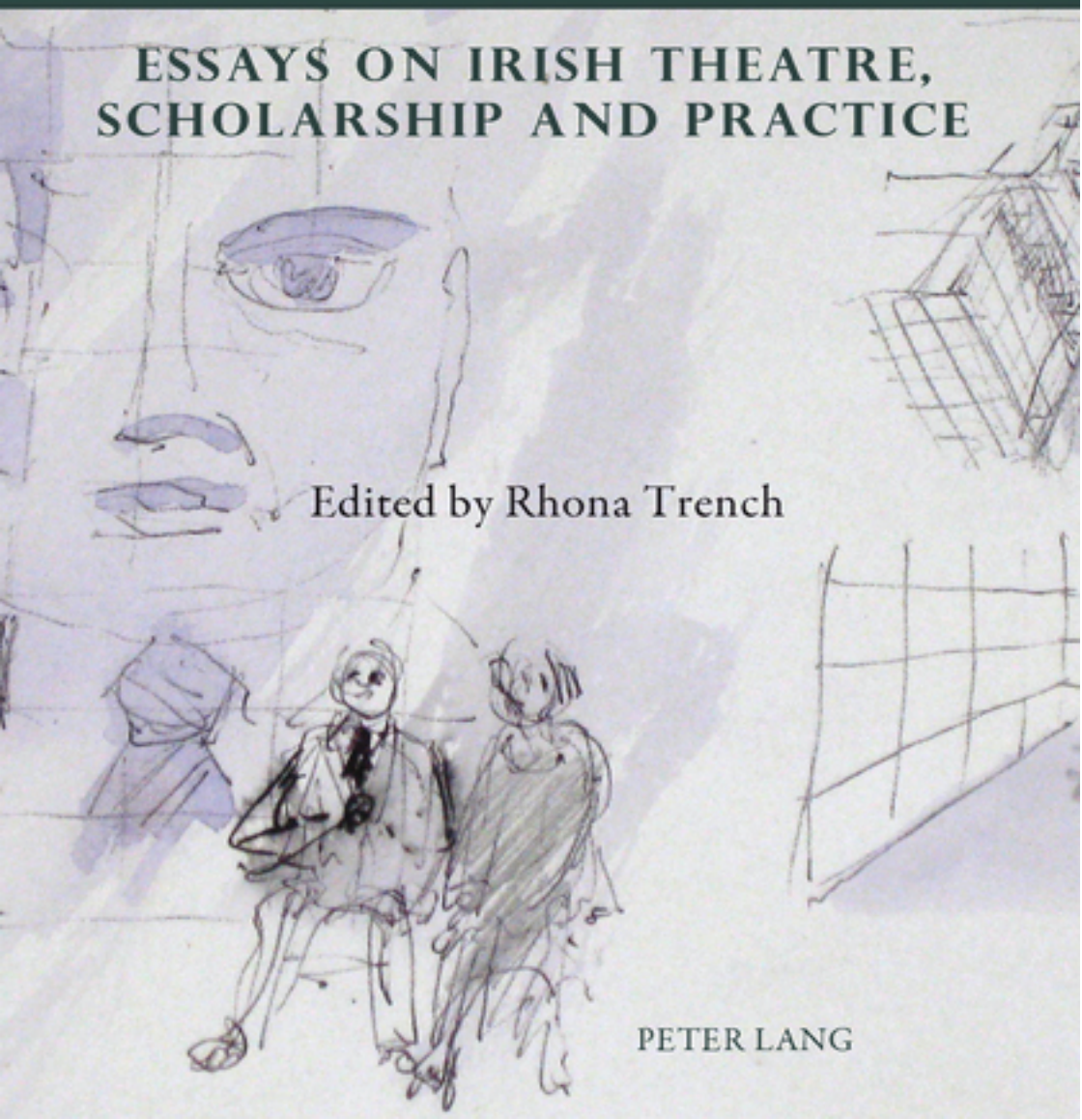


STAGING THOUGHT

ESSAYS ON IRISH THEATRE, SCHOLARSHIP AND PRACTICE

Edited by Rhona Trench

PETER LANG



Foreword

There is no place more desolate than an empty stage. The odd stage lamp abandoned in one corner. Perhaps, an old table and rickety chair to one side, left over from some earlier encounter, maybe an audition. And, everywhere, dust. Like all deserted spaces, the empty stage cries out for human habitation, human action, human voices. This odd potency, this sense of imminence, of something about to happen, is one of the essential ingredients of the theatrical imagination.

Playwrights differ from other writers in several important respects. One such difference is in this spatial dimension in the process of making plays. Playwrights think of writing in terms of space. Thinking of space, of where the thing is going to happen, may come before a word is written. This suggests that space itself may be one of the spurs which gets going the imagination of a playwright.

The nature of the space, its dimensions. Its physicality, its decoration or absence of it, is like an invitation to the actor to appear, to perform. In the Beckett manuscripts in the Trinity College Library there are drafts, notes towards the writing of stage works that are written in the form of geometrical diagrams, A to B to C to D, like theorems waiting to be solved. This mathematical exactitude is an extreme version of what I am talking about. But, when you think about it, such precision, such attention to space, is a crucial feature of all Beckett's work for the stage.

All successful theatre is an arousal of the curiosity of an audience followed by an action which satisfies that curiosity. If this is so, the stage space itself is the first stimulant to the curiosity of an audience. What is this place? Why are we here? Why are we being shown this? All of this occurs before a line is spoken, before a performance begins.

The second stimulant to the curiosity of the audience comes with the appearance of the actor or actors. Who are these people? Why is she dressed like this? And what is she carrying in her hands? This theatrical

experience, too, can happen without a word being spoken. Performance, as we know, even vivid performance, can exist without speech. Indeed, it is the physical meeting, the encounter between the actor and the space she is going to occupy which is the first element in performance. Actors find an affecting security when they step onto a stage precisely because it invites them to step into the mysterious release that is role-playing.

There is a dynamic, then, between space and the human body in theatre which may or may not include human utterance, a powerful release of energy through the creation of the illusion of invented identities. Naturally, as a writer, I would want this dynamic to include speech. The most complete performance for me is one which combines the visual and the verbal at a degree of heightened expression.

It is appropriate that this important book should appear from Sligo. Of all our classical playwrights Yeats is the one who has thought most deeply about this dynamic between space, the human body and speech. There are the startling lines of Congal from *The Herne's Egg*:

This is Tara; in a moment
Men must come out of the gate

This is language in dynamic engagement with stage space, language which transforms a space into a place and drives forward the impetus towards performance.

THOMAS KILROY