The Pillowman: Setting the Stage

By Courtney Royer

Martin McDonagh permeates his play, *The Pillowman,* with a multitude of postmodern elements, which he artfully and continuously intertwines in a labyrinth of intertextuality. I have conceptualized a set design with corresponding stage directions that not only provides a visual and structural cohesion with McDonagh’s postmodern artistry, but actually operates in tandem with the actors, allowing for physical manifestations of postmodern theories such as intertextuality, simulacra and metafiction as applied by McDonagh throughout the play. When we analyze the structure of the set design, we see that each feature of the stage, including the shape, layout and technical qualities, symbolizes a postmodern theory and literary element employed in the play. When we extend the parameters of our analysis to include the accompanying stage directions, we have a deeper and more multifaceted understanding of these various levels of postmodernity.

In order to fully realize the symbolic potential behind the set, we will begin our analysis by looking only at the structure of the stage itself. One of the most symbolic features of the stage structure is the open passageway at the center, which simultaneously divides and connects the two facades of the circular stage. In *A Reader’s Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory*, Raman Seldon writes “For if there is a summarizing idea it is the theme of the absent centre” (202). In postmodern theory, centres, which ground a person to a sense of reality, are discredited as metanarratives. Seldon writes that “human shock in the face of the unimaginable…results in a loss of fixed points of reference. Neither the world nor the self any longer possesses unity, coherence [or] meaning” (202). In *The Pillowman*, each of the characters have indeed faced ‘the unimaginable’ including torture, molestation, loss of a child and committing murder. The open or ‘absent’ center passageway in the set design is the structural representation of this unifying postmodern concept of the ‘absent centre’.

This same passageway also symbolizes a dichotomy McDonagh seems to create between the distinctively postmodern and non-postmodern reactions the characters have to their own historical narratives. On one side of the schism, represented by double-room façade, Katurian and Michal do not work toward creating a “better reality” than the previous generation. Rather, they have responded to their horrific pasts in corruptive, absurd and deconstructive ways. McDonagh provides a sketch of this behavior as the brothers discus the implications of the ‘Pillowman’ story: “I mean, you’re my brother and I love you, but, y’know, you’ve just spent twenty minutes telling me a story about a bloke, his main thing in life’s to get a bunch of little kids to, at minimum, set themselves on fire, so, y’know? And he’s the hero! And I’m not criticizing. He’s a very good character. He’s a very good character. He reminds me a lot of me” (McDonagh, 52). On the other side of the dichotomy however, represented by the open, half-stage façade, the detectives have devoted their lives to creating order in the chaotic world. “I shall save my fellow man from those criminals, and I won’t even get thanks for it… But that doesn’t matter, I don’t need thanks. All I need is to know that because of me toiling away with my detective work, that little boy is going to be safe…” (90). Here, Tupolski’s declaration does not align with postmodern theory since it follows the linear trajectory of a progressing culture and morality.

McDonagh and the stage ultimately discredit even the detectives’ pursuit of progress and dissolve progress as a failed grand narrative entirely. Despite their professed objectives, the detectives seem to justify, and even enjoy, their own patterns of abusive behavior. McDonagh has essentially created characters with contradictory identities of heroic and sadistic natures, indicating that the hope of a linear progression toward a ‘better reality’ falls short, even for the detectives.

**Tupolski** I’m just tired of everybody round here using their shitty childhoods to justify their own shitty behavior. *My* dad was a violent alcoholic. Am *I* a violent alcoholic? Yes I am, but that was my *personal choice.* I freely admit it.

**Ariel** I would like to get back to torturing the prisoner now (80).

The rotation of the circular stage and inner track represent McDonagh’s theme of progress as a failed grand narrative. Despite which direction the stage rotates, or through which door an actor exits, no ‘progress’ can be made because no linear option exists. The actors are destined to operate within the confines of the stage’s circumference. Additionally, because the stage has two elements that rotate either direction and completely independently of the other, the actors may ‘move’ on stage without actually making progress toward any direction at all. It also allows the environment to shift around characters who remain stationary, as if remaining stagnant in an ever-changing world.

The rotating set also manifests McDonagh’s postmodern themes of “intertextuality and knowingness” (Seldon 203). This short play has a multitude of sub-narratives and backstories, many of which are alluded to or mentioned well before being told, creating a sense of fragmented knowledge. The characters are also subject to this fragmented knowledge as McDonagh creates a web of ‘known unknowns.’ This web is evident as Katurian attempts to decode the narrative of his interrogation.

**Katurian** A man comes into a room, says, ‘your brother’s just confessed to the killing of three children and we found one of the kid’s toes in a box in your house.’ What do we know?

**Michal** aha! I get it!

**Katurian** Do we know that the brother has killed three children?

**Michal** No.

**Katurian** No. Do we know that the brother has *confessed* to killing three children?

**Michal** No.

**Katurian** No. Do we even know that they found a kid’s toes in a box in their house? No. Do we…Oh my God…

**Michal** What?

**Katurian** We don’t even know that there were any children killed at all. (McDonagh, 40)

The rotating function of the stage creates this same web of ‘certain uncertainty’. The audience knows that multiple sets exist; at some angles of rotation, they may even see fragments of multiple sets. What they do not know, however, is which direction the stage will turn next, what happens to a set while it is out of view or on which segment of stage the play will continue. Additionally, the rotation creates moments in which “everything is ‘obscenely’ on display, moving endlessly and transparently across a surface… “(Seldon, 205). This will be most apparent when audience members briefly see into the open center.

Finally, the LED screens, which provide additional set décor and interactive backdrops, enhance McDonagh’s theme of metafiction and transform his intertextualities into “media event[s] or spectacle[s]” (Seldon, 205). The irony of the LED screens is that they are the only structures that provide any horizontal depth or dimension to the set, yet they supply only depthless images. Additionally, the actors must “navigat[e] through [technology’s] information overload, information management [and] fragmented [or] partial knowledge” (Irvine, 7) since these screens house the only doors through which the actors may pass in order to reach other sections—on or off stage.

Now, after having established the basic structural symbolic foundation of the set design, we may include elements of the stage directions to further analyze the multifaceted layers of postmodernism and literary symbolism the stage has to offer. The play begins in “Katurian’s interrogation room”. As previously established, this segmented, double-room façade, in some ways, symbolizes Katurian and Michal’s opposition to the detectives. Within this façade, however, the brothers are also ‘separated’ by a faux division, or, like in the script, a false dichotomy. McDonagh seems to separate the brothers based on their individual concepts of ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ and their abilities to establish ‘truth’ from ‘fiction’.

**Katurian** No, I’ll tell you why you never acted out any of the nice ones, shall I?

**Michal** Alright.

**Katurian** Because you’re a sadistic, retarded fucking pervert who *enjoys* killing little kids, and even if every story I ever wrote was the sweetest thing imaginable, the outcome’d still be the fucking same. (McDonagh, 50)

However, McDonagh first introduces the audience to the dynamics of the brothers’ relationship as if it was one of love and even protection.

**Katurian** I’m scared my brother is all alone in a strange place, and I’m scared your friend is going to kick the shirt out of him…my brother gets frightened easily, and he doesn’t understand these things and he’s got nothing to do with these stories anyway…I think you should just fucking go and fucking let him out of here right now! Right fucking now!” (15)

The angle of the stage in the opening scene allows Katurian’s interrogation room to act as a physical barrier between the audience and the room Michal is “held” in “one door down” (McDonagh, 15), essentially protecting Michal’s interrogation room from the audience. When McDonagh inverts this dichotomy in Katurian’s narrative ‘The Writer and the Writer’s Brother,’ the stage directions parallel the role reversal: during the production of ‘The Writer and the Writer’s Brother,’ the boys’ bedrooms are inverted from the pre-established interrogation rooms. Further, McDonagh disperses this dichotomy completely within the main narrative when Katurian smothers Michal with a pillow. In order to parallel this complete dissolution of the false dichotomy, the stage directions indicate Katurian’s final written statement and execution to take place on the opposing side of the stage, once identified as the detectives’ ‘side’ of the stage.

As the play transitions in and out of the other numerous sub-stories, the stage directions substantially employ the LED screens to enhance McDonagh’s themes of simulacra, intertextuality and metafiction. During the performance of ‘The Little Jesus Girl’ for example, both the girl and the parents frequently “disappear” behind the LED screen wall, only to be replaced by warped or incomplete versions—typically disproportionate silhouettes—of themselves. As Seldon defines it, this represents “the dominance of the sign or image and consequent loss of the real” (204). In the conceptualized stage directions, this story, along with nearly all of the other sub-narratives told throughout the play, also involves live interaction with the images on the screen walls. This is a manifestation of what Martin Irvine describes as “Culture adapting to simulation, visual media becoming undifferentiated equivalent forms, simulation and real-time media substituting for the real”(6). One of the unique features of ‘The Little Jesus Girl,’ as described in the original stage directions, is that the narrator, Katurian, interacts with the performers as they pantomime the narration: “*Katurian plays the blind man. She rubs dust and spittle over his eyelids*” (McDonagh, 69). In my conceptualized stage direction, this is unique only to this particular story. Katurian’s interaction with the girl on stage, along with the silhouettes on the LED screen, creates additionally multifaceted levels of intertextuality within McDonagh’s play.

The entirety of McDonagh’s play embodies metafiction, or writing about writing. Within this framework, McDonagh often has his characters work together, or even interrupt one another, in an attempt to create a version of the story that coincides with their preferences or agenda. These interruptions often create a comedic interlude in the typically gruesome stories. We see an example of this when Michal interrupts during Katurian’s narration of ‘The Pillowman’:

**Katurian** ...even his head was a pillow, a big round pillow.

**Michal** A *circular* pillow.

**Katurian**  It’s the same thing.

**Michal** But I prefer ‘a *circular* pillow,’ (McDonagh 43).

The LED screens will actually mimic these comedic interruptions, or “challenge[s] to official seriousness [and] subversion[s] of earnestness,” (Irvine, 7) by pausing or going blank to allow for narrator/listener consensus, or even by changing the images to adapt to the newly created descriptions. For example, preceding Tupolski’s story, ‘The Story of the Little Deaf Boy on the Big Long Railroad Tracks. In China,’ after mimicking the ridiculous string of words in his title, the LED screen wall actually invites the audience into the dynamic of metafiction by asking them “Pretty good title right?” These words remain on screen as the characters debate the adequacy of the title. This simple question generates a multitude of thematic elements. It parallels the disruption and creates an infinitival loop of self-reflexivity. The audience becomes aware that the stage and performers are aware that the audience is there etc. etc. etc. Irvine describes this form of circular reflexivity as “Art as recycling of culture authenticated by audience and validated in subcultures sharing identity with the artist,” (7).

Finally, as the play ends, Katurian and Michal’s post-mortem dialogue and accompanying stage directions echo McDonagh’s postmodern theme of ‘the copy,’ or in this play, ‘the stories,’ being more important than the ‘original’ or the ‘writer.’ In the play, Katurian states “If they came to me right now and said, ‘We’re going to burn two out of the three of you—you, your brother, or your stories,’ I’d have them burn you first, I’d have them burn me second, and I’d have it be the stories they saved,” (McDonagh 53). As readers or audience members, we know that, ultimately, only the copies can be saved in this postmodern production. Symbolic of Ariel saving Katurian’s stories, Katurian’s final words are spoken from his mediated image on the LED screen. Unlike the other images portrayed on the screens throughout the production, however, in this scene, Katurian’s image is life-size and in full, realistic color. The image is absolutely identical to the ‘real’ Katurian whom Tupolski just executed. As the post-mortem Michal converses with this ultra-realistic image, there is an element of “cyborgian mixing of organic and inorganic, human and machine…”(Irvine, 7) Eventually, the lights go down on Michal, and the ‘copy’ or ‘story’ of Katurian is the last image the audience will see of McDonagh’s play.

Although any stage could easily adapt to McDonagh’s masterfully constructed and exceptionally postmodern play, having a stage with so many interactive qualities and structures, which are inspired by and adapted specifically to *The Pillowman,* enhances every aspect of the live performance. The stage itself symbolizes and highlights many of the thematic elements McDonagh employs throughout the play while the media qualities of the stage allow the producers to layer even more postmodern characteristics into its production. Although the astronomical cost of producing a set like this makes it rather implausible, perhaps it could begin to take shape in an already exceptionally postmodern city like Las Vegas.

Works Cited

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APPENDIX A: STAGE FEATURES AND DIRECTIONS

STAGE FEATURES

* Circular stage with 360° dual-direction rotation.
* Circular, independent, in-floor conveyor track with 360° dual-direction rotation
* LED walls display digital, pre-recorded images
* Two completely separate set facades
  + Open half-stage segment has curved LED wall
  + Segmented double-room façade with LED walls
* Open center accessible from off stage and by doors leading to set facades.

ACT ONE STAGE DIRECTIONS

SCENE ONE

Katurian Interrogation room

* Stage pivoted so only stage left segment of double-room façade faces audience
* LED background displays barred window
* Table placed in center of segment
* Katurian seated at far side (left stage) of table- chair situated ON conveyer track
* Ariel and Tupolski enter from center segment, left door

THE LITTLE APPLE MEN STORY

* On Tupolski’s line “Here we are, ‘The Little Apple Men’” The stage pivots so both segments of the double-room façade face the audience
* On stage right segment, a little girl sits on a bed.
* A larger-than-life silhouette of her ‘father’ appears behind her on the LED screen.
* As Tupolski and Katurian narrate the story, the girl and the silhouette interact. (he slaps air, she dramatically retracts as if slapped)
* LED screen freezes when Tupolski and Katurian are not actually narrating story.
* At end of story, the girl lies on the bed, large “apple men” appear on the LED screen above the girl, as if walking on her. She dies, the lights go down on that side of the stage, the stage pivots back to Katurian Interrogation room only.

THE THREE GIBBET CROSSROADS

* Katurian still seated in his chair situated on the conveyor track.
* Tupolski wanders the stage during interrogation, stops directly in front of Katurian, standing on conveyor track
* On Tupolski’s line “The Three Gibbet Crossroads. What are you trying to tell us in this story?” The actors stay stationary on track as the stage pivots around them to the open half, half-stage segment.
* Already set up on the stage are three men in iron gibbets who pantomime the narrative as told by Katurian.
* The stage continues to rotate slowly throughout the entire narration. The final line of the narration “and the last sound he ever hears…” will mark the actors’ exit from the half segment of the stage.
* Katurian’s line “that’s a good story…” should be said as the stage pivots through the empty Stage-Right room façade.
* Upon Tupolski’s line “No, There’s nothing wrong with that story…” the actors end at their original positions.

THE TOWN ON THE RIVER STORY

* As Katurian stands, the stage and the conveyor track rotate in unison.
* As they speak, Katurian and Tupolski walk in unison against the rotation of the stage (they remain stationary as they walk)
* The stage stops rotating on Katurian’s “once upon a time” and the two are standing stage left of half-stage segment, which has been cleared. Katurian narrates.
* A young boy stands in the middle of the stage, head down.
* Larger-than-life silhouettes of ‘drunk parents’ hover on one side of the boy on the LED screen, a group of bullying children’s silhouettes mime vulgar movements on the other side.
* On the line “Then, one night, as he sat nursing his newest bruises…” the LED goes black, the boy sits.
* The LED screen shows the silhouette of a man driving a horse-drawn cart.
* The silhouette and the boy proceed to interact and pantomime the remainder of Katurian’s narrative.
* On Katurian’s line “And as the little boy sat there in gaping silent shock…” The stage begins to rotate again and the actors “walk” back to their original places.
* The stage returns to Katurian’s interrogation room and the actors take their places once more.

SCENE TWO

THE WRITER AND THE WRITER’S BROTHER

* The entire double-room façade is facing the audience for the entirety of this scene.
* Stage right is lit, dressed as a child’s bedroom.
* Stage left is dark. No furniture on this side of the stage.
* Mother, father, and child playing with toys on the floor of stage right.
* Katurian sits on a chair, far stage right, not interacting with the family.
* Katurian begins to narrate the story.
* Following with original stage directions, Mother and father exit through middle stage door, and reappear through door in stage left section.
* Stage left lights. LED wall shows larger-than-life silhouette of boy, thrashing, strapped to institution-type bed frame.
* Actors on either side of the façade proceed to pantomime Katurian’s narration, ‘interacting’ with the silhouette and using the center stage doors to travel between ‘rooms’.

ACT TWO STAGE DIRETIONS

SCENE ONE

MICHAL’S INTERROGATION ROOM

* Stage is pivoted so that only stage right of double room façade directly faces audience.
* LED screen shows floor to ceiling jail cell bars behind Michal.
* Props are set up according to original stage directions.
* Katurian enters through middle stage door.
* In preparation for “The Pillowman Story”, Michal and Katurian each lie, lounging on the floor, situated on the conveyor track.

THE PILLOWMAN

* Michal and Katurian are ‘lounging’ on the conveyor track
* On Katurian’s line “once upon a time’’ the stage begins to rotate. The actors remain stationary.
* The stage rotates until the open, half-stage façade is facing the audience. Michal and Katurian are slightly right of center stage on the conveyer track.
* The LED screen begins to create the outline drawing of a “pillowman” piece by piece as Michal and Katurian narrate his features.
* As Michal narrates the history of the Pillowman, live children appear onstage from the door on stage right, the ‘Pillowman’ on the screen silently guides them to the door on the opposite side.
* When the children exit through the door, their larger-than-life silhouette immediately appears and depicts their fatal ‘accident’.
* The ending of the Pillowman story is depicted solely through images on the LED screen.
* On Katurian’s line “the last thing he heard….” The stage begins to rotate back around. The actors remain stationary as Michal’s interrogation room returns to its place.

THE LITTLE GREEN PIG

* Michal and Katurian are again situated on the conveyor track.
* On Katurian’s line “Okay. Settle down…” ‘The Little Green Pig’… the track moves Michal and Katurian toward stage left, so they are in front of the left stage room façade. Simultaneously, the stage rotates slightly in the opposite direction so the entire double-room façade faces the audience.
* The LED screen behind Michal’s interrogation room depicts an illustrated farm scene with pigs—images are in bright, almost florescent color.
* The LED screen silently depicts the entirety of the story as narrated by Katurian.
* On Katurian’s line “You like that one, don’t you, Michal?” the conveyor moves Michal and Katurian directly to center stage.
* Katurian smothers sleeping Michal.
* As Katurian walks to the door, the stage and the conveyor continue to rotate simultaneously until the actors are gone, and stage reveals an empty façade.

SCENE TWO

THE LITTLE JESUS GIRL

* The open half-stage façade faces the audience.
* A girl and two adults stand on the stage.
* Katurian narrates from far stage left as the girl and her parents begin to act out the story.
* On Katurian’s line “Well, one day, the little girl slipped away…” the girl exits through the door on stage right.
* On Katurian’s line “and they sped downtown to pick her up…’ the parents exit the stage through the door on stage left. The LED screen shows their departing silhouettes. The silhouette of a giant ‘meat truck’ smashes into the parent’s silhouettes.
* The girl comes back out on stage
* The LED screen shows two larger-than-life silhouettes of the ‘foster parents’ who tower over the girl.
* The silhouettes (on screen) mime beating the girl (on stage) who gets back up each time they ‘push her down’.
* On Katurian’s line “Her life was a constant torture, yet she bore it all with a smile…” he walks over to the girl and begins “playing the blind man”. The girl mimes rubbing Katurian’s eyes while he continues to narrate.
* The silhouettes of the step parents flank each side of the LED screen behind Katurian and the Girl.
* On Katurian’s line “He reported her to the police…” Katurian returns to where he previously stood. The parents come back out on stage and continue pantomiming Katurian’s narrative with the girl.
* Just after Katurian’s line “And, through her tears, she said, ‘Yes, I do.’” The girl runs through the door on stage left. The parents remain on stage.
* As Katurian continues the narrative, the LED screen shows the silhouette of a girl carrying a cross, back and forth, back and forth, until collapsing under the weight.
* The step parents (still on stage) interact with the silhouette and mime nailing the girl to the cross and standing it upright.
* The lights go down. The LED screen goes dark. The parents exit through the door stage right.
* The lights come back on, the step parents return to the stage from the door stage right. They are pushing a coffin onto the stage. The parents leave the coffin at center stage. They continue walking and exit through the door on stage left.
* Only the coffin remains on the stage as Katurian finishes his narration.

ACT THREE

POLICE INTERROGATION ROOM

* The stage is situated so that the open half-stage façade faces the audience.
* Katurian sits, writing at a table center stage. Ariel and Tupolski stand.
* The LED screen shows floor to ceiling bars like a sliding jail door on one side, and a barred window on the other. It looks like Michal and Katurian’s individual rooms combined.

THE STORY OF THE LITTLE DEF BOY ON THE BIG LONG RAILROAD TRACKS. IN CHINA.

* Katurian still seated at a table in the middle of the large half-stage façade. Tupolski stands and narrates the story.
* As Tupolski says the name of his story, the words appear on the LED screen behind the men, one word at a time—including the punctuation. As the men debate the legitimacy of the title, the words “Pretty good title, right?” appear on screen.
* On Tupolski’s “Once upon a time” the words disappear and a little boy (larger than life and not Chinese) appears on screen. Images are in sepia tones. The changes to a Chinese boy according to Tupolski’s narration. Images continue to appear, shift and conform to Tupolski’s narration.
* When Katurian interrupts, the screen freezes as if the “pause” button had been pushed.
* The LED screen plays out the remainder of Tupolski’s narration like a movie. Many camera angles including the view from the train as it speeds toward the boy and the view from the tower as the old man would see it.
* When Tupolski ends the narration, the screen goes dark and the men continue their scene on the open half-stage façade.
* The remainder of the play happens on this side of the stage. The actors, including the little green girl, use the doors on either end to enter and exit the scene.
* The execution of Katurian takes place center stage.
* When Katurian rises post-mortem, it is his image that appears (life sized and in full color, exactly as he was last seen) on the LED screen.
* Real life Michal appears in the door way and converses with the Katurian on screen.
* Michal exits.
* Katurian delivers his last lines
* End.

APPENDIX B: STAGE IMAGES (SEE PDF)