

## Chapter 4

# Staging Theatrical Child– Centric Violence: Aesthetic Ownership in *The Pillowman*

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### ABSTRACT

*Prolific and controversial British-Irish playwright Martin McDonagh has built a prominent career on genre-bending works that combine irreverent humor and aggressive violence. His award-winning black comedy play *The Pillowman*, which premiered in 2003 at London’s renowned National Theatre, is one of the playwright’s most well-known and divisive pieces of theatre. Arguably, the play’s most memorable moments involve segments reenacting original twisted fairy tale-esque stories. The majority of McDonagh’s dark tales center on children characters enduring acts of violence and cruelty, ultimately concluding with disturbing endings. The *Pillowman* script offers few instructions in its storytelling scenes, allowing—even demanding—artistic ownership of each production’s unique aesthetic approach to the unsettling material. This chapter discusses the divisiveness of McDonagh’s work, his inspiration from violence in historical fairy tales, and the sensitive considerations and controversies theatre leadership teams must ponder when staging fictionalized child-centric violence.*

### INTRODUCTION

Highly acclaimed Irish playwright Martin McDonagh is well-known for his controversial black comedy narratives consisting of irreverent humor, disturbing content, and aggressive shock values. His plays have been described by theater critics as “grotesque,” “unsettling,” “intense,” “provocative,” “overwhelming,” “brutal,” “uncomfortable,” “harsh,” “nauseating,” “disturbing,” “draining,” and “challenging,” even within praise-filled reviews (Moore, 2007; Wolf, 2003; Crawley, 2015; Clarke, 2019; Newmark, 2015; Bochicchio, 2016; Schkloven, 2015; Kenah, 2007; Stuhlbarg, 2006). Considered “one of the most distinguished living playwrights,” McDonagh’s writing frequently tells narratives involving amoral characters, sharp naturalistic dialogue, and cruel acts (Mohammed, 2014: p. 22; Hodges, 2003). The playwright’s

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meteoric rise began in 1996 with the premiere of his provocative play *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*, a black comedy depicting a toxic co-dependent relationship between a mother and daughter that ends with the daughter torturing her mother with hot oil before aggressively bashing in her head with a fire poker. McDonagh rejects the notion that he attempts pure shock for its own sake, instead crediting his writing style with a refusal to censor his imagination, stating, “I’m more worried about boring people than offending them” (Pacheco, 2005). The black comedy playwright also puts equal importance on the humor in his violent stories, explaining, “The jokes are as important to me as the violence and the sadness” (Crawley, 2016).

McDonagh’s award-winning black comedy play *The Pillowman*, which premiered in 2003 at London’s renowned National Theatre before transferring to New York City’s Broadway in 2005, is considered a peak example of the playwright’s irreverent sensibilities. During its initial tenures in New York City and London, the divisive play earned both high praise and deep criticism—even outrage—from critics and audiences, including walkouts during its Broadway run (Pacheco, 2005; Shalom, 2015: p. 1). The play’s reputation successfully survived the controversy, earning financial profits and esteemed recognition from theatre’s highest awarding institutions, including winning the 2004 ‘Best New Play’ Olivier Award and the 2005 ‘Best Foreign Play’ New York Drama Critic’s Circle Award, and being nominated for the 2005 ‘Best Play’ Tony Award and the 2005 ‘Outstanding Play’ Drama Desk Award (Gans and Simonson, 2005; Brantley, 2005; Olivier Awards, n.d.; Tony Awards, n.d.). Additionally, the play won specific awards for its actors and technical designs, including the 2005 ‘Outstanding Featured Actor in a Play’ and ‘Outstanding Sound Design’ Drama Desk Awards, the 2005 ‘Outstanding Featured Actor in a Play’ Outer Critics Circle Award, and the 2005 ‘Best Scenic Design of a Play’ and ‘Best Lighting Design of a Play’ Tony Awards (Olivier Awards, n.d.; Tony Awards, n.d.). The successful London and Broadway runs of the play placed McDonagh’s controversial work at a foreground of theatre conversations, earning him descriptors ranging from “prestigiously talented” and “brilliant” to “upsetting” and “a sick mind” (Rooney, 2005; Stuhlbarg, 2006; Pacheco, 2005).

The organization and methodology of this chapter explore the evolution of violence in aesthetic on-stage performance, summarizes *The Pillowman* and its specific controversies, explores McDonagh’s inspiration in historical fairy tales, and discusses interviews between this chapter’s author and three directors of recent productions of *The Pillowman* who detail their aesthetic visions and ownerships for the violent piece of theatre. These explorations further necessary discussions of the perceived merits of violence in modern theatre by navigating McDonagh’s *The Pillowman*—one of the most controversial and violent plays offered to modern audiences in 21<sup>st</sup>-century commercial theatre.

## **THEATRE ART: AESTHETIC PERFORMANCE AND VIOLENCE**

Since theatre is traditionally a physical, live presentation in front of spectators, theatrical aesthetics can be defined through various fragmented or collective perspectives. Philosophy, sociology, psychology, and even semiology can all own rightful claim in the shared aesthetics of performance art, leading some contemporary philosophers to “put forward an analytical aesthetics that no longer seeks to define art, but to establish how the spectator and the context decide that they are looking at art” (Pavis, 2016: pp. 4-5). Contemporary theatre is inherently interactive and collaborative artistry that is simultaneously experienced and witnessed. Subsequently, those who define the existence and value of staged aesthetics include the director (the person heading a production’s artistic vision), the designers and performers

(the people creatively executing the director's vision), and the audience (the people who are ultimately consuming and critiquing the performed art). At any given moment, every aesthetic component from process to performance is personally interpreted by those in a theatre production's cast, crew, or audience, granting members of each group the chance to define any perceived aesthetical meanings.

Violence has historically been a common aesthetical element of staged drama. Ancient Greek tragedies often constructed themselves on plots involving combat, suicide, or murder. Early traditional Asian theatre told stories of abuse and wrongful executions. Dramatic presentations in the ancient Roman world contained bloody spectacles. Shakespeare plays depicted acts of brutality and grotesqueness. As live entertainment evolved through contemporary decades into modern theatre, on-stage violence became increasingly more realistic, gorier, and irreverent.

Violence is a globally-common discussion and presentation throughout cultures, societies, and their stories told on stage. However, among these commonalities lies stark differences: *how* and *why* violence is depicted. During ancient theatre eras, violent acts were typically performed off-stage, often for various religious or cultural reasons. The violence of traditional theatre was also seen as a therapeutic and educational shared experience for audiences to mentally and emotionally grapple with trauma, being reflected upon by theatre critics as a “communal response to suffering” and “helping the community come to terms with the violence they've experienced, and the violence they've perpetuated” (Mandell, 2015). As societies modernized theatre over the coming centuries, stories depicted violence more on-stage and seemingly satisfied purposes of entertainment, spectacle, and shock. This evolution culminated in audiences being increasingly fed violent imagery and visuals in often aggressive ways. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, modern theatergoers experience fully uncensored on-stage brutality and unsettling gore that consistently push industry boundaries. Consequently, contemporary audiences are challenged to debate the merits of the on-stage violence they are witnessing by pondering if it is merely titillating or if it provokes an interrogation of their own relationship with violence (Mandell, 2015).

### ***The Pillowman Overview***

*The Pillowman's* setting is an unnamed totalitarian state resembling a “vaguely East European-sounding country” (Rooney, 2005). Its plot centers on a writer, Katurian, being brutally interrogated after a series of recent child-murders bear uncanny similarities to his stories—which are all but one unpublished. The three-act play consistently alternates between depicting ‘reality’ and ‘fiction’ scenes. The play's reality involves interactions between Katurian, Michal (Katurian's mentally disabled brother, and a prime suspect in the child-murders), and Tupolski and Ariel (the two interrogating police officers). In contrast, intermittent fictional segments depict interpretive reenactments of Katurian's disturbing fairy tale-esque stories, which frequently involve mental and physical violence toward child characters and conclude with tragic endings. Ultimately, Michael confesses to Katurian that he did murder the children, professing, “you told me to” through the stories (McDonagh, 2003: p. 34). Consequently, Katurian smothered Michael to death and falsely confesses to Tupolski and Ariel that he is the child murderer to save his brother from a more horrific execution. Although the police detectives discover Katurian is not guilty of the crimes, they still sentence him to execution upon learning that Katurian did murder his and Michael's parents. Katurian pleads for his stories to not be destroyed, exclaiming, “I was a good writer. It was all I ever wanted to be” (McDonagh, 2003: p. 67). Ariel proceeds to shoot Katurian dead. Although he proclaimed he would burn Katurian's stories after killing him, Ariel instead preserves the writings in a case file that remains unopened for approximately fifty years. The play concludes with

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deceased Katurian addressing the audience and describing Ariel's act of letting his stories survive yet remain unread as being both a fulfilling and unfulfilling ending, stating the act "would have ruined the writer's fashionably downbeat ending, but was somehow...somehow...more in keeping with the spirit of the thing" (McDonagh, 2003: p. 69).

McDonagh's stories in *The Pillowman* are reminiscent of classic tales penned by the German sibling writers Jacob Grimm and Wilhelm Grimm, albeit perhaps more grotesque and uncomfortable. The accomplished siblings, commonly referred to as the Brothers Grimm, were nineteenth-century writers whose published collections of fairy tales made the stories prolific in the western world (Grimm and Grimm, 2014: p. xix). Their series of publications throughout the mid-1800s became one of the most influential folklore works, leading to the siblings being considered the writers who "saved the fairy tale" (Zipes, 2015). In addition to the Brothers Grimm, McDonagh's stories in *The Pillowman* are also comparable to the writings of Franz Kafka, a twentieth-century Czech-born German author most notable for his fantasy-realism literature such as his famous 1915 published novella *The Metamorphosis* (Brod, 1995; Crawley, 2015; Brantley, 2005).

The theatrical interpretations of *The Pillowman's* unsettling tales with twisted morals are arguably the play's most impactful and memorable moments for live audiences. McDonagh believes *The Pillowman's* structure of "stories within stories" makes the play his most "cinematic" stage work, and ranks as one of the playwright's personal favorites among his works (Lyttelton, 2012; Crawley, 2016). Moreover, the creative freedom permitted in portraying these macabre stories liberates each staged production from narrative boundaries and allows—or even demands—artistic ownership of desired violent aesthetics, whether nuanced or forceful.

## **FAIRY TALE VIOLENCE**

McDonagh seemingly found inspiration for his cinematic script in traditional fairy tales. A majority of the tales within *The Pillowman* begin with the massively popular stock phrase "Once upon a time," which historically is a traditional opening line for a story, especially in children's literature and fairy tales (Knowles, 1999: p. 556; McDonagh, 2003). Moreover, McDonagh acknowledges his fascination with the underlying darkness within traditional folk and fairy tales before their twentieth-century sanitized commercialization (Zipes, 1988: pp. 24-26; O'Toole, 1998: pp. 65-66). During a 1998 interview with *Bomb Magazine*, the playwright discusses his perception of fairy-tales and their purposes of being "a short story quickly told, and told with elements of strange danger" (O'Toole, 1998: p. 65). The interviewer explains his observation of the "fairy tale dimension" to McDonagh's works, arguing the writer's plays "work with speed and violence and a slightly surreal feeling" (O'Toole, 1998: p. 65). McDonagh responds to the observation by describing his personal relationship with fairy-tales:

*When I was starting out, trying to write short stories and such, most of those were fairy-tale-like stories...I'd start getting into trying to retell the fairy tales I'd remembered as a kid, but to tell them in a more truthful way than I remember them having been told. There's something dark about them that doesn't quite come through...In re-reading the Grimm's [Fairy Tales], they're pretty bloody dark. (O'Toole, 1998: p. 65)*

During the same interview response, McDonagh laments the contemporary sanitizing of fairy-tales that were initially dark and violent, producing "cleaned up versions" of tales that prompts revisionist

history of older stories (O'Toole, 1998: p. 66). The playwright then proceeds to offer the fairy tale *Little Red Riding Hood* as a prime example of a traditional tale that fell victim to modern cultural sanitation:

*'Little Red Riding Hood' is a bloody dark story. And in the original it's quite horrific at the end; they cut the wolf open. I like the details. They cut the wolf open, took out Little Red Riding Hood and her friend. They put rocks in the wolf's stomach, and sewed him back up with green wire. They watched him as he awoke, and waited until he jumped out of bed in fright at everybody watching him, and dropped down dead 'cause the stones were grating against his intestines! I would love to write something as horrific as that if I could. (O'Toole, 1998: p. 66)*

Although *The Pillowman* was not initially produced until 2003, McDonagh wrote his play between 1994 and 1995, meaning McDonagh's fairy tale inspired play was already in existence when the playwright stated "I would love to write something as horrific as that if I could" (Lyttelton, 2012; O'Toole, 1998: p. 66). Furthermore, McDonagh initially wrote the tales found in *The Pillowman* for unmaterialized screen projects before actually writing the play as a whole, validating that the playwright's fairy tale-esque stories were always the heartbeat that brought the play to life (James, 2005).

McDonagh is accurate in his assertion that traditional tales were much darker than their contemporary retellings in children's literature. Historically, folk and fairy tales, such as ones popularized by the Brothers Grimm, consistently depicted horrific acts of cruelty and violence, including cannibalism, suicide, self-mutilation, and sexual assault. Many of these dark stories told of children finding themselves in threatening situations. Cultures often utilized tales of children in danger as cautionary lessons for young people, such as the risks of talking to strangers, the dangers of seduction, and the threats of unknown locations. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, school curriculums introduced fairy tales into their literature, and by the twentieth century, fairy tales became staple readings in education (Zipes, 1988: p. 24). This inclusion in education bled into the entertainment industry when institutions such as The Walt Disney Company brought to life fairy tale stories in more comfortable censored versions. The mass marketing of these stories in both worlds of education and entertainment established a canon of "classical" fairy tales (Zipes, 1988: p. 24).

Well-known contemporary versions of classic fairy tales often differ significantly from their older historical versions, especially for purposes of softening descriptions of violence and cruelty. For example, in the Brothers Grimm's original *Snow White* tale, the evil queen commands her huntsman to stab seven-year-old Snow White to death and bring back the child's internal organs (including her liver and lungs) so the queen may eat them; when her plan is foiled, the queen is forced to wear hot iron shoes and feel her feet burn while dancing in them until she dies (Grimm and Grimm, 2014: pp. 170-178). In *Cinderella*, another famous Brothers Grimm tale, the titular character's two evil stepsisters—at the advice of their mother—self-mutilate themselves with a knife so their feet will fit the mysterious slipper and allow them to marry the Prince; one stepsister cuts off her heel while the other stepsister cuts off her toe (Grimm and Grimm, 2014: pp. 69-76). Other aggressive moments found in the Grimms' popular tales include a prince being blinded after throwing himself off of a tower in *Rapunzel*, children cannibalism in *Hansel and Gretel*, and insidious mentalities towards infants in *Rumpelstiltskin* and *Briar Rose* (more commonly known as *Sleeping Beauty*) (Grimm and Grimm, 2014: pp. 37-38, 43-48, 162-164, 181-182). Even more egregious acts of cruelty are found in the Grimms' lesser-known stories such as a cowardly father chopping off his daughter's hands to save himself from the devil in *Maiden Without Hands*, a devil-possessed stepmother decapitating her stepson in *The Juniper Tree*, and a group of male

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robbers (led by a corrupt prince) dismembering and eating women in *The Robber Bridegroom* (Grimm and Grimm, 2014: pp. 99-102, 135-136, 148-157).

Although the Grimm Brothers are perhaps the most prolific writers of fairy tales, they were not the only nineteenth-century European writers penning twisted tales. The darker original version of *The Little Mermaid*, written by Danish writer Hans Christian Andersen, ends with the mermaid protagonist choosing death—essentially committing suicide—instead of stabbing her beloved Prince in the heart with a knife (as instructed by the sea witch) (Andersen, 2002: pp. 1-23). Similarly dark, German author Heinrich Hoffmann’s *Struwwelpeter* contains a tale about a boy named Conrad who is permanently cured of his thumb-sucking by a tailor cutting off his thumb with giant scissors (Isaacs, 2013). An additional example is the iconic *Beauty and the Beast* tale with several interpretations throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries by the French writers Gabrielle-Suzanne Barbot de Villeneuve and Jeanne-Marie Leprince de Beaumont, the German Grimm Brothers, and the Scottish author Andrew Lang; these various adaptations depict story aspects darker than the famous Disney version, including Beauty’s jealous-filled sisters who plot her death through being devoured by the Beast (Beaumont, Villeneuve, Grimm, Grimm, & Lang, 2017; Gilbert, 2017; Fallon, 2017).

Fairy tales, in their original historical versions, are often considered “too twisted” for children, which is why contemporary societies understandably prefer censored “disneyfied” versions of the stories for their children (Evans, 2014). However, aggressive violence found in older versions of folk and fairy tales were not purposefully twisted for pure shock value or to abrasively embed morals into children’s brains. These stories also taught children how to survive in a harsh world filled with hardships; thus, violence occurred in these stories because it “corresponds to lived reality” (Martin, 2008: p. 1015). Fairy tales were violent because the world was considered violent.

## **THE PILLOWMAN STORIES**

*The Pillowman* contains discussions of nine tales written by the Katurian character, some being more detailed than others. Five of the nine stories describe violence towards children. The following are synopses of those five stories, in the order of which they appear in the play’s script.

### **“The Little Apple Men”**

“The Little Apple Men” is told in Act One, Scene 1 of *The Pillowman* (McDonagh, 2003: p. 11). The story opens with a little girl giving a present to her abusive father: a set of apples carved into the shape of little men, all adorned with tiny fingers, eyes, and toes. She instructs her father not to eat them, but instead cherish them as a memento of her childhood. The spiteful father predictably ignores her request and eats several of the apple men, unaware that razor blades are hidden inside them. Consequently, the father dies an agonizing death. That night, the little girl is awakened by the remaining apple men who have come alive and are walking up her body. The vengeful apple men force the girl’s mouth open and climb down her throat while mourning, “You killed our little brothers” (McDonagh, 2003: p. 11). Against her will, the young girl swallows the little apple men with disguised razor blades, subsequently choking to death on her own blood.

### **“The Tale of the Town on the River”**

“The Tale of the Town on the River” is told in Act One, Scene 1 of *The Pillowman* (McDonagh, 2003: pp. 16-17). The story tells of a bullied little boy who lives in poverty with his alcoholic parents in a “tiny cobble-streeted town on the banks of a fast-flowing river” (McDonagh, 2003: p. 16). One night, the boy is resting on the wooden bridge that leads into town when a mysterious hooded stranger cloaked in dark garments approaches the bridge. As the rider nears the boy, the kind-hearted child offers to share his small sandwich with the visitor. Touched by the gesture, the dark figure sits with the boy, eats with him, and enjoys his company. As the stranger prepares to leave, he tells the boy that he will repay his kind gesture with something “the worth of which today you may not realise, but one day, when you are a little older, perhaps, I think you will truly value and thank me for” (McDonagh, 2003: p. 17). The mysterious figure then tells the boy to close his eyes and proceeds to violently mutilate the child by crashing a sharp meat cleaver down onto the boy’s right foot, severing all five toes. The horrified child sits in silent shock as the dark stranger gathers up the bloody toes, throws them in the gutters for the numerous rats that were beginning to gather, and silently rides across the bridge towards the town’s entrance.

The story ends with the revelation that the town’s name is “Hamelin,” meaning this story is actually a prologue to the classic *Pied Piper of Hamelin* tale about a mysterious outsider who lures Hamelin’s children away with his magic flute as retribution for the adults not paying for his services of magically luring rats away (McDonagh, 2003: p. 17; Hamelin, n.d.). “The Tale of the Town on the River” ends with a dark twist that insinuates the violence thrust upon the young boy was ultimately beneficial by handicapping the child’s ability to be hypnotically led away from the town when the Piper plays his magic flute—an act that the Piper seemingly knows he will perform.

### **“The Writer and the Writer’s Brother”**

“The Writer and the Writer’s Brother” is told in Act One, Scene 2 of *The Pillowman* (McDonagh, 2003: pp. 22-25). The story opens by describing a privileged young boy who lives with his seemingly loving and attentive parents in a spacious toy-filled house in the middle of a beautiful forest. The little boy enjoys writing stories and shows great talent in writing. It is then revealed that the boy’s impressive creativity becomes at the center of a shocking experiment being conducted by his parents. When the boy is seven years old, he begins hearing terrifying nightly sounds coming from the padlocked room next to his bedroom; these noises include “the low whirring of drills, the scritchety-scratch of bolts being tightened, the dull fizz of unknown things electrical, and the muffled screams of a small gagged child” (McDonagh, 2003: p. 23). Each time the boy questions the sounds, his mother assures him the noises are only in his imagination and that only extremely talented boys hear such abominable sounds; the child accepts this premise and continues to write.

As time goes by, the boy’s stories become progressively darker due to the nightly relentless sounds of a child being tortured; his writing talent also improves due to the loving encouragement he receives from his parents. When the boy turns fourteen years old, he sees a note slip out from under the door of the padlocked room. The note is written in blood and reads “They have loved you and tortured me for seven straight years for no reason other than as an artistic experiment, an artistic experiment which has worked”—the note concludes with being signed “Your brother” (McDonagh, 2003: pp. 23-24). Horrified, the boy breaks into the locked room to discover his parents sitting there alone and smiling; his father creates drilling sounds while his mother mimics the muffled cries of a gagged child. The parents tell their

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son that the note is written with pig's blood and instructs him to turn the note over; the boy flips the note and reads that he has won first place in a writing competition he was entered. The boy and his parents celebrate his victory and laugh together at the revelation that the parents were behind the nightly terrorizing sounds that ultimately inspired their son's creativity and turned him into an extraordinary writer.

The family eventually moves out of the house, and the boy grows up to be an accomplished young man who finds success as a writer of dark stories. On the day of his first book's publication, he decides to revisit his childhood home where his writing talent was born and nurtured. Upon entering the mysterious room that had remained locked for his entire childhood, he initially laughs to himself at the absurdity of believing he had a secret brother being consistently tortured by his parents. Then suddenly, he discovers the rotting corpse of a young teenager hidden under a mattress, revealing that he actually did have a secret brother. The lifeless body displays several broken bones and is covered in burns and bruises. In the corpse's hand is a story written in blood; the shocked writer reads the story and is astonished at the writing:

*And the boy read that story, a story that could only have been written under the most sickening of circumstances, and it was the sweetest, gentlest thing he'd ever come across, but what was even worse, it was better than anything he himself had ever written. Or ever would. (McDonagh, 2003: p. 24)*

Overwhelmed, the young writer covers back up his brother's dead body, burns the discovered story, and never mentions a word of what he saw to anyone.

Katurian, who has been narrating his tale "The Writer and the Writer's Brother," concludes by informing the audience that the story is semibiographical. However, in real life, Katurian did actually discover his parents were hiding and torturing a secret brother, Michal, which was the cause of Michal's brain damage. Katurian confesses to the audience that the evening he discovered Michal, he murdered his parents by suffocating them both with a pillow.

### **"The Pillowman"**

"The Pillowman" is told in Act Two, Scene 1 of *The Pillowman* (McDonagh, 2003: pp. 30-33). The play's titular story tells of an oversized fantasy creature made of "pink fluffy pillows" who convinces children to kill themselves before growing up to become suicidally depressed adults (McDonagh, 2003: p. 30). The creature—referred to as "the Pillowman"—visits depressed adults who have had "dreadful and hard" lives and desire to "take their own lives and take all the pain away...by razor, or by bullet, or by gas...by whatever preferred method of suicide" (McDonagh, 2003: p. 31). The Pillowman visits these adults right before their moment of suicidal attempts, sits with them, gently embraces them, and slowly time-travels back to when they were children before "the life of horror they were to lead hadn't quite yet begun" (McDonagh, 2003: p.31). The Pillowman then convinces the children to commit suicide in order to avoid the painful years they would endure until ultimately arriving at their suicidal moment in adulthood. The Pillowman instructs the children to kill themselves in ways that look like tragic accidents, so their deaths are more easily understood and accepted by their parents.

However, not all children are convinced by the creature's argument. An example is given of a young girl who does not accept the creature's assertion that her life would become awful, and so she rejects the notion of killing herself. After the girl sends the Pillowman away, she is visited by a man who begins visiting her room whenever her mother is away from home (insinuating acts of frequent molestation).



The girl grows up wounded and depressed, and is revisited by the Pillowman as an adult right before she commits suicide; he is unable to save her.

The creature is ultimately disheartened by the inevitable unfulfillment of his burdensome responsibility: “When the Pillowman was successful in his work, a little child would die horrifically...when the Pillowman was unsuccessful, a little child would have a horrific life, grow into an adult who’d also have a horrific life, and *then* die horrifically” (McDonagh, 2003: p. 32). No longer able to bear the emotional weight of his work, the depressed Pillowman journeys back in time to when he was a happy young Pillowboy filled with hopeful aspirations of helping people. The Pillowman convinces his younger self to commit suicide so he will not have to grow up and perform his awful tasks. As the Pillowboy sets himself on fire, the last sounds he hears are the cries of the thousands of children he had persuaded to commit suicide resurrecting and aging into adulthood up to the final moments of their adult suicides, screaming and crying alone without the Pillowman by their sides.

### **“The Little Jesus”**

“The Little Jesus” is told in Act Two, Scene 2 of *The Pillowman* (McDonagh, 2003: pp. 46-49). The story depicts a six-year-old girl who, despite being raised by non-religious parents, firmly believes she is “the second coming of the Lord Jesus Christ” (McDonagh, 2003: p.46). The little girl wears a fake beard and sandals while walking around town performing blessings rituals and consorting with various people that her loving parents find inappropriate for a child to engage with, such as alcoholics and drug addicts.

One tragic day, her parents are beheaded in a horrific automobile accident. The young orphan girl is sent to live in the woods with abusive foster parents who loath religion. Subsequently, the foster parents attempt to thwart the girl’s Christ-inspired behaviors in various ways, including stealing the girl’s sandals, including stealing the girl’s sandals (so she has to walk to church barefoot through roads filled with broken glass), and beating her for numerous reasons such as sharing food with her poor school friends and befriending kids who are considered ugly. Despite the foster parents’ frequent attempts to physically and emotionally punish the little girl, the child never waivers in her belief that she is the second coming of Christ. Consequently, the foster parents severely heighten their abuse by thrusting upon the child the same physical torments that Christ was put through during his crucifixion process. These cruel acts include forcing the little girl to wear a crown of thorns (handmade of barbed wire), endure whip lashings, carry a heavy wooden cross relentlessly until her legs break, be nailed to that same cross, and be stabbed with a spear in her side (McDonagh, 2003: p. 47-48). After each horrific torment, the foster parents sinisterly ask “Do you still want to be like Jesus?,” to which the girl always replies through her tears, “Yes, I do” (McDonagh, 2003: p. 48).

Frustrated, the foster parents execute one last horrific act of burying the girl alive in a tiny wooded coffin containing just enough air to survive for three days, proclaiming, “Well, if you’re Jesus, you’ll rise again in three days” (McDonagh, 2003: p. 48). The little girl lies buried underground for three days, clawing and scratching the wooden coffin lid until her fingers are merely bones. On the third day, a blind man walking through the woods stumbles over the fresh grave, but does not think it anything unordinary due to his blindness, and carries on his walk, not hearing the horrific sounds of little bones scratching wood.

## **AESTHETIC FREEDOM AND OWNERSHIP**

*The Pillowman* script offers little direction on how Katurian's stories are to be told, giving the director, actors, and designers pure creative freedom and autonomy in determining how these tales will be presented to live audiences.

### **Interviews With Directors**

The author of this chapter conducted written interviews with three theatre directors who have directed staged productions of Martin McDonagh's *The Pillowman* in recent years. Each director guided a different aesthetic approach towards the play and the reenactment of its stories. The following are excerpts from the directors' responses to the same questions asked of all of them.

#### **Director #1**

Rachel Pottern Nunn directed a 2017 production of *The Pillowman* produced by the theatre group Dramatic Irony—housed under William Peace University's Theatre Department—in Raleigh, North Carolina. Nunn's aesthetic approaches to the play's stories involved utilizing a large shadow screen that created a backdrop for actors to appear as shadow figures. The following are questions asked by this chapter's author (MH) and the responses given by Rachel Pottern Nunn (RPN).

*MH: What was your overall artistic and aesthetic approaches to directing your production?*

*RPN: My aesthetic for the show revolved around portraying the shadow side of humanity and of society. I was interested in exploring the question, what are we like when we feel anonymous? This informed my use of the shadow puppets and screen for telling the stories; the muted colors onstage (to indicate shadows, darkness, secrecy); and the way my actors and I conducted character work. Costumes were generic and drab to reinforce that these characters could be any unremarkable-looking person you pass on the street; their horrific inner demons are not worn on their sleeves. During character work sessions, the cast and I had long discussions where we dove into the backstories of each character, making choices that informed how they are tied to each other and to the rest of humanity—as much as they would like to feel safely anonymous. Against the script's backdrop of a mysterious totalitarian dictatorship where identities and motives are being called into question, I wanted to play with the idea that our true self is the one that emerges when we feel anonymous. (R. Nunn, personal communication, December 10, 2019)*

*MH: How did you approach the telling of the stories within the play? How did the violence within the stories (especially violence centered on children characters) affect your artistic and aesthetic visions for presenting the stories to an audience?*

*RPN: I chose shadow figures against a backdrop because my concept for the show revolved around exploring the shadow self (cost and equipment were also factors, but I think even with a bigger budget, I would have simply built a more elaborate shadow screen and used the same method). The violence of the stories did influence my decision to keep the storytelling method highly stylized; while I didn't shy away from the violence in the script, I also didn't want to play up the shock factor in a way that was*

*gratuitous or distracting. Additionally, I wanted some visual separation between the violence that occurs in the stories and offstage versus the violence that occurs onstage (Ariel brutalizing Katurian, Katurian smothering Michal, etc.). (R. Nunn, personal communication, December 10, 2019)*

*MH: What commentary (if any) about the staged portrayal of violence do you believe exists in the play?*

*RPN: One of the reasons ‘Pillowman’ is fascinating to me is that it raises the question “what do we do with violent art?” and allows the audience to feel as though they can debate the question...however, they have already answered it simply by coming to a production of ‘Pillowman’: as long as the staged portrayal of violence fascinates people, it will be created, performed, and viewed. This is the exterior manifestation of the shadow-self theme within the play: it’s our shadow-selves that are riveted by art like ‘Pillowman’; it’s the parts of ourselves that we don’t tend to acknowledge that are drawn to representations of violence. Looking past his clever trap, I think McDonagh absolutely argues for the representation of violence on stage in ‘Pillowman.’ The character of Katurian strikes me as a thinly veiled portrait of McDonagh himself, struggling for freedom of self-expression in a world that would prefer he keep things G-rated. But ultimately, I think McDonagh is telling us this about staged portrayals of violence: it doesn’t matter what we think we should or should not portray in art. It’s the art that gets bought, sold, viewed, and talked about that is effective art. And you’ve already proved his point by getting this far into a discussion about ‘Pillowman.’ (R. Nunn, personal communication, December 10, 2019)*

## **Director #2**

Tony Robinson directed a 2016 production of *The Pillowman* produced by the theatre company Generic Theater in Norfolk, Virginia. Robinson’s aesthetic approaches to the play’s stories involved utilizing on-screen animation. The following are questions asked by this chapter’s author (MH) and the responses given by Tony Robinson (TR).

*MH: What was your overall artistic and aesthetic approaches to directing your production?*

*TR: My “aesthetic” was first and foremost informed by my space limitations. We are a black box theater performing in a space that is often needed by the theater upstairs that hosts the Broadway touring shows. So, we get our space when we get it. Our run of ‘The Pillowman’ was three weekends over the course of five weeks. So, we had to take the set down at the end of each weekend. Obviously, this required a fairly basic set. Fortunately, and perhaps by design, this show fits that need beautifully. It has simple requirements, requirements that we fulfilled primarily with pipe and drape and technical solutions. The darkness of the set fits the stark nature of the environment. Also, I tasked my costumer with the idea of creating uniforms that looked like they belonged to an authoritarian governmental regime, but without any tie to any real-world example. I wanted the authoritarianism to be universal. This could be anywhere, anytime. (T. Robinson, personal communication, December 13, 2019)*

*MH: How did you approach the telling of the stories within the play? How did the violence within the stories (especially violence centered on children characters) affect your artistic and aesthetic visions for presenting the stories to an audience?*

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*TR: The stories were what drew me to directing 'The Pillowman.' I had no preconceived ideas about 'The Pillowman.' I was not familiar with the script before it was handed to me to consider directing. What hit me right away, more than the violence of the stories, was the idea that art is not art until it is received by an audience. That idea shaped my entire production concept. My stage had two basic sections, the scene area and the shadow area. Over the scene area was a projection screen. When stories were told within the context of a scene (i.e., 'The Little Apple Men,' 'The Three Gibbet Crossroads,' 'The Tale of the Town on the River,' and 'The Little Green Pig') they were presented in animation on the projection screen over the scene while the narration was live. The idea was that the animation was the scene playing out inside the mind of the hearer, and the hearer layered their own interpretation on to them. Since the first three were heard by Tupolski, the animation had an extremely dark style. My animator used the Edward Gorey cartoons as an inspiration for these stories. 'The Little Green Pig,' however, since it was being heard by Michal, was bright and cheery. For the stories told as scenes of and within themselves (i.e. 'The Writer and the Writer's Brother' and 'The Little Jesus'), my idea was that these would be solely in the mind of the storyteller, and as such not fully formed works of art. These were presented with a cast of shadow actors while Katurian stood in the spotlight to the side of the screen narrating. (T. Robinson, personal communication, December 13, 2019)*

*MH: What commentary (if any) about the staged portrayal of violence do you believe exists in the play*

*TR: I read it as the audience is as responsible, if not more so, for what they do with what the artist has presented them. There are, of course, concepts like violence begets violence, a violent society visits its violence on its inhabitants, etc. But I think those things are just a by-product of discussing violence. They are undeniable realities. The message I received was more pointed. (T. Robinson, personal communication, December 13, 2019)*

### **Director #3**

Jaimelyn Gray directed a 2018 production of *The Pillowman* produced by the theater company The Constructivists in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Gray's aesthetic approaches to the play's stories involved utilizing live reenactments. The following are questions asked by this chapter's author (MH) and the responses given by Jaimelyn Gray (JG).

*MH: What was your overall artistic and aesthetic approaches to directing your production?*

*JG: We wanted to make the production feel now, or just beyond now. That the threat of Totalitarianism is still very much real and very much a threat. We work within intimate environments and try to make productions feel close and real. (J. Gray, personal communication, January 16, 2020)*

*MH: How did you approach the telling of the stories within the play? How did the violence within the stories (especially violence on around children characters) affect your artistic and aesthetic visions for presenting the stories to an audience?*

*JG: We thought about the various ways to approach the storytelling, but ultimately ended up using live dramatizations. I'm happy things ended up that way. Our work with the Constructivists is founded in*

*intimacy, and I feel this reinforced our aesthetics, rather than giving a “safer space” (possibly) with film or animation. We did lean into a more stylized choreography out of pragmatism, but it was still a powerful representation with live actors. We had a wall that opened up to take us to the “other world” of the storytelling scenes—a set design assisted with beautiful lighting design. (J. Gray, personal communication, January 16, 2020)*

*MH: What commentary (if any) about the staged portrayal of violence do you believe exists in the play?*

*JG: Violence begets violence. Child abuse is carried into adult life and perpetuates more trauma in various ways. (J. Gray, personal communication, January 16, 2020)*

### **Additional Interpretations**

Further examples of aesthetic freedoms are observed in previous productions of *The Pillowman*. Irish stage and screen director John Crowley directed both the acclaimed 2003 London and 2005 Broadway runs of *The Pillowman*, earning him a nomination for the 2005 ‘Best Direction of a Play’ Tony Award (Tony Awards, n.d.). For both productions, Crowley alternated between solo dramatic storytelling narration of certain stories and live actor portrayals of other stories silently depicted in picturesque tableaux decorated with colorful, sometime cartoon-inspired storybook visuals (Rooney, 2005; James, 2005; Stuhlbarg, 2006). Additionally, Crowley continued experimenting with the visualization of the stories’ reenactments throughout both London and Broadway productions. One example of change was his aesthetic direction for the “Little Jesus” segment. In the London production, Crowley costumed the young actress in a white robe to be the visual embodiment of the seven-year-old girl who endures Christ’s crucifixion process; for the New York production, Crowley dressed the actress in a “pretty little dress” which gave a heavier unsettling emphasis on the child’s young age (James, 2005). Another editing example from Crowley was his vision for “The Pillowman” story. Initially, for the London production, the director chose to have a live actor on stage dressed in a pink Pillowman costume, believing the visual would appear “quite spooky and scary”; however, the director realized after two performances that the costume was cartoonish and “looked nothing like the Pillowman of [the audiences’] imaginations” (James, 2005). Consequently, the concept of a Pillowman costume was permanently cut.

Desiring to capture a more cinematic approach to McDonagh’s writing, stage director Ravyn Jazper-Hawke incorporated films into her 2014 production of *The Pillowman* with Epiphany Theatre Company in Portland, Oregon. Jazper-Hawke worked with award-winning filmmaker Cameron Harrison to produce live-action short films of specific story segments—including “The Writer and the Writer’s Brother” and “The Little Jesus”—that were played for audiences during the staged performance (“Epiphany Theatre Company 2014,” n.d.; OuchMouth, 2014a; OuchMouth, 2014b). A seemingly age-appropriate child actor portrayed the central young boy character in “The Writer and the Writer’s Brother”; conversely, an older female teenager portrayed the young girl character in “The Little Jesus.” The film segments stylistically presented themselves as a somewhat collection of indie horror movies, emphasizing the cinematic distress of the play.

In a different artistic direction, Peter Welch directed a 2009 production of *The Pillowman* at Lawrence University in Appleton, Wisconsin, in which he utilized oversized puppets as primary storytelling tools. After experiencing studying abroad in Ireland, Welch believed elaborated puppetry added to the dark comedy elements of the play written by an acclaimed Irish playwright in a way that reflects the Irish’s

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history of combining humor and distress, stating, “The Irish have this interesting sense about comedy. Culturally, they seem to have a light opinion about their hardship” (Hendricks, 2009). Welch believed fantastical puppetry would help focus the comedic lens of the play and “add to the element of dark comedy that might otherwise be lost on viewers” (Hendricks, 2009).

In a similar whimsical direction, director Gary Amos led a 2018 production of *The Pillowman* at the Playhouse Theatre Northampton in England. Amos’s intimate execution used the same condensed stage space for the ‘real’ scenes and the ‘fictional’ story scenes, primarily differentiated through bold lighting changes and live actors in costumes (Amos, 2019). In a surprising twist, Amos’s artistic vision for “The Pillowman” tale forewent a live reenactment for a more amusing interpretation through colorful “toy theatre,” a popular nineteenth century European invention that allowed children and adult theatre fans to bring home souvenir miniature paper-made replicas of plays (“Toy Theatre,” n.d.; “Make Your Own Toy Theatre,” n.d.). Amos’s use of toy theatre brought a comical levity and a childishness to the darker tones of “The Pillowman” story by presenting the narrative to the audience in the historical fashion of a fairy tale retelling for 19<sup>th</sup>-century European children (“Review of The Pillowman,” 2018).

Other arts fields, such as visual illustration and dance, have been primary narrative tools in *The Pillowman* stagings. In a 2012 production by Springs Ensemble Theatre in Colorado Springs, Colorado, director Max Ferguson employed various visual presentations to depict each play’s unique tale. “The Little Jesus” story was depicted as a series of illustrated ink drawings by a graphic novel artist (Wallinger, 2012; Wright, 2012). In contrast, “The Pillowman” segment was presented as a film (Wallinger, 2012; Wright 2012). Furthermore, other tales were presented in more unique stylistic ways, including stiff-limbed Balinese shadow puppets and delicate ballet dancing (Wallinger, 2012; Wright, 2012). Ferguson believed the combination of the different artistic visual interpretations allowed the production to “build for the audience a sense of how imaginative Katurian really is, relative to the world in which he lives” (Wright, 2012).

The artistic scope of *The Pillowman* stories has also reached beyond traditional theatre stagings of the play. In 2013, the award-winning Olympic Heights Community High School Theatre Department, located in Florida’s Palm Beach County, performed the “The Little Jesus” scene as a stand-alone theatrical ensemble piece during the Florida Thespian Competition. The presentation of McDonagh’s anti-comparable tale consisted of over a dozen students dressed in all black executing intricate choreographed movement work while highlighted student actors provided the narration and character dialogue (Kayla Marie, 2013). The performance was enhanced by a crescendoing recording of the famously dramatic orchestral piece “Lux Aeterna” (written by composer Clint Mansell for the 2000 psychological drama film *Requiem for a Dream*) (Smith, 2015).

## **Aesthetic Considerations**

Amateur and professional productions of Martin McDonagh’s *The Pillowman* have executed their individualized aesthetics to McDonagh’s twisted tales. Some productions chose a cinematic approach, playing pre-recorded or pre-edited live-action film adaptations of the stories on large screens; other productions projected original animated sequences. In contrast to pre-developed media, several stagings focused on live portrayals of the stories, though in different executions. Some productions opted for traditional stagings of visible actors acting out the stories like mini-plays, while other interpretations utilized more fantasy-esque innovations such as shadow screens and elaborate puppetry. Moreover, some stagings opted for more intimate depictions through physical storytelling involving dramatic choreography and blocking, or

through oral storytelling involving voice narration (live or recorded) heightened by strategic lighting and sound designs. *The Pillowman* productions must also weigh the merits of cohesiveness and consistency that thread the stories. Some directors chose one primary visual method of story reenactment—such as shadow screens, puppetry, films, or live-actor portrayals—which helps to clearly differentiate between the one ‘reality’ world and the one ‘fictional’ world. Conversely, other directors desired to incorporate a combination of various artistic mediums, allowing each story to live in its own unique world while still all being connected through a fictional fantasy thread.

Every production’s unique aesthetic design for McDonagh’s stories evokes specific genre moods and impacts for its audiences. Live-action film projections can resemble horror movies, while projected animated segments can be reminiscent of children’s entertainment such as Disney films, albeit a disturbing R-rated version. In contrast, live stagings of these stories through interpretative physicality could be perceived as a living art piece, while a sole emphasis on voice narration could reflect the tone of a scary campfire story in the woods at night. Any aesthetic decisions made by those involved in a production of *The Pillowman* create a desired relationship between the audience and the depicted child-centric violence within the play’s stories. The purposeful experiences designed for the play inspire audiences’ psychological reactions towards the fictional violence, ranging from numbingly detached to aggressively confrontational.

Another major decision in the aesthetic vision of *The Pillowman* is the visual realism of both character and grotesqueness. When live actors depict the disturbing tales (either on-screen or stage), directors must decide if age-appropriate actors should portray the child characters. Some productions used actual young actors to play the young characters being thrust into mental and physical violence, while other productions used youthful-looking adult actors to portray the roles. Furthermore, much of the stories’ violent acts would cause grotesque gore in real-life; thus, directors must ponder if the stories’ depictions should remain imaginary-looking with no manufactured visual grotesqueness, or should bloody visuals enhance the performance.

Every story’s artistic design can drastically change a production’s aesthetic outcome. Consider “The Little Jesus” story, for instance. An audience would arguably emotionally react differently to witnessing the horror of a crucified child if the actor is a young girl versus an adult woman pretending to be young. Furthermore, an audience’s connection to the violence might feel different if they are viewing a child’s crucifixion on a two-dimensional screen versus live on-stage in front of them. Moreover, an audience’s level of uncomfortableness may rise to various heights if an on-stage child actor pretending to scream during her faux crucifixion is accompanied by squirting fake blood versus no visible gore. Additionally, an audience could potentially allow themselves more emotional detachment if a child’s crucifixion is portrayed in a non-realistic whimsical way through animation, shadows, or puppetry. Alternatively, in complete contrast, an audience member’s own imagination might be more horrific when merely hearing the descriptive narration of a young girl nailed to a cross versus seeing any visual representation of the violent act.

## **SOLUTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

When considering the individuality and autonomy of each theatrical production, there are no specific solutions that must be executed when facing the difficult task of staging violent material. Instead, solutions and recommendations come in the form of artistic and intelligent considerations from directors,

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designers, and cast. Several factors should be considered when creating an aesthetic vision in staging controversial theatre, such as *The Pillowman*. Geographical location, venue size, budget limitations, and audience demographics can all influence decisions regarding sensitive components of unsettling storytelling, such as how violent fairy tale-esque segments present themselves on a stage. Tighter budgets may lend themselves to less expensive fantastical presentations such as shadow screens or creative movement by live actors. Smaller venues with limited-stage areas may require space-saving presentations such as audio narration or projected pre-filmed videos. Geographical locations or audience demographics that veer towards younger ages or more conservative cultures may prefer to witness staged violence that is more stylized or insinuated instead of realistic and gory. Each theatrical production is accompanied with unique freedoms and limitations that require creative solutions and artistic ownership.

## **FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS**

Further research could expand this chapter's scope of discussions and explorations through multiple means. Firstly, more directors could be interviewed about their unique artistic interpretations and approaches towards their past productions of *The Pillowman*. Secondly, actors and production designers from recent productions could be interviewed regarding their perspectives of bringing the play's fairy tale-esque stories to life on stage. Increasing the number of productions and people surveyed might result in observable aesthetic patterns among category groups such as geographical location, venue size, budget limitations, and anticipated audience demographics. Moreover, audience and critical responses towards future productions could lead to discussions about any noticeable differences in reactions throughout the decades since the play's premiere.

## **CONCLUSION**

When considering historical darker versions of folk and fairy tales, *The Pillowman* is not unique in offering up stories involving grotesque actions, especially involving children characters. Several traditional tales depict physical and mental horrors towards children for various insidious, vengeful, or religious motivations. McDonagh also frequently presents his violence within the framework of black comedy, aligning humor and violence in similar ways found in older fairy tales (Martin, 2008, p.1015). However, McDonagh rebels against traditional fairy tale "happy endings" narratives and pushes the edge of uncomfortableness by concluding *The Pillowman*'s stories with tragic and unjust endings, which contrast to typical fairy tale conclusions that bring justice, peace, or clarity for protagonists, revealing an insightful moral or lesson for the reader (Bottigheimer, 2009; Pavlovic, 2014). McDonagh's central character, Katurian, acknowledges his stories are "fashionably downbeat" with horrific endings that provide a "bit of a twist," proclaiming "there are no happy endings in real life" (McDonagh, 2003: pp. 11, 24, 41).

McDonagh's characters in *The Pillowman* use storytelling and fictional narratives "to shape their sense of their own experience, to compensate for the pain of living...to control their suffering and compensate for their losses" (Cadden, 2007: pp. 678-679). McDonagh went on to revisit navigating his fondness for "stories-within-stories" narratives in his 2012 film *Seven Psychopaths* (Godfrey, 2012; Pacheco, 2005). Additionally, McDonagh continued embracing irreverent humor and aggressive violence in his plays proceeding *The Pillowman*, including such topics as cruel dismemberment in *A Behanding in Spokane*



(2010) and vengeful murder by hanging in *Hangmen* (2015) (Als, 2010; O'Hagan, 2015). Moreover, McDonagh's recent 2018 play *A Very Very Very Dark Matter*—a black comedy fictionalizing a sinister secret life of prolific fairy tale writer Hans Christian Andersen—mixes macabre fairy tale fantasy, controversial comedy, acts of cruelty, and clever meta storytelling that strongly echoes essences of *The Pillowman* (Felperin, 2018). This mixture of gothic fantasy, cruelty, and dark humor is an established stylistic formula that critics now perceive as “McDonagh tropes” (Trueman, 2018; O'Dell, 2018).

Despite having a perceived artistic commentary on how violence begets violence, McDonagh rejects the notion that the violence in *The Pillowman*—or any of his plays—bears any responsibility for inspiring potential cruelty in real life, stating in a 2009 interview:

*I think [The Pillowman] does say that creativity is beautiful and worthwhile for its own sake. But in terms of responsibility? I don't think that Martin Scorsese can be held responsible because John Hinckley saw 'Taxi Driver' many times and became obsessed with Jodi Foster. If something happened to a child after a person saw 'Pillowman,' I'd definitely feel guilty about it, but I wouldn't be culpable. (Pacheco, 2005)*

McDonagh's simultaneous acknowledgment of his violent art and rejection of his art's culpability is representative of the argument within the broader entertainment industry. The phrase “violence begets violence”—coined famously by Martin Luther King Jr.—is often interpreted as violent *people or behavior* bring about more violent people or behavior (King, 2007, p. 426). However, several contemporary debates reframe the notion to include an insinuation that violent *art* begets violent people. Much research has been done on the societal and psychological impacts of rising depictions of violence, brutality, and cruelty in entertainment. A 2014 published case study regarding psychological reactions to media violence concluded that the way a viewer's brain responds to violent media (including entertainment) depends upon whether the person is aggression by nature (Alia-Klein et al., 2014; Carroll, 2014). Professor Nelly Alia-Klein, the study's lead author, stated, “Just as beauty is in the eye of the beholder, environmental stimuli are in the brain of the beholder” (Carroll, 2014). Alia-Klein speculates the results show viewing violent entertainment might impact enhancement of an individual's existing internal aggression, stating, “At the right time, when they become violent, they may act out some of the ideas they have seen” (Carroll, 2014). Thus, if portrayals of violence in our entertainment does not directly *cause* aggression among individual audience members, Alia-Klein argues it can still *enhance* aggression.

Public debates about the responsibility of violent artforms have heavily circulated in recent decades, with arguments ranging from the importance of first amendment freedoms to a need for government censorship (Nagle, 2009: p. 44). While artistic freedom remains a fundamental right, audiences are the ultimate judge and jury for the purpose and meaning of theatre, especially in divisive works such as McDonagh's plays. In their 2006 published article “*The Pillowman* and the Ethics of Allegory,” Hana Worthen and William Worthen ultimately find “the question of the ethics of such violence cannot be answered by the work itself. The meaning of violent representation depends on how we make it mean, usually by claiming the plays' metonymic, *allegorical*, relation to the world beyond the stage” (Worthen and Worthen, 2006: p. 156).

McDonagh acknowledges the irony that his career launched with theatre since he only started writing plays out of frustration for his unsuccessful works for other mediums (including film scripts and a radio play) (O'Hagan, 2015). McDonagh had disdain for theatre at a young age, believing it to be “the worst of all the art forms” (O'Hagan, 2015). A few years later, the 27-year-old found himself praised as “the most exciting new voice in British theatre” while achieving the historical precedent of being “the

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first playwright since Shakespeare to have four plays performed simultaneously on the London stage” (O’Hagan, 2015). Now, after a successful career that has spanned over two decades, the playwright looks back at his theatre work—especially *The Pillowman*—with fondness and appreciation; in February of 2020, McDonagh expressed, “*The Pillowman* is a play that’s always been very close to my heart, in terms of its combination of the darkest of dark comedy with its exploration of the nature of storytelling itself” (Lefkowitz, 2020).

*The Pillowman* is consistently being experienced in fresh ways for newer audiences through continuous productions throughout multiple countries. In 2021, the comedy-horror play is seeing its highly publicized West End premiere in London, making this the work’s first major revival (Daniels, 2020; Gans, 2020). During a press statement, McDonagh described the excitement for *The Pillowman* to reach a new audience, stating, “I feel it’s the perfect time to find out what a whole new generation makes of this peculiar tale” (Lefkowitz, 2020). The revival will be directed by Matthew Dunster, a frequent collaborator with McDonagh who directed the previous London and New York productions of McDonagh’s plays *Hangmen* and *A Very Very Very Dark Matter*. A representative from the company producing *The Pillowman*’s upcoming revival stated, “I really hope that with this play, this cast and for this production, we can welcome both established and new playgoers into the West End” (Hemley, 2020). Since the play’s original Broadway run attracted younger audiences in comparison to most Broadway plays, this new publicized 2021 run may very well bring in younger and newer audiences who might be considered non-traditional visitors for West End theatre plays (Pacheco, 2005). Once the anticipated revival premieres, theatergoers will be able to experience and react to whatever unique aesthetic ownership Dunster and his creative team create.

Martin McDonagh’s *The Pillowman* has captivated and divided audiences since its premiere nearly two decades ago. Receiving prestigious award wins and nominations, as well as seeing several annual staged productions around the world, validates that critics and audiences alike find fascination with the controversial play. Few pieces of theatre have found such success while treading the disturbing waters of depicted child-centric violence in unapologetic aggressive ways. However, the combination of the violence’s doubled-down fictionalization as stories-within-a-story, the fairy tale-esque narratives blanketing the horrific details, and the limitless production freedom allow theaters and their audiences to feel ownership of the play’s unique aesthetical experiences. With dialogue including such lines as “The only duty of a storyteller is to tell a story,” “I was a good writer. It was all I ever wanted to be,” and “It isn’t about being or not being dead. It’s about what you leave behind,” McDonagh seemingly projects an empathy for the Katurian character who ultimately finds freedom and importance in telling honest—and if necessary, violent—stories (McDonagh, 2003: pp. 8, 41, 67). Each production of *The Pillowman* requires confident leadership who conveys aesthetic ownership in staging the violent child-centric tales. Whether experiencing McDonagh’s twisted stories is ultimately perceived by audiences as emotionally moving or gratuitous, it will undoubtedly be hard to forget—which appears to be the playwright’s primary goal, since he is “more worried about boring people than offending them” (Pacheco, 2005). *The Pillowman* may not be real, but its lasting effects sure can be.

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## KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

**Broadway:** A simplified term in the theatre industry referring to the 41 professional theatres, each having 500 or more seats, located in the Times Square area in Midtown Manhattan, New York City, New York. Broadway theatre, along with London West End theatre, is considered the highest level of commercial theatre in the English-speaking regions of the world.

**Fairy Tale:** A literary genre consisting of fantastical and imaginative fictional stories typically geared towards children.

**Play:** A written work of drama intended to be staged as a theatrical performance rather than just read.

**Playwright:** A person who writes plays. A playwright can also be referred to as a dramatist.

**Staging:** The method of presenting a theatrical work on the stage in a stylized or realistic presentation that is physically safe for actors.

**Violence:** Exercising force intended to cause physical pain, damage, or destruction towards someone or something.

**West End:** A simplified term in the theatre industry referring to the 39 large professional theatres located in and near the West End district of Central London, England. London West End theatre, along with Broadway theatre, is considered the highest level of commercial theatre in the English-speaking regions of the world.