effectiveness or exploration of subtext in this production i.e. your awareness of it, its implicitness or explicitness.

Use of Space

Consider how the director utilised the space in this production. You might like to draw on any of the suggested scenes and moments already mentioned above or discuss new ones. For example, Finbar showing Valerie pictures on the wall in another room, the suggestion of a staircase, the entrances and exits of each character.

- How is space used to create familiarity between characters?
- When and how is the entire space used, if at all?
- Why might the designer choose to create space that isn't utilised?
- How does the director create relationships between the characters in the playing space and through specific spatial relationships i.e. diagonal, on-off stage, proximity?
- How do the directorial decisions impact on the audience's gaze? For instance, what do you look at in any given moment?
- The character Brendan spends much of his time behind the bar. How does he utilise this limited space and what impact does it have?
- Evaluate the use of space in this production. Were some moments very effective? Were others less so? Why?

In talking about stage directions, Sam Strong says - *Conor McPherson's thinking is to share the characters around the room and thus to share them to the audience.*

- Consider the use of space and movement during the story-telling specifically.
- Who are they telling their story to?
- While one character is telling their story, what are the other characters doing?

Think about the Fairfax Studio as a playing space.

- What choices have the Director and Designer made about utilising this space?
- Does the play suit the space? How so?
- How might *you* stage a production of *The Weir*?

Actor-audience relationship

MTC Literary Director Chris Mead believes that it is the writing and the world of the play that primarily determines the audience's relationship with the actors/characters.

- Do you agree?
- Which characters did you respond to, relate to, laugh with, laugh at, empathise with, sympathise with, abhor?

Directorially, there also exists the physical actor-audience relationship. For instance how the playing space is designed, where the characters stand in the space in relationship to each other and in relationship to the audience.

- How is off-stage used to create a particular actor-audience relationship?
- How are the walls/beams/edges of the set used to create spatial relationships between the characters?
- How does the existence of the bar create a particular actor-audience relationship?
- How does the existence of partially visible rooms/spaces impact on or create a particular actor-audience relationship?

The 'fourth wall' – the imaginary wall between the world of the play and the audience which is a convention of 'realistic theatre'. In some scenes in *The Weir* the characters face outward or gesture towards the farmland 'outside'.

- Discuss the actor-audience relationship in these moments

- Does the fourth wall get broken at any time during the performance?
- Does the fourth wall exist for other moments in the performance?
- Importantly, discuss how the performers used their expressive skills in order to maintain or break the fourth wall.

Characterisation

This section addresses characterisation - in terms of function, motivation and status. It may be useful to consider how particular characters 'function' in the play. There may also be characters that function as representations of concepts or ideas.

- How might certain characters in *The Weir* represent particular concepts or ideas? Who and what are they?

Valerie: Nadine Garner states - *we understand that Valerie as a character is symptomatic of the themes of this play: that life is both precious and fleeting. While Valerie is a very real character, I also think she is a conduit or a tool or a device to assist the playwright to comment on these ideas.*

- Discuss Nadine's statement about her character Valerie
- How can a character be a *conduit* or *device*?
- How did you feel about the characters? Did you like/dislike them, love/hate them?
- Did you recognise their pain, obstacles, failures, loneliness and hope?

Finbar: Greg Stone states - *Finbar left when he was about 23 and moved to a larger town to make his fortune now he has returned and bought up quite a bit of property. I think he tries to see himself as a local but there is a bit of resentment from the others about his motives.*

- Create a detailed character analysis of Finbar
- How did the performer, Greg Stone, create this character?
- Comment on and evaluate his vocal quality, accent, gesture, movement, stillness, facial expression, mood shifts
- Discuss the character's relationship to other characters. Who was he most connected to? What was his relationship to them? Did this relationship change? Why?
- How did costume, hair and makeup assist or enhance the creation of the role, if at all?
- Do you agree that there is resentment from the other characters towards Finbar?

Brendan: Ian Meadows states - *I draw Brendan from what's in the text and then extrapolate, for instance the idea that his parents have passed away. They are absent from the text and aren't spoken about. Their absence is something that I think is meaningful in the play but it isn't necessarily present in the text. I don't want to impose anything too extraneous but it informs the way Brendan talks about his sisters, about the history of his pub, *The Weir*, or whether he keeps it.*

- Ian Meadows is discussing a particular approach to characterisation in this comment
- What acting approach might it reference?
- If you were to apply this approach to Brendan, choose a particular moment from the performance and examine what his objective, super-objective and wants may be.

Characterisation – Motivation

When Sam Strong is asked about the 'world' of *The Weir*, he says *...it is a very Irish world and a very male world. What Conor McPherson does well is to capture the kind of loneliness contemporary men may experience, how they communicate lost hopes and thwarted dreams. They either over-share or they miscommunicate.*

- How is the world of *The Weir* a very Irish world?

- How is it a very male world?
- How are these aspects of the 'world' enhanced by characterisation?
- What motivates these men to be in this place at this time?
- What motivates Valerie to enter into such a male world? Does her arrival have an impact on the motivation of the other characters?

Brendan is the only character who doesn't tell a long-form story during the play

- Does this tell us anything about his character?
- What do you think Brendan's story would be about if he told it?

Through the story-telling, each character (apart from Brendan) has a chance to reveal more of themselves to the other characters and in turn to us as the audience.

- Discuss how the actors conveyed the **emotions, wants, needs and fears** of the characters – what expressive skills did they use? How did the directorial choices influence these?

Characterisation – Status

My character, Jim, tells a story that isn't necessarily focused on an audience, but is rather a meandering account of something that happened to me years ago but in a fairly startling manner –
Rob Menzies

- How would you describe the status of the character Jim in the play?
- When do you notice Jim? Does he have a particular function?
- What is his relationship to Jack? How do they interact?

In the very opening scene to the production, Jack walks into the pub and, finding the publican Brendan absent, helps himself to a pint from the tap and puts his money into the till.

- What does this tell us about Jack as a person?
- What does it tell us about Jack's status?
- What other aspects of Jack's character give us clues to his status? Does he maintain the same status throughout the play or does it change?

Valerie as a character commands attention from the other characters even when she isn't speaking.

- Why might this be so?
- How do the other characters interact with Valerie?
- What is Valerie's response to their attentions?
- Consider her interactions with Finbar, the barman Brendan and Jim. How do they differ?
- How does the actor, Nadine Garner, manipulate her expressive skills to convey high/low status, equal status or changing status in her relationships with these three characters?

Stagecraft – set and properties, costumes/hair/makeup, sound and lighting

Set and properties

Part of the design challenge is to create a believable and authentic Irish country pub – one that is both functional and authentic – Sam Strong

- Discuss the design of the 'authentic Irish pub'.
- Consider how the characters interact with the set. Does their interaction enhance the 'authenticity' of the set?
- In particular, discuss the entrances and exits of each character

Discuss the presence of the fire

- Is this a set item or a prop?
- Who uses it? Why? When?
- Discuss the symbolism of this set item/prop. What meaning does it have in the overall play?

Discuss the use of the bar as a design element, in particular its presence in the opening scene

- How do particular characters use it? How does it act to 'reveal' characters or characters' behaviour?
- How does the presence and use of the bar contribute to the comedy?
- Does the bar have a greater meaning or symbolism in the play? What could that be?

The characters use particular props throughout the play including a tea towel, broom, glasses of beer/spirits, ashtrays, tissues, money, photos, newspapers, leaflets and a piano. Several characters also smoke cigarettes.

- Analyse and evaluate the choice of these props and their relevance to the world of the play
- Does the choice of props reflect any particular era or location?
- What other props did you notice?
- Discuss the designers choice to include props that are not used for anything by the characters
- Discuss how particular props may have significance for certain characters – Brendan and his tea towel for instance – and how particular props may contribute to the development and establishment of character.
- Did you notice the plunger? Discuss this moment.

Costume, makeup and hair

Part of the design challenge is to create a believable and authentic Irish country pub – one that is both functional and authentic – Sam Strong, Director

- Were the characters aesthetically 'believable'?
- What did you notice about hair and makeup?
- How do the costumes of the characters contribute to the authenticity of the overall design?
- Select **two characters** and analyse and evaluate the costumes they wear in some detail
- Do their costumes change throughout the play?
- Do their costumes reference their status or social standing?
- Do their costumes assist in enhancing the character?
- Consider the character of Finbar, the property developer who's moved back from the big town – how does his costume assist in referencing his ambitious nature?

Conor McPherson set *The Weir* in the 1990s

- Is there anything about the costume, hair and makeup of the characters that is telling of the nineties?
- If you were to set *The Weir* in a different era, what would you need to change about the design?

Some of the characters in the play reference their jobs

- Discuss the choices made for the characters of Brendan and Jim
- Do the costumes relate to their job? Does this assist in enhancing meaning?
- How might you have dressed the characters differently?

As you work towards your own monologue performance, consider how these questions may be relevant to your own costume choice.

Sound

Diagetic sound – sound that exists naturally within the world of the characters that they can hear. It may be useful to consider the pre-set and opening of the play where music is used in different ways

- The internal music of the pub radio
- How do the characters respond to this music? Initially there is only Brendan there to hear it and then Jack arrives. What happens?
- What other ‘natural’ sounds exist within the world of this play? For instance – the cash till
- What did you observe about the external sound we hear as the door opens and closes

Stillness and silence are key components of any performance

- When did you notice stillness and silence being utilised in *The Weir*?
- What do you think it means for the characters?
- How does this silence contribute to meaning in the overall production?
- Characters also make reference to the ‘peace and quiet’. What is their relationship to the ‘peace and quiet’ - is it the same for each character?

Composer and Sound Designer, Steve Francis created a complex composition for *The Weir* which plays throughout the performance

- What did you observe about the composition?
- Analyse and evaluate other sound design and compositional choices that you and your class heard and can recall
- For example, were any non-diagetic sounds present?
- Did sound design contribute to particular character’s situations? Dramatically? Comically? Tragically?
- Analyse and evaluate how the sound design and composition represented the theatrical styles inherent in the production
- Were there moments when rhythm was particularly apparent?

Lighting

On such a naturalistic and authentic set, the lighting plays an important role. Lighting designer, Matt Scott, has used light in a remarkably subtle manner. Consider and discuss the following points:

- The opening scene with Brendan cleaning the pub
- Jacks arrival at the pub
- When Finbar arrives in his car with Valerie
- Whenever a character adds more peat to the fire
- Valerie’s story-telling
- Towards the end of the play as Brendan, Jack and Valerie move to the fire
- See if you can recall how these scenes were lit considering the colour and intensity of the light
- What stood out for you in terms of lighting? Why?
- How did particular lighting states evoke mood?
- Was lighting used symbolically i.e. to capture characters’ feelings or states of mind?

The central concerns of the play

What I love about the play is that the audience is coached through life by Valerie and the other characters. What the playwright says is that life is hard, life is painful, there is death everywhere but there is still potential and there is still capacity for great unity. I think it is a very moving play. –

Nadine Garner, performer

- How does *The Weir* explore the concept of ‘unity’?
- How do the actors use their expressive skills to enhance the sense of ‘unity’ in the play?
- Did you find parts of the play ‘moving’?

When Director, Sam Strong talks about the play, he says - *it offers an exploration of grief, an explanation of how humans deal with the world, and how these conditions are explored through emotions and personal experience. It offers an exploration of how some people are able to talk about it and some aren't. It deals with the gap between hopes and dreams and the reality of people's lives.*

- How do the characters explore grief in *The Weir*?
- Consider the character of Valerie. What has her journey been in the 100 minutes you have witnessed?
- Has she changed?
- Consider and discuss the following words which Sam Strong has used in talking about *The Weir* –
 - Emotions
 - Personal experience
 - Hopes / lost hopes
 - Dreams / thwarted dreams
 - Reality
 - Loneliness
 - Miscommunicate
 - What would you add to this list?

Stagecraft Performance Examination

As you approach the Performance Analysis Outcome, consider how the performances you see could inform your stagecraft examination – interpreting text, conveying context, applying theatrical styles, selecting design elements that can illuminate the actor's work in the monologue.

For instance – if you were performing Valerie's story as a monologue, what essential design elements would you think are important to her costume, hair and makeup, properties, set pieces, sound?

Additional links and further reading

***The Weir* MTC webpage**

<http://www.mtc.com.au/plays-and-tickets/mainstage-2015/the-weir/>

Interview with Leith MacPherson

<http://www.mtc.com.au/interact/2015/08/interview-voice-and-dialect-coach-leith-mcpherson/>

Rehearsal Images

<http://www.mtc.com.au/interact/2015/07/in-rehearsal-the-weir/>

Conor McPherson

Interview: <http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2006/sep/13/theatre4>

Interview: <http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2014/jan/12/conor-mcpherson-tv-drama>

Interview: <http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2011/sep/28/conor-mcpherson-interview>

Wiki Page: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Conor_McPherson

***The Weir* Donmar Warehouse UK Production**

<http://www.donmarwarehouse.com/whats-on/donmar-warehouse/2013/the-weir>

Find *The Weir* on the Royal Court timeline

<http://www.royalcourttheatre.com/about-us/timeline>

Ireland and Irish Culture

Traditional Folklore: <http://www.yourirish.com/folklore>

Culture and History: <http://www.yourirish.com/culture>

Theatrical Styles

Naturalistic Theatre History: <http://www.dramaonlinelibrary.com/genres/naturalistic-realistic-drama-iid-2495>

Naturalism and Stanislavski from the BBC:

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/education/guides/zxn4mp3/revision>

Production Images

All images by Jeff Busby, *The Weir* 2015



L to R: Robert Menzies, Ian Meadows, Peter Kowitz in *The Weir*, 2015



L to R: Peter Kowitz, Nadine Garner in *The Weir*, 2015



L to R: Robert Menzies, Greg Stone, Ian Meadows, Nadine Garner, Peter Kowitz in *The Weir*, 2015



L to R: Greg Stone, Robert Menzies, Ian Meadows, Peter Kowitz in *The Weir*, 2015



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L to R: Peter Kowitz, Robert Menzies, Nadine Garner, Greg Stone, Ian Meadows in *The Weir*, 2015



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