Stones in His Pockets
The articles in this study guide are not meant to mirror or interpret any productions at the Utah Shakespeare Festival. They are meant, instead, to be an educational jumping-off point to understanding and enjoying the plays (in any production at any theatre) a bit more thoroughly. Therefore the stories of the plays and the interpretative articles (and even characters, at times) may differ dramatically from what is ultimately produced on the Festival's stages.

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Cover photo: Brian Vaughan (left) and David Ivers in Stones in His Pockets, 2005.
Stones in His Pockets

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Synopsis: Stones in His Pockets

A Hollywood movie, The Quiet Valley, is being filmed in rural County Kerry, Ireland, and two local men, Jake Quinn and Charlie Conlon, are among the many who have been cast as extras. (The two actors who play these characters also play all the other characters in the play.)

The two men are beginning to get acquainted over lunch at the catering truck and are soon joined by Mickey, another local extra who was also an extra in The Quiet Man with John Wayne filmed many years ago in the same area. Next to appear are Simon and Aisling, two assistant directors, trying to get the extras back on the filming set before the daylight is gone.

Caroline Giovanni, the movie’s star, finally appears on the set with John, her accent coach, who is trying to improve her bad Irish dialect. The filming finally resumes, as Jake and Charlie continue their conversation.

Charlie, it seems, has a film manuscript of his own and badly wants an opportunity to show it to the movie people. However, shooting for the day soon ends, and the extras move to the locker room to change into their everyday street clothes. While there, Sean appears. He is a local lad who wants to be an extra but wasn’t hired because he is usually under the influence of drugs or drink. He is angry that others were hired but not him, and he stumps off cursing: “You’re a nobody, just like me and she won’t give me a job.”

Jake, Charlie, and Sean are among the many others who gather that evening at the local pub. Surprisingly, Caroline and some of her entourage also appear, trying to soak up some of the local atmosphere. Sean, angry that Caroline won’t give him the time of day and that he still hasn’t been hired, bitterly leaves again.

Later, Caroline, still looking for local flavor for her character, invites Jake to join her, or rather, she joins him. She invites him to go back to the hotel for a drink with her. Jake, of course, thinks this is his big chance to make love to the beautiful star. Of course, Jake’s attempts to impress her are awkward and over-inflated, but the two do talk for some time as Caroline tries to mimic his accent—and she does invite him to her trailer again tomorrow. In his mind, she is falling for him, but in hers he is simply a good way to practice her Irish dialect.

As shooting resumes, news is brought that Sean Harkin has drowned himself. When the divers found him, his pockets were full of stones.

As Act Two begins, filming is again in progress. A flashback scene takes the characters back to a twelve-year-old Sean Harkin and his friend, Fin, who dream of going to America to become a movie star, a dream that obviously never saw the light of day.

The film director, Clem, is trying to keep the shooting moving along before clouds come in and ruin the light, but the locals, grieving Sean’s death, are not in the mood. Clem expresses his sympathy, but makes it clear that shooting will go on the next day, and no one will be allowed time off to attend Sean’s funeral. That evening, Jake and Charlie attend Sean’s wake. In a flashback scene, we learn that Caroline Giovanni had caused Sean Harkin to be humiliated and thrown out of the tavern, the night before he committed suicide.

The next day, shooting is interrupted because one of the stars is allergic to the two truckloads of flowers that had been ordered for the wedding scene. In a public relations move, Caroline orders the flowers to be sent to the chapel where Sean Harkin’s funeral is to be held. Jake confronts her about her hypocrisy and humiliation of his cousin, Sean: “The way you and everybody else treated him like he was a piece of muck on their boots. . . . You had him thrown out of the pub, in his own town in front of his own people, think about that for humiliation.”

Jake suggests that he and Charlie write a movie script; a true story about a film being made and the suicide of a young man. They get no encouragement from the movie people. The movie shooting goes on, but Jake and Charlie grow more excited and animated as they make plans for their own movie, to be called Stones in His Pockets.
Characters: *Stones in His Pockets*

Charlie Conlon: In his mid-thirties and one of a number of extras hired in the filming of a Hollywood movie being shot in rural Ireland, Charlie is the former owner of a failed video store. He has a movie script in his back pocket that he hopes will win some consideration from the movie people. He is relegated to a faceless background role, and his script is never even considered by anyone.

Jake Quinn: One of a number of extras hired in the filming of a Hollywood movie being shot in rural Ireland, Jake has recently returned from a short and very unsuccessful stay in New York. Jake has the notion that he might become a film star. Instead, as an extra, he is relegated to digging turf as a “background bog man.” His attempts at winning the favors of the film’s female star by pretending to be a poet don’t go much better. He is a cousin of the tragic Sean Harkin.

The actors playing these two roles also portray the rest of the characters in the play. These include:

Simon: The first assistant director on the set, Simon is just trying to get the film shot on time.

Aisling: The third assistant director, Aisling is young, pretty, and anxious to impress those above her, especially Simon and Clem. She has no interest in those beneath her, especially the local extras.

Mickey Riordan: A local in his seventies, Mickey is one of the few surviving extras in The Quiet Man, John Wayne’s seminal Hollywood-in-Ireland movie shot in this same region of the country many years ago. As such, he thinks he knows best how the extras should act to keep their jobs and their “forty quid per day.”

Clem: The movie director, Clem is a stuffy Englishman with little or no understanding of the local community.

Sean Harkin: A dreamy, local lad, Sean’s dreams are continually dashed until he commits suicide partway through the play.

Fin: Another young local, Fin is Sean’s friend.

Caroline Giovanni: The beautiful but flighty American star, Caroline thinks she understands Ireland and its people, but it soon becomes evident that her knowledge and caring are about as real as her poor accent.

John: Caroline’s accent coach.

Brother Gerard: A local teacher.

Dave: A Cockney crew member.

Jock Campbell: Caroline’s Scottish security man.
Stones in His Pockets: The Playwright

By Carly Hughes
From Insights, 2005

Marie Jones is a playwright for the people of Ireland. Be they Protestant, Catholic, nationalist or loyalist, she draws upon the collective experiences of all those who could claim Irish blood. “I still write plays about us. I haven’t moved away from my background and culture. Yes, when I am in London I might go to the Ivy for dinner. But in Belfast, I pop into Sainsbury’s to do my shopping like everyone else and people stop and talk and tell me about their lives all the time, because these people have known me all my life” (Jones, Marie, quoted in Gardner, Lyn, “The Bard of Belfast,” Guardian Unlimited [Guardian Limited Newspapers 2004] http://www.guardian.co.uk/arts/features/story/0,,1280430,00.html, 26 November 2004). It is this connection with her roots that gives her plays their authentic flavor, enabling her to infuse her characters with life from the lives of persons she meets in the grocery store, the restaurant, the casual stroll down the street, and not least of all, her own life. In this way, she gives name and voice to a people so often confined to the stereotyped portrait of Irish people displayed by Hollywood.

Born in 1955 in Belfast, a city divided by the years-old conflict between Protestant loyalists and Catholic unionists, Jones began to acquire the experiences that would sculpt her as a playwright. Some of her earliest and most vivid memories included the weekly visits with her mother to her aunt’s house. There she was witness to the candidness of two sisters reminiscing. “They would tell the same stories every week. They would laugh, they would cry. And although they were the same stories, they were told differently every time. I couldn’t get enough of them” (Bard of Belfast). In these conversations, Jones discovered the power of stories and story telling, and the need for the dreams, desires, and disasters of a human life to be expressed. This intrinsic value of storytelling, shown by the sheer numbers shared and heard in a single day, was permanently impressed upon Jones by these weekly, ritualistic visits. In her own words, “If anything turned me into a playwright, it was those visits to my aunt” (Bard of Belfast).

Though she would later credit this beginning for shaping her as a playwright, she didn’t originally intend this as her profession and passion. Before she wrote her first published word, she was an aspiring actress. As a child she was enchanted by the annual pantomimes that would grace Belfast’s Grand Opera House, and at fifteen, she was so taken by a particular play, that she wrote to the director to ask for an opportunity to participate in the next production (Maguire, Tom. “Marie Jones,” British and Irish Dramatists Since WWII Volume 233, John Bull, Ed. [Farmington Hill, Michigan: The Gale Group, 2001] 182-187). It was the beginning of a romance with the stage so profound, that after a later absence from it, she chose to leave a husband and son to pursue her career as an actress (Bard of Belfast). Of this decision between dream and duty she says, “I knew that I would be no use to my son if I felt frustrated and angry all the time. I felt that I had to learn, and listen, and educate myself. It was a very hard decision and it wasn’t the traditional decision, but I am glad I made it because I wouldn’t be sitting here now being interviewed if I hadn’t (Bard of Belfast). That kind of decision is scorned by society and chosen by few, but the quandary between dream and duty is so common that when it appears in various contexts on the stage, it is impossible that it will not find resonance with an audience. Regardless of whether one judges such a decision as right or wrong, it certainly was the inspiration, alongside numerous other real life examples that enables Jones to write with a genuineness and authority that only come from having been “in the thick of it.”

After this turning point, Jones continued to work as an actress for years but became increasingly frustrated with the roles she was given, roles that used women as extras and eye candy in a male dominated cast (Maguire, 183). That was, of course, if she was fortunate to even get a part.
She lamented, “We were in our thirties and widely experienced, but whenever a Belfast theatre put on a classic it would get young English actresses just out of drama school to play the roles” (Bard of Belfast). The frustration became so acute that Jones, with other fed-up friends, founded the Charabanc Theatre Company in 1983 (Maguire, 183). It was at this time that she drew upon the memoirs of her mother and aunt, the foibles of her own life, and the conflicts of countless others to be the fuel for her creativity. Her first collaborative play, Lay Up Your Ends, was well received and only the beginning of Marie’s efforts to capture pieces of the Irish experience, the laughter, the tears, the challenges, and conflict which she wove into plays that “make critics sneer and ordinary audiences cheer” (Bard of Belfast). All who claim literary or theatrical authority are not particularly inventive or profound; as Jones notes, “people want to keep the theatre as some kind of special preserve for people like them, educated, cultured people; they don’t like it when a play packs out the theatre with ordinary people having a good time” (Bard of Belfast). That’s exactly what happened. Local spectators attended and failed to encounter a Hamlet or Macbeth, nothing epic at all. Instead, they saw themselves satirized and parodied but even more importantly, actualized and validated.

Jones remained with Charabanc until 1990 when she resigned, but continued to write and co-founded another company, DubbleJoint, for which she could write plays that addressed “the troubles” of the age old unionist-loyalist conflict (Maguire, 185). However, these plays were written in such a way that they brought ethical questions to attention without becoming a screaming complaint or sweeping moral/political statement. The Blind Fiddler, Stones in His Pockets, and A Night in November explore such themes as generational rift, geo-political discrimination, and cultural exploitation in a humorous manner so that an audience is skillfully seduced into pondering these questions, even enticed, making it more effective than an overtly critical manner. This can leave some to surmise that her play’s statements are weak because they invite the intellect of the audience to take from it what lessons it will, instead of ramming it down the collective throats. That courtesy compensates for any weakness a critic could attach to her plays.

To date, Marie Jones has received multiple awards and acclaim for her wit as well as cultural commentary. The greatest award, however, is the delight of play-goers with her ability to soften the harshness of reality by placing it upon the altar of a stage where they can laugh at what would bring them heartache in life. She uncovers the meaning in everyday, mundane life so that people of Northern Ireland and the Republic or Ireland, people, are represented, and “even in the midst of total devastation we’ll always be having a laugh” (Bard of Belfast).

People need to tell stories; they need to relate and make sense of what they experience, to heal and understand, laugh and let go, but not everyone can be heard. Marie Jones speaks for those.
Stones in His Pockets:  
All’s Right with the World  
By Daniel Frezza

In rural County Kerry, a Hollywood company is on location filming a grand, romantic Irish saga. We see a few days of the shooting and the ups and downs this intrusion has on the villagers—in particular on two of the movie’s extras, Jake and Charlie. That, in a nutshell, is the situation in the recent New York and London hit play Stones in His Pockets. (If the combination of an Irish village, an American film company, plus numerous references to cows reminds you of Martin McDonagh’s The Cripple of Inishmaan, you are up-to-date on contemporary Irish drama.) In this very funny and at times serious work, Irish playwright Marie Jones takes shots at Hollywood and the Irish, offers a clear-eyed look at both the bright and the dark sides of show business (she’s an actress herself), and says some interesting things about hopes and illusions. Jake and Charlie frequently scoff at the film’s fanciful story because it’s not true to real life, yet Jones keeps the emotional conflicts and intellectual arguments nicely balanced. Empty illusions exist outside of Hollywood too, and those of real life are worse than those in the movies for they can be demoralizing and sometimes fatal. Above all else, though, Stones in His Pockets is a celebration of theatricality, virtuosity, and of “Hey, kids, let’s put on a show!”

The most unusual aspect of Stones in His Pockets is how it works. Only two actors play all the characters. This play, however, doesn’t rely on quick offstage costume changes as does the evergreen 1982 hit Greater Tuna, where the two actors who play all the characters alternate leaving the stage to return dressed as their next character. In Stones in His Pockets the two actors remain on stage, instantly shifting back and forth among more than a dozen characters with only a change of voice, stance, gesture, and perhaps the aid of a costume piece or a prop. The roots of Jones’s approach might be traced to the type of storytelling where the speaker doesn’t simply relate what the characters say but impersonates the characters. The play’s construction, too, shares a characteristic of the genial storyteller: looping back to fill in needed detail. This is, of course, the flashback, familiar in movies and television but not often used on stage.

Stones in His Pockets explores parallels as well as differences between the movies and life. “Showbiz” is such an unstable mix of hard-headed business, artistry, greed, skill, ego, imagination, estimating (or underestimating) the public’s tastes and interests, and sheer luck that fame and financial success are rare. “Talent is talent. . . . It wins through in the end,” says Charlie; and Jake retorts: “You don’t believe that do ya?” (Marie Jones, Stones in His Pocket. [Applause Theatre & Cinema Books. New York, 2001] p. 30). Nor, when fame and success come, are they a sure indicator of what’s true and valuable. Chatting up the film’s star, Caroline, Jake asks what he should do to break into the movies. Caroline tells him—most emphatically—“You don’t want to get into the movies” (p. 51). We sense that her outburst stems from genuine disillusionment with her profession. This is a possibility that Jake can’t quite comprehend and that Charlie flatly rejects when told about it later. Since one of the themes of Stones in His Pockets is disappointment, it is fitting to remember Pam Brighton and Tim Murphy, respectively the director and the actor who played Jake in the original 1996 Belfast production of Stones in His Pockets. (Jane Coyle, “Juggernaut rolls into town” [Irish Times, Dublin. August 8, 1996] p. 6]). Both were replaced for the completely revised 1999 version which was a hit at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival then London, New York, and now around the world. Though Brighton and Murphy weren’t involved in shaping the play that became so successful and even though Brighton lost her court case in which she claimed part copyright ownership in Stones in His Pockets (“Success in her pockets.” [Irish Times, Dublin. May 22, 2004] p. 54), their work on the earlier version almost certainly contrib-
Stones in His Pockets allows-in fact, calls for—wide latitude in production. The script grew out of collaboration between Jones and her director and actors. As she put it: “I had no idea how I would have staged it. In a funny way, it’s like radio: nothing there but words and a few signs” (Jones, p. 10). Thus, a truly alive production will draw afresh on the collaborative inventiveness of its director and performers to an unusual degree and any two productions are likely to vary a good deal. For example, a row of old shoes against the back wall was featured in the 2001 New York production. (Ben Brantley, “Wearing everyone’s shoes, yet being themselves” [The New York Times, April 2, 2001] p. E-1). They aren’t called for in the script, however, and may not show up in other productions. Or they just might; theatre artists have been known to recycle appealing ideas. Even if you’ve seen this show before, expect to find a lot that’s new in this production.

Unlike her two principal characters, Jones knows how to wrap up a story. After spending most of the play dashing would-be playwright Charlie’s hopes, the pessimist Jake at last catches the bug and encourages Charlie to turn the tragic death they recently experienced into a film script. Their attempt to sell the story to Clem, the director of the film in which they are extras, is shot down; though he might be interested if they added a love interest and scrapped the suicide. Charlie defends his story by saying that it’s true to what actually happened. “People want happy endings,” says Clem finally (Jones, p. 91). Are Jake and Charlie dismayed? Not on your life. Rejecting Clem’s advice, they talk themselves into a state of giddy enthusiasm as the play ends. Jake and Charlie may eventually come to accept Clem’s lesson, though. Jones has. Critic Nancy Franklin summed up her review of Stones in His Pockets this way: “Its crowd-pleasing ending is corny, but it’s also perfect: you think it represents the triumph of the authentic over the phony, and then it occurs to you that Jones has tricked you one last time-she’s written the kind of ending that could only happen in the movies” (Nancy Franklin, “Blarney Stones” [The New Yorker, April 16, 2001] p. 88). Or on stage. As Clem says: “Movies aren’t real life” (Jones, p. 90). Nor are plays. If a play or film makes us laugh or cry or think (or, ideally, all three), does it matter how much it resembles real life?
An Irish-American View of

Stones in His Pockets

By Kelli Allred, PhD

Playwright Marie Jones has painted a canvas covered in vibrantly assorted characters, set on Ireland’s powerful Dingle Peninsula, and peppered with thematic material worthy of praise. Jones’s choice of setting and characters helps to reveal the play’s rich themes. Her characters include Irish and American, rich and poor, young and old, film stars and extras. By asking only two actors to portray all the characters in the story, Jones allows the audience to experience the stark distinctions and human similarities among her characters. In spite of the curt, pithy dialogue that moves the story along in spurts, Jones manages to capture the essence of the various assets and liabilities of being human, qualities readily recognizable to viewers or readers of the play.

Hollywood has distorted and perpetuated stereotypes of Irish men and woman for decades, but one can hardly accuse Hollywood of originating such stereotypes. Glancing back at the earliest plays penned by Irish writers provides a clue to the origins of archetypal characters who speak with thick Irish brogue; folks who live in quaint, impoverished seaside villages; a nation of people whose identity defies description. In Stones in His Pocket, Jones has created a story that illuminates the characters, the setting, and the themes from the perspectives of both Hollywood filmmakers and native Irish villagers. Indeed, the play is a contemporary link to the medieval morality play, Everyman.

Modern tragicomedy is often the story of an antihero—a character whose most obvious traits would be considered less heroic than villainous. While neither of the protagonists in Stones in His Pockets could be considered an antihero, both Jake and Charlie cling to their hopes for a brighter tomorrow in a more nurturing homeland. The play provides plenty of comic relief through the quick-change antics of the two actors; nevertheless, its serious elements reveal the modestly noble frailties of Jake and Charlie: determination, confusion, frustration, and cynicism. The playwright adeptly uses these two everyman characters to explore cultural nuances that make it easy for audiences to connect with them on a personal level by asking themselves: “Would my choices be the same as that character’s if I were faced with the same dilemma? How might that character’s choices differ if they had the freedoms afforded by another time and place? What do I have in common with that character?” The play script of a tragicomedy will usually be read more often than seen by live audiences, but theatergoers who read Stones in His Pocket after seeing it are likely to find the reading “its own joyful experience” (Mel Gussow, Introduction to Stones in His Pocket [New York: Applause, 2001], 7).

Jones sets the play in a village on the Dingle Peninsula, a narrow arm of land in the southwest corner of Ireland. Its diverse landscapes run from lush mountaintop farms to sandy beaches too cold for swimming. It happens to be the setting most commonly used by playwrights and filmmakers for over a century. British film director David Lean chose to set his film Ryan’s Daughter (1970) in the quaint Irish location of Dunquin, located on the Dingle Peninsula. He built for the film a village made of stone so that it could withstand the pelting storms. Villagers from the town of Dunquin were hired as extras. “The area was at the time economically destitute, but the amount of money spent in the town—nearly a million pounds—revived the local economy and led to increased immigration to the Dingle Peninsula” (Paul F. State, A Brief History of Ireland [New York: Checkmark Books, 2009], 318).

Between 1890 and 1980, most films originating in Ireland were produced by American companies, with American directors, writers, and actors. These early films perpetuated the romanticism of an impoverished Ireland with its quaint seaside villages, traditional music, religious devotion, thick brogues, weathered farm folk, and red haired children. Most plotlines were so rural as to be barely recognizable to city dwellers. Since the 1990s, however, the Irish Film Board has empowered Irish filmmakers (writers, directors, actors) with the backing to create genuine Irish movies.
“May your pockets be heavy and your heart be light, and may good luck pursue you each morning and night.” The sentimental Irish blessings exemplify Irish tradition as one of hope and encouragement, but the theme of hope requires a more thoughtful explication: “Hope can make the present moment less difficult to bare. If we believe that tomorrow will be better, we can bear a hardship today” (Thich Nhat Hanh, Peace Is Every Step: The Path of Mindfulness in Everyday Life [New York: Bantam, 1992]). Not all philosophers see hope as a good thing, as in Nietzsche’s statement that hope is the worst of all evils because it “prolongs the torments of man.” Throughout Stones in His Pocket, Charlie carries in his back pocket the screenplay he has written, hoping to deliver it into the hands of someone from Hollywood who will read it. Jake mocks Charlie’s hopeful efforts saying, “You haven’t a hope Charlie, it’s who you know in this business” (Act 1) and “You have nothing in your life, you are going nowhere” (Act 2).

Jones weaves this grim perspective into Stones in His Pockets via the pathetic, tormented Sean Harkin who, in his short life, has suffered insurmountable losses: his father has sold the family farm, rendering Sean useless and his life without purpose. He has lost his identity and all hope, and he falls into a serious addiction to drugs. When Sean dies, his cousin Jake blames himself: “I could have gave him hope!” But when Charlie assures him it was too late to help Sean, the audience can almost hear Nietzsche whispering in Jake’s ear, Why prolong the torment?

“I’ll tell you what’s a terrible tragedy, filling young Sean’s head with dreams” says Charlie, whose own dreams for wealth in America came to naught. An enthusiastic crewmember reminds the extras on set: “Remember, you’re defeated, broken men,” and “the Irish know one thing, that’s how to dance!” (Act 2). The existence of such presumptive stereotypes serve to reinforce the play’s secondary theme: that although the Irish continue to struggle past their ambiguous national identity there is more to being Irish than the rustic folk made iconic on the silver screen; that the Irish are more than the demonized villains of Hollywood’s imagination.

The author of two dozen plays, Marie Jones’ contributes to the long tradition of Anglo-Irish literature with her colorful montage of speech and characterization in Stones in His Pocket. The play’s title remains enigmatic for the audience, until the grim reality sets in during the final moments of Act 1. The theme that drives Stones in His Pockets explains the Irish belief that “the half-said thing to them is dearest” (Padraic Colum, ed. Anthology of Irish Verse [New York: Boni and Liveright, 1922; Bartleby.com, 20 Jan 2012]). Audiences will wonder at the title Stones in His Pocket, because the title is, indeed, the half-said thing. Once they have seen or read the play, that same half-said thing will resonate as a refreshing reminder that the lifelong struggle of everyman includes the need for hope and belonging. While one man may give up, countless others never lose hope for a brighter future.