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SHINING CITY – Conor McPherson
Royal Court Theatre

Psychotherapy as a discipline is and remains problematic for many socialists. While few of us would want to deny the value of professional help for combating depression or other symptoms of unhappiness, therapy as a profession remains predominantly trapped within the narrow mindset of individualism. For many therapists, alienation is about an individual's inability to conform to the norms of the society they inhabit (in the sense of being 'ill-adjusted'); fine and true, but the onus of responsibility is frequently placed solely upon the 'dysfunctional' individual, without consideration of the possibility that the society itself might be the primary cause of such alienation. Also, therapy's seems to appeal predominantly to the upper and middle classes, whose 'issues' are much less likely to derive from poverty, unemployment, repossession, and so on.

[There have of course been numerous Marxists who have entered into an engagement with the specific methodology of Freudian psychoanalysis, as a means of explaining processes of repression that reveal more about broader societal forces. Alas, Freudianism has been thoroughly appropriated for the sustenance of bourgeois conformity, especially in the United States. Terry Eagleton describes American 'ego psychology' as "a psychology concerned with how the ego adapts to social life: by therapeutic techniques, the individual is 'fitted' into his natural, healthy role as an aspiring executive with the appropriate make of automobile, and any distressing personality traits which might deviate from this norm are 'treated'".]

Therapy is at the heart of Conor McPherson's latest play, which focuses upon two primary characters, a forty-something therapist called Ian and a fifty-something recently widowed man called John, who visits him after being driven crazy, unable to work, by apparitions of his dead wife in his house. Both inhabit relatively comfortable middle class employment (John reveals himself to be a rep for a catering supplier). At the outset, John seems a nervous and deeply unsettled character, unused to articulating that which disturbs him (perhaps an appeal to bourgeois notions of 'emotional intelligence'). Through the course of the play he gains increased composure and calm simply through the ability to talk to a 'friend' (which relatively passive role Ian plays, suggesting that therapy acts merely as a temporary form of catharsis in an alienated society). In the three of the five scenes of the play that feature just these two characters, more is gradually revealed about events prior to John's wife's tragic road accident – unfulfilled, frustrated adulterous intent, visitation to a prostitute resulting in a minor violent incident, followed by hints of domestic violence towards his wife (ignored by many critics who find this fits uneasily with their notion of John's cuddly 'character'), leading to irrational feelings of responsibility for her accidental death.

Meanwhile, in the other two scenes, we see Ian's life begin to fragment. First he breaks off his relationship with his wife or girlfriend Neasa (played with a powerful combination of anger and vulnerability by Kathy Kiera Clarke), who cares for their child and will be left as a needy single mother. Later he brings back to his office a male prostitute, Laurence, as a first attempt to come to terms with his latent homosexuality. He is revealed as an ex-priest; perhaps in a secular world his patients

take the place of those who attended his confessional. Without giving away the trite conclusion, it will suffice to say that the play presents a textbook view of psychotherapeutic 'transference', without any consideration of the ideologies that might underlie such a notion. Ian, about to move away from the job and city (Dublin) in which he has never felt settled, has become highly dependent upon John by the end of the play, desperately grateful when John offers him his card.

Ultimately, the play amounts to little more than an exposition of bourgeois male angst, with a few red herrings of religion and superstition as a minor foil to the uncritical adoption of naturalistic theatrical conventions. John's life is sorted when he is restored to a state of mind that enables him to continue his work in a service industry successfully. Women are only significant to the extent that they impact upon the male characters. The alienation of working-class Neasa, struggling to look after her baby in a society that provides little help in terms of child-care, or that of the male prostitute Laurence, forced into such work since an accident prevented him from carrying out his work as a van driver, are matters passed over lightly yet much more profound in nature than the whims of the two major protagonists. Michael Billington in the *Guardian* described this as 'a play that suggests there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in our modern materialist philosophy'. Try explaining that to a single mother (such as Neasa) trying desperately to feed her children on social security.

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