The Contemporary Reputation of Brendan Behan

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Then our age was in its prime,
Free from rage and free from crime;
A very merry dancing, drinking,
Laughing and unthinking time.
- John Dryden -- The Secular Masque

In recognition of the need, when a controversial and stimulating literary figure dies, for examination and analysis of the reaction of his contemporary critics, this paper has been designed. The hope of this work is that from it the reader will be moved closer to an understanding of the nature of Brendan Behan as a playwright of the modern theatre.

Of the many rather diverse personalities which have found their ways into the annals of the modern stage, few have received such noisy (if not always favorable) recognition, few have cut as colorful a figure, few, in short, have been as involving as Brendan Behan.

Our dealings for now will be with the dramatic countenance of the two plays which placed Behan in the public notice: The Quare Fellow (1956) and The Hostage (1958). His popularly received autobiography, Borstal Boy, and the frivolous prose phantasmagoria of life in his native Ireland contained between the covers of Brendan Behan's Island, both followed Behan's advent as a playwright, and are of less significance to his literary stature.

As one critic of Behan's plays observed, "Long bits out of the plays have the indefinable sound of projected autobiography, with the author never quite invisible behind his
characters, however real they become."¹ For this reason, we shall begin with the evident, Behan's life, and work through an understanding of the man toward the ambiguous, the meaning of his work.

On March 20, 1964, Behan died at forty-one of a combination of ailments (some of them the result of many years of heavy drinking), leaving his wife, Beatrice, to care for their five-month-old daughter.² Dead was the man whose history is told in Borstal Boy—an appropriate title for the autobiography of one who had spent eight years in prison.³ A product of Dublin's slums, Behan at sixteen was sentenced in Liverpool to three years in a borstal (British youth prison) for illegal possession of explosives.⁴ He had been sent by the Irish Republican Army to sink a battleship.⁵ He was incarcerated twice more in the next decade: once in connection with the attempted murder of two detectives; once for aiding an I.R.A. man in his escape from jail.⁶ Newsweek conjectures that "these experiences in detention sustained his anti-authoritarian sentiments and provoked his most powerful writing."⁷ There is little doubt that

¹"Laughter and the Cage," Nation, CXXXVIII (February 28, 1959), 190.
⁴"End to Confusion," Newsweek, LXIII (March 30, 1964), 72.
⁵Ibid.
⁶Ibid.
⁷Ibid.
Behan had "anti-authoritarian sentiments." He admitted had considered "turning to a life of crime," but added, "When I'm drunk, I'm too drunk to aim a gun, and when I'm sober, I'm too cowardly to shoot it."

Miraculously though, Behan was not—in the years of his writing success—the rather bitter "ex-con" one would expect to be the end result of such hard times. He once responded to an interviewer with this broadly philosophical statement: "I respect kindness to human beings first of all, and kindness to animals. I don't respect the law; I have a total irreverence for anything connected with society except that which makes the roads safer, the beer stronger, the food cheaper, and old men and women warmer in the winter, and happier in the summer." Sean O'Casey, another product of the Dublin slums, said of Behan upon the latter's death that "He was amiable and kind without bitterness or venom and had no literary jealousy." Behan's mother once quipped that "he had a heart as big as his thirst."

The life that Behan portrayed in his plays is as filled with paradoxes and anomalies, with depth and mystery, as the one he lived. Whatever it was that made Brendan Behan "a brave man in an age of ninnies," we can safely assume

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8 Ibid.
11 Ibid.
that, with respect to popularity, "It was his macabre comedy of prison life, The Quare Fellow, which in 1956 made Behan."\(^{13}\) Let us then take a brief look at The Quare Fellow.

The setting of The Quare Fellow is an Ulster prison where two convicted murderers are sentenced to hang. On the day the action begins, Dunlavin, a garrulous long-time prisoner, tells us that the man who beat his wife to death with a silver-topped cane (presented him, we're told, by the "Combined staffs, Excess and Refunds Branch of the late Great Southern Railways") has had his death-sentence commuted to life imprisonment. A few minutes later, "Silver-top" arrives and goes immediately to his cell where he tries to hang himself. The action continues to shift from the ribaldry of the prisoners to the hangman's benign and scientific (if slightly inebriated) execution of his duties. Finally, the action comes to rest lightly on the tension of Reagan, a compassionate warder who out-spokenly hates hangings and endangers his position as head-warder by saying so. The whole prison community awaits the following morning, which will bring "The Quare Fellow" to the gallows.

A number of critics feel that "it is as though he (Behan) had decided the problem of avoiding the stock situations of prison stories by dispensing with both scenery and story." 14 "By the end of Act I," states the same critic, "we are content to wait for him to get down to the business of providing a dramatic theme in his own leisurely way.... By the end of Act II we are still waiting, and soon thereafter we are aware that our hope was in vain." 15

Nevertheless, Behan used the same unusual technique two years later in The Hostage, which portrays a British soldier held prisoner by the I.R.A. in a desperate attempt to bring about the reprieve of an Irish lad who is to be hanged for shooting a policeman. The setting is a "magnificently sleazy slum dwelling, half lodginghouse, half brothel" 16 in which a large and motley mob of prostitutes, queers, and ex-I.R.A. men subsist, apparently, on a diet of stout. After three fast-moving acts of "mixed wit and foolishness, pomposity and humor, selfishness and compassion, until you can't tell the saints from the sinners," 17 Leslie,

14 "Quare Fellow," Theatre Arts, XLIII (February, 1959), 66.
15 Ibid.
the British soldier, persuades Teresa, a naive country girl who believes herself in love with Leslie, to go for help. The police fight a battle with the I.R.A. in which Leslie is killed, but "before we have much time to mourn his death, Leslie jumps up and sings what may be the message of The Hostage:

'The bells of hell go ting-a-ling-a-ling
For you but not for me.
O Death where is thy sting-a-ling-a-ling
Or grave thy victory?'"18

The accusation of formlessness fell as heavily on The Hostage as it had on The Quare Fellow. Alan Pryce-Jones of Theatre Arts Magazine said, "I have to use the word play for lack of anything better; but in fact The Hostage is a kind of vaudeville, charivari, or callithump, in which the parts have no constant relation to the whole."19 Mr. Pryce-Jones suggests that The Hostage could have been written by "some quiet old soul without much gift for writing plays but with a good ear for talk and a romantic yearning to be one of the boys...."20 Henry Hawes of the Saturday Review felt that "...this Donnybrook is nothing more than a collection of Dublin types carrying on like music-hall comedians on the periphery of a borrowed tragic plot."21

20 Ibid.
21 Hawes, op. cit., p. 32.
A number of critics judged harshly Behan's failure to live up to the "strictly realistic demands" of director Littlewood's practically bare setting, especially in The Quare Fellow, which held its United States opening in New York's open arena stage at Circle-in-the-Square. 22 "No amount of stylization," charged Mr. Pryce-Jones, "can establish what is most wanting: a requisite solidarity." 23

And well might the defenders of the "unity of action" rave, for Behan had originally written The Quare Fellow as a radio-script, then it became a one-act play, and finally a three-act play. 24 The Hostage was commissioned by Gael Linn, the organization for reviving the Irish language, and purportedly took Behan just a fortnight to write. 25 Such haphazard and hasty methods of composition do not always make for perfect works.

Despite the furor raised over Behan's meandering plot, both The Quare Fellow and The Hostage were proclaimed successes by the critics and the populace alike. "The Quare Fellow's peculiar power seems to take hold in spite of the play's scanty dramatic structure rather than because of it."

23Ibid.
24Christopher Hicks, op. cit., p. 9.
25Ibid.
and in The Hostage "it is the incidental hijinks, rather than the play itself, that seize the attention and are remembered," said a critic for Nation magazine.\(^{26}\) Robert Hatch of Horizon magazine felt that "...in 'The Quare Fellow,' that cold-eyed attack on capital punishment, Behan constructs horror and pity out of small vignettes of courtesy, tact, humor, slyness, and above all tolerance,"\(^{27}\) and the courtesy and humor, the slyness and tolerance in Behan's plays come from the strange collage of characters he portrays. Even unsympathetic Mr. Pryce-Jones admitted, "If you thrill to stage Oirish, and have an exceptionally quick ear, this is the play for you."\(^{28}\) One could conjecture that Behan had "done time," said one reviewer, by "the excellence of his characterization.... Every one of his inmates and warders is a three-dimensional figure."\(^{29}\) Indeed, some critics, while railing against the amorphousness of Behan's works, admitted that it gave Behan the freedom necessary to "sketch an astonishing number of mordantly funny portraits."\(^{30}\)

Behan's "dramatic technique," then, is simply a vaudevillian procedure of incidents or anecdotes, which are (at best) loosely arranged about the simplest thread of a plot,

\(^{26}\) "Laughter and the Cage," p. 190.

\(^{27}\) Robert Hatch, op. cit., p. 113.

\(^{28}\) Alan Pryce-Jones, op. cit., p. 9.

\(^{29}\) "Quare Fellow," Theatre Arts, XLIII (February, 1959), 66.

\(^{30}\) Donald Malcolm, "Off Broadway," Newsweek, XXXIV (December 6, 1958), 119.
and which allow a tremendous amount of freedom to both writer and cast. Such freedom in the hands of a man as adept at humor, as openly irreverent of man's society, and as unlimited in his language as Behan can create an inexpressible fracas—and it did. "At various times," noted The New Yorker, "Behan takes pot shots at everything from Anglo-Irishmen ('an Anglo-Irishman is an Irishman with a horse') to de Valera ('He speaks seven languages, Irish and English not among them')."  

Released from the restrictions of an involving plot, "performers appear remarkably uninhibited, as if the whole business were invented at rehearsal." In both the New York and the London productions of both plays, lines were changed or added to the script with the passing weeks to keep Behan's satirical arm tight around the contemporary shoulder. In the New York Circle-in-the-Square production of The Hostage, for instance, there was, for a time, "a personal diatribe against Dorothy Kilgallen, and a more subtle dig at The Connection when he has the prize fighter say to the audience, 'This is the way it is, man. This is the way it really is.'" At intervals the action of the play is "fitfully interrupted to give the cast a chance to line out some traditional airs, to which Mr. Behan has contributed outrageous lyrics, 

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31 "Gaelic Gyrations," New Yorker, XXXVI (October 1, 1960), 128.  
34 Alan Pryce-Jones, op. cit., p. 9.
and every now and then one of the characters cuts loose with a jig.\textsuperscript{35}

Amidst the ribaldry and confusion of such a production, it is sometimes easy to forget that Behan is, if "less than a philosopher, more than a buffoon."\textsuperscript{36} "...It's easy to call it mere tongue-in-cheekiness, a jolly but self-indulgent romp..."\textsuperscript{37} Richard Hayes of \textit{Commonweal} praised the dramatic technique of Irish playwright Sean O'Casey, saying that it compelled the soul to its unique resolution, finality and truth.\textsuperscript{38} "This experience of revelation," Mr. Hayes continued, is "the fundamental trajectory of all great drama," and was the finale of the major O'Casey plays.\textsuperscript{39} "Behan," Hayes contended, "stands by virtue of his antecedents, his moral commitments, his intentions" in the same "line" as O'Casey, but "apart from a certain scurrilous drollery, \textit{The Quare Fellow} is fatally uninteresting, and as a document of compassion...it dwindles into a kind of garrulous morbidity."\textsuperscript{40} Hayes concluded with the indictment that "Where O'Casey moves always, however erratically, toward the pain of revelation, Mr. Behan is content to rest in an (often quite expressive) complacency."\textsuperscript{41}

\textsuperscript{35}"Gaelic Gyrations," \textit{New Yorker}, XXXVI (October 1, 1960), 125.
\textsuperscript{36}"The Hostage," \textit{Time}, LXXVI (October 3, 1960), 51.
\textsuperscript{37}Ibid.
\textsuperscript{38}Richard Hayes, op. cit., p. 438.
\textsuperscript{39}Ibid.
\textsuperscript{40}Ibid.
\textsuperscript{41}Ibid.
Perhaps Mr. Hayes failed to recognize Behan's depth—failed to perceive that "...amid the shenanigans, there comes a sudden stab or a surface shot that plumbs the depths...." A militant I.R.A. officer who turns to a laughing Circle-in-the-Square audience to command, "Silence! This is a serious play," may not be as irrelevant and frivolous an addition to the script as Mr. Hayes would have us believe. Is "complacency" the proper description of the works of a man who Robert Hatch says "is in rebellion against establishment and propriety?" Most critics would stand firmly on the conviction that Behan both had something to say, and said it effectively. "The Quare Fellow" was hanged, as Reagan said, "at the public expense, and they let it go on," and Leslie was only resurrected long enough to lay "the blame and damnation for his death (and the boy in the Belfast jail)... on everybody connected with the I.R.A. and the British Empire, not the soldier" who fired the shot. Such instances reflect an attitude far from complacent, and make Behan's humorous attack on our times far more than "scurrilous drollery." Also, there can be no mistaking (by virtue of his popularity, if nothing else) the fact that Behan's carefree style was strikingly effective. "His heroes are tough and disreputable, his speech is rude, and his ability to seize and shake the imagination of his time is prodigious."

43 "Wooly and Wonderful," Newsweek, LVI (October 3, 1960), 57.
44 Robert Hatch, op. cit., p. 113.
46 Robert Hatch, op. cit., p. 113.
Aside from these more serious indictments of society, the myriad remarks and anecdotes which comprise a Behan play are, thus, intended to "cry havoc—to laugh at ourselves, to curse, to give ourselves and the world at large the razzberry."47 "Anybody who can raise a laugh these days deserves an accolade,"48 said one review of The Hostage, but laughter also gives a wry wit like Behan the full attention of an imperfect society. Moreover, a foothold of attention was all Behan needed; from the opening lines of a play, his blasphemy of all that is orthodox—if not his humor—engenders interest. "Behan's dialogue might well get him tossed out of a waterfront saloon,"49 was one critic's comment. Another felt that "He is no one's cup of tea who recoils from finding it sloshed in the saucer, no one's humorist who, for being outraged, can't be amused."50 Behan deals the harsh blows of blasphemy to all that he considers farcical or unjust, and many find the battle powerfully invigorating. "In the midst of death we are still alive and Behan's subversion explains why his pull on the audience is close to irresistible,"51 wrote Robert Hatch. Hatch finds

47Harold Clurman, "Theatre," Nation, CXCI (October 8, 1960), 236.
50"Gaelic Gyrations," New Yorker, XXXVI (October 1, 1960), 128.
51Robert Hatch, op. cit., p. 113.
that "Irreverence has almost disappeared from our daily speech and we miss the salt of it."\textsuperscript{52} Everything from atomic warfare ("The North and South Poles they are parted,/
Perhaps it is all for the best,/
'Till the H-bomb will bring
them together--/
And there we will let matters rest.") and capital punishment ("England, the hangman of thousands.") to the church ("My Father was a parish priest.") gets a generous dose of "salt" in Behan.

Are we to conclude, then, that \textit{The Quare Fellow} is a comic portrayal of prison life with a slight moral overtone, and that \textit{The Hostage} is a guileless observation of Dublin characters—a romp of comic and carefree anecdotes with little or no meaning beyond amusement?

Part of the melange of incongruities that confront a student of Behan is the tendency toward comedy in a man who had spent a quarter of his life in prison and the rest in poverty. Andrew Malone wrote a chapter many decades ago on the rationale behind "The Necessity for Comedy" in the Irish Theatre which is still valid. He said, "Irish comedy certainly is disposed to hit hard, and there is always some moral purpose."\textsuperscript{53} At this point, contentions begins over just how bitter Behan actually intended to be. Some critics find his humor "macabre,"\textsuperscript{54} while others see Behan as silly and optimistic. Robert Hatch states,

\textsuperscript{52} Robert Hatch, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 113.
\textsuperscript{53} Andrew Malone, \textit{The Irish Drama} (New York, 1929), p. 227.
\textsuperscript{54} "Quare Fellow," \textit{Theatre Arts}, XLIII (February, 1959), 66.
"He insults you with his arm around you. He invites you to join in a song dedicated to your own asininity." 55 Few observers believe that his humor is ineffectual.

G.K. Chesterton once made a statement concerning English policy toward Ireland: "While we are laughing at a comic Irishman in fiction [refering to the English stage version of the comic Irish character], we are creating a tragic Irishman in fact." 56 Walter Starkie of the Saturday Review found these words applicable to Brendan Behan, the man behind The Quare Fellow and The Hostage, and many critics would note a parallel to this dichotomy in the plays themselves. If Behan is a comedian, then the joke he tells is "a hell of a joke, and a very serious one...." 57 It would be possible for us to conjecture endlessly on the dagger of social criticism behind the cloak of comedy in Behan, but let us follow through on just one example, Irish patriotic zeal.

The theme of anti-chauvinism is not new to Irish literature. "From the beginning of the century," comments Edith Oliver in the New Yorker, "most of Ireland's good writers have been trying—with ridicule or poetry or whatever—to snap the country out of her bondage to worn-out standards and attitudes, and to memories of

55 Robert Hatch, op. cit., p. 114.
56 Walter Starkie, "Irish Extravaganza," Saturday Review, XLIII (March 12, 1960), 84.
57 "Laughter and the Cage," p. 190.
injustice which should be worn-out."58 Such was Behan's rationale behind presenting a militant I.R.A. officer who reminded one of a Gestapo fanatic but who could not pay the rent for a room in which to keep a hostage, an I.R.A. volunteer who is either a naive fool or just extremely inarticulate, an ex-I.R.A. man who continually sings patriotic ballads of past glories and who sees the modern I.R.A. as a farce by comparison, and "Nonsewer," who in his senility (and parading with kilt and bagpipes) still believes the I.R.A. will soon push the British into the sea. The numerous sly remarks against the I.R.A., and the satirical connotation of "Up the Republic!" are apparent to any sensitive viewer of The Hostage. There can be no mistaking Behan's sincerity in his disapproval of this cause, which he once so fervently advocated. "The first duty of a writer," he once remarked during one of his rare, serious interviews, "is to let his country down. He knows his own people the best. He has a special responsibility to let them down."59 "He does these things," wrote Robert Hatch in reference to Behan's anti-Irish-nationalism theme, "because the remnants of the I.R.A. are the sons of heroes sunk into seediness, crazy with the wail of old glories and falling out of the frame of reality like fragments from a cracked mirror."60

58 Edith Oliver, "Off Broadway," New Yorker, XXXVII (December 23, 1961), 58.
59 Robert Hatch, op. cit., p. 113.
60 Ibid.
Behan's plays, let there be no doubt, are intended to dig deeply into the conscience of his victim. His rebellion, if not bitter, is at least sincere.

In the London production of *The Hostage*, the final words of the play were spoken not by Leslie, as in the printed script, but by a chorus of the whole cast, which chanted: "The Bells of Hell go ring-a-ling-a-ling for us but not for him." An audience, after the delightful asides and contemporary satire of *The Hostage*, is left with this haunting recrimination echoing through their minds. A number of critics—especially reviewers of *The Quare Fellow*—even felt that Behan went too far toward a sharp-tongued accusation of society. *Commonweal*'s Richard Hayes advised that "Mr. Behan might profitably consider his kinsman Joyce's strictures on those improper arts ('pornographical and didactic') which excite the kinetic responses of desire or loathing."

Was Behan's rebellion, for all its clamor, in step with our times? I think yes. A critic of *Borstal Boy* in February of 1959 noted that "Two days ago, the newspapers in London told of large sums of money voted by Parliament for penal reforms, and of the necessity for some little discussion as to just how they would be spent. And this

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morning the papers are full of an I.R.A. raid...." Behan was a highly individual and contemporary voice of our age, and rebellion was not associated in his mind with "lonely withdrawal and frustrated rage," but with participation, protest, and, as we can see by his life, subversion—even the subversion of comedy designed to sting.

For all that made him a playwright of our times, however, Behan seems very little to be a product of the mode of thought prevalent in modern theatre. What sets Behan above (in some minds) and apart (in most) from the contemporary company of playwrights? Robert Hatch states:

It is convenient then, almost to the point of being inevitable, that [Behan] should be thought of in company with such maudling talents of the day as Beckett, Genet, and John Osborne. But the association is more evident than it is comfortable. These others have in common a vision of society in decay: their sense smell of bad teeth and septic fish, and the condition they diagnose does not seem to be reversible.

Hatch also asserts that they "do not rebel from within a community; they have removed themselves." None of these charges can be leveled at Behan. The social criticism of Behan's work, which is meant to impress the conscience of his audience deeply, is not, however, a part of the rather fatalistic helplessness that pervades

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63 "Laughter and the Cage," p. 190.
64 Robert Hatch, op. cit., p. 114.
65 Ibid.
66 Ibid.
the modern dramatic school. Behan's plays choose to laugh—as the man himself laughed—at the incomprehensibility of life, and the criticism that they contain is not meant despairingly, but as a "compelling testament of hope, to the addled milk of human kindness, and to desperation as well."67

For in both Behan plays, the feeling that society is without values—which Nation's Harold Clurman feels is "at the bottom" of the work being done today in drama—68 is deserted in favor of values based on Behan's idea of human nature. In Brendan Behan we have a man who is critical of man's society without feeling venomous toward it, and satirical of human nature while feeling an open-minded and warm-hearted affection for it. With the advent of Behan, one reviewer feels, "...a gush of blood seemed to sweep through the stagnant arteries of Broadway. We were back again at the old business of being the vulgar, raucous, incorrigible children of God."69 And in Behan's plays are all the wildly happy and incomprehensibly tragic, the complex and confusing flaws of life and of mankind—and they compel any observer to join in. The didactic school of critics, who would have Behan "call his own nature to order, and hit out at human folly instead of smiling along

68 Harold Clurman, op. cit., p. 236.
69 Robert Hatch, op. cit., p. 114.
with it, simply define the value of theatre differently from the way Behan does. Behan's plays display a basic trust in man, not to be good, evil, or even alterable, but to be himself; and it is not Behan's idea that the role of the theatre is to attempt to alter human nature.

Most critics who commented on both The Quare Fellow and The Hostage favored the former over the latter because though:

For some, The Hostage will seem a wild spree and a joyous release from the sobriety of most conventional theatre.... to those of us who were deeply moved and excited by the Circle-in-the-Square production of Mr. Behan's Quare Fellow, it can only seem by comparison badly organized and half-baked Behan. 71

By the traditional criteria of plot, symmetry, realism, and moral purpose, The Quare Fellow admittedly scores higher than The Hostage.

But for that which we could only receive from Behan—the rough-edged humor, the sarcastic striking out at the pompous and the ridiculous, and the uncontrolled and frolicking love of all that is human in life (that which conveys itself in song and jig)—The Hostage is the play to see, to experience, to ponder. In our age and in dealing with a man who was as much a part of that age as Behan, one can only misinterpret, undervalue, and err by demanding that his plays conform precisely to those which have come before.

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70 Alan Pryce-Jones, op. cit. p. 8.
71 Ibid.
Brendan Behan was, for one sympathetic reviewer, the tragic figure of our times—"Mortal man in a life situation demanding against humanity. We should all drink with him."² Caroline Swan, who was to a great extent responsible for bringing *The Hostage* from London to New York, felt that the real purpose of that play was "To cut through the artificiality and hypocrisy of our times and share with the audience, as Brendan shared with the world, the truth and warmth and vigor of *The Hostage."³ Toward the goals of sharing truth, warmth, and vigor, no critic can deny the efficiency of *The Hostage* and its apparent equality of worth to *The Quare Fellow*.

After *The Hostage* had run its course in the United States and Canada, Behan's story becomes one of progressively rapid decline. The prose critics were not as caustic in evaluating the works of Behan as the reviewers of the stage, and he found a great deal of popular success with his casually written *Borstal Boy* (1959) and only a bit less success with his fragmentary *Brendan Behan's Island* (1963).⁴ There followed a couple of radio-sketches. A radio script, "The Big House," was adapted for the stage in 1963, but failed to make headway. A jazz revue, "Impulse," with which

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³Caroline Swan, *op. cit.*, p. 27.
⁴Christopher Ricks, *op. cit.* p. 9.
Behan was closely associated, failed in Toronto in 1961; then came two new plays, Richard's Cork Leg and Checkmate, which came to nothing and were at last shelved. 75

Christopher Ricks of The New York Review commented, I think accurately, on the reason for Behan's failure:

To look back now over Behan's work is to see how terribly repetitive he was. Three times he used the anecdote about Queen Victoria giving five pounds to the Battersea Dogs' Home at the same time as to the Irish famine fund, so as not to seem to be encouraging rebels. The jokes, the songs, the historical incidents—all return word for word again and again and again. Not because they are obsessions, but because Behan was short of material. 76

To what degree we may attribute the literary decline of Behan to his running short of something to say, and to what degree his failure may be attributed to other matters (e.g. his declining health or his monetary success) is a moot question. Many of our contemporary critics feel that today's successful playwrights owe a great deal of their popularity to the fact that modern drama is badly in need of talent. I would agree with the majority of Behan's reviewers that the author of The Hostage and The Quare Fellow was certainly no creative genius. The chaotic nature of his work made necessary only a minimum amount of discipline, refinement, and skill. One would never think of comparing the creative ability of Behan to that of, say, Sean O'Casey or Tennessee Williams.

75 Christopher Ricks, op. cit., p. 9.
76 Ibid.
Yet as a playwright, Behan's contribution to his age was both unique and worthy. The careful balance and cross-fire between his clever humor and his stinging criticism has won for him a level of achievement for which many an author has tried and failed. Behan's plays were respected by the critics and attended by the public, and they impressed both. The critic was made to broaden his concepts of the proper form of a good play because Behan's plays were meritorious despite their deviation from the accepted mode of even his contemporaries (much less those limits set by dramatists of ages past). The public was made to acknowledge in laughter the serio-comic condition of man as Behan saw it, and the ridiculousness and triviality of human society.

Behan's method was a road that he built for himself toward a goal which he kept consistently in mind. His unorthodox and blasphemous style was not simply for the sake of deviation or a meaningless rebellion. Behan wrote with an unerring personal philosophy of life and of the theatre. The stage, for him, was the display case of the artist. Drama was the art of presenting life's patterns and flaws, and the skill of the artist was not only in his ability to present that delight and pathos which any artist gleans from life, but in his ability to emphasize non-didactically the underlying truth behind contemporary daily lives. Critical and impressive presentation—
neither moral judgment nor simple diversion as an end—was Behan's idea of the role of the artist and the theatre.

It is a popular indictment among the literary elite that the United States—indeed, the entire industrial West—has of late turned an increasingly deaf ear toward its most useful and necessary critic, the artist. The problem of the censored Henry Miller and the lightly-taken Arthur Miller is how to reach a content and blase bourgeois society. The artist, as the iconoclast and critic of society and the interpreter of Nature, has never been more remote from his public than he is today.

Brendan Behan, however, so successfully combined the unorthodox with the humorous, the satirical with the clever, the critical with the witty, that his idea of truth was reacted to—sometimes violently, always bluntly—by every faction with which he came in contact. The test of Behan's success as an artist is the contrast between the popularity and fanfare of his reception in some countries and societies, and the disdain for and even censorship of his works by others. The decline of Behan came not so much because of a change in his material itself, but simply because his later work failed to arouse people to either disdain or delight.

Brendan Behan's greatest gift to both the modern theatre and the world is not his strictly theatrical contribution to the stage. The unique legacy of Behan lies
in his courageous view of life and is to be found behind every word and movement—every song and jig—of his plays. What Behan tried to say was what it took him most of his short, difficult life to learn; that Dryden's "Merry and unthinking time" is here to be enjoyed by every man, if only he would bring himself and his society into perspective. The heroes of his plays are, in the final analysis, those who laugh at the world around them and choose to find in humor and stout the bountiful life.

In his characteristic manner, Behan once wrote:

Death is vulgarized when looked upon as an end. It may be the end in this world as far as the bloke is concerned, but life goes on.... I don't know what life is...I'm a very confused man. But I'm all for resurrection. There should be resurrection every week for the dead. 77

May Brendan Behan have his periodic resurrection in performances of his plays and even in occasional senior honors theses.

77"End to Confusion," p. 72.
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