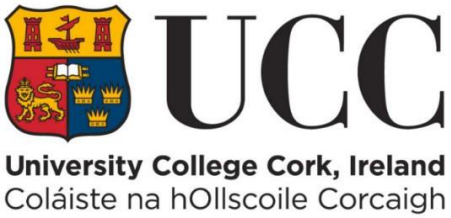
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"A vocation without a ministry?" Contexts and Developments in Contemporary Irish Play Writing.

Thesis presented by
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81402601
for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

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Declaration

This is to certify that the work I am submitting is my own and has not been submitted for another degree, either at University College Cork or elsewhere. All external references and sources are clearly acknowledged and identified within the contents. I have read and understood the regulations of University College Cork concerning plagiarism and intellectual property.

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Abstract

This study focuses on the changing landscape of Irish theatre in the first two decades of the new millennium and its effect on the position of the Irish playwright. The final decade of the twentieth century witnessed the emergence of what has been described as the 'golden' generation of Irish playwrights: Marina Carr, Martin McDonagh, Conor McPherson, Mark O'Rowe and Enda Walsh. No Irish playwright of the twenty-first century has garnered a similar type of critical and/or popular reception. My hypothesis is that, in the new millennium, Irish theatre provided an exciting new forum for the work of theatre makers, actor-authors and dance theatre practitioners, reducing the dependence on the playwright's script and repositioning the relationship between the audience and the stage irrevocably. Where does that leave the playwright? Is there enough support from funding and other bodies to allow the playwright to survive? Is there sufficient support for the playwrights not just to survive but to develop? These were some questions I set out to answer only to find myself asking many more. I examined case studies from the 'golden generation' and from three playwrights of the new millennium in an attempt to understand whether extant threads exist through the political, myth and dramaturgy that link all these playwrights to what Tom Kilroy describes as an Anglic tradition. It was also important not to lose sight of so many other talented practitioners working in my profession. As such, bearing in mind the national and international successes of Louise Lowe, Gary Keegan and Feidlim Cannon of the theatre-maker sector; Pat Kinevane, Mikel Murfi, Sonya Kelly and Seamus O'Rourke of the actor-author sector; and the spellbinding work of Michael Keegan-Dolan's dance theatre, a further aim of the research is to question whether a complete redefinition of the term 'Irish playwright' is required.

Introduction

A craft without an apprenticeship, a ministry without responsibility, a vocation without a ministry. (Friel, *Faith Healer* 13)

The title of this thesis is borrowed from Brian Friel, regarded as one of Ireland's greatest playwrights. I suggest the epigraph as a metaphor for the playwright who cannot get his/her work produced. They have the 'vocation' to write plays but no 'ministry' to house them, no opportunity to have their work produced.

Theatre is important to me. It is how I make my living. I remember an interview with Harrison Ford where he was asked whether he succeeded because he was the best actor in his acting school, to which he replied negatively, explaining that he just stayed on the bus longer than everyone else. Over the past almost thirty years working in professional theatre I have witnessed many talented playwrights, actors, directors, designers, who could no longer suffer the slings and arrows of Irish theatre, disembark from that bus, tired of the lack of work, the interminable gaps between one job and the next, the lack of funding for worthwhile projects, but mostly that sense of spending a lifetime working in mundane jobs waiting for the call that seldom comes. Short-order chef, England Rugby merchandiser, pretend archaeologist, car parking attendant at the Ryder Cup, builder's labourer and house painter are only some of the numerous positions that I have filled while trying to survive in the world of theatre. Survive is the right word. I work as a theatre director. I have directed 52 professional productions. For at least half of these I received no fee. The largest fee I have ever been paid is 12,000 euro. I received 1,000 euro for each of the last two productions I directed as neither received Arts Council funding. The average fee paid to a director for a production now is about 5,000 euro. Unlike actors who can work on television,

film, radio and voice-overs, directors and designers are tied to the world of theatre and the possibility of work on the few productions that present themselves each year.

However unpredictable the position that actors, directors and designers inhabit, the position of the playwright may be the most precarious of all. The playwright can spend months writing a new play and find that his/her efforts in securing a producer are futile. Over the past twenty-five years I have become increasingly aware of the lack of emerging playwrights. It is therefore an attempt to understand the factors that contribute to the playwrights' position that motivated my doctoral research. In doing so, I engaged with the devised work of theatre makers in particular, which revived, and for Fintan O'Toole re-politicised contemporary theatre ("The new theatre"). I also benefited from my professional access to actor-authors – I have directed Seamus O'Rourke and Mikel Murfi, and toured extensively with Pat Kinevane and Sonya Kelly – to analyse how their work again offers an alternative to the conventional play and playwriting process. Finally, a reflection on the contemporary Irish theatre landscape would seem incomplete if it did not consider the innovations brought by dance theatre. Michael Keegan-Dolan and his dance theatre company, Teac Damsa, are at the forefront with "interdisciplinary works [that] inhabit the space between dance and theatre to tell stories through hybrid mixes of various dance and movement vocabularies in combination with text, music and other performance media" (McGrath 2).

The 1990s saw the emergence of what Fintan O'Toole describes as the "golden" generation: Marina Carr, Martin McDonagh, Conor McPherson, Mark O'Rowe, and Enda Walsh ("Can Irish dramatists tackle the big questions again?"). Three decades later it is difficult to identify any Irish playwright who has a similar profile. Why? Are the contemporary playwrights not writing as well as their predecessors? Has their dramaturgy evolved against audience expectations, leading to neglect? Has the landscape of theatre

changed to such an extent that the traditional support systems, namely Arts Council Funding and theatre company support, are not supporting the emergence of new work? Has the collapse of the independent theatre system contributed to the paucity of important new writers? Has the focus of the Arts Council shifted? Or is it a combination of some or all of these factors?

This thesis offers an internal view of Irish contemporary theatre through the lens of a practitioner who has directed the plays of both canonical and new playwrights, from Brian Friel to Shane Mac An Bhaird. My initial introduction to theatre was through the amateur drama movement. My first professional placement was as Artistic Director of The Everyman Palace Theatre in Cork where I spent five years directing in-house productions, programming touring productions and venue management. I have experience of the amateur drama sector, venue management, theatre training systems, producing and directing plays, producing festivals and developing new plays, which has given me a broad overview of theatre.

Irish theatre, like a tectonic plate, is constantly moving. Theatrical forms, staging techniques, funding policies and personnel are changing, developing, and interrogating the nature and the art of theatre. Over the first two decades of the new millennium Irish theatre has changed irrevocably. Traditional definitions of what constitutes a play, a playwright and a director have become fluid.

In Chapter 1, I map out how the industry of contemporary Irish theatre is composed in order to establish the presence of a new framework – in the sense that it is historically different. Instead of, but as well as, the creation of plays written by a playwright, contemporary Irish theatre is made up of the work of the theatre makers and that of the actor-authors. By theatre maker I refer to productions that hinge on a devised script,

emanating from specific practitioners or an ensemble, and that often employ a collaborative ethos and multimedia. Chapter 1 gives an overview of some of the different companies working in that sector, and addresses critical aspects relevant to the factual basis of their productions, such as ethics, elitism, and trauma tourism. More evidently, actor-author work is defined as plays that are written and performed by an actor. The chapter also examines the growth of the actor-author sector, exploring the diversity and quantitative import of this rapidly-expanding genre. The final part of the chapter examines the position of the playwright in contemporary theatre, by which I mean the author of a literary play. The chapter frames this mapping within the context of the industry, establishing the pivotal role of funding in the development of all of these theatre forms.

By the end of the twentieth century Irish theatre consisted mostly of playwrights' scripts. Independent theatre companies commissioned playwrights to write new plays and the companies produced them. Playwrights also wrote scripts in isolation and sent them to the Abbey, the Gate and some of the larger venues with the possibility they would be accepted for production. Martin McDonagh sent his plays to Druid who recognised the possibilities of the plays and produced them. Arts Council funding policies provided funding to the independent theatre companies to commission and produce these new plays. In 2009 a decision was made by the Arts Council to reduce the funding granted to the independent theatre company sector and channel that funding directly to the individual artist: in one night, referred to by both Arts Council staff and the practitioners concerned as 'the night of the long knives', the Arts Council phoned a number of companies announcing the cut to their subsidies. This decision was copper-fastened by an Arts Council policy document of 2010 titled "Supporting the production and presentation of theatre: A new approach", the central premise of which was to replace the Annual Funding Grant system for companies and organisations with the Project Funding Award system or at the very least to reduce

funding being granted to organisations and to channel increased funding directly to the artist.

For those of us working in theatre, changes in funding criteria were seismic. On the surface the new system was a far fairer forum for individual artists and small theatre companies who were attempting to access funding to produce new plays. A small theatre company, such as my own theatre company Blood in the Alley, could never compete with companies like Druid, Rough Magic or Corcadorca but, at least the Project Funding system allowed us an avenue to which one can apply to produce new plays. In reality, however, the system very much favoured a more interdisciplinary approach to performance rather than new playwriting. By interdisciplinary what is meant is that the finished performance would have elements of dance, photography, audio-visual, clown, or opera, in collaborative interventions that fit the criteria of the new Arts Council funding system. The inclusion of some or all of these in a production is more easily achievable, and naturally found as a dialectic means, in a theatre maker performance than in a traditional play. Take dance as a case in point. In many productions, theatre makers communicate with the audience through dance – a well-known example is Pan Pan's *The Seagull and Other Birds* (2014). This allows collaborations with theatre practitioners such as dancers, or movement directors. In the more traditional scripts of Friel, Murphy, or McPherson and Carr, dance, choreographers and movement directors would seldom if ever be used: moments of singing or dancing would fall under the remit of the director.

The research for this thesis suggests that the position of the Irish playwright has never been as precarious as it is now. An Arts Council report titled "Views of Theatre in Ireland 1995" outlined shortcomings in the funding systems as far back as the mid 1990s. In 2009, the Arts Council issued a document titled "Examining New Ways to Fund the Production and Presentation of Theatre" in order to "prompt discussion with and amongst

the theatre sector and the Arts Council" about how best "to fund theatre presentation and production in the future" (2). The Arts Council had reached a funding impasse. What this discussion document recognised is that too many independent theatre companies were being underfunded and too much Arts Council funding was going directly to administration costs and less and less to the artist. The aim at that critical point was therefore to turn the funding policy on its head, that is, to reduce – and in some cases eradicate – funding to the independent theatre sector in favour of a new system where individual artists could apply directly to the Arts Council for funding for their projects. The Arts Council, in attempting to divert funding away from the traditional company system and directly to the artist, may have inadvertently 'thrown the baby out with the bath-water'.

If the playwrights were affected by the collapse of the independent theatre sector, the actors who worked for those companies were the biggest losers. Companies like Barabbas, Island Theatre, Red Kettle, Gallowglass and Ouroboros regularly did productions with large casts and productions that toured, providing much needed work for the often under-employed actors. As artistic director of the Everyman Palace in 1997, we produced and toured *The Playboy of the Western World* providing over six months work for the eleven actors involved. Many of them were just out of drama college and extremely grateful to have the employment, the training, billing credits, and an opportunity to be seen by other directors. Yet, at the end of a tour, many actors were left with little alternative but to write and perform their own work as a one-actor play. While actor-authors first appeared in the 1960s, evidence suggests an upsurge of this type of theatre in the twenty-first century, and my contention is that this upsurge was motivated by financial considerations.

Since 2011 the work of the theatre makers is staunchly supported by the Arts Council Project funding system. Chapter 2 examines the work of two of the most celebrated theatre companies, ANU and Brokentalkers. There are numerous theatre making companies

working in Ireland at the moment but I have chosen ANU and Brokentalkers because they interrogate social issues that continue to haunt contemporary Ireland and, by using different theatrical methods, force audiences to take position. While much of their work has been discussed in relation to the historical happenings they address, I will also reflect on how they rethink the relationship between the performer and the spectator. ANU, under the stewardship of artistic director Louise Lowe and designer Owen Boss, employ intimate performance structures in site-specific, immersive productions. Brokentalkers combine actors and non-actors selected for the authentic dimension that they bring to the issue explored, which also renegotiates the relationship between stage and auditorium.

In ANU'S work, the "site-specificity lies in its political efficacy to emerge from and engage with communities in the present but mindful of their past" (Singleton *ANU* 7). To achieve this, immersion of the spectator is often individual: the audience member may be in the space alone with the actors and have to engage with them, in an intimate position that is sometimes uncomfortable. If ANU are interested in the site and the history emanating from that site, Brokentalkers, led by Feidlim Cannon and Gary Keegan, are interested in people's life experiences, and devise work that gives people a forum to tell their stories. As a result, much of the work is (auto)-biographical. In *Have I No Mouth* (2017), for instance, Brokentalkers' artistic director, Feidlim Cannon, tells his story of grief and loss.

The *seanachaí*, or storyteller, has long held a revered role in Irish culture. Ireland's creative history is interlinked with the art of storytelling and the tradition of the *seanchaí* is deeply rooted in rural areas. Chapter 3 examines the growth of actor-author plays and highlights the importance of storytelling in this type of work. I argue that, like the *seanchaís* before them, the work of the actor-authors appears to ground itself in community, tradition, bridges the gap between the past and present, and often centres on the more marginal or vulnerable in the community. In his biography of Seánín Tom Sheáin – the famous Aran

Island *seanchaí* who was used in Robert Flaherty's film *Oidche Sheanchais* – Tomás Ó hÍde points out that Seánín Tom "told stories about happenings in the Aran Islands as well as short accounts that involved the Otherworld" (244). Many of the stories contained "fairy folk" whose dealings "were far from natural", like "*Black the Forge, Open Sesame*, or *The Ship-sinking Witch*" (244). Many of Seánín Tom's stories were biographical or autobiographical, and family history and personal experience appear as connective threads in the work of the actor-authors.

While topics covered by the actor-authors are varied, my approach in chapter 3 focuses on two categories: autobiographical work, and work that presents the main protagonist's struggle. Since 2000 there has been a substantial growth in actor-authors' productions, which make up almost 10% of all theatre performances. This chapter questions various points of origin for actor-author work, and in doing so identifies Donal O'Kelly's *Catalpa* (1994) as a groundbreaking production that allied storytelling with movement and visual effects. At the same time as the collapse of the independent companies, art centres and studio theatres all around the country were becoming desperate to programme their venues with inexpensive product. Mid-range funded theatre companies like Fishamble also needed to produce new small cast plays for grant requirements. By the early part of the new millennium, actor-author productions became very popular with venues and audiences alike. Aidan Dooley's one-man play, *Tom Crean* (2003), a stage version of Tom Crean's real-life mammoth Antarctic odyssey with Shackleton, toured to every small venue in the country and even reached some of the bigger ones. To illustrate the diversity in the industry framework and artistic contributions of the actor-author, and study how they make use of the solo performance format to engage with audiences, chapter 3 devotes case studies to Sonya Kelly, Pat Kinevane, Mikel Murfi, and Seamus O'Rourke.

In the 1990s a new generation of playwrights emerged whose plays were celebrated nationally and internationally. Marina Carr, Martin McDonagh, Conor McPherson, Mark O'Rowe and Enda Walsh have written over seventy plays between them. Their work has been and continues to be performed and revived all over the world. In the first two decades of the new millennium no single playwright has reproduced the success of any of these writers. Chapter 4 examines the possible reasons for this by examining the contexts of production and by questioning what 'makes' an Irish play – by which I mean whether criteria can be drawn that define the Irish literary play from Boucicault to Shane Mac An Bhaird. We shall see that funding has been detrimental to the position of the playwright in contemporary theatre, but dramaturgy may also have played a role in the playwrights' neglect.

While playwrights in the latter part of the twentieth century – beginning with Behan and Beckett in the 1950s, through Friel in the 1960s, and culminating with Carr, McPherson and Walsh in the 1990s – attempted to move away from the stifling naturalism of the Abbey plays of the 1930s and 1940s, and have experimented with dramaturgy, the millennium playwrights may arguably be opting for two extremes, the strongly naturalistic or the heavily experimental.

Chapter 4 will attempt to identify the ingredients that have contributed to the successful plays of the Irish canon: the creation of stage Irish characters, the political dimension of previous plays, myth, and dramaturgy. I examine Marina Carr's *By The Bog of Cats* (1996), Conor McPherson's *The Weir* (1997), and Enda Walsh's *The Walworth Farce* (2009) through the use of myth, language, and dramaturgy to identify possible recurring elements that may link them to the previous and/or the next generation. Embracing the same approach to analyse the plays, I have selected Michael West's *Dublin by Lamplight* (2004),

Ailís Ní Ríain's *The Tallest Man in the World* (2013), and Shane Mac An Bhaird's *Melt* (2017) for the variety in playwriting that their work illustrates.

As an epilogue to this study of contemporary Irish theatre, a shorter chapter 5 is devoted to Michael Keegan-Dolan, a dancer, script-writer and director of the theatre dance companies Fabulous Beast and Teac Damsa. He has received national and international acclaim. As we will see in chapter 5, he moved away from a strictly dance practice because he felt restricted in telling the story by using just dance. Keegan-Dolan is "an artist who resists categorisation" (Seaver 108), and chapter 5 positions him as "a unique theatrical voice" within the Irish theatre landscape, despite bearing similarities between that of the theatre maker, the actor-author, or even the playwright.

The composition of the case studies was based on a dual principle: that the authors selected are representative of the variety of innovations within the industry; and that I attended the performances of the plays studied. This was not possible in the case of ANU's *Laundry*, which is unpublished – unlike *The Boys of Foley Street* – but Louise Lowe gave me video material that permitted an understanding of the creative and reception process. As I am studying a contemporary field, scholarship has not always caught up and is often limited on published work or performances that have taken place in Dublin and/or within major events such as the Dublin Theatre Festival. Instead, this thesis also insists on looking at the periphery of Dublin, therefore giving breadth to the idea of 'Irish' theatre – an approach previously taken by Etienne and Dubost. I make a few references to practices in Northern Ireland, but this thesis is primarily concerned with the Republic of Ireland (ROI) as the crux of my argument hinges on the impact of the funding system.

Over the past fifteen years I have directed and toured with a host of actor-author plays including Pat Kinevane's *Forgotten* (2006), *Silent* (2011), *Underneath* (2014), *Before* (2018)

and *King* (2023) – Sonya Kelly's *Wheelchair on my Face* (2011) and *How to Keep an Alien* (2014) – Mikel Murfi's *The Man in the Woman Shoes* and *I Hear You and Rejoice* – Seamus O'Rourke's *Indigestion* (2016), *The Ballad of Mossy Flood* (2023) and *The Sand Park* (2017). As a result, not only do I have privileged access to unpublished texts but also to artists, which has allowed me to share in this thesis new material when there is scant criticism, for instance regarding the work of the actor-authors. Notable exceptions are Joan Fitzpatrick Dean's "Pat Kinevane's *Forgotten* and *Silent*: Universalising the Abject", and Jim Culleton's "Key Moments and Relationships: Working with Pat Kinevane". Mikel Murfi is often discussed with regard to his work with Barabbas or Enda Walsh but seldom in relation to his actor-author work. Sonya Kelly's scripts are all published but criticism of her actor-author work remains limited. Although Seamus O'Rourke has written ten plays and tours constantly his work has never received critical attention, possibly because they are still unpublished.

During this research, the impact of what I have learned from the practitioners themselves, particularly Louise Lowe and Gary Keegan, has proved as essential to my critical understanding of contemporary Irish theatre as scholarship, and I have made extensive use of my unique access to practitioners, particularly in such cases when no scholarship exists so far. However, a number of seminal studies have directed and grounded my arguments.

Most influential was Christopher Murray's idea that,

> the best theatre is always in transition. The one you have to watch out for is the theatre that is the same today as it was twenty years ago, following the same conservative principles of a safe, inoffensive repertory and covering up with a casting system that presses the politically correct buttons that market research reveals are likely to please audiences at this time. But the theatre that matters, the theatre likely to produce new voices, is the theatre that breaks with the past, or, at the very least, the theatre that operates with such an awareness of the past that audiences will recognise and react to the difference. ("The Irish Theatre" 13)

Not only does Murray identify how theatre functions as a business, in an implicit understanding between patrons and venues, but he provided me with an approach to the case studies: in addressing new dramaturgy, I analysed both principles prevalent in Irish playwriting and the ways in which new authors consciously broke with this tradition.

Though emerging in the 1970s, the use of any space that is *not* a traditional theatre venue proved pivotal for contemporary Irish practitioners in contributing towards changing the relationship between the audience and performance/performers. The tension between location and text in site-responsive and site-specific performances has been investigated theoretically by a number of scholars (in particular Pearson), but I have favoured specific case studies insofar as the practitioners I studied experimented with such forms within the specific Irish landscape. Brian Singleton's insightful and informative *ANU Productions: The Monto Cycle* provided an in-depth understanding of the mechanisms of immersion and intimacy prevalent at ANU, while Miriam Haughton's central theory that the "conditions of mourning and melancholia, absence and loss, acting out and working through, and structural trauma, and historical trauma play pivotal roles in the construction of texts, literary and performance, modern and postmodern" (*Staging Trauma* 12) proved relevant to the work of both ANU and Brokentalkers. Chris Morash and Shaun Richards's *Mapping Irish Theatre: Theories of Space and Place* focuses on how spaces and the representation of location has evolved in Irish theatre historiography, from peasant cottages in the early part of the twentieth century to site-specific spaces in the early part of the new millennium. They contend that "binding spatial identification to cultural identification" is a defining characteristic of much site-specific theatre in Ireland (160), a point which serves in approaching ANU's work.

Scholarship on the playwrights of the new millennium is even more scant than that of the actor-authors. Nicholas Grene has written a number of articles on The Corn Exchange

and Michael West, including in *Irish Theatre in the Twenty-First Century* (31-37) and his essay "The Physical and Verbal Theatre of Michael West". West's plays *Foley* (2001), *Conservatory* (2010), *Freefall* (2014) and *Dublin By Lamplight* (2017) are all published and West kindly sent me a copy of his PhD thesis *Writing on Water.* There is no published script of Ailís Ní Ríain's *The Tallest Man in the World* (2013) and only one critical essay to my knowledge, Thierry Dubost's "A Dark Rosebud on the Irish Stage". Ní Ríain kindly sent me a copy of the script, which I had seen produced by Corcadorca. Shane Mac An Bhaird's *Melt* (2017) has been published, but there are no critical references to the play outside of reviews. In all cases, I was given access to their unpublished plays, which gave me an overall sense of the direction of their writing and the ability to choose the most interesting case study. Michael Keegan-Dolan also sent me his three unpublished scripts, *Giselle* (2003), *The Bull* (2005) and *Loch na hEala* (2016).

In contrast, the realm of playwriting up to the 'golden generation' has yielded extensive scholarship, and my analysis grounds itself on seminal studies. Lilian Chambers and Eamonn Jordan's *The Theatre of Conor McPherson* offers insights on themes of sexual violence, urban spaces, drug and alcohol addictions; Murray's and Clare Wallace's essays on Walsh have informed my reading of *The Walworth Farce* (2006). In 2012 I directed and produced Marina Carr's *Woman and Scarecrow*, which had a national tour, so that I have an intimate familiarity with the world of Carr. But Cathy Leeney and Anna McMullan's *The Theatre of Marina Carr* and Melissa Sihra's *Marina Carr: Pastures of the Unknown* have been pivotal in my reading of *By The Bog of Cats*, in particular Sihra's contention that Carr can be linked to Lady Gregory "through language, myth, landscape, women, storytelling" (8).

Regarding the use of myth in Irish theatre, Sihra's contention that "we have inherited and internalised the narrative that there was no female tradition in Irish theatre" (5) has

participated to my analysis of myth as an enduring Irish trope, as well as Eamonn Jordan's *Dissident Dramaturgies*, Lisa Fitzpatrick's "Nation and Myth in the Age of the Celtic Tiger: Muide Eire?", Richard Kearney's *On Stories*, Helena Sheehan's "Irish Television Drama: A Society and Its Stories", and Shonagh Hill's *Women and Embodied Mythmaking in Irish Theatre.* In addition to myth, this thesis highlights political and dramaturgical elements as a continuum from Irish playwrights of the eighteenth and nineteenth century to now. Nicholas Grene's *The Politics of Irish Drama* sheds light on the politics of representation of Ireland and introduces the figures of "stage interpreters", "strangers in the house" and "versions of the pastoral", which I draw on in Chapter 4. It is Grene's arguments that are used as a basis for the discussion of the political in the contemporary Irish playwright. Political theatre is a vast and complicated notion to negotiate particularly when it falls under the umbrella of postdramatic theatre, and Jerome Carroll et al's *Postdramatic Theatre and The Political* has provided a major critical grounding when considering the work of theatre makers in particular.

Tom Kilroy's shadow is a constant in this thesis. I had the pleasure of meeting him in Glenties for Brian Friel's week-long eightieth birthday celebrations where we spent many a late night discussing theatre. His three essays "A Generation of Playwrights", "Anglo Irish Playwrights and Comic Tradition", and "Groundwork for an Irish Theatre" as well as his interview with Anthony Roche provided the framework for this thesis. In the summer of 1959 Kilroy looks upon,

> the theatre as a community, at its best an exuberant, self-educating community with the individual members influencing one another and the group as a whole very responsive to the demands of the society around it […] In order to assess the value of our theatre one might well begin by listening to its audience and the various motives for its applause. It may be a dangerous, misleading form of observation, but audience-reaction is the quickest indication of the strength and nature of the bond between a theatre and the society which supports it. ("Groundwork" 192)

Seventy-five years later his words are prescient. When Kilroy wrote this article the 'theatre' he was discussing was that of the playwright, who wrote plays for casts that were performed behind the proscenium arch in a theatre venue. It would be a further decade before the emergence of the solo performance of Maurice Davin-Power, two decades before Eamon Kelly would write the earliest actor-author play and four decades before the theatre makers would completely change the landscape of Irish theatre.

While literary scholarship has made a significant contribution to this thesis, empirical research provided data that supports the central premise that the Irish theatre landscape has changed irrevocably in the new millennium. I have gathered this research in a number of different ways; Arts Council data has been collected from emails and conversations with past and existing staff, analysis of funding decisions and Arts Council reports; data concerning the growth, play content and venue support of the actor-author sector in Appendices 2, 3 and 5 respectively was gathered after exhaustive research of plays in Irish Playography.

These results are presented in the Appendices section of the thesis. The results are not comprehensive, in part because of the lack of availability of information available on awards made by the Arts Council, and also because much of the information has been gathered from Irish Playography which only collates information that is registered with the site by the practitioners. It does, however, provide an overview of the landscape that exists in Irish contemporary theatre.

My contention is that during the 1990s the Arts Council supported the development of playwrights. In the new millennium the Council responded to, and then encouraged new forms of theatre making, in particular the support of companies like ANU, Brokentalkers, Thisispopbaby and Dead Centre. Appendix 1 presents a breakdown of the Arts Council

Project Funding Awards from 2009 to 2018. Of the 365 awards presented and documented on the Arts Council website 300 of these were granted to what can best be described as theatre-making companies, while the remaining 65 were granted to playwrights and/or, for script development projects.

A central premise of this thesis is that Arts Council funding decisions in the late 1990s and the early decade of the new millennium has led to an increase in theatre-makers' work but also significantly in the work of the actor-authors. Appendix 2 represents the growth of this sector over the past seven decades. The information for this and Appendices 3 and 5 was gleaned from an in-depth analysis of all plays registered on Irish Playography written and performed by the writer. Every play registered on the site has a thematic outline of the subject matter of the play. These are written by the actor-authors themselves and can be anything from two-line outlines to expanded pieces. While my research is not definitive of the content it does point to the constancy of a number of themes and may be of interest to students in the future.

Appendix 4 was constructed by analysing productions on the Royal Court website archive. This appendix outlines the Irish productions staged at the venue from 1905 to 2015 and highlights the paucity of new playwrights staged at the venue in the new millennium. Appendix 5 presents data outlining the support that different venues have given to staging premieres of new plays and highlights for example the importance of Bewley's Café Theatre in that regard. The Appendices provide an easily accessible snapshot of some aspects of contemporary theatre that will be of use to present and future scholars.

Chapter 1. Mapping Contemporary Irish Theatre

In considering how to analyse the position of the playwright in the contemporary Irish theatre landscape, one must first explore the emergence of alternative voices as well as their presence at the periphery of the national stage. This chapter sets out to identify how the Irish stage has witnessed the development of diverse forms of theatre since the 1990s and how innovative these practices are.

Pondering on theatre and the future, Caoimhe McAvinchey's 1999 chapter "Theatre – Act or Place?" appears far-sighted two decades later:

> I'm not advocating site specific work as the be all and end all – as the *only* future for Irish theatre. But what I am saying is that it is the one way that allows theatre to find a way to reach beyond its current comfortable boundaries, to shake up and re-educate both theatre audiences' and theatre practitioners' expectations of themselves. Theatre has to reach beyond comfort and complacency if audiences are to give theatre a future that spans well into the next century, and if theatre works hard enough, beyond. (88)

The notion that a shaking-up and re-educating is required at the end of the twentieth century in Irish theatre suggests a degree of staleness which may resonate with some audiences. The allure of off-site performances resides in its opposition to the constraints of the venue and the possibility that theatre may exist elsewhere, potentially everywhere. Along with this shaking-up of the space for performance comes the promise of a different audience, more diverse in age and social class, as Anne Etienne discusses in relation to Corcadorca theatre company (see "Slump and Punk").

For me, this moment of realisation that theatre in Ireland had expanded into a wider canvas than I had experienced since my youth came with my attachment to the great playwrights of the twentieth century. As published plays by new authors seemed to become rarer, I wondered how contemporary Irish theatre was composed. It would be naïve to think

that the answer had solely to do with the work of practitioners, and before I discuss the various types of artists creating for the stage today the crucial impact of funding needs to be addressed.

An analysis of Arts Council funding schemes suggests that the work of the theatre makers has been at the forefront of Arts Council Project Funding, potentially at the expense of text-based projects. Evidence shows that the support provided by the Arts Council through this scheme from 2008-2018 to the theatre makers far outweighs that of the playwright. Of the 365 awards granted under this scheme from 2008-2018, 300 were granted to theatre makers (see Appendix 1). Yet, between 2010 and 2019, the highest number of plays ever seen in Irish theatre has been written: 555 in total (see Appendix 2 for figures concerning previous decades), of which 70 plays are the work of actor-authors. If the figures indicate that quantity is higher than ever, the absence of funding has repercussions on the shape and development of the literary play. I am not implying that all of these plays necessarily deserve to be nurtured and/or produced, but it is clear that some playwrights in particular lack the support that is required for their work to reach the highest level of production and to reach big (and national and international) audiences. In effect, one may suggest four levels of existence for plays. Tier one would consist of a rehearsed reading; tier two in a full production by a small theatre company in a studio-style venue; tier three in a funded full production in mid- to large-scale venues or regional festivals; finally tier four is the Abbey, Druid, and the Dublin Theatre Festival, and international structures. The last two tiers are pivotal in lifting authors out of oblivion and bringing them to media attention.

1. Landscapes

a. Funding contexts

On 10 February 2010, Theatre Forum, the representative body for Irish theatre, hosted a meeting in the National Concert Hall. The meeting was closed to the public and the press. More than 120 arts organisations were represented and a delegation from the Arts Council was present to address funding issues. In an article for *The Irish Times*, titled "Behind Closed Doors in the Theatre World", arts journalist Deirdre Falvey outlines the "anger and despair" felt by the sector against the severe cuts in Arts Council funding:

> In December, the Arts Council received a €9 million reduction from Government, which meant it would have hard decisions to take. More than 300 organisations had their grant cut, some by up to 65 per cent, and more than 30 had their funding cut altogether. […] In answer to a question about how the cuts are affecting people's livelihoods, the role of the council in funding art rather than having responsibility for livelihoods was pointed out.

At that point, the meeting made clear that the Arts Council (AC) would not be in the position to continue funding production companies as widely as it previously had. However, if the announcement was made in 2010, the decision had already been taken in 2009, as evidenced in an Arts Council report dated May 2009 (see "Examining Ways"). I will study this report to explain how this crucial decision has affected the shape of theatre funding and therefore theatre production from 2009 onwards. This grounds my hypothesis that funding is partly responsible for the decline of the playwright, as it is for the development of theatre makers.

The knock-on effects of those cuts were felt throughout the theatre industry leading to the closure of numerous independent theatre companies, a lack of employment for theatre practitioners and most importantly a lack of support for developing playwriting. There were also, however, a number of positive effects insofar as, for decades, the industry (actors, directors, playwrights and technicians) had criticised the large amounts of Arts Council funding invested in production companies with poor production quality. As far back as 1995,

an Arts Council Report on theatre highlighted practitioners' concerns with regard to rationalisation:

> As a result of the generally perceived under-funded nature of the sector, most interviewees were clear-cut in their assertion that rationalisation of the sector is necessary and that it would have long-term beneficial effects. In this regard, rationalisation is seen, essentially, in terms of reducing the number of production companies operating within the country. (Arts Council Report 1995)

The practitioners interviewed were very clear on the necessary solution to this problem: "in regard to rationalisation, it was suggested that the Council should be more ruthless in pulling the plug on consistently weak companies" (Arts Council Report 1995). The severe nature of Government cuts in funding in 2008/2009 and 2010 left the Arts Council with no option but to rationalise. The result was a levelling of the playing field for all those working in theatre, which was further enhanced by the Arts Council's introduction of the Project Funding Band in 2010. This fund would enable the theatre makers and, to a lesser degree, the actor-authors access to funding to develop their ideas without the necessity of a Limited Company scenario and would lead to seismic changes in contemporary theatre. Interestingly, this is an instance when the production field may have influenced the Arts Council to rethink the criteria of its funding schemes. If we consider that ANU "are devoted to an interdisciplinary approach to performance/installation that cross-pollinates visual art, dance and theatre" (ANU), the decisions between the criteria of the new Project Funding system from 2010 were influenced by such collaborative ventures. For Orlaith McBride, the AC recognised "a sense of distinct boundaries being blurred as artists created works and that supports were needed towards the collaborative nature of the artform" (email to author, 25 August 2024). In other words, if theatre needed a shaking up, the Arts Council responded in kind. Whether this had a direct impact on the development of literary drama is a question that will be investigated in the following chapters.

b. **“The new theatre: magical, visible, hidden”** (O’Toole 2011)

In pinpointing the beginnings of these theatrical changes, Fintan O’Toole suggests two potential events: the Dublin Theatre Festival (DTF) 2005 and “Behind Closed Doors”, a selection of events organised by the Dublin Theatre Festival in 2011. For O’Toole, DTF2005 marks the death of the playwright, because the main productions were director-as-*auteur* driven (“The death of the playwright?”). Though this clearly signals an early shift from the tradition of the hierarchy of Irish dramatists as representative of Irish theatre, my contention is that “Behind Closed Doors” in 2011 marks the heralding of a new era of theatre-making, one that for O’Toole is illustrative of the postdramatic turn in Ireland. With the shows of ANU (*Laundry*), Brokentalkers (*The Blue Boy*), and the site-specific *Trade* by Mark O’Halloran, O’Toole observes that “one or more of the basic elements of drama: a text, a theatre, an audience, and a performer" have been abandoned for an alternative that defines the 2011 DTF as "the most significant in 30 years” (“The new theatre”). In terms of content, what those shows have in common is a move towards what I would call authenticity, of a sense of reality. O’Toole does note the “commitment to the hidden, the documentary, the physical, and the place”, and Van Winkle confirms that “[t]hese intimate, site-specific pieces used the most public of art forms to penetrate and illuminate the most private of spaces” (133). This move towards what Carol Martin identifies as ‘the theatre of the real’ (2013) was already noticeable in the UK twenty years earlier (see Billington), and goes hand in hand with the neglect of playwrights.

Indeed, in 2011, O’Toole mentions a new type of authorship:

> Perhaps the kind of unified dramatic vision that comes from a literary playwright labouring over a text is not available in a context in which younger writers think of themselves more as "theatre makers" than as dramatists. ("Can Irish Dramatists")

O'Toole may be correct in identifying the emergence of a 'new movement' though perhaps not for the reason he offers. Work of a similar form had been presented much earlier by the Belfast-based company Charabanc. Charabanc was a theatre company set up in 1983 by five actresses, Eleanor Methven, Brenda Winter, Maureen Macauley, Carol Scanlon and Marie Jones and a female director, Pam Boyd. They worked as a team to improvise, research and present historical moments in Northern Irish history, such as the Linen Mill workers strike of 1911, which formed the basis for *Lay Up Your Ends* (1983) and the Belfast traders of 1949 in *Aul Delf and False Teeth* (1984). Tom Maguire observes that Charabanc was led into "ways of working that distinguished it from a mainstream of Irish theatre still primarily concerned with the production of dramatic literature by individual playwrights" (109). In an Irish context, therefore, 'theatre making', is not a 'new' phenomenon. In her essay "Theatre – Actor or Place?", Caoimhe McAvinchey cites numerous examples of site-specific and collaborative work with playwrights in the 1990s, such as Tinderbox's *Northern Star* (1998) in the Presbyterian Church in Belfast – which was the spiritual home of the United Irishmen of 1798, on which the play is based. Similarly, the playwrights Martin Lynch and Marie Jones collaborated with a local community to script *The Wedding Community Play* (1999), which invited audiences into the homes of Nicola Marshall and David Kelly, to watch them prepare for their mixed marriage and afterwards their wedding at St. Anne's Cathedral and the reception at the Hilton Hotel (McAvinchey 87). To commemorate the four hundredth anniversary of the "Flight of the Earls" Ouroboros theatre company toured Brian Friel's *Making History* (2007) to 22 locations in Ireland and 3 in Europe, most of which had a direct connection to Hugh O'Neill, Red Hugh O'Donnell or Brian Friel. In other words,

since the 1990s, Ireland had already witnessed the development of devised and ensemble work, mostly based on historical research and documentary work, while still including an authorial voice.

In fact, even the companies that O'Toole refers to had produced theatre-maker shows prior to the "Behind Closed Doors" festival. ANU produced *Basin*, a site-specific piece on Blessington Street (2009); Thisispopbaby created a theatre site at Electric Picnic each year from 2008-2010; Brokentalkers produced *Track* (2005) – a site-specific walk through Dublin about multiculturalism – and *On This One Night* (2006); Corcadorca presented numerous site-responsive productions of plays, including *The Trial of Jesus* (2000), *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (2001), *Woyzeck* (2007) and *The Hairy Ape* (2008).[1] Yet, "Behind Closed Doors" was the first time that these new theatre companies had been grouped together under an inspired nomenclature, suggesting both the ultimate voyeurism and the promise of intimacy. It is this provision of intimate theatre that has become the basis of much of the theatre makers' work and the concept of "intimacy" as a theatrical form will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 2.

Following O'Toole's point, "Behind Closed Doors Festival" can be viewed as a landmark in Irish theatre in that a 'new movement' towards what Hans Lehmann describes as postdramatic theatre was recognisable at the 2011 Festival. The term "postdramatic theatre" is comprehensively defined in Lehmann's eponymous study (2006), but it is Stephen E. Wilmer's condensed understanding of the mechanics of postdramatic theatre that is invaluable to the understanding of this chapter. While O'Toole claims in 2011 that the changes were the "most significant in twenty years", Wilmer points out that they were "not specific to Ireland" but a response to "trends happening throughout Europe" (191). In

[1] *The Trial of Jesus* was performed on Good Friday on St. Patricks Hill, Cork, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was performed open air in Fitzgerald Park, *Woyzeck,* at the Naval Base in Haulbowline and *The Hairy Ape* in the Old Southern Fruit Warehouse. http://www.corcadorca.com/website/previous-productions-2

lamenting over the dismissal of the dramatic text, Martin Puchner links "the postdramatic age" to the visionary work of Edward Gordon Craig to Antonin Artaud (292), who rebelled against the 'text-as-instructions' and "devised forms of spectacle unhinged from drama, which meant that directors and actors, devising their productions collectively, took over the function of the playwright", thereby showing that the postdramatic may be only the latest iteration of a reflection on the art of theatre (294). Yet, Wilmer contends that "what is unique is how Irish theatre artists have adapted these innovative techniques in such a way that they reflect the changes in Irish culture and society" (191). My argument regarding those innovations hinges on the turn towards authenticity which is experienced through the new work of theatre makers and actor-authors. Wilmer observes that "in postdramatic theatre the spectator is denied most kinds of *synthesis*", that the conventions of a fictional time span, location, theatrical spaces, and even the notion of roles and actors are abandoned, and that postdramatic performance practice "renounces the *unity of drama* and dramatic representation" (191). Chapter 2 will address the extent of the influence of the postdramatic on the practice of theatre makers. While the work of the theatre makers has clearly embraced the theoretical aspects of postdramatic theatre, in mapping the creators of contemporary Irish theatre, I will attempt to define the different categories of authorship (using this term as a synonym for main creator).

2. The Theatre Makers

The term theatre maker may be seen as generic – pointing as much to directors, theatre companies, artistic designers, and even playwrights – but it also raises in the collective consciousness the work of specific companies, such as ANU, and Brokentalkers. While the term is often, and rightly, associated with devised work, it is also one that is fluid and often

used by the practitioners themselves to give a sense of process and also to flag a break with conventional authorial dramatic work. For instance, Louise Lowe considers herself to be "a socially-engaged artist" and is categorical that ANU's work is not "improvised" (Interview with author), and Brokentalkers insists on the centrality of the "collaborative process" at the heart of their practice. In approaching the term in the context of the movement highlighted by O'Toole, it is useful to refer to his take on what defined "Behind Closed Doors", that the work abandons "one or more of the basic elements of drama: a text, a theatre, an audience, and a performer" ("The new theatre").

Though theatre makers' performances are based on a script, the process never starts with text, but with an idea, that is developed through a devising process. With the theatre companies under scrutiny in this thesis, that process emerges through research and the work carries a documentary dimension – the range of techniques used might draw on verbatim or autobiography. For instance, the script for ANU's *Foley Street* has emerged from conversations between members of the community and the company; *Laundry* is constructed on the verbatim evidence of women who were incarcerated in the Magdalene laundries. Brokentalkers' *The Blue Boy* is based on the evidence of Gary Keegan's grandfather who was a carpenter in St Joseph's Industrial School in Artane; *Have I No Mouth* is based on Feidlim Cannon's life and presents documentary material.

Brokentalkers is a company that produces shows in theatre venues, whereas ANU – up to 2024 – specialises in site-specific and site-responsive performances. Briefly, the Monto Trilogy was performed in Monto, the poorest working-class area of Dublin, where the crimes the shows explore took place. While Morash and Richards differentiate the terms 'place specific' – "where the site of performance draws on the resonance of the place, but the form of the play does not depend on being staged there" – from 'site specific', "in which

the form and meaning of the production are inextricably bound to the site of performance" (156), I will use the notion of site-specificity unilaterally.

Peter Brook famously wrote that all that was needed for theatre was a man walking across an empty space and "someone else watching him" (11). In that sense, all these theatre makers have an audience. ANU specifically devises some of their shows for a personal experience: in *Laundry* (2011), the spectator encounters the characters alone through a promenade in the space; in *The Boys of Foley Street* (2012) and *Vardo* (2014), two and four audience members respectively, are separated through the performance journeys to be confronted alone in various locations, therefore, not sharing the same experience. This emphasis on audience experience will be discussed in Chapter 2 in connection with intimacy and immersion.

When O'Toole suggests the potential absence of a performer, what he is nodding to is that shows may rely on non-actors, various amateur actors, community members, or professional experts in a field relevant to the topic of performance. For instance, Brokentalkers use Eric Fuller, the psychiatrist of Feidlim Cannon, as well as Feidlim's mother, Ann, as two of the three 'performers'. ANU engages with members of the community to devise their pieces and may employ them in the performance as well.

In selecting these two theatre companies as case studies for theatre makers, I wanted not only to explore the work of the most celebrated and innovative theatre makers but also to reflect on common aspects of their work, in particular, exposing the histories of silence, rethinking the relationship between audience and performers – elements which will be investigated in chapter 2 when discussing immersion. Pointedly, ANU places a strong emphasis on immersing "the audience at the very centre of the experience to create autonomous and meaningful exchanges with them" (ANU).

Since their first production in 2009 (*Basin*), ANU has garnered ample criticism, focusing inter alia on audience interaction. Brian Singleton provides a comprehensive account of the first four productions in *ANU Productions, The Monto Cycle*. *World's End Lane* (2010) was an exploration of the Monto district of Dublin which at one stage accommodated 6000 prostitutes. Only three audience members were involved in each staging during which they got to "experience the area as punter, tourist and complicit worker" (Singleton 2). *Laundry*, the second instalment of the Monto tetralogy, explored the history of the Gloucester Street Magdalene Laundry "challenging spectators by making them co-present at moments of committal and escape from the asylum/laundry that stands abandoned at the north end of Monto" (2). *The Boys of Foley Street* "brought us into the world of the heroin blight that decimated the area's youth in the 1980s" and the final production, *Vardo*, immersed the audience in "the international sex trade" and "the limbo state of asylum seekers" (2). ANU's insistence on the inclusion of the audience as participants in the performance has completely reimagined the potential role of the audience in contemporary theatre.

In "Theatre-as-Memory and as Witness", Emilie Pine explains the importance of immersion, not solely to renew the relationship with the audience, but also to link the past with the present:

> This production is literally enacting theatre-as-memory by blending past and present, by insisting on the presence—rather than absence—of the women who had been incarcerated in the laundry, and by mimicking some of the actions that may have occurred in the past, thereby placing the spectator in what is both a visceral and voyeuristic relationship to that past. *Laundry* thus invites the audience to go beyond the walls of the convent laundry to function as active spectators of what is being performed in the present, and of the past that its performances evoke. (n.p.)

Pine raises some interesting ethical issues with regard to the audience and the community (which I investigate further in the following chapter). Singleton also highlights two further

issues linked to ethics that ANU's work may be accused of, that of "dark tourism" and "poverty porn", before eventually refuting them:

> There has been much debate in Heritage and Tourism studies in the past twenty years regarding the notion of 'dark tourism', that is bringing spectators to sites of death or trauma and the dilemmas of curating the experience at the site. Coined by Malcolm Foley and John J. Lennon 'dark tourism' poses for curators ethical dramas concerning the commodification and consumption of past traumatic events. (*ANU* 5)

While some productions are close to dark tourism, such as *Laundry* but also Dead Centre's *Lippy* (2013), their initial objective to shed light on historical problems is full of integrity towards the characters involved. As a matter of fact, Miriam Haughton argues that,

> ANU is extremely aware of these issues and tensions and speaks to them directly. ANU is dedicated to creating 'ethical encounters' where the audience will experience 'moments of communion'. They do not fictionalise their work, rather they represent testimonies to dramatize the relationship between people and place. (133)

Whether Lennon and Foley's definition of 'dark tourism', which is mostly concerned with holocaust sites, can be compared to the sites used by ANU is debatable, but the company has positioned itself to be held accountable for retelling uncomfortable truths and placing the contemporary spectators right in the middle of it, thereby questioning the responsibility of a whole nation. Neither Singleton, Haughton nor even Lowe at the time, in the interviews referenced by Haughton, have addressed the key ethical issue, which is whether ANU's productions have a negative impact on the communities that live in those areas. However, Lowe continued this conversation with me in an interview in 2024 (see chapter 2).

Another criticism raised with regard to ANU's work is one that has dogged Irish theatre since Yeats, Gregory and Martyn founded the Irish Literary Theatre in 1899, that of elitism.

Shaun Richards observes that from 1905 onwards Yeats "withdrew into a haughty class-bound elitism" (49) and expands on this view of the early theatre in *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth Century Irish Theatre* (49-55). Each of the plays in the Monto Cycle had a maximum audience of four, making spectatorship an individual journey. As Haughton observes, "by continually placing the spectator at the centre of the work, and encouraging each spectator to engage with the performance, this form works to create an experience specific to each individual" (133). In addition, the charge of elitism appears erroneous since an analysis of the audience figures for ANU's production of *The Boys of Foley Street* shows that the two-week production at the 2012 Dublin Theatre Festival provided 456 performances, and a box office in excess of 1,850 people. Comparatively, while these would have occupied the Gaiety Theatre for less than two nights, few venues today enjoy that level of attendance as runs have become increasingly limited.

The lines between audience and performer have become blurred in contemporary theatre, and the success of theatre makers may in part be credited to this empowerment. Over the past decade, there has been a substantial growth in reality television. Shows like *Oprah*, *Gogglebox*, *The Apprentice* and *The Jeremy Kyle Show* have proved incredibly popular with viewers. The form of much of this type of production for television bears a strong similarity to the work of the theatre makers in that; there is no script or at least just a structure of a script, there are often no actors, the story is based on the truth, there is no fourth wall and the studio audience is permitted/expected to participate in the production. Society, in central forms of culture, appears to give permission to audience members to invade the creation of the art if they so decide. Lowe is very clear on her aim as a theatre maker:

> I now believe that the real power of theatre lies in the moments of conflict or communion that crop up between audience and performer, both parties detached from the traditional rulebook and both unsure where the power lies. ("You had to be there." 64)

This suggests unpredictability that creates excitement in the audience members and enhances focus for the actors. Her actors do work from a set structure and have rehearsed the script, following an intricate staging pattern. But if the actors are not 'unsure' of the journey, the audience is unaware of everything related to the production. Singleton raises questions regarding his own experience: "As an individual spectator for the most part in all the performances had I done the right thing? Was there a right thing to do when engaging with history? And what would I have done […] in the real circumstances that the performances were reflecting?" (*ANU* 7). ANU productions are uncomfortable because they place you face to face not with performers, but with a given situation where they have potential agency – a position that Etienne also queries in relation to foreign spectatorship (2016).

Founded in 2001 by Feidlim Cannon, Damien Fenty, Gary Keegan and Faye Munns, the objective of Brokentalkers has been described by Charlotte McIvor as follows:

> They seek to reassess, celebrate and interrogate Irish national histories of silence via performance, but in doing so, they doubt the company's own ability to deliver on this task coherently, choosing instead to embrace brokenness of form and narrative through a pillaging of multiple theatrical and performance genres at the limits of Irish theatrical vocabularies. (51)

Brokentalkers' work tends to use real stories portrayed by company members and non-professional actors, supported by dance, and audio-visual material. Brokentalkers place the performers in the uncomfortable situation of unveiling their histories, which are part of a wider history shared by their audience members. In *Silver Stars* (premiered at Bealtaine Festival 2008), the play which brought them to prominence, Cannon and Keegan worked

with singer/songwriter Séan Millar, combining interviews he carried out with gay men (who lived in Dublin and New York while homosexuality was still legally a crime) with original songs. Testimonies were played on voiceover and recited by the actors on stage; in some instances, the actors sang while the testimonies played on voice-over. McIvor notes that the innovation of the piece lies in its "use of the documentary song-cycle form and Brokentalkers' casting of mostly non-professional actors" (47).

The Blue Boy (2011) similarly sources testimonies to theatricalise the experiences of men and women who as children were incarcerated in care homes, once more "interrogat[ing] the silence", as they describe on their website. *The Blue Boy* emanated from Keegan and Cannon's reaction to the Ryan Report published in 2009:

> in our investigation and reading the fucking Ryan Report, you literally get headaches reading these awful stories, we just felt that there's a real need to make this piece. We kind of have to make this piece. We haven't really got another option. It's important that we make the piece. And with all those things as you mentioned with *Track* and *Silver Stars* and *This Is Still Life*, this is giving a voice completely to a part of society who are silenced, who are still getting silenced now with the Redress Board. ("Musings in Intermissions")

If an interrogation of silence is the primary objective of the company, they address it by having the 'silenced' speak out: their being heard provides a cathartic experience, one that is primarily for the performers. The testimonies of injustices are treated in a lowkey manner, and the theatrical apparatus is constructed to support the legitimacy and authenticity of the histories uncovered. For instance, as will be discussed in Chapter 2, the "brokenness" of the testimony-driven narrative, especially from a number of sources, reinforces the authenticity of the performance.

According to Pine,

> what is obvious here is a narrative that is formed in the present but is used to read—and to judge—the past. This is not to say that the use of these performance strategies is misleading; rather, it is to identify how they are functioning. Indeed, Brokentalkers invite the spectator to ask these kinds of questions by creating such a non-traditional show. ("Theatre-as-Memory" n.p.)

What Pine articulates provides a useful comparison with ANU: while both companies engage the audience with an uncomfortable past/present, their strategies differ (in terms of performers, sources, theatrical elements) as do their use of performance locations, as will be further explored in Chapter 2.

Prior to the work of theatre makers, who revolutionised Irish theatre with non-text-centred production, the emergence of the actor-author on the stage signalled a new form of theatre, one that relied on the text but that also relied on the individual performer to craft his/her own roles, away from the tyranny of conventional theatrical parameters.

3. The Actor-Authors

A.E. But at the centre of theatre for you is the text.
P.K.: Absolutely. Drama for the audience. (Etienne and Kinevane 160)

The contemporary period in Irish theatre has been additionally redefined by the recent development of plays by actor-authors. Before exploring this new trend, one may point to the fact that not only was Shakespeare an actor, but also that Henry Medwall was the first actor who wrote and performed "the first secular play in English to have come down to us" in 1497 (Farrell 59), and that the "tradition of the actor-author in Italian theatre originates in about the second decade of the sixteenth century" (Ferguson 21). Beyond these international

traditions, my contention is that there is something inherently and historically Irish to be traced in the current explosion of actor-author performances.

Ireland's theatrical history can be traced back to the poets, the bards, the *reachtaires* (reciters), and the *seanachaí*, "an itinerant storyteller whose one-man performance would entertain privately in homes" and a "homo fabulator, a creator of fables whose art was not simply the story but the art of telling the story" (Singleton, *Masculinities* 75). While Singleton suggests Conor McPherson may be regarded as the "inheritor and champion of this tradition" (75), McPherson has only performed in two plays written by himself and neither of them are one-man plays: *Inventing Fortune's Wheel* (1992) and *Radio Play* (1992) at the International Bar. A more likely contender for the position of "inheritor and champion" of the tradition in the twentieth century is Eamon Kelly. Kelly was a highly accomplished stage actor who worked with the Gate and Abbey theatres in numerous stage productions including Brian Friel's *Philadelphia Here I Come*, for which he was nominated for a Tony award. During the late 1970s and early 1980s, Kelly regularly performed his own works on the Peacock Stage. His works invites scrutiny in terms of categorisation insofar as they were described as "an evening of storytelling" on the Irish Playography site, but were nonetheless also listed as plays. Beyond this formal debate, Kelly is rightly recognised as 'The Storyteller', one of the first Irish actors to perform his own works on the Irish stage, with 'plays' such as *In My Father's Time* (1975), *The Rub of the Relic* (1978), *The Story Goes…* (1979), *English That For Me* (1980) and *A Rogue of Low Degree* (1981) that had a running time of about 90 minutes – as long or longer even than most contemporary plays. While the text was mostly spoken with no attempt at physical embodiment, Chad Buterbaugh makes the point that "much of the success of the Storyteller grew from the stylistic attention that Kelly gave the character in terms of verbal artistry" (150). In a similar fashion, Sheila Flitton became the first female actor to write and perform her own play

Beezie, which opened at The Damer Hall in 1984. The play is based on the life of the Sligo woman Bezzie Gallagher who lived alone on Lough Gill and was the subject of Yeats's poem "The Lonely One". Flitton, who is in her eighties, is still performing the play.

Over the next three decades, Donal O'Kelly would write over twenty new plays and contribute in a pivotal way to the development of the one-person play, through his production of *Catalpa* (1995). The play is historically based on the prison breakout of six Fenian prisoners from the Fremantle Penal Colony in Australia by the IRB. The importance of the production is based not on the content of the play but on the form O'Kelly and his director Bairbre Ní Chaoimh used to present the story. The play opens with O'Kelly in his pyjamas as the central character Matthew Kidd. The set is Kidd's bedroom but the production uses this minimalist setting, namely a bed, a white mosquito-style curtain, a table and a chair. He has written a script for film and has failed to convince the film company to produce the movie. Kidd sits dejected at his writing table staring at the script and says "why didn't I show them? Why didn't I show them?" (O'Kelly 3). He climbs onto the table, shapes himself into a seagull, squawks like a seagull and takes the audience on an epic journey across oceans and continents that culminates in a ticker-tape parade through the streets of New York. The play is written in the form of a movie script in that O'Kelly (or Kidd) continually moves the action forward with cinematic-style directions. The bed becomes the "Catalpa", the whaling boat used in the enterprise, the white curtain, the sail of the boat and the table, the balcony of the hotel in New York for the celebratory speeches. What differentiates this production from those of Eamon Kelly is that O'Kelly inhabits, characterises and physicalises the nineteen characters of the play. According to Claudia Harris, O'Kelly's performance "capitalises on the performative possibilities of traditional Irish storytelling" (220). The production is ground-breaking in this regard and the changes

that it wrought will provide the basis for much of the discussion regarding the form of the actor-author in Chapter 3.

The growth of the body of work by actor-authors in the past 20 years has been phenomenal, as evidenced by the figures garnered from the Irish Playography database. From 1960 to 1999, 20 plays are recorded as having been written and performed by the actor-author. There is no record of any actor-author plays written and performed prior to 1960. The only one-person play recorded as produced in the 1960s is Maurice Davin-Power's *Mr. Handel's Visit to Dublin,* which was performed by Terence Healy in St. Patrick's Cathedral in 1969. This may also be considered one of the earliest site-specific pieces as the central character Dean Swift was the Dean at St. Patrick's Cathedral. From 2000 to 2019 the number of plays written and performed by one actor increased to 97. The gender distribution is also telling of a rapid development, arguably aided by the potential for women to produce work that speaks to women's experiences. In the twentieth century, only four plays were written and performed by women: Sheila Flitton's *Beezie* (1984), Eithne McGuinness's *Typhoid Mary* (1992), Sylvia Cullen's *Chrysalis* (1992) and Maggie Cronin's *A Most Notorious Woman* (1995). In the 2000s, 14 of the one actor-author plays are written by men and 13 by women while in the 2010s, 38 are written by men and 29 by women actor-authors. There are more actors writing their own plays now than at any time in the history of Irish theatre and a large percentage of them are women. From 2000 to 2019 almost one hundred plays were written and performed by the actor-authors, forty-two of them by women. In the past two years alone, eleven actor-author plays have been written and performed, nine of them by women.

One of the most instrumental contributors to the growth of actor-author plays is Show in a Bag (SIAB), an artist development initiative instigated in 2010 by Fishamble in association with the Irish Theatre Institute and the Dublin Fringe Festival "to facilitate the

creation of five new small scale, tourable shows which would highlight the talents and skills of performers making work for the Dublin Fringe Festival" (Fishamble). Since the inception of SIAB, 36 plays written and performed by actors have been presented nationally and internationally.

One of the actor-authors that emerged from the SIAB initiative was Sonya Kelly. Kelly studied Drama and Classics at Trinity prior to embarking on an acting career that saw her perform with Druid, The Gate, Kabosh, Corn Exchange and Fishamble. Her first play, *Wheelchair on my Face,* won a Scotsman Fringe First Award at the Edinburgh Theatre Festival in 2012, and Rough Magic produced her second play *How to Keep an Alien* in 2014. Both plays are autobiographical and mix comedy with empathy to engage intimately with the audience. These three elements form the grounds for enquiry of the four case studies in Chapter 3: Kelly's *Wheelchair on my Face*, Pat Kinevane's *Underneath* (2014), Seamus O'Rourke's *Indigestion* (2015), Mikel Murfi's *The Man in the Woman Shoes* (2016).

A vastly experienced stage actor, Pat Kinevane has worked with the Abbey, the Gate, Passion Machine and Druid. His first full-length play, *The Nun's Wood,* was commissioned and produced by Fishamble in 1998 at the Dublin Theatre Festival. His second play *The Plains of Enna,* also produced by Fishamble, opened at the Dublin Theatre Festival in 1999. In 2005 Kinevane approached Jim Culleton, the Artistic Director of Fishamble The New Play company, with 'a suggestion for a play about four elderly people at the end of their lives whose stories are intertwined' (Director's note, *Silent* and *Forgotten*). The result was *Forgotten* (2006), a play in which Kinevane embodies the four characters, relying on voice and physicality, masks, and lighting design to fuel the theatricality of the piece and bring to life the individual characters. *Forgotten* opened at the Dublin Theatre Festival in 2006 and toured throughout Europe and to both coasts of the U.S. in the interim. Juxtaposing Japanese Kabuki dance and storytelling, Kinevane creates a captivating and moving performance that

has toured over 60 Irish venues and 15 European countries. On the tail of this first success, Kinevane wrote and performed *Silent* (2011), *Underneath* (2014), *Before* (2018), and *King* (2023).

The historical trajectory of the actor-author points to a modern truism: that celebrated playwrights in Irish theatre had never spent time on the stage as professional actors. There are exceptions, but in general, playwrights like Brian Friel, Frank McGuinness, Tom Murphy, John B. Keane and Marina Carr have had no professional stage experience and their only understanding of the skills of the actor was from looking in at the craft as opposed to looking out. O'Kelly broke the mould, with 21 plays to his credit, yet he is still considered an actor rather than a playwright. Hence the need to create a signifier that emphasises the separation and uneasy union of two crafts: the actor-author. The case studies in Chapter 3 illustrate the variety of theatrical and dramatic components which each actor-author employs. About Kinevane in particular, Joan Fitzpatrick Deane questions the critical response to his work as one-sided:

> Kinevane's fluid departures from conventional stage monologue and the interpolation and allusions to Kabuki theatre and silent movies, however, submerge the narrative and foreground virtuoso physical performances. Critics and interviewers frequently focus on those features of performance and relegate the texts of *Forgotten* and *Silent* to the mists of an Irish tradition of storytelling. (208)

Fitzpatrick Deane highlights a difficulty that has long existed in Irish theatre, that somehow the definition of an Irish playwright defines one who writes for stage but not one who acts and writes for stage. Perhaps, as a nation, we have elevated our playwrights to the esteemed position of the poets and bards of old, a position that the common actor of today can never attain, or is seemingly not supposed to.

If Kinevane's *Silent* is a tour de force with regard to theatricality, the text is equally relevant. In 2011, Fintan O'Toole bemoans the fact that so few dramatists are taking "aim at the establishment", but in the same year, *Silent* was performed across Ireland and toured internationally in 2012, tackling the big questions: the silence of homosexuality, the silence of mental disorders, the silence of homelessness, and the societal silence of a nation with regard to all of these issues. *Forgotten* looks at the care of the old, while *Underneath* highlights female abuse, leading Fitzpatrick Deane to consider them as 'state of the nation' plays (214) in revealing "how fully bound we are to even the most forgotten, the most silent in our world" (215).

Similarly to Kinevane, Seamus O'Rourke began his career on the amateur drama circuit. As an actor and director at the Corn Mill theatre, he founded his professional theatre company Big Guerilla Productions in 2012. Over the past twelve years, he has written and performed twelve full-length plays and two one-acters. He is based in Carrigallen, a small town in Co. Leitrim and the majority of his work is premiered at the local Corn Mill theatre, which explains his lack of recognition outside of the Midlands. His first play *Dig* opened at the Corn Mill in 2006 and he followed it up with *Down* (2007) and *The Trappe Family* (2008). Livin' Dread theatre company produced *Ride On* at the Ramor in 2010 and over the next eight years, O'Rourke wrote, directed and produced *The Sand Park* (2010), *For Club and County* (2012), *Stalemate* (2013), *Padraig Pott's Guide to Walking* (2014), *My Aunt Bee* (2014), *Indigestion* (2015), and *And Thank You* (2018). It was only in 2017 that the Viking theatre in Dublin premiered *From Under the Bed*, and *Indigestion* (2015) was only staged at the Galway International Festival in the summer of 2024.

O'Rourke uses minimalistic settings, local vernacular and an inbuilt rhyming scheme to convey the intricacies of human relationships in a rural setting. In performance, he is the closest to Eamon Kelly and the seanchaí. The themes however are topical as he grapples

with the many faces of marginalised male characters, isolated in rural environments. In *Indigestion,* the central nameless character walks onto the stage carrying a concrete block, before putting it down and sitting on it for the majority of the show. 'I want to tell ya a story…' initiates a stream of consciousness that deals with depression and anger management and pits the supposedly pastoral rurality of Cavan against the dangerous construction sites of urban London in a manner that portrays the former negatively and the latter positively. In contrast with the other actor-authors, O'Rourke's shows do not rely on movement or theatrical design, but on storytelling and the reliance of the imagination of the audience to differentiate the characters.

In his plays *The Man in the Woman's Shoes*, *I Hear you and Rejoice* (2017), and *The Mysterious Case of Kitsy Rainey* (2023), actor Mikel Murfi engages with more movement and character embodiment than O'Rourke, mixing mime and storytelling, but his physical work is limited in terms of theatricality in contrast with Kinevane for example. The extraordinary talent of Murfi as a physical actor means that he requires no more to create a palpable image of a whole village of characters to the audience. As an author, his aim was to create shows that would be "utterly uplifting and joyful" (qtd. in Bano). One of the founding members of Barabbas Theatre Company, Murfi is an all-round practitioner as he has also directed for Druid, Red Kettle, The Galway Arts Festival and Macnas. Not only does he write and perform his own work but he also directs his plays.

Unusually, his central character in both plays, Pat Farnon, is mute. Employing a mute character as the central narrator of his plays is ingenious as it allows Murfi to showcase his extraordinary talents as clown, mime and actor while also challenging the audience with regard to creating an imaginary world. Pat Farnon is a metaphor for the marginalised in rural society; a generation of Irish males who are/were unable to express their inner emotions.

The immense difficulty the character has in expressing himself verbally and emotionally is a central factor for the successful reception by audiences of the plays.

The canon of contemporary theatre is replete with examples of actor-author plays. While many of those are the first and, to date, only plays written by these actors, they are informative regarding form and content. Margaret McAuliffe's *The Humours of Bandon* opened at the Dublin Fringe Festival in 2016. The play concerns a young Irish dancer, Annie, and her quest to be All-Ireland dancing champion. McAuliffe is an All-Ireland-winning dancer. Timmy Creed's debut play *Spliced,* which premiered as part of the Cork Midsummer Festival in 2018, is concerned with toxic masculinity within the GAA. Creed played club hurling at the highest level and the play has to be performed in hand-ball alleys and large community halls due to the hurling involved in the production. Ronan Dempsey trained at Le Coq. His one-man show *The Words Are There* (2017) centres on his non-verbal movement with a mop and a voice-over of his abusive wife. Noelle Brown's *Postscript,* which follows her own search for her natural mother; Emma O'Grady's *What Good is Looking Well When You're Rotten On The Inside*, based on her grandfather's tape recordings; and Michael Patrick's *My Left Nut,* dealing with his teenage battle with hydrocele testis, are plays that are autobiographical, a point discussed in Chapter 3.

In his foreword to Dermot Bolger's play *The Passion of Jerome,* Patrick Mason claims:

> There are those playwrights who revel in and express the cultural DNA of the times, in all its pluralisms and vertiginous newness. And there are those who, Janus like, also look back and indeed write back to a time before Yeats, back to the *seanachaí*, and the Greeks before them. (qtd in Bolger n.p.)

If Mason's argument that the ability to be a storyteller is one of the central skills available to the playwright, my contention is that the inheritors of the *seanachaí* are first and foremost the actor-authors and that the contemporary period has allowed them – even though it might

initially have been for economic reasons – to renew with this inherently Irish tradition. This categorising of the new forms of productions that has emerged since the 1990s started with a troubling question, which was the disappearance of the dominance of the Irish playwright. Notwithstanding the rich innovations that both theatre makers and actor-authors have brought to the stage, the director in me is seeking the new Brian Friel, and the last part of my investigation is devoted to this now elusive figure.

4. The Playwrights

Irish theatre audiences and those who work in Irish theatre have a clear definition of what constitutes an Irish playwright. The playwright writes a script that has characters who are played by actors but not the playwright. The plot carries the central authorial voice of the play. The story may be minimal, as in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, but a narrative arc can always be identified, as can a dramatic conflict. This perception of what constitutes a play in the dramatic tradition is pivotal to the definition of the contemporary playwright. But this perception also has to do with the cultural heritage of Ireland, as both Lionel Pilkington (1) and Morse (1) testify to Ireland's "fertile history of performances". Since the establishment of the Abbey as the National Theatre of Ireland, Irish theatre has had a long history of playwrights who have contributed to the cultural fabric of the nation. In looking for the Irish playwright, one may therefore attempt to identify common traits to canonical authors in order to find them in emerging playwrights.

If a shortcut to Irish plays is the idea of the rural play, treated in a realistic manner, and set in a kitchen, this has become almost a caricature – as belied by some of the plays of Martin MacDonagh who subverts Irish tropes. Rather I will explore hypotheses by analysing the use of myth, political commentary, and dramaturgy through three generations of

playwriting: Friel and Murphy's, the 'golden generation' that started writing in the 1990s, and writers who emerged in the millennium.

In the 1990s the "golden" generation identified by Fintan O'Toole ("Can Irish") provided a theatrical bridge into a new century and a new millennium. While their plays are strongly influenced by the work of their predecessors, they differ greatly both in form and content. If, as Christopher Murray suggests, the work of Friel, Murphy and Leonard "converge on a set of questions on origin and destination" (*Twentieth-Century* 224), the golden generation startle by their wide range of themes and form. The emergence of this new group of playwrights was immediate, commencing in the early part of the decade with the powerful new female voice of Marina Carr, followed by Corcadorca's collaboration with Enda Walsh and his play *Disco Pigs* (1995), and Druid's discovery of Martin McDonagh; the Dublin playwrights, Conor McPherson and Mark O'Rowe, made up the quintet. In addressing their body of work, I will concentrate on Carr, McPherson, and Walsh in that their work offers representative illustrations of, respectively, rural Ireland, urban Ireland, and the absurd.

Looking at the playwrights who started working in the new millennium, I could name thirty authors whose work has been performed, but few have attained national recognition, and fewer have had their plays published – a point which also factors in gaining critical attention. While it is tempting to discuss in this thesis the rich plays of Carmel Winters, Micheál Lovett, Nancy Harris, Philip MacMahon, Lucy Caldwell, Abbie Spallen, Stacey Gregg, and Deirdre Kinahan, I will focus on three: Michael West, Ailís Ní Ríain, and Shane Mac An Bhaird to emphasise the diversity of voices, dramaturgical choices, as well as contexts feeding their work. My contention is that, while a thread of tradition can be drawn from Friel to them, via the golden generation – and those elements of an Irish tradition will be investigated from the 1990s onwards – the rock on which these new playwrights may well perish is that of over-experimentation.

Michael West may be a contentious choice insofar as he started writing in the 1990s. However, in contrast with the playwrights identified as the 'golden generation', his plays remained neglected and international recognition elusive. Over the past thirty years, he has written thirteen plays and adapted nine, many of which were collaborations with the theatre company Corn Exchange. His first plays, *A Play on Two Chairs* and *Scene Around Six*, were performed as a double bill, at the Lombard St. Studio in Trinity College in 1990. *A Play on Two Chairs* was then revived by Corn Exchange in 1997, performed by West and actor-director Annie Ryan, at the Dublin, New York and Edinburgh Fringe Festivals. Throughout the 1990s West was commissioned to write new work for Bickerstaffe theatre company (*Snow* 1993), Pigsback – now renamed Fishamble – (*The Tender Trap* in 1992, and *Sardines* in 1995), and the Abbey (*Monkey* in 1995). His adaptations of classics such as *Tartuffe*, *The Marriage of Figaro* and *The Seagull* were critically well received and signal a commonality with the work of Friel, Murphy, Kilroy, and Carr. However, it was his collaborations with the Corn Exchange (*Everyday* in 2006, *Freefall* in 2009, *Man of Valour* in 2011, and *Dubliners* in 2012) that brought him to the fore.

Dublin by Lamplight, the case study analysed in chapter 4, is representative of his work with Corn Exchange and their *commedia* style. Not only was it an instant hit on its premiere in Project Arts Centre in 2004, but it also was the only play of his that graced the main stage of the Abbey, albeit in 2017. Interspersed with this collaborative work with Ryan, West opened the new millennium with the acclaimed one-man play *Foley* (2000), *Conservatory* was produced by the Abbey at the Peacock in 2014, and *The Chinese Room* directed by James Macdonald premiered at the Williamstown Theatre Festival in 2016. West's work is of particular interest because of the dual nature of his work, both collaborative and open to development in rehearsals with the ensemble company, and more independent creativity on other plays – in a way that we associate more traditionally with playwriting. While the

playwrights selected have been under-researched, Nicholas Grene has nonetheless written repeatedly about West, noting, for instance, the similarities with Anglo-Irish gothic in such plays as *Conservatory* and *Foley* (95), and discussing the elements of physical theatre in his work. Indeed, his early plays were very physical, often using mime alone (e.g. *A Play on Two Chairs*), while his collaborative work hinged on the employment of *Commedia Dell'Arte* techniques.

The particularity of Ní Ríain may also be regarded as her duality. A classical composer who studied music at Cork and York, her plays bear the mark of musicality. Her first play *Tilt* was produced in 2007 at the Granary Theatre in Cork and the Citizens Theatre, Glasgow. Her play *Cell* premiered at The Printworks for the 24/7 Theatre Festival in 2009 and *Desolate Heaven* at Theatre 503 in 2013. *Ostrav* was produced in London at Theatre 503 in 2014. While she pursues a successful career as a composer, her theatre work has received limited plaudits: *Desolate Heaven* was shortlisted for the 2014 James Tait Prize for Drama, and *The Tallest Man in the World* was a finalist at the Eugene O'Neill Playwriting Conference in 2015 and was shortlisted for The Octagon Prize in 2016. Her most recent play *Bitterweed*, which had a public reading in the Everyman in 2019, is based in Sarajevo and deals with rape in both a war-torn Serbia and a rural Irish setting. Violence exists centrally in all her plays, be it physical or psychological. But the ambivalence of her writing style, as close to poetry as Kane's later plays, is another defining element. *The Tallest Man in The World* is written in the form of an epic poem and the poetic language creates a surreal, almost mystical reality to the piece. The play challenges every sexual mores in Irish society and in Erin, Ní Ríain has drawn the most overtly sexual female character ever written in Irish theatre. To date, only this play has been subject to academic scrutiny (see Dubost).

Finally, Monaghan-born playwright Shane Mac an Bhaird is yet to be discovered by academic critics. Educated in Maynooth and Birmingham, Mac an Bhaird is currently

completing a PhD in playwriting at Trinity College, Dublin. He has no acting experience but began his career in theatre as an assistant stage manager for Ouroboros's national tour of *Making History* in 2007. He has had so far only two plays produced out of the five he wrote: *Traitor*, self-produced and premiered at the Dublin Fringe Festival in 2016, and *Melt*, produced by Rough Magic at Smock Alley Theatre for the Dublin Theatre Festival in 2017. His other three plays received public readings: *The Mouth of the Birch* (Druid debut, 2020), *The Delirium Archive* (Rough Magic, 2022), and *Swallow your Pride, Art MacCooey* (which I directed for the Patrick Kavanagh Weekend in 2023). In view of the paucity of critical commentary, much of the analysis of his play *Melt* will be mine. However, it is worth noting that Peter Crawley's review of the play focuses on the surreal quality present in his first four plays: the play "begins with a chill reality but bends unsteadily towards the surreal, like a Dali clock, as it depicts catastrophes human and global. If the polar ice caps are melting, how solid are we? ("*Melt* Review").

Just as the playwrights selected for case studies on the golden generation present the diversity of dramaturgy at one moment in time, these three playwrights illustrate different qualities of writing: West's linguistic mastery allies itself to the physical world of commedia to produce comedies; Ní Ríain unravels the brutality of personal relationships through a language that can be heard – even if not seen (Dubost); Mac an Bhaird uses surrealism to convey the urgency of a disappearing humanity. In discussing how these playwrights innovate while continuing to build on the tradition of Irish drama, Chapter 4 will interrogate the political aspects of their plays, the importance of myth, and their dramaturgy.

5. Dance Theatre: Michael Keegan-Dolan

The impact of the recent development of dance theatre in Ireland is best illustrated through the work of its most inventive practitioner**,** Michael Keegan-Dolan. In considering how he makes theatre by using various art forms, my initial instinct was to study his work in chapter 2. However, in contrast with the theatre makers, he makes use of the fourth wall and the effect of his work does not hinge on reinventing the relationship with the audience. Because of the poetic aspects present in his performances, I was inclined to include him in the playwriting chapter. Yet, a study of his scripts led me to conclude that the poetry resides mostly in how the theatrical (dance but also set designs and use of space, sound and lighting designs) interacts with the textual rather than in the dramaturgy. In *How to be a Dancer in Seventy-Two Thousand Easy Lessons* (2023), Keegan-Dolan shows similarities with the work of the actor-authors as he faces the audience and breaks the fourth wall to tell them his story, from the childhood of a boy with crooked feet in an Irish village to his international journey as a professional dancer. The story is personal, funny and enlightening as to the small-mindedness of the milieu. But he is not alone on stage: he is joined by a dancer, Rachel Poirier, as if he wanted to test how to revisit what we understand as 'dance theatre'. As a result, the last chapter is devoted entirely to his work.

As in the previous chapters I focus on both the political dimension of his work and his use of myth. In appraising Keegan-Dolan's use of myth one is reminded of Murray's analysis of Yeats's plays which sit at a borderline "where shadow rivals substance; mythology challenges history; the dream constantly opposes responsibility" (*Twentieth-Century* 18). The link with Yeats is perhaps even more evident since Yeats too thought of dance as a form of expression within his dramatic work. Certainly with Keegan-Dolan the dualities identified by Murray are present, prompting the audience to find meaning through words and visual metaphors, the non-verbal eliciting the realms of shadows, myths and dreams. But Keegan-Dolan is contemporary and therefore his position is very different to

Yeats's. In fact, for Lisa Fitzpatrick, "Irish theatre is at a liminal point, in transition between national myths whose elements no longer function, and a new mythology that is either more local, more pan-national, or more likely is simultaneously both" ("Nation and Myth" 178). Keegan-Dolan's sources are Celtic mythology located in small villages and towns in rural Ireland, and his intent is to unveil the uncomfortable faults of a Catholic Ireland. What if he has succeeded in creating a new national theatre, by bringing together old myths and new political issues, and by dusting off Irish drama through reclaiming the importance of spectacle – an element emphasised through dance and designs?

The following chapters will analyse in turn the innovations brought on by the work of the theatre makers, focusing on authenticity, the actor-authors, reflecting on how they frame personal stories within Irish history, and the playwrights, exploring how they follow and break with the literary tradition of Irish playwriting. Finally, I will consider as an epilogue the radical work of Keegan-Dolan dance theatre companies to extend my investigation of the contemporary Irish playwright.

Chapter 2. The Theatre Makers: Away from Drama?

In the introduction to *Postdramatic Theatre and the Political,* Jerome Carroll et al. explain Hans Lehmann's term 'postdramatic' as referring to "a vast variety of contemporary forms of theatre and performance" which "had departed […] from 'drama', that is they no longer conformed to the idea of mimetically enacting a dramatic conflict in the form of a story (fable) and dialogue spoken by characters in a fictional universe" (1). This definition is a useful summary of what intrinsically divides the work of theatre makers from that of other authors, be they actor-authors or literary playwrights, whose primary material is the text. In fact, what theatre makers have in common is that the initial creative process does not start with a script. This rejection of drama is aimed, according to O'Toole, at confronting the audience with "a reality that has been repressed" ("The new theatre"). This idea shapes both the content of their work, the reality of which is reinforced by the employment of documentary techniques, as well as the nature of performance, which can be immersive and site-specific, but in any case, reinvents the relationship between work and audience members. For O'Toole, what ANU productions does – and I suggest that Brokentalkers be included in that respect – is produce urgent and political theatre "in a way that Yeats's was not" ("It's Ireland best public theatre").

This chapter will address how these two companies make new political work directly linked with the real (past or present) through their theatrical choices, namely, their use of documentary techniques and reflection on site specificity, whereby they renew the relationship with theatre audiences and create theatre that aims to achieve a perception of reality which encourages the spectator to believe that what they are witnessing is true.

In describing what she calls "theatre of the real", Carol Martin "identifies a wide range of theatre practices and styles that recycle reality, whether that reality is personal, social,

political, or historical" (5). To explore how Brokentalkers and ANU proceed to create political discourse in direct relation to reality, I will discuss *Have I No Mouth* (2017) and *The Examination* (2022), as well as *Laundry* (2011) and *The Boys of Foley Street* (2012). While ANU makes use of documentary, my focus in exploring documentary and verbatim material will be centred on Brokentalkers' work, allowing me to explore ANU's defining strength as its dialogue with sites. I will then reflect on how they both reinvent, through different theatrical techniques, their relationship with the audience, an aspect central not only to revitalising Irish theatre but also to making political plays.

1. The Textual Real: Documentary, Verbatim and Docu-verbatim

In his essay "A Search for New Realities; Documentary Theatre in Germany", Thomas Irmer provides a concise and succinct historical development of documentary theatre which he states was initiated by Erwin Piscator in the 1920s and re-emerged in the 1960s as "a new type of drama represented by the works of Peter Weiss, Heinar Kipphardt and Rolf Hochhuth" (16). Irmer selects three representative plays – Weiss's, *Die Ermittlung* (1965), Kipphardt's, *In Der Sache F Robert Oppenheimer* (1964) and Hochhuth's *Der Stellevertreter* (1963) – which

> make use of the techniques and aesthetics of documentary theatre and where historical documents are treated as the principal material for the stage; characters are seen as authentic protagonists from history; and quite often the forms of investigation trial or factual reconstruction – are employed to confront the audience with the content. (17)

By the late 1990s, this trend had developed into "new forms of documentary based on auteur-directors' projects, critical of historical or sociological knowledge-making while exploring history as an open project that could not be known through accepted principles

and ideas" (17). Ulick O'Connor's *Executions* (1985) is one of the earliest examples of both "documentary" and "investigation-trial" theatre in Ireland. The play explores the murder of Deputy Sean Hales by the IRA on 7 December 1922 outside the Dáil and the execution by the Free State government, on the following morning, of four prisoners in reprisal. O'Connor's play is based on Dáil transcripts, interviews and the prisoners' diaries, taking the form of an "investigation-trial". It can also be described as "verbatim theatre", as the majority of the data presented was constructed from interviews with people who were contemporaneous with the executions. As O'Connor explained about his writing process:

> Using interviews with both men, along with interviews from other people, letters, articles, speeches, I created a *mise en scene* which was strictly grounded in fact; for the monologues of Barrett and McKelvey I used a similar process. From the descriptions of four people who were present at the executions in the prison yard I constructed the final passage of the play. (15)

O'Connor's play was also one of the earliest productions in Irish theatre to employ video and photographic footage to authenticate the historical context. In *Contemporary British Drama*, Catherine Rees affirms that "one thing that no one can agree on is a single definition of fact-based theatre, with many different terms on offer to describe a wide variety of theatre that engages with contemporary political events" (74). Indeed, the umbrella term of documentary theatre accommodates practices as various as verbatim, docu-verbatim, tribunal theatre, theatre of witness, and testimony theatre, which offer nuances on the forms and objectives of documentary drama, and which are all evident in *Executions.*[2]

Looking at contemporary fact-based theatre, it would be difficult to argue that ANU's work is not documentary theatre so it is unusual that their work, or that of Brokentalkers, is not discussed or analysed in the recently published *Contemporary Irish Documentary*

[2] While this does not serve the current argument, it is notable that the first Irish documentary play should be based on a playwright's script, rather than devised.

Theatre (2020). It appears that the editors, Beatriz Kopschitz Bastos and Shaun Richards, have made a conscious decision that documentary theatre is only concerned with plays written by a playwright and, with the exception of Grace Dyas's play *History*, have decided to completely ignore the work of the contemporary theatre makers – though this might be caused by the absence of scripts available from theatre makers at the time.

In ANU productions, "historical documents are treated as the principal material" in performances that are always "exploring history as an open project that could not be known through accepted principles and ideas" (Irwin 17). This exploration of the historical and the local has received ample critical attention, notably by Brian Singleton in *Anu Productions: The Monto Cycle*, who articulates how the company challenged "what we conventionally know to be theatre" in making interdisciplinary performances, and in displacing theatre audiences into situations where they are "asked to make choices about whether or not to intervene in the stories and dilemmas of the protagonists" (6). Like O'Toole, Singleton addresses the eminently political nature of their work. ANU's *Monto Cycle* is a tetralogy of plays all historically located in the Monto district of Dublin: *World's End Lane* (2010) sheds light on the Monto in the early nineteenth century, when it was the busiest prostitute area in Europe; *Laundry* (2012) highlights the atrocious conditions of unmarried mothers incarcerated in the Magdalene Laundries; *The Boys of Foley Street* (2012) is based on an RTE Radio documentary; and *Vardo* (2014) on the immigrant sex trade of the early millennium. What ANU achieved with the *Monto Cycle* is an "excavat[ion of] the area's social and political history over the past century" (Meany), the image of the archaeological digging process making clear their research of an undeniable and confrontational truth while taking unashamed possession of these uncomfortable realities.

Their documentary work continued beyond the cycle: in 2016 ANU contributed 12 different projects in various formats including theatrical, cinematic and visual art, each

commemorating the 1916 Rising. For instance, *Sunder* (2016) in which 100 testimonies from the foot soldiers and the poorer Dublin participants in the 1916 Rising were presented, and *The Sin Eaters* (2017), where "the all-female cast immerse you in various scenarios from the less savoury chapters of Ireland's recent history" (O'Driscoll). Research for *The Sin Eaters* was gathered from the National Archives while *Hentown* (2017) was based on the 1963 housing crisis and for *Faultline* (2019) ANU based the production on research from the Irish Queer Archive.

Brokentalkers has navigated the wide field of documentary theatre since *Silver Stars* in 2009. *The Blue Boy* (2016) is based on documentary and verbatim testimony of the institutional abuse of young boys at The Artane Boys School; *Woman Undone* (2018), on Mary Coughlan's "fraught personal biography" (Crawley "Review of Woman Undone"), and *The Examination* (2019) on docu-verbatim evidence from interviews with prisoners in Mountjoy and historical analysis researched in the History Department University College Dublin. Brokentalkers therefore specialises in productions structured on personal stories that lend themselves to a socio-political reading.

One aspect firmly characterises every documentary production of Brokentalkers. The perpetrators are seldom, if ever, represented in the production: as a result, the performers are never contradicted, given the space and permission to express themselves with no repercussions. When institutions responsible, such as the industrial school system in *The Blue Boy*, are included in the show it is solely via video or audio footage: they are given no physical space. Though this may lead to the charge that the plays are biased, affording no right of reply, the work of Brokentalkers clearly is not dialectical in its objectives: they create a primarily confessional work, rather than a social play. Yet, the topics of their work, as that of ANU, implicitly point to the undeniable responsibility of wider institutions.

a. Verbatim theatre

Derek Paget coined the term "verbatim theatre" in 1987 in his essay "'Verbatim Theatre' – Oral History and Documentary Techniques", which David Lane describes as "one of the first attempts to identify common methodologies in documentary theatre", one of which is according to Paget the use of recorded voices (Lane 59), a technique used by Brokentalkers in *Silver Stars* (2009) in order to articulate the hidden stories of gay men before the 1990s. Lane contends that "a common element of verbatim theatre is the focus on minority groups and their unheard stories, or upon information demanding to be presented to a wider public"; primarily, what matters is that "these words have been written and spoken by others" (66), which lends authenticity to the texts on stage.

Discussing British productions in *Verbatim, Verbatim: Contemporary Documentary Theatre*, Will Hammond and Dan Steward address the difficulty of fine-tuning the umbrella term of documentary theatre and suggest that verbatim theatre may be "best considered as a process or a technique" (6-9). For Alex Sierz in *Rewriting The Nation; British Theatre Today,* "verbatim theatre is the latest incarnation of a long tradition of fact-based drama" and "in the 2000s, it was a market leader in the decades revival of political theatre" (58). While Stephen Bottoms observes that the term "verbatim theatre" is often seen as synonymous with the more general term "documentary theatre", he asserts the importance of distinguishing between the two because while documentary theatre implies "the foregrounding of documents, of texts, the term 'verbatim theatre' tends to fetishise the notion that we are getting things 'word for word', straight from the mouths of those

'involved'" (59). This distinction is useful in guiding our use of both terms, documentary referring to written documents and verbatim to oral testimonies.

To acknowledge the specificity of documentary theatre in Ireland, a brief comparison with UK practices is enlightening. In *The Guardian* in 2008 David Edgar reports that "dozens and dozens of verbatim and witness plays have appeared" ("Doc and Dram"). Verbatim theatre in the UK is based on transcripts and interviews and is presented in a journalistic style and, more often than not, the script is written by playwrights. Lane posits that "verbatim theatre grew in popularity across the millennium thanks to the public's increasing distrust of politicians, journalism and respected organisations such as the BBC and the Metropolitan Police Force, and the rise of celebrity 'real-life' drama via reality TV programmes and talent competitions" (77-78). The plays generally spotlight an injustice by the system; for instance, the Metropolitan Police's handling of the Steven Lawrence murder (Richard Norton-Taylor's *The Colour of Justice* in 1999), Britain's invasion of Iraq (Robin Soans's *A State Affair* in 2001), or British Rail's privatisation (David Hare's *The Permanent Way* in 2004). Verbatim theatre in the U.K. makes evident its political objective while, in contrast, Irish verbatim theatre leans towards the personal, often (auto-)biographical, and is devised by those involved rather than compiled and shaped by a playwright, making the personal political. In the case of Brokentalkers, the performers are often non-actors, placed on the stage because they have their stories to tell: in that sense, the verbatim testimony is immediately received by the audience as the authentic experience of each of the participants on stage. For instance, in *Have I No Mouth* Cannon and his mother each give their own version of the death of his father, the result of a misdiagnosis by the medical staff of the hospital in whose care he was placed. Though discrepancies are revealed, each articulates their own truths about the common experience of loss and mourning.

With Brokentalkers, the victims are often non-actors placed on the stage so that they can relate the injustice perpetrated against them, reinforcing the quality of truth that the nonetheless constructed script vehiculates. As McIvor explains, this "valorisation of the personal perspectives of 'ordinary' people" speaks to their "commitment to relating the experiences of 'real' Irish people" (43). In *Have I No Mouth,* Feidlim Cannon is joined on stage by two non-actors who multiply the perspectives of real, ordinary people – his mother Ann, and his therapist Erich Keller. Feidlim and his mother, Ann, perform and engage with their memories of, and feelings, resentments and recriminations about the death of his father Sean.

The play may be regarded as a verbatim-like journey to the past. It is also an interrogation by Brokentalkers of how they use verbatim material. A central criticism levelled at documentary productions, particularly verbatim, is their reliance on "a process of research, selection and editing, distorting truth claims through the partisan nature of the writer's choices" (Lane 78). While sources like tribunals, recordings of interviews, diaries and journalistic print help "to inform the shape of the drama", they nevertheless do not "necessitate utter fidelity from the writer, who is free to disrupt the original structure of the sources" (Lane 78). In his review of *The Blue Boy,* for instance, Peter Crawley criticises the company's use of a television interview with Br. Joseph O'Connor, founder of the Artane Boys Band and subject of the worst allegations, as "an easy, useless target for the revulsion of a bewildered people" (n.p). In *Have I No Mouth* Cannon's personal reliability is questioned not only in retelling the past but also in re-membering it, for example as I will discuss later when he and Ann argue over the objects that should be used to present their reading of the past. Indeed, McIvor observes that "the exchanges between Feidlim and Ann play out not only their personal history with one another, but interrogate the limits of

representation and memory in the theatre" while also "explicitly query[ing] many of the formal approaches that define Brokentalkers' approach to the theatre of the real" (55).

In *Have I No Mouth*, the approach allies the personal memories of two individuals of two deaths, the emotions attached to these memories, the images created from these memories, and the elucidation of these two conflicting narratives by a psychiatrist, whose expertise gives him the objective function of a referee while he nonetheless participates in what is a performance. For McIvor, this layered process is "an earnest attempt to engage with his own memories within the conceit of *Have I No Mouth*" (54). The "conceit" is employed even when acknowledging the verbatim material, for instance when Feidlim reads a "transcript" of his mother's memories of the death of her son:

> ERICH. When you say that you had a feeling something was wrong…how did you express that?
>
> FEIDLIM. I said. I said, well I told the Doctor and Nurses that I felt something was wrong, not right. They told me not to worry and. everything is fine. The baby is fine.
>
> ERICH. What was that like not being heard?
>
> FEIDLIM. I just kept thinking they knew best. But my whole instinct was, was he's not safe. I felt he wasn't safe. I brought him down to the nursery he would be safe there with the medical staff. I went back to the room. Looked out the window. It was snowing. All of a sudden calmness came over me, in my mind he was safe. The nurse came into my room and said can I speak to you. She said I don't know how to tell you this, and I said you don't have to I know he's gone isn't he? But he was safe. […]
>
> ERICH. How was it for you bringing that news home?
>
> FEIDLIM. Padraic was only two but Feidlim was six and he knew I was going to have a baby. Feidlim was excited about having a new brother or sister. My Mother told Feidlim I had lost the Baby. But you know a child a child doesn't understand loss, doesn't understand loss the way the way we do. Feidlim thought it meant misplaced, that I really lost the baby somewhere. And when I got home he was waiting standing there in the doorway and he asked me, I remember he shouted 'How did you lose the baby'? I didn't know what to say. How do you explain to a six-year-old child? And I put my arms around Feidlim and I told him I didn't lose the baby; he's gone back to holy God. But Feidlim just kept shouting "HOW DID YOU LOSE THE BABY"?
>
> How did you lose the baby?

How do you lose a baby?

How can you lose a baby?

How could you lose a baby?

Why can't you find the baby**?** (*Ann covers young Feidlim's mouth***)**

Why did you lose the baby?

Why don't you look for the baby? (Erich gets chair. Erich goes centre stage for spotlight)

Where did you lose the baby?

Where did you put the baby?

How can you lose a baby?

How could you lose a baby? (16-18)

As Feidlim shouts the last lines, Ann moves towards the cardboard cut-out of Feidlim as a child and places her hand over his mouth, reproducing in the present her past gesture, but also creating a postdramatic distancing effect that reinforces the notion of verbatim conceit.

b. Docu-verbatim theatre

Emilie Pine, in *The Memory Marketplace*, uses a "blended term" when coining the phrase/category "docu-verbatim" to describe a yoking of documentary and verbatim theatre, "a genre increasing both its market share and its symbolic impact" (1-2). Rather than explicating how the combination functions, she approaches its effects, which are to "transform complex ethical and social debates into a theatrically powerful moment, harnessing the emotive power of crisis and controversy to do so" (2-3). In *The Examination*, the controversy centres on the treatment of Irish prisoners in jails now, opposing the

documentary research on prison with the testimonies spoken by Willie White, a former prisoner. For Pine, testimony theatre has clear objectives:

> This form of theatre aims to present documentary stories, often through verbatim testimony, to an audience who will bear witness to its truths and, through their collective presence, validate those stories and experiences being performed. The sharing of testimony allows the person whose story is being performed whether by an actor, through a veil of anonymity or the person themselves, to move away from being portrayed as an object of representation, toward instead portraying their experience as an agent of their own lives and memories. (xxx)

In the two case studies, Brokentalkers employs various methods to create this distance and agency when the actors' personal experiences are at the core of the performances.

The Examination (2019) is a production by Brokentalkers commissioned by the School of History at U.C.D. Gary Keegan and Feidlim Cannon spent a year interviewing prisoners and former prisoners of Mountjoy Prison, to construct the testimonial material of the play, and they used scholarly research published by Cox as the documentary basis. The show contains two performers: Gary Keegan has the dual function of presenting the documentary research – in the form of a TED talk – as well as his own testimonial evidence in response to being physically attacked; Willie White, a non-actor, responds by offering the many verbatim testimonies of fellow inmates. The factual evidence is presented through textual and visual means and emphasises the binary opposition of the performers. Gary Keegan, impeccably suited, talks into a microphone, while slide photographs projected on a screen offer evidence to the theories of criminologist Cesar Lombroso. Keegan explains that according to Lombroso, "criminals were a genetic throwback to a primitive subhuman creature reminiscent of apes or lower primates" and that they display "certain distinctive physical characteristics such as a sloping forehead, ears of an unusual size, asymmetry of the face, asymmetry of the cranium and fleshy lips" (*The Examination* 1.12-1.38). Aptly, the other character on the stage wears a gorilla suit, which therefore identifies it as a criminal. While

Keegan speaks, a photograph of a man is presented behind him, and he asks the audience whether they think the photographed man is a criminal, urging them to focus their attention on the facial features:

> Just look at that face, He just has … that look doesn't he. You know … that look. Ask yourselves this. You're at home one evening and … (*He taps the microphone three times*). You get a knock at the door. You look out the window and you see that face staring back at you or you're walking down a secluded street and you see that face walking towards you. How do you feel in that moment? What do you imagine happens within you when you see that face walking towards you? It might be just a very slight shift . . .not quite panic but I imagine something will definitely shift within you and I want to tell you that that is a natural reaction. Some faces just trigger fear. (*The Examination* 2.20-3.17)

When he asks the gorilla to take off his mask, the man underneath the mask (Willie White) is also the one on screen. The opening contention presented by Keegan is that the

> born criminal is biologically inclined towards crime and until we can figure out a way of eradicating this defective trait we have a responsibility as a civilised society to impose harsh and fearful consequences in order to discourage as best we can the born criminal from offending. (7.09 – 7.37)

To establish the validity of his speech, Keegan procures documentary evidence from Lombroso's "born to be a criminal theory" to the Victorian prison system of "Separation and Silence", meaning to reassure the audience as to the authenticity of his claims.

At the same time, he plays a role, that of the researcher. Beyond the research, the most impactful part of his performance therefore lies in his testimony as a victim of violence, the situation that prompts his take on the issue of imprisonment. As such, he can personally, rather than objectively, address the testimonial arguments of the gorilla/White about the inhuman conditions Irish prisoners are living under. Like Keegan, White combines personal experiences with published research, such as the *Whitaker Report*, *The European Court for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment* and the *Irish*

Penal Reform Trust. Despite being initially presented as an animal – until he steps out of the gorilla suit and is left, vulnerable, in his vest and underpants – he earns the trust of the audience in that way, shedding light in a theoretical and a personal way on the state of mental and physical welfare of prisoners. In these opposite movements that tilt the balance of power from Gary to Willie, each performer, to use Pine's arguments, appears "to move away from being portrayed as an object of representation" toward instead portraying his experience as an agent of his "own life and memories" (xxx), in a double approach that further legitimises their perspectives and shapes their dialogue.

In *The Examination* both characters present and represent opposing sides of the debate on punishment for criminals: Willie, reading transcripts of the interviews conducted with inmates, stands for all prisoners as well as himself; Keegan uses his experience as a victim to become the stage representative of "civilised society":

> KEEGAN. No just saying a lotta people say prison is gone a bit like a holiday camp you know with your flat screen televisions and your gym and your school courses and your dietary requirements. You know a lotta people would say give them bread and water and fuck away the key. […]
>
> WHITE. Now I'm going to say something Gary. I don't know any holiday camp where you get locked up at seven o'clock in the fucking night. And I don't know any holiday camp where the feelings you have are fear, anxiety and depression. (*He almost breaks down*) And I don't know any holiday camp where sometimes you have to shit in front of a complete stranger. (*He stops to breathe deeply*) And I certainly don't know any holiday camp where you get to see the people that you love for a half an hour a fucking week. (23.06 – 25.36)

What the performance highlights is that both Keegan and White are emotionally overcome by their respective experiences, and both suffer from "fear, anxiety and depression". They nonetheless remain opposed at the end of the performance, White being positive, forgiving and hopeful while Keegan remains violently angry. Pine's observations materialise as both White and Keegan have become agents of their own life experiences.

The play contains elements central to all their productions: the personal story, the political discourse, and what Wilmer has called "a collage of theatrical elements" (191). Though McIvor argues that the company shows no "consistent approach", I suggest defining similarities in the fact that the work bases itself on the personal story first, offered in an unadorned manner via documentary techniques, and that the implied socio-political dialectic is hinted at through the theatrical images – physicality, masks, props, music, visual aids – which call upon the universality of the initial personal basis.

2. The Physical Real: Playing with Site

ANU is known for "creating transformative experiences in unusual locations" that "challenge theatrical conventions by blurring the lines between immersive and site-specific practice" (ANU). As a preliminary frame to their work around locations, I'll give a brief theoretical and historical background. Both Louise Lowe and Owen Boss grew up in the Monto area. Of the eighteen students in Lowe's class, only four are still alive (Lowe in interview with author). In his introduction to *Contemporary Irish Plays*, Patrick Lonergan questions the silence and oblivion surrounding the lives of the people ANU spotlights:

> The community depicted in this play is complex and multifaceted – and it occupies a space that is only five minutes' walk from Dublin's main throughfare O'Connell Street. Why have these lives been so frequently absent from public consciousness? The problems we find in the production are real: why have they been ignored? (xix)

The problems he refers to are varied: low-employment, drug abuse, violence and prostitution, all of which have contributed to a historical perception of the Monto area. In creating ANU's Monto cycle – *World's End Lane* (2010), *Laundry* (2011), *The Boys of Foley Street* (2012), and *Vardo* (2013) – Lowe and Boss can be described as socially-engaged

artists who have worked with the communities in these areas of Dublin. As Singleton explains, “ANU Productions do not simply re-site spectators in real sites of history and memory” but in communities “that have had to contend with marginalisation or near-erasure” (10). By creating with communities and with the spaces they inhabit, ANU not only sheds light on their problems but counters the social marginalisation that made those lives invisible. Morash and Richards articulate how the duality of space and story functions in their site-specific productions: “Through becoming the physical location and thematic focus of the drama, places were imaginatively returned to the possession of local audiences as part of the social agenda of the site-specific work” (160). Lowe is “very aware for a long time how failed my community has been”. She is “not interested in creating poverty porn” but prefers to work with the community “where they're the experts in that space” and the inhabitants of that community are “first to see the work for free” (interview with author).

a. Defining off-site performances

Much has been written about theatre that is performed at or emanates from a particular site, giving rise to numerous terms nuancing these various relationships between performance and space. Kwon refers to “site-determined, site-oriented, site-referenced, site-conscious, site responsive, site-related” as some of the new “terms that have emerged in recent years among many artists and critics to account for the various permutations” (1). In *Mapping Irish Theatre,* Morash and Richards acknowledge the difficulties in using the term ‘site-specific’ which is “wide ranging and often contentious” (155). Without entering terminological debates, my interest is in observing how sites offer varied alternatives to traditional venues, and how these will influence the relationship with the audience. For Hans

Lehmann, site-specific theatre "seeks out an architecture or other location […] not so much […] because the site corresponds well to a certain text but because it is made to 'speak' and is *cast in a new light* through theatre" (152). He explains: "When a factory floor, an electric power station or a junkyard is being performed in, a new 'aesthetic gaze' is cast onto them. The space presents itself. It becomes a co-player without having a definite significance" (152). In defining the space as having no "specific significance", this suggests a much wider scope of practices than what is envisaged by Morash and Richards who define 'site-specific' as any production "in which the form and meaning […] are inextricably bound to the site of the performance, usually (but not always) such that it could not be staged elsewhere" (156). This nuance gives an appreciation that fits ANU's work. In their productions, site is not just a co-player it both hosts and ghosts the performance.

A few theatre companies in the Republic of Ireland (ROI) are at the forefront of what can be widely called off-site and site-responsive productions: Corcadorca, Company SJ, The Performance Corporation and ANU produce work in non-conventional venues, often privileging urban spaces as makeshift stages and discursive loci. Corcadorca and Company SJ both present mostly canonical texts in locations that prompt site-responsive performances. The Performance Corporation and ANU produce devised, site-specific work in locations that bear a historical or cultural connection. In over forty productions that constitute the body of work by these four companies, only a handful could be said to be truly 'site-specific' as proposed by Morash and Richards while almost all qualify as site-specific under Lehmann's definition.

When Corcadorca initiated off-site performances in ROI, it was for financial reasons as well as the desire to evade the bourgeois limitations of seated theatre. Since the late 1990s, the company, under the artistic direction of Pat Kiernan, has used the geographical layout of Cork city and its surrounds as a wide backdrop to present canonical and new texts to Cork

audiences. Whether on St. Patrick's Hill (*The Passion of Christ*, 2000), Fitzgerald Park, (*A Midsummer Night's Dream,* 2001), the site of the old Ford factory (*Losing Steam*, 2004), the city centre (*The Merchant of Venice*, 2005), the Naval base at Haulbowline (*Woycezk*, 2007) or other locations in or around the city, the company have renewed and diversified its relationship with audience as promenades through the city (see Fitzpatrick "Staging *The Merchant*"; Etienne "Slump and Punk" and "'I remember'").

b. Site-specific

Central to Lowe's ethos is the constant interrogation of the relationship between the production and the 'audience', a term which "sometimes seems inappropriate" to her as "it implies, in its traditional context, a group of aloof watchers". In devising a production, she always considers "the communion between the viewer and the performer in the space" (Lowe "You Had to be There" 57). A much-discussed performance, given how this communion was thought out, is *Laundry* (2011), ANU's second Monto production, which took the form of a one-to-one performance journey on the site of the original Magdalene Laundry at Gloucester Street in Dublin. While productions with one audience member were already popular in the U.K. (for instance with Punchdrunk or You Me Bum Bum Train) *Laundry* is arguably its earliest example in an Irish context. Because there is no published or unpublished script for *Laundry*, my argument is based on two sources: Singleton's detailed, insightful and informative account of his attendance (see "ANU Productions" 27-31) as well as a short video of the production provided by Louise Lowe. Singleton outlines that the "claustrophobic intimacy of waiting along with all the characters was disconcerting", creating the impression that past and present were "collapsing into each other" (27).

"Spectators arrived in groups of three" (27) and were immediately separated inside for an individual journey. The audience member is the only other person in the rooms, moving through the laundry to meet different protagonists. In one room, a man physically wrestles with one of the women, physicalising unwanted sexual encounters. In another room one of the women recites the names of four women – Allison Brady, Bridget Brady, Ceilia Ann Brady, Mary Brady – and asks the audience member: "Do you mind remembering those four names for me. I'll say them again" (1.41-2.00). She repeats the names, clearly calling for audience intervention. Singleton recalls:

> I recited these names in my mind over and over again fearful of the performative consequences of forgetting. Though I was quizzed later in the performance without consequence I remember the names to this day. This small act of remembering was one of the most powerful moments of engagement in the performance. The ghosting installations would come and go in memory but I found by attaching these names to some of the nameless re-imagined women in the laundry that they would not be forgotten. (28)

Those names were but a sample of those found in documentary evidence, and may have had a limited effect if they had been spoken or read as a long list of victims. In not only performing those few names, vocalising them together, and committing them to the memory of the spectators, the production ensured that these unknown forgotten figures of history were identified and memorialised.

Other performers illustrate how the women incarcerated in the laundries all had different stories explaining their presence there and how they reacted to the space. In a room on her own, Christine whistles and smiles, saying "Girls who whistle make holy Mary cry". She whistles again almost in defiance. She kicks off her Wellington boots. At the same time, she shows her femininity, standing as if she were in high heels. The impression is one of lost innocence and a part of a woman's life that she will never be allowed to experience.

Christine intimates a connection through innocent flirtation, but above all she appears to possess an indomitable spirit that suggests survival. Another woman, unnamed, then beckons the audience member to follow her. She moves quietly into the church, sits, and whispers:

> Will you sit with me for a minute and hold my hand. Thank you. The world is an awful place. He said …You're a good girl. You've been a good wife he said but I want you to promise me one thing. I hate to think of you being left on your own. Go back to the laundry, he said, to the nuns. Would you like a sweet? (5.2-6.2)

In this case, immersion is central to creating intimacy as the audience member is required to engage physically with the performer, to hold her hand. In addition, her personal story shows that the nuns were seen then as minders of the women: the husband, as he is dying, tells her to go back to the nuns thinking she will be protected in the laundry when he is gone.

Reviews of the production have pointed to the uncomfortable position given to the audience: "by placing us in such close proximity to history, Lowe is inviting us to question our own complicity" (Keating "Laundry"). Singleton shared this feeling of helplessness, hinting that his lack of agency was "perhaps a more effective mirror of the women's plight" ("ANU Productions" 30). Are the women ghosts from the past in Singleton's world or is he a ghost from the future in theirs?

The production makes full use of the layered significance and physicality of the site. Locks and chains, parquet floors and mahogany doors, stained glass and crucifixes, peepholes and glass all contribute to a feeling of institution and prisoner, watcher and watched, while the whispering nods to the silence of respect for the church as much as the silence that permeated into society and the institutions of the state regarding the Magdalene laundries. Because the performance reveals the past, the audience cannot act in the present

to help these women. However, the dramatic illusion enables the audience to take part first-hand in the "unspoken social collusion that enabled the Magdalene Laundries to remain open and operational into the late twentieth century" (Keating). On leaving the laundry's performing space, the audience member is taken to another laundry where historical information about the institution is given. This shatters the silence and ghost-like world that the audience had experienced, but further grounds the performance in social documentary.

Similarly to *Laundry*, *The Boys of Foley Street* was first performed as part of the Dublin Theatre Festival (DTF), and commissioned by Dublin City Council. It is an hour-long promenade performance constructed as a series of vignettes. Four audience members attend each performance. Two audience members are taken off in a taxi while two others are taken on a walking tour of the city by Larry, armed with a "crutch", "a blue sleeping bag" and "a bottle of cider" (*The Boys* 351). The play is based on a radio interview that Pat Kenny conducted with four boys in Foley Street for RTE in 1975, and after Larry makes no secret of the fact that he was one of the boys interviewed the action begins:

> LARRY. Git! Git! C'mere you, stay there. Stay there. Where's the money?
>
> CHRISTOPHER. Give us about five minutes and I'll have it for ye, I'm in a hurry.
>
> LARRY. You fucking scum bag you never even came up to see me when I was inside. Stand there!
>
> CHRISTOPHER. I was busy.
>
> LARRY. Busy me bollix.
>
> CHRISTOPHER. I'm in a hurry. Gimme about five minutes I'm good for it. (352)

As Christopher runs down an alley, Larry organises the chase with the two spectators. Larry, as director, assigns each a specific role: "Larry gives Audience member B his sleeping bag and tells him to stand there in the laneway" and then tells Audience member A to "get into

the car" (353). While the play-within-the-play signals self-referentiality, in this case, the creation of roles within the performance only serves to connect the audience with the reality and immediacy of being a protagonist in Monto.

The Boys of Foley Street is not solely site-specific but also immersive, relying on more active audience participation than *Laundry*. While the label of immersion is somewhat ambivalent, "theatre that surrounds audiences within an aesthetic space in which they are frequently, but not always, free to move and/or participate is open to interpretation" and "is largely synonymous with a theatre of experience" (Alston 128, 130). At the end of the scene, Larry kisses Audience member B on the lips and "*[t]ogether they walk back up the lane*" (*The Boys* 355), while Christopher shows Audience member A "a video of a gang rape he was involved in" (356), before a new set of actors bring both spectators to a different location. Risk-taking is pivotal in the thrill of an immersive performance, and Eric Weitz testifies that, in *The Boys of Foley*, there is "no anonymous safety of a darkened auditorium". Instead, "spectators are thrust into an argument between a strung-out young man and his mother", "sit in a car with the lifeless body of a young woman sprawled on top", or are "asked for assistance by a traumatised young woman in a bathroom in the aftermath of sexual violence" ("When The Mirror" 131). If participation, in varying degrees, is central to any immersive process, one must note that it is impossible to draw conclusions or even envisage a generalised discussion on 'the' audience when individual responses are also what creates the value of the performance. What Singleton suggests however is that the immersive apparatus devised by ANU is aimed primarily at the audience's relationship to the site, and its need for intervention: the politics of ANU's productions "primarily resides in the dramaturgical immersion of the spectator in environments that are both dream-like and hyper-real, in intimate encounters in which there is no place to hide" (10).

In investigating the Monto neighbourhood, ANU opened themselves to criticism, because "any encounter with site is potentially divisive, recovering that which was thought lost – reawakening memories, stirring emotions, mobilising causes" (Pearson 144). Beyond ethical questions, this suggests that theatre explorations with sites engage audience members more directly than the conventionally located and structured proscenium experience. This not only functions emotionally, but also triggers the political conscience.

c. Site-responsive promenade

To offer an example based on site but not devised – hence emphasising the unique aspect of site in terms of audience response – Corcadorca's *The Merchant of Venice* (2005) provides an apt illustration. Much as ANU excavates the past by prodding locations, Kiernan explains on the company website that he wanted to "examine the city as it is today […] in a European context" so that the production could question how "tolerant and welcoming" a city is when "suddenly exposed to different resident cultures and colours?" (Corcadorca). The production was presented at night, the audience being led through the city centre from the old distillery overlooking the river to the church, via the Courthouse for Shylock's trial. The city centre was closed for the event. This is significant in that it is only ever closed for political events like the Queen's visit or sporting events like an All-Ireland victory, but not for cultural events. The city lights at night, the river, and the old narrow streets all added to a sense of being in Venice. The cast was a mixture of Irish and Polish actors, sharing a production, sharing a stage and sharing a city. Locating Shylock's warehouse in the old distillery signalled brewing as the fibre of the city, which was not lost on the Cork audience. I recognised several audience members as being part of the Cork Jewish community. In the

late 1900s, after the Jewish pogrom in Russia, Cork opened its doors to the immigrant Jews who were arriving in Ireland. Right through the twentieth century, Jewish people in Cork had made a tangible contribution to the business, cultural and legal fraternities of the city and it seemed apt that the final scene would be in the courthouse where some of these people had served their careers. It was easy to make the metaphorical leap between the arrival of the Jews in the late nineteenth century with the arrival of the Polish people in the late twentieth century.

The audience was unusually large for a promenade production, and even more unusual was the fact that nightly four hundred spectators acquired their tickets through a lottery system organised with the local *Examiner* newspaper. To have such a unique experience available for free speaks to the democratic spirit of Corcadorca – and the support it received from funders that year – and their desire to return to theatre as a place for the people. The 'journey' itself was visceral, emotive, exhilarating, and thought-provoking. In her essay "The Production of 'Site'; Site-specific Theatre", Fiona Wilkie contends that "the journey, and more specifically the walk, has emerged as perhaps the most prominent motif of site-specific practice at the beginning of the twenty-first century" and that this "journey offers a version of the site-specific that is shifting, unfixed; a literal exploration that seems to invite direct connections with a metaphorical exploration" (78).

The importance of the connection between the community and the site of performance is central to ANU's *Laundry* and *The Boys of Foley Street*. A large percentage of the audiences attending all three productions of the Monto Trilogy were quite possibly local working-class community audiences and not a typical theatre-going audience. As well as providing a new perspective on the theatre/stage/auditorium to experienced theatregoers, these productions offer an invaluable introduction to theatre to the uninitiated.

3. Relationship to Audience

The strategies of the two companies to rethink and revitalise the relationship between stage and auditorium differ. Brokentalkers changes the engagement with audience by defying expectations, combining the reality of the spoken content with strategies that point to the artificiality of theatre conventions. The position of Brokentalkers towards drama may be best exemplified by their infamous first production, *It is Now 16 or 17* in 2001, where an actor ingested and vomited pages of Friel's *Philadelphia, Here I Come*, leading to a prosecution. They straddle the division between the art of illusion and the tyranny of the real by breaking the fourth wall and employing non-actors, but also by fascinating audiences with the creation of stunning and highly theatricalised images. ANU's approach, as we have seen, starts with location: hosting and ghosting, to use Cathy Turner's terms in "Palimpsest or potential Space? Finding a Vocabulary for Site-Specific performance", a site the significance of which she reveals by making it visible and populating it for potential interventions (373-390). Pine addresses the limited potential for intervention in *Laundry*, a piece where the palimpsest is one of repeated trauma:

> If the experience of being incarcerated in the laundry was, for the majority of the Magdalene women, a traumatic experience, then the reanimation of the past is also, by extension, a reanimation of that trauma. Audience members, who are more like participants than distanced spectators, may thus find the experience of the show not simply unsettling but actually traumatic (the lack of boundaries is also, of course, an issue for the actors). The ethical question with regard to *Laundry* thus centres on the risk that a commemorative and ethical-memory-oriented theatre piece, which is site-specific and actively asks for audience participation, may not enable sufficient critical distance between the spectator and spectacle to prevent the show from becoming a transference of trauma. ("Theatre-as-Memory" n.p.)

Pine's concerns are valid, and a comparison with other productions that re-present trauma in conventional venues may best illustrate how the site as host and the performance as ghost function to create a unique engagement with the audience.

Talking about creating *The Blue Boy*, Keegan explains the process of engaging with traumatic material:

> it's not to sensationalise, to shock, it's just to remind people to ask themselves, and as a community asking themselves, where do we go from here. So it is forward-looking even though it's talking about something historically. We all know it's still happening today, just on a different scale and in different ways. Abuse is still taking place, and the message of the piece then is to not dwell on the past but we need to remember and learn from and bring that forward into how we legislate for the protection of children in the future. (Chris McCormack interview)

If both companies create uncomfortable situations to call direct attention to abuse and trauma, it is difficult to compare them further given their opposite strategies, linked to location. The audience for a play like *The Blue Boy* does have a certain psychological safety provided by the fourth wall, which ensures that the perpetrators (the priests) remain within the imaginary world of the stage, even when their testimony is presented in a video projection. In ANU's productions, there is no dividing space, no proscenium arch; and the actors interact with the audience, often individually, which means an isolated and nerve-wracking experience.

In approaching the work of Brokentalkers, the sense of innovation may not be immediate insofar as their productions take place in theatre venues. Yet, in *Have I No Mouth,* the attempt to redefine the relationship between the stage and the audience is made evident from the production apparatus prior to the beginning of the performance. On entering the auditorium of the Everyman in Cork, a 130-year-old Victorian theatre, the usher hands each audience member a balloon. The lights in the auditorium are on and a poorly constructed video-art piece – a grainy collage of images of Cannon as a child and of his father – is

playing on the stage, foregrounding the recourse to documents as well as the focus on the father figure. Cannon introduces each performer in turn – himself, his mother Ann, and his psychotherapist Erich:

> FEIDLIM. This is Erich. Erich is a psychotherapist. Erich practices Humanistic and Integrative psychotherapy. Over the course of a year my Mother and I went to see Erich together and sometimes individually for counseling. Those therapy sessions with Erich were the starting point for making this show that you are about to see. (2)

In this process of breaking the fourth wall, Cannon flags the ambivalence of an unconventional spectacle within a conventional structure.

Cannon is using "theatrical production and reception as formal material for performance itself" in admitting the construction of the show while deconstructing what the audience expects of it: he is stepping outside of the fictional space of the stage to assert "the insistent appearance of its own theatreness", to acknowledge that no suspension of disbelief is required (Boyle, Cornish and Woolf 14). On the contrary, what he calls for is belief for what he claims to be real as well as the audience's willingness to take part in the show at specific moments. Made aware that their status has shifted from passive audience to active participants when Erich launches into relaxation exercises with them, spectators may feel uncomfortable, irritable, or even angry at this blatant transgression of the rules of the theatre. By purchasing a ticket to see the "show", the audience did not expect to engage with the protagonists and a feeling of being duped pervaded the production I attended. Yet, the production is also utterly compelling, like watching a car crash where you know there will be no deaths.

The importance of both anger and safety is part of the show in that they mirror emotions on and off the stage. On the one hand, anger is the emotional starting point of Cannon as a protagonist; on the other, as its preliminary response, the balloon may well serve not only to

create a community between audience members and protagonists but also to counteract any irritation in the audience. Following an emotional session with Feidlim and Ann, Keller takes a seat, and talks to the audience:

> ERICH. On your way into the theatre, you were each given a balloon. Can I ask you now to take out the balloon, and stretch it a little? This exercise is called Anger Balloon. Anger Balloon is a great way to safely explore your anger. It also helps you to understand that you can be in control of your feelings. With anger balloon we imagine that we can blow all our anger out of your body into the balloon. If you feel comfortable with balloons, I would like you to try this exercise with me now. We start by blowing all of our anger out of our body and into the balloon. Like this. Try it. You don't have to fill it all the way, and when you're finished hold the balloon like this keeping all your anger inside. You are now holding your anger. You are in control. Now watch what happens when I take this scalpel and stick it into Feidlim's balloon?
>
> Bursting the balloon is like displaying explosive behavior. It's just like a temper tantrum. Bursting the balloon is loud; it's unpredictable, and unsafe to others. Instead of that unpredictable explosion, you are going to be in control of the balloon, and the anger inside in the balloon. We do this by slowly letting the air out of the balloon like this, try it. (18-19)

While the discrepancy of a psychiatrist giving advice in a theatre holds potential for comedy – a reading emphasized by his sticking Feidlim's balloon – this example of direct address also signals how Brokentalkers engages their stories with their audiences: in talking to but also in playing with the audience, the protagonists are creating a community, where it is safe to share experiences. At the very end of the performance Erich, Ann and Feidlim all play with a balloon, signifying the sense of play, of childhood fun, and of closure.

Critics have noted that the production suffers from the weak performances of Ann Cannon and Erich Keller. Jennifer Porter reviews the performances as "jarring" and considers that "there is too obvious a discrepancy between the actor (Feidlim Cannon) and non-actors (Ann Cannon and Erich Keller) who are somewhat self-conscious and wooden" ("Have I No Mouth" n.p.). A professional cast of actors could of course have been employed, and given the verbatim material to speak out. This raises questions about the

importance of non-actors and the voyeuristic nature with which they endow the piece. Does it create intimacy with the audience, or are the personal confessions uncomfortable? Effectively, being part of a therapy session for two people is disconcerting but the moments of subjective revelation, of confessional theatre, are also very moving. Above all perhaps, the authenticity of the work – and its novelty – is made undeniable and confrontational by the immediate, fragile and imperfect presence of the ordinary people whose thoughts and feelings are offered to the gaze.

Beyond the notion of authenticity though, the great strength of the work relies on theatrical moments: Ann dancing with cardboard cut-outs, Erich metaphorically standing in for Feidlim's father, and Feidlim stepping into full-size family photograph frames. It begs the question of whether, in these postdramatic pieces, *catharsis* remains attainable through the consumption of the real or whether it hinges on its accompanying visual apparatus; and whether there is a catharsis for everyone present. For Lehmann however, such questions may seem irrelevant as theatre makers present "an authentic testimony of the times and as such develop their own yardstick" (24).

Early in the production, Cannon castigates his mother for using a cardboard box to represent his dead brother's coffin, rather than a framed photograph of a happy child. Ann counters that, "that wouldn't have been the truth. This box represents your baby brother Sean and there is a truth in that for me. The truth is he was born, he lived, and he died and this is how I chose to represent him" (6). In doing so, Ann provides a theatrical 'truth' oft used in dramatic theatre by asking the audience to accept that the cardboard box she holds in her hands represents her son Sean's coffin. Ann further claims her position as a steward for the 'truth' in dialogues that highlight the unreliability of memories as the basis for an objective narration:

> FEIDLIM. I have a clear memory, being at the hospital with my Dad and he lifts me up and we are looking through the window of the nursery and he is pointing at a new born baby and he says" that's your new baby brother" but my mother says that didn't happen.
>
> ANN. No, it didn't happen. There wouldn't have been enough time for that to happen. You're mixing up your memories.
>
> FEIDLIM. I still think it happened.
>
> ANN. It didn't.
>
> FEIDLIM. It did.
>
> ANN. Feidlim it didn't. (7)

The performers appear to be telling the truth(s). Where the discussion becomes more complicated is when we question "how" authentic a production may ever be and how much this matters or influences the relationship between the performance and the audience.

In her review of *Have I No Mouth* for *Exeunt Magazine*, Loren Noveck points out that "there's a very curious balance struck here between voyeurism, self-exploitation (in a sort of reality-TV way where one makes a product out of one's own life), and genuine communication and connection between people" (n.p.). Noveck's observations are apt. At what stage does a "real" production become a staged reality show? There may be a perception from audiences that the play is an improvised piece but the production sticks to the script. In fact, the nature of the work is to be found in the re-construction of the real via its theatricalization rather than dramatization. Some objects, like the homemade video, photographs and hospital records are original documentation, but many of the objects have a theatrical reason for existing on the stage. They are props: cardboard cut-outs, a Guinness glass, balloons, and handwritten signs. Yet, even the props are deconstructed, pointed out, and explained, to reflect their existence in the real:

ERICH. Do you remember we talked about how Objects can symbolize your life, your memories. We talked about how objects can symbolize intimate moments from your past and experiences with loved ones, your family.

ANN. Yes.

ERICH. Ann, How would you feel about sharing these objects with us now?

ANN. Yes, I think I'd be fine to share them. (4)

As Ann moves around to each object, she speaks out an inventory whereby props become images of life rather than mere theatrical signifiers:

ANN. THIS IS AN OPERATING TABLE.

ANN. A GLASS OF MILK FROM 1984.

ANN. A COFFIN FOR A BABY.

ANN. MY SON FEIDLIM AGE 7.

ANN. MY SON PADRAIC AGE 4.

ANN. A TELEPHONE IN LONDON.

ANN. A SURGEON'S KNIFE.

ANN. A ROLL OF BANDAGE.

ANN. A MEDICAL EXAMINER'S REPORT.

ANN. A PSYCHOTHERAPIST.

ANN. MY SON FEIDLIM AGED 40. (4)

In the last lines, she further points to their own presence on stage as objects: props to their own show. Each object thus gets our attention and its relevance is clarified, leaving the audience with no doubt as to its meaning.

There is a suggestion of the flimsiness, the fictionality and the liminality of this theatre world of objects. The authentic family photographs, the medical examiner's report and the real people are juxtaposed against the theatricality of cardboard cut-outs, balloons, a surgeon's knife and a roll of bandage. This is not a real world on stage, but theatrical fiction

is used as a technique to represent the real world, reinforced as real by the presence of authentic elements (non-actors, verbatim). This recourse to theatre might be in aid of the unreliability of memory:

> My mother and I would sometimes have contrasting and contradictory recollections of memories. (That was always fun.) It struck me how fragile, and brief memory is, that memory isn't something permanent or reliable. This realisation really upset me, memory is all that I have now of my father. With every passing day, those memories deteriorate. (Cannon "Brokentalkers speak" n.p.)

As such, the purpose of the show may be universal in retaining the truth before disappearance, and the audience stands as witnesses to this recapturing process – the ephemerality of theatre an apt metaphor in itself. In *The Drowned and the Saved*, Primo Levi addresses this paradoxical duality between impermanent memory and truth:

> Human memory is a marvellous but fallacious instrument [. . .] The memories which lie within us are not carved in stone; not only do they tend to become erased as the years go by, but often they change, or even increase by incorporating extraneous features. (11)

Beyond the employment of symbolic images (the coffin for the boy, the balloon for anger), such features are found in the seemingly arbitrary selection of the moments offered to the audience. For instance:

> FEIDLIM. Padraic and I are sent to bed. Padraic falls asleep. I lay in my bed and I can hear the two of you down stairs having an argument. Have an argument. Argue, I want you to have an argument.
>
> ANN. No.
>
> FEIDLIM. Well what do you want to do?
>
> ANN. Our first date.
>
> FEIDLIM. You want to do your first date?
>
> ANN. Yes.

FEIDLIM. Do you not think it's too sentimental? (29)

The exchange may be interpreted as illustrating the freedom of the 'actors' within the devising process, but it also shows how the process itself is both fluid and in the end arbitrary.

As they redefined the relationship between the audience and the performance, theatre makers have created a new political theatre for Irish audiences. In a 2013 article titled "It's Ireland's best public theatre and it needs our support", Fintan O'Toole made the point that "Louise Lowe's ANU Productions has become a kind of alternative national theatre, exploring the legacy of coercive institutionalisation, sexual exploitation, poverty, social collapse and the heroin epidemic". In comparing Louise Lowe to W.B. Yeats, O'Toole situates her work in relation to the legacy of the National Theatre and its literary tradition:

> Lowe's work is urgently and directly political in a way that Yeats's was not. It evokes a notion of "reality" – contemporary lived experience – that Yeats could do without. It cries out for public engagement. Yet its aesthetic is all about the small scale, the personal, the close-up.

O'Toole's claim may be affected by his enthusiasm for the company, in that he leaps from Yeats to ANU without mentioning the plays of O'Casey, Friel or Kilroy. However, the notion of the personal, the close-up, gives a springboard towards reassessing what political theatre might encompass in the contemporary period.

4. More Political than Yeats?

Is ANU's highlighting of the effects of heroin in inner city Dublin in *The Boys of Foley Street*, of the institutional abuse of single mothers in the Magdalen laundries in *Laundry* and of the immigrant sex trade in *Vardo*, as Fintan O'Toole describes, "urgently and directly political" ("It's Ireland's best public theatre")? McIvor gives an affirmative response in "Other Spaces (Non Theatre Spaces)" by suggesting that ANU "remain eager to stay critical in their politics even of the links that make their work possible, and have perhaps given us a new model for an Irish 'national' theatre" (480).

Certainly, the notion of political drama continues to elicit redefinitions and illustrations that are a testament to the lasting role of drama in offering a public forum to ask social questions and create potential political controversies – Plato's initial reason for banning the poet from the city. But the tradition of political drama, of plays written for political motives in a Brechtian sense, has become blurred over the past two decades, possibly due to the abundance of subjects tackled:

> the almost global recession in the wake of the collapse of the US debt market in 2008, leading to increasing unemployment, the Eurozone crisis and the threat of bankruptcy to national governments in the West, as well as a widening gap between the rich and the poor; the worsening global climate crisis and food crisis. (Carroll et al 2)

What Fintan O'Toole refers to as 'political theatre' however are Irish plays that overtly "engage with the major national issues of its day" ("It's Ireland's best public theatre").

Brokentalkers' *The Blue Boy* forefronts the historical abuse of young boys in the Artane Industrial school while *The Examination* centres on bringing the current inadequacies in the prison system to the fore. Veronica Dyas's *In My Bed* (2011), Bush Muskarzel's *Lippy* (2013), and Grace Dyas's *Heroin* are only a small percentage of a myriad of productions that could be classified as political theatre. But the more interesting question is how devised work addresses political issues. Regarding postdramatic performance, Lehmann refutes

traditional views of political drama, stating: “theatre is not a place and a means to distribute an ideology, to teach an insight. It works only *modo obliquo*, for example by laying bare ideological structures in our everyday way of seeing the world” (108). Of course, the use of site is a primary means to ‘lay bare’ the structures that ANU, for instance, are railing against, but I argue that it is their employment of immersion that places the audience at the centre of the *polis*.

Their work, therefore, illustrates Lukacs’s opinion that the “truly social dimension of art is the form” (Lehmann 3), and that it is through the “main characteristics of postdramatic performance” that the theatre makers achieve a “distinct approach to ‘the political’, centring on the newly conceived relationship between performance and audience” (7). The “main characteristics” include a postdramatic move away from fiction – thereby from “dedicated theatre buildings”, text and characters; the use of “experts of the everyday”; and encountering “real people who bring aspects of their real world identity into the theatre unadorned with fiction or character” (3). ANU has shunned traditional venues to carry conversations with urban sites of trauma, and reconfigure the stage-auditorium special and connective tradition. Brokentalkers continues to use theatre venues but has replaced actors with “real” people like Willie White in *The Examination*.

Lehmann, however, suggests that categorising postdramatic performances as political is problematic, in part because this theatre making critique “reaches only a self-selecting minority and preaches to the converted” (Carroll et al 16-17). What is evident in the work of the Irish theatre makers is the success that they have achieved in rejecting traditional modes of theatrical discourse and representation. The inclusion of audiences, not just as spectators but as participants, the use of site-specific locations, and the contact with local communities have all combined to create a more intimate and immersive theatre than heretofore experienced in Irish theatre. While an argument can be made to suggest that the work of the

theatre makers leans heavily towards postdramatic theatre, there is already evidence in this chapter that great attention remains on traditional venues, the character, and storytelling – arguably the most specifically Irish artistic tradition, which will be further discussed in the following chapters in relation to the work of the actors-authors and of literary playwrights.

The groundbreaking work of theatre makers has achieved a shaking-up in redefining the relationship to the audience, through intimacy and immersive practices, but also in heralding a new form of political discourse for a new Ireland. It may be seen as symptomatic that their work emerged around the decade of the centenary, providing a timely critique of the sins, silences, and control of the past on the cusp of a Europeanisation, and ethnical diversification, of contemporary Ireland. Is the new relation to audience and the new form of political theatre always linked, however? The political may be found, as we have seen, not only in the choice and treatment of topics but also in elaborating new ways to engage a response from the audience. This response denies expectations in that it may equally take the form of a political reflection to be followed by action, i.e. the Brechtian model, or an emotional/experiential response.

The next chapter explores the work of actor-authors, a category which has arguably developed in the last thirty years. However, my contention is that, while this rapid development is dependent on a number of contexts, these practitioners are effectively connecting with a form of performance that is part of an Irish storytelling tradition.

Chapter 3. The Actor-Authors: Re-Inventing Tradition?

The first decade of the millennium witnessed a sizable increase in actor-author driven performance in Irish theatre, an increase that gathered momentum in the 2010s and cemented its place as a central strand of contemporary theatre in conjunction with the work of theatre-makers and playwrights. This chapter will examine the growth of the work of actor-authors from 2000, and identify the internal factors, economic and cultural, present and past, that underpin it. It will argue that the re-emergence and development of actor-authors over the past two decades has created a new genre of theatre in a contemporary context, and that the socio-political concerns evoked in many of the plays link them to earlier solo performers like the *filí* in particular.

Historically solo-performers, male and female, have been an integral part of Irish culture. *cruittiri* (harpers*)*, *scélaig*e (storytellers), *clessanaig* (jugglers), *reccaire* (reciters) and *fili* (poets) respectively, played the harp, told stories, juggled, performed tricks or recited poems, so that as Christopher Morash suggests, there is evidence of "a long history of performance, extending back at least to the seventh century" (3). Sagas, myths, poems and stories were predominantly composed and presented by the very powerful *filid,* which originally meant seer, and the *senchaid* or storytellers. This chapter will highlight the importance of this latter figure to argue that storytelling plays a central role in the work of the contemporary actor-authors.

This chapter also questions the influence of monodramas and monologues in the plays of Samuel Beckett, Brian Friel, and Conor McPherson on the re-emergence and development of solo-performers and actor-author plays. At the core of the work of these playwrights, like their predecessors the *seanchaí*, can be found the formal concern to tell stories first and

foremost, sometimes favouring orality to the risk of undermining the performance aspect. In conversation with Anne Fogarty, Tom Murphy also outlines the value of the spoken word:

> I suppose, like many other playwrights I'm very interested in sound *per se*, the individual sounds people make, the sound that powers the words they use. The sound that demands certain rhythms of people – that excites me and I try to make a music of my own out of the spoken word. (355-356)

I contend that the introduction of monologues by Beckett since *Krapp's Last Tape* and by Friel (in *Faith Healer* in 1979) – textual material that can be described for the purpose of this thesis as a direct address by a character to an audience – was instrumental in modifying the perception of a play as dialogic. Furthermore, what defines the one-man plays, plays written for and by solo performers, resides in their clear nature as stories, rather than plays – a point that will be nuanced through our case studies. The chapter explores the authors and factors that opened the doors to the significant increase of actor-authors' plays since the early 1990s.

Other factors contributed to the development of the work of actor-authors: the opening of a large amount of small intimate venues, international influences, the emergence of funding companies and collaborations like Fishamble and Show in a Bag (hereafter SIAB), whose sole purpose is to support small-cast productions. The greatest influence in the development of the actor-author work, and in irrevocably changing the landscape of Irish theatre, are the Arts Council Funding policies evolving since the 1990s.

Since 2000, over 1000 new plays have been written for Irish theatre (see Appendix 2). 203 of these were written for solo performers and 97 of these were written and performed by the same person: the actor-author. Although this constitutes only ten per cent of the overall new work presented over two decades, if the figure is examined with regard to the number of performances given, it shows how quantitatively important their productions are in sustaining the stage.

In researching the themes and tonalities of the plays written for solo performers, including actor-authors, since 1950, one notices that the stories deal with personal struggles, which are often based on biographical or autobiographical material (see Appendix 3). While our concern is not in highlighting specific biographies, the thematic approach of the case studies reflects the employment of real-life experiences and their varying degree of fictionalisation. Scholarship devoted to the figure of the *seanchaí* is sparse as what is known is based on oral history. However what critical sources have highlighted (for instance Declan Kiberd in *The Irish Writer and the World*) testifies to the parallel that exists between the *seanchaí* and the actor-authors selected in grounding their stories in the real.

Sonya Kelly's first play *The Wheelchair on My Face* (2011) exemplifies the biographical/autobiographical category through comedy. While the focus here is on this play, Kelly has evolved from solo performances to writing full-length plays with multiple characters and cast. Mikel Murfi's *The Man in the Woman's Shoes* (2016) revolves around his physical characterisation of narrator Pat Farnon and all the characters that inhabit a country town. This technique, where the actor embodies one central character while also playing numerous other characters, can be witnessed in much of the work of the actor-authors and can be linked back to Donal O'Kelly in *Catalpa* (1995). Pat Kinevane's *Underneath* (2014) deserves attention for a number of reasons. Not only does it contain a female character written and performed by a male actor-author, but it is also very representative of Kinevane's work, demonstrating "his trademark theatricality, his wicked sense of humour, [and] his huge capacity for warmth and empathy" (Culleton 311). Seamus O'Rourke has written six actor-author plays since 2012, and performed prolifically in theatres and community halls throughout Ireland, despite operating without any local authority or Arts Council funding. His plays centre on a solitary male character, in rural

Ireland, marginalised in his own society. *Indigestion* (2014), which deals with the subject of depression, is reminiscent of Eamon Kelly's work, in his reliance on storytelling.

In the case studies, I will examine the characteristics common to actor-author work. Thus, I will highlight the actor-authors' use of the vernacular, place, comedy, intimacy and empathy in their writing and engagement with audiences. In an Irish context of storytelling their work can be considered to have re-emerged rather than emerged.

1. Legacy of an Irish Tradition

a. The origins of the story-teller

Ireland has a very strong oral tradition, which encourages and embraces recitation and extempore composition. In their foundational study *The Growth of Literature*, Hector and Nora Chadwick suggest that "in Ireland saga has had a much longer history than Iceland" and that "it began in much earlier times, and even today is not wholly dead" (543). Within these sagas "speeches are extremely numerous" and "form a considerable proportion of the matter" (58). They point out that in all the periods they researched, from the seventh to the twelfth centuries, "recitation of poetry or saga (or both) was extensively cultivated" (587-588), and contend that orality is central to the recitation of saga so that "the practice of story-telling has always prevailed in Ireland" (548). Many of those sagas were written or told by the *filid* (587). In *The Gaelic Background of Old English Poetry Before Bede*, Colin Ireland proposes that "far more historical poets can be verified for the Gaelic tradition than for any other insular peoples" (11) and that "there is precedence in the Gaelic tradition for poets performing or chanting poems more or less as songs" (30). Yet, their role was not solely entertainment, Alan Fletcher argues in *Drama, Performance, and Polity in Pre-*

Cromwellian Ireland. There is strong evidence to suggest that from the fourteenth to the seventeenth centuries *filid*, *senchaide* and *reccaire* provided an early form of agit-prop theatre:

> Gaelic society, at this date largely factional and lacking in such political institutions as might confer upon it a sense of nationwide solidarity, was tending to rely on its ritual specialists– storytellers, harpers and performers of various sorts– to head its political and military response to the English colonial presence. (47)

Clearly these performers were politically motivated and carefully negotiated the triangle of peasantry, ascendancy and the English government.

While the *filí* mostly disappeared as patronage dwindled over the centuries, *seanchaí* continued to operate and remained popular, albeit in small rural areas (Ó Giolláin 136-140). The *seanchaí*'s oral tradition of storytelling, little of which was written down, re-emerged in the work of Eamon Kelly and others in the 1970s.

b. Monodrama and monologue: Beckett, Friel, and McPherson

In his essay "Close to Home but Distant: Irish Drama in the 1990s", Anthony Roche confirms that "Irish drama arguably had its origins as much in the communal art of oral storytelling in the home or in a pub as much as in a fourth wall drama performed in proscenium arch stage" and links this rural tradition to Conor McPherson who "regards himself as a storyteller" (20). This self-perception has resulted in "plays that are frequently monologues, where the primary engagement is between the actor and the audience" (20). This suggests an intimacy between actor and spectators that emerges as a central consideration for both theatre makers and actor-authors, which would not necessarily have come to play in the case of literary plays. In turn, this poses the formal question of whether such storytelling work functions in the same vein as a conventionally-structured play, built

around a conflict. In an interview with Ronan Farren with regard to his use of monologues in *Faith Healer*, Friel admits that while losing

> normal dramatic tensions you can succeed on different levels, […] on the level of storytelling for example. The play, in fact must find its own thrust at that level: people simply telling stories about their lives, the way, for example, Eamon Kelly does his one man shows. (125)

Before addressing the pivotal contribution of Kelly and of O'Kelly in developing the form, one must acknowledge the pioneering position of Samuel Beckett in writing *Krapp's Last Tape* (1958), the first monologue written in English for the stage, and thereby positing that solo performances were apt for an evening at the theatre. Beckett's work for the stage and the radio are replete with characters searching for a story to tell, or telling each other stories. In *Beckett Matters*, Stanley E. Gontarski contends that "Beckett's own creative roots […] were set deeply unavoidable in the tradition of Irish story-telling […] particularly that of the Irish *seanchaí*" (41), and even a cursory examination of his theatre and radio plays would appear to support this hypothesis. Krapp is all the more important in our analysis of contemporary solo storytelling insofar as he is concerned with recapturing snippets of his own life, anticipating the (auto-)biographic emphasis found in Sonya Kelly, Noelle Browne, and Timmy Creed for example.

If Beckett's characters were searching for stories in the 1950s, Friel admitted his own inclination for stories in a 1965 interview with Graham Morrison: "I live on short stories. Play-writing began as a self-indulgence then eventually I got caught up more and more in it. But the short story is the basis for all I do" (Russell "Brian Friel" 451). Friel introduced the monologue and the direct address into his naturalistic settings in *Philadelphia Here I Come* (1964) and developed the form further in *Freedom of the City* (1973). Russell recognises Friel's "formal reliance on monologue throughout" *Freedom of the City* as "a manoeuvre that he would later take to new heights in the minimalist monologues of *Faith Healer*

(1979)" (*Modernity* 95) – a play which consists of four parts with a monologue making up each part. According to Matt Wolf the structure of *Faith Healer* "distils the playwright's gift for narrative and provides a link back to his initial work as a short-story writer" (199). Friel revisited interlocking monologues in 1994 with *Molly Sweeney*.[3]

Conor McPherson's *The Weir*, which premiered at the Royal Court Theatre in July 1997, will be analysed as an illustration of the contemporary Irish plays which emerged in the 1990s. It is striking that the play holds as its formal speech pattern a monologual core. Yet, McPherson's relevance to my argument on monologues can be found in his early plays, when his company Fly by Night presented *The Good Thief* at The City Arts Centre in April and *Rum and Vodka* in August 1994. These were two solo-performer shows acted by Kevin Healy and Jason Byrne respectively. For Roche, "McPherson has clearly been influenced" by Friel's *Faith Healer* and by the monologues in Tom Murphy's *The Gigli Concert*, an influence that he also traces in *This Lime Tree Bower* (1995) and *Port Authority* (2001), two monologues which signify a move towards a more direct address and story-telling format (Roche "The Early 24).

McPherson was not the only writer championing the use of monologue and direct address. Without proposing an exhaustive list, 1994 was a watershed year, featuring a staggering 14 monologues written by Irish playwrights (both in ROI and NI) for solo performers. Nell McCafferty's *Sheep, Shite and Desolation*, Michael Harding's *Where the Heart Is*, and Antoine Ó Flahartha's *Between Venus and Mars* all premiered at the Project as part of Passion Machine's *Songs of the Reaper* programme. Sean Moffat's *Without the H* opened at

[3] While this analysis focuses on Friel as representative of a shift towards the monologual in full-length plays, it must be noted that other writers similarly toyed with monologues in their plays. For instance, Murphy introduced a twenty-five minute monologue in *The Sanctuary Lamp* in 1975, and closes *The Gigli Concert* with a poignant monologue in 1983. In 1982, Platform Theatre Group presented Frank McGuinness's one-man play *The Glass God* at the Lourdes Hall in Sean MacDermott street, performed by Thom McGinty. His *Baglady* (1985) and *Feed The Money and Keep Them Coming* (1988) were another two monologues, both produced by the Abbey for the Peacock.

the Black Box in Galway. Marie Jones's *A Night in November,* Glenn Patterson's *Monday Night, Little Ireland, North of England*, and Ruth Hooley's *What The Eye Doesn't See* followed suit in Northern Ireland. In February 1995, at the Garter Lane Theatre in Waterford, Red Kettle Theatre Company produced Donal O'Kelly's *Catalpa* which would influence so many theatre practitioners.

c. Emergence of the actor-author

The emergence of the actor-author begins in the 1970s. From 1970 to 1979, eleven solo plays were produced. Six of these were performed by their author, registering the strong entrance of the actor-author in Irish theatre historiography. Eamon Morrissey's *The Brother* (1974) – while strictly speaking not a new play, as it is adapted from Flann O'Brien's satirical writings as Myles Na gCopaleen – opened at the Peacock in February 1974. It was followed at the same venue in 1975 by a far more important piece, Eamon Kelly's performance of his play *In My Father's Time.* Kelly did not write a literary play – plot and characters are absent – but instead his performance is composed of a collection of stories, some didactic, some funny, some based on myth and some loosely based on Kelly's own rural upbringing. Kelly's and Morrissey's performances were so popular that they transferred to the only television channel in the state, RTÉ. There are few instances of this happening and it confirmed the popularity of this *seanchaí*-inspired production. Kelly is widely regarded as one of the finest storytellers of his generation (Buterbaugh 144-62)), but to describe his scripts (*English That For Me* in 1980, and *A Rogue of Low Degree* in 1981) as plays is questionable as all three productions lean heavily on the single creation of the character of the storyteller, and this character's ability to tell a variety of non-connectable stories, duplicating the traditional format of the *seanchaí*.

It was Donal O'Kelly, with *Catalpa*, who took the Irish theatre world by storm in 1994 and possibly paved the way for a myriad of contemporary actor-author plays emulating his performance format (Lonergan, "Donal O' Kelly" 332). The play was based on the prison breakout of six Fenians from an Australian prison in 1875 by a whaling ship named Catalpa. The production was ground-breaking in every sense at the time. It was minimalist in design. The soundtrack was performed on stage by the designer Trevor Knight. O'Kelly portrayed nineteen different characters in such diverse locations as Dublin to Freemantle to New York.

In his foreword on staging *Catalpa,* O'Kelly provides what might be a future template for actor-authors:

> The theatrical challenge is to flick images into the audience's heads, to stimulate their imaginations so that they will see the Catalpa at sea, they will see and hear and feel and smell the Atlantic swell, the whale blubber, the scorched Australian shore. The instruments used to do this are the text itself – the images described, the bits of dialogue, the words used, the sounds, with movement, gesture, energy, stillness, with music sometimes, with lighting, and the use of a few select props. But the main function of all of these is to kick-start the most important instrument of all: the audience's imagination. (10)

This last point participates in defining the shift that O'Kelly introduced in solo performances: that the power of imagination would be called upon to enable the performer to embody more than one character, and also to move beyond the two traditional Irish sets (the armchair of Kelly on the one hand, and the rural Irish cottage kitchen on the other). This is possibly this dual shift that prompted Enda Walsh to testify that *Catalpa* "had the hugest impact on [him]" when he was disillusioned with theatre (Isaacs). Indeed, Walsh would attempt to emulate O'Kelly's performance with his one-man play *Misterman*, which he performed himself at the Granary Theatre in Cork in April 1999.

If the early decades of actor-author's work showed a stagnation (8 from 1980 to 1989; 7 from 1990 to 1999), the first decade of the new millennium would provide more new actor-author plays than the previous three decades combined.

d. Actor-author plays: facts and figures

At least 27 new actor-author plays recorded in *Irish Playography* were performed from 2000 to 2009. This figure is not only superior to the 22 new actor-author plays for the previous three decades, but also to the combined number of new actor-author plays for the previous century. Within the solo performer sector, the work of the actor-author has grown from 3% of new plays in the period 1970-1979 to 12% of new work from 2010-2020 (see Appendix 2). Briefly, we move from 6 actor-author plays in the 1970s to 63 actor-author plays in the 2010s, a decade when Irish theatre witnessed an exponential growth in their work. 555 new plays were written during that period – against 360 from 1990-1999 and 451 from 2000 to 2009 – and 10% of these were actor-author plays. The percentage of plays may seem low but productions in the actor-author sector are far easier to tour, which results in a high number of performances, nationally and internationally.

During this period Pat Kinevane presented his three plays – *Silent* (2010), *Underneath* (2014) and *Before* (2018) – over 750 times. Mikel Murfi performed his two plays – *The Man in the Woman's Shoes* (2014) and *I Hear You and Rejoice* (2018) – over 300 times. Seamus O'Rourke has in excess of 600 performances of his six plays.[4] Noni Stapleton's *Charolais* (2016), Margaret McAuliffe's *The Humours of Bandon* (2017), and Irene Kelleher's *Mary and Me* (2017) and *Gone Full Havisham* (2019) contribute a further 250 performances. 13 actor-author productions had in excess of 1800 performances. Aidan Dooley's play *Tom Crean* (2001), bringing to life the riveting exploits of the unsung Kerry Antarctic explorer, is now in its twentieth year touring, reaching a total of 1500 performances in Ireland and abroad at the time of writing (email to author). To put these figures into perspective the total

[4] *The Sand Park* (2012) *Padraic Potts Walking Tour of Ireland* (2014), *Indigestion* (2015), *And Thank You* (2018), *The Handyman* (2021) and *The Ballad of Mossy Flood* (2023).

number of performances listed above are approximately 2700. According to the Abbey archives the total number of performances on the Abbey and Peacock between 2010 and 2019 amounted to approximately 10,000 based on an average of 550 performances per annum. A large percentage of these performance figures are made up of Irish classical plays by Friel, McGuinness and Carr and are not new plays. This comparison suggests that quantitatively a quarter of the landscape of Irish theatre is composed of actor-authors' work, and qualitatively that their work is entirely new. The work of the actor-author is therefore growing rapidly into a strong and innovative force in Irish theatre.

2. Contributing Factors

Swingeing Arts Council cuts in the late 1990s and early 2000s signalled a change in policy that would lead to the eventual collapse of the independent theatre company system in Ireland, resulting in a shortage of employment for actors, directors, writers and designers. This chapter will examine the effects that changes in Arts Council Funding policies had on the growth of actor-author work. A number of other funding streams and support structures emerged to support new work, particularly actor-author work, and Show In A Bag (SIAB) was at the vanguard of these groups. The SIAB initiative was launched in 2010 as a collaboration between Fishamble The New Play Company, Dublin Fringe Festival and Irish Theatre Institute with the primary aim of supporting the development of one-actor plays in producing and touring to venues.

a. Arts Council policies

The late 1990s and the early part of the new millennium witnessed a dramatic shift in Arts Council funding policy, which had one major objective: to redirect funding away from company resources such as staff and office rental to a more direct support for the artist. This view was made evident in the 1995 Arts Council Report on Views of Theatre. Ciarán Benson, the then Chairperson of the Arts Council, points out their dilemma in his foreword to the review:

> In our first year of office we spent an anxious time realising that the growth of the independent theatre sector, the needs of the National Theatre Society, the Gate and the rest of the theatre world was in all likelihood fast out-stripping the resources available to nurture and sustain it. Starkly presented, were we to cut and concentrate, or drip-feed and starve, or put all of our efforts into campaigning for a bigger cake and temporarily stave off the necessity of either type of choice. (5)

It would appear that the decision was to "cut and concentrate" (Etienne and Fitzpatrick 83). Writing in 2023, the objective of reducing the number of independent theatre companies in existence and a redirection of the funding directly to the artist has almost been fully realised. In the late 1990s, riding on the Celtic Tiger wave and the resultant increased Arts Council budget, almost 50 independent theatre companies throughout the country were being funded on an annual basis by the Arts Council. Yearly renewal decisions were almost automatic, so that these companies expected to receive the same funding, if not an accrued one, every year. These regularly funded companies included Druid in Galway, Meridian and Corcadorca in Cork, Island in Limerick, Gallowglass in Clonmel, Red Kettle in Waterford. Most of these companies were Dublin-based including Corn Exchange, Ouroboros, Rough Magic, Calypso and Corn Exchange, PanPan to name but a few.

Only Druid, PanPan, and Rough Magic of the aforementioned are still in existence and regularly funded.[5] Many of the defunct companies had offices and full-time staff which

[5] This is based on information provided by the Head of Drama at the Arts Council, that shows the list of regular funding in 2008 and in 2017. As such, new companies have also appeared (e.g. Thisispopbaby) in 2017 under the heading of annual funding.

required a large percentage of their annual funding to maintain, thereby reducing the amount available to put towards creative projects. Over a period of 15 years the Arts Council pursued a gradual phasing out of the Annual Company Arts Grants (i.e. yearly funding), and replacing them with the Project Development and Project Funding Grants. From the late 1990s to 2015 over 30 companies closed down in rural towns and cities like Limerick, Waterford, Clonmel, Sligo and Cork.

The loss of these companies had an immediate detrimental effect on the earning potential of those they employed, especially actors. From 1997-2001, I was Artistic Director of the Everyman Palace theatre. In any single year we would programme at least 30 productions from these companies. Each production opened on a Tuesday night and closed on a Saturday night. They had cast sizes ranging from 5 to 12 actors, a travelling stage director, stage manager, a production manager and crew. As each one of these companies closed, the loss of employment, particularly outside of Dublin, had a ripple effect throughout the theatre industry. I know actors, directors and designers who were out of work almost continuously for 5 to 7 years. Their decision was simple: find alternative employment or create work for themselves. Actors, such as Kinevane, Murfi, Kelly, O'Rourke, but also Noni Stapleton, Margaret McAuliffe and Noelle Browne, etc – with whom I worked – turned to writing their own roles in order to survive.

The Project Funding Awards/ Project Development Awards were instigated as an alternative method of dispersing funding that originally went to theatre companies. Both of these grants can be viewed as incredible assets to the creation of new theatre work in Ireland. They are easily accessible and can be applied for directly by the actor, the writer, the director or the producer, in fact any creator of theatrical art. The Project Development grant can only be used to cover costs that are directly related to the development of the project. The Development Grant allows emerging or existing practitioners to develop an idea or a

script over a short period of time and awards up to €25,000, cutting down the requirement of a company structure and the cost associated therein. The following year the developed work can be carried forward as an application towards the Project Funding grant of up to €175,000 which allows performance costs to be included. In a system where some companies did not have to compete and could plan programmes well in advance – thanks to annual funding – those grants levelled the playing field.

The more recent introduction of the Arts Council Agility Grant in 2020 has injected further investment towards the individual artist, actor as well as writer but also from any artistic field, beyond theatre. This grant has a maximum of €5,000 and cannot be used for performance but towards research or a re-thinking of the artist's craft. Since then, there have been 5304 applicants. 2467 were successful, among which only 289 were theatre projects, totalling a budget to date of over 24 million euro ("The Arts Council announces over €3.8M"). A number of these will emerge as actor-author stage productions, though precise titles and figures are currently unavailable.

One of the most important facets of writing and performing one's own play is that one has complete control of the product, creatively and economically. For instance, if Druid decide to produce a new play they will either commission the playwright at a set fee or agree a royalty of generally 10 % of the gross box office. The actors receive a weekly wage of between 700-900 euros a week. The Abbey rate is approximately 900 per week for performance and can often be less for the rehearsal period. If an actor decides to write a solo performance, they can direct themselves for the rehearsal period and if necessary employ a director for the final week and keep lighting and sound cues to an absolute minimum, thereby reducing the need for a substantial investment in the production team. If the play is a hit and venues want it, then the actor-author-performer can expect anything from €400-1500 per performance.

Within this production model many actors emphasise the sense of creative independence, as Seamus O'Rourke, Irene Kelleher, Noni Stapleton, Little John Nee and Margaret MacAuliffe did in email with me. Many of them voice the possibility of being able to create work that raises topical social issues rather than performing the canon while innovating is a further incentive. For instance, Kinevane admits that his desire to "say something about […] the care of the elderly in Ireland" was the impetus for writing *Forgotten* (162). Control of content appears to be important to many of the actor-authors with most of them focused on societal issues such as mental health, homelessness, suicide and addiction but economic survival is primary.

In approaching the category of the actor-author and how the changing landscape of Arts Council policies affects the development of their work, the conclusion appears to be a conundrum and the situation grim despite the welcome introduction of project grants. Indeed, the very situation of the unemployed actor can be attributed directly to the cuts enforced by the Arts Council to the vital system of independent theatre companies. Would one therefore dare suggest that, based on this, the Arts Council is responsible for the development of a new form of Irish theatre, namely the actor-author work. As we have seen in chapter 2, the sector which benefited most from project funding was that of the theatre makers. In fact, actor-authors rarely receive Project funding, and when they do it tends to be limited to the writing process, and occasionally extremely limited funds towards production. As such, the actor-authors just self-produced (for instance Mikel Murfi and Seamus O'Rourke), while others sought and found support within the few remaining funded theatre companies.

b. 'Show in a bag' and SIAB

Since 2010, SIAB has been instrumental in championing the work of the actor-authors in particular. While SIAB is supported by all three companies, Fishamble's contribution to the development, production and presentation of the plays is paramount. Fishamble, originally set up as Pigsback Theatre Company in 1988 by Jim Culleton and Gavin Kostick, has been in operation since 1997. Jim Culleton explains that:

> We introduced the SIAB initiative to help artists create their own tourable work, after the economic crash, as we saw a need for the initiative, with lots of actors/performers unemployed, and lots of theatres and arts centres lying empty around the country. After 11 years we replaced SIAB with DUETS to focus on two-person collaborations rather than solo shows. DUETS will be replaced next year with a new initiative, Play with Form, for writers to experiment formally. (email to author)

Since 1997 Fishamble produced 12 actor-author plays and supported the development of over 50 altogether, through SIAB and New Play Clinic (Culleton, email to the author, 9 Nov 2023) – significantly among those, the plays of Pat Kinevane and Sonya Kelly. In doing so, they enabled a new genre of plays to expand its scope.

Sonya Kelly's *The Wheelchair on my Face* (2011) and Pat Kinevane's *Underneath* (2014) were given full-scale productions by Fishamble: this means that there was no expense spared in providing the artistic personnel needed. Productions of this scale would have a budget of between €35,000-50,000 and would include a producer, director, dramaturg, choreographer, composer, sound, lighting and set designers and a technical crew. Neither Pat Kinevane or Sonya Kelly are involved in the production aspect of the project. As a result they can concentrate on the artistic aspect. In addition, subsequent to the premiere, the producing theatre company can apply for a Touring Funding Grant from the Arts Council, which takes pressure off the actor-authors when it comes to touring.

In contrast Mikel Murfi and Seamus O'Rourke proceed with minimal support, which bears evident consequences for the creative ambition of their productions. Murfi received a small grant from Bealtaine and The Hawkswell in Sligo to research stories from nursing

homes in the area. *The Man in The Woman's Shoes* (2016) was the outcome of this work. There is no sound or lighting design, the stage is bare apart from the only props of two pairs of shoes. Murfi directed the play himself and can tour it on his own with the lighting operated by a resident venue technician. O'Rourke uses a concrete block, upon which he sits, as the only prop in *Indigestion* (2015). There is no set, sound or lighting design, and he directed the play himself. Similarly to Murfi he requires nothing more than a venue technician to operate the lights. From a financial point of view, over five performances a travelling technician can cost €1000 in wages, €200 in per diems and €500 towards accommodation. Thus, a travelling technician can cost up to €1700 a week while a resident technician is provided at no cost by the venue. Neither Murfi nor O'Rourke have access to a creative team which means only their own artistic input is required. This means that their productions veer towards a minimalist storytelling format. In order to recoup the costs of the time and effort spent in producing the work Murfi and O'Rourke will need audiences to attend in large numbers. To achieve this their plays have favoured the use of comedy: venues are forever in search of comedies because comedies bring in audiences. Murfi and O'Rourke have written nine actor-author plays between them and *all* of them can be defined as comedies.

Whether heavily funded or not, each of the case studies attempts to create a minimalist and easily tourable product. Kinevane's *Underneath* has resonances of the large-scale traditional theatre company production with costume, make-up, movement, sound and lighting design, but he can tour the play with a very large suitcase. He does not drive, but travels on trains and buses in Ireland with his costume and set in the bag. Sonya Kelly also tours *The Wheelchair on my Face* with a suitcase and can access most of her minimal set and props (a table and chairs) in any local town or village. While both plays had the benefit of a large support and design team from Fishamble they are still "show in a bag"

productions, and in that sense share with Murfi and O'Rourke the aesthetics of a minimal or stylised set and the ability to easily transport the show from venue to venue.

c. Venues

In 1999 Bewley's Café in Dublin opened a new 80-seater theatre upstairs. In 2000, the Project theatre, which had been in existence since 1967, opened two new auditoria, Project Arts Centre and The Cube, as part of the development of the inner city Temple Bar area. These three venues concentrate specifically on new small-scale work and continually contribute to the development of actor-author plays (see Appendix 5, which outlines the venues contributing to actor-author work). The arrival of new intimate venues was not confined to the cities with new Arts Centres opening all over the country in the late 1990s early 2000s. Backstage Theatre in Longford was opened in 1996, followed by the Dunamaise in Portlaoise, An Grianán in Letterkenny, the Ramor in Cavan, and the Civic in Tallaght all in 1999. Those venues responded not only to small productions but also to the reality of dwindling audience members.

2001 witnessed the further openings of new Arts Centres and theatres. The Axis was opened in Ballymun, Draíocht in Blanchardstown, Glór in Ennis, the Riverbank Theatre in Newbridge, the Pavilion Theatre in Dun Laoghaire and Tech Amergen in Waterville. The developments continued nationally with the Mermaid in Bray opening in 2002, Source in Tipperary, The Mill in Dundrum and the Cork Arts Theatre in 2006. Most of these Arts Centres have on average a 200-seat main theatre and an 80-seat studio space. These venues may not necessarily aim to develop the work of the actor-authors, though some do. However, they are constantly in need of 'product' for their programmes, and almost all of these Local Authority-built Arts Council funded venues do continually programme the plays

of actor-authors Mikel Murfi, Pat Kinevane, Sonya Kelly, Niamh McGrath and Seamus O'Rourke.

There are two other groupings of venues that feed the growth of the actor-author work: village arts centres and community halls. Most of these venues have no funding from any sources. The Viking in Clontarf opened a 60-seat venue over Connolly's pub in 2011 and is one of the foremost theatres for championing new small-scale work, including that of the actor-authors. All around the country in small villages in the late 1990s and early 2000s, communities were gaining new performance spaces. In Carrigallen in Leitrim, the Cornmill was opened in 1989; Kilworth in Co. Cork, a 90-seat theatre in 1995; the Schoolyard in Charleville, an old schoolhouse renovated in 1992 into an 80-seat theatre; Kill, a crossroads in Co. Waterford, where Angela Mulcahy turned an old squash court into a 90-seat theatre in 2005 and The Glen in Banteer, a converted Old Schoolhouse with 120 seats run by the O'Keeffe brothers since 1990. These five venues are only a sample of the myriad of old buildings (churches and schoolhouses mostly) converted into performance spaces all around the country.

They are all either privately or voluntarily run by committees. They are ideal for the solo performer as the contract is usually based on a 70%/30% split of the box office or at best an 80%/20%. The Viking is the exception as they insist on a 60%/40% split. In order to understand the mechanics of this type of contract, I will explain it in a one-off performance scenario. If an actor-author presents his/her play at the Glen Theatre in Banteer for one night to 90 people – and that would not be unusual at this venue as they have built an excellent theatre-going audience over the years – the potential box-office income at €18 a ticket would be €1620 with €324 to the venue and €1296 to the performer. A professional technician is required costing €200 per performance and petrol and, if necessary, €200 euro accommodation costs. The actor can expect a return of €800 to a €1000 euro and sometimes

more. This is a snapshot of the situation in 2023 and is obviously subject to numerous combinations and changing costs.

The village halls and community halls can be even more lucrative. GAA clubs, in particular, have run fundraisers for which they sell 300 tickets at €20 each. The performer can expect to receive €3000, the club gaining the other €3000 and often substantial bar proceeds from the evening. The emergence of the Fit-up Theatre Festivals in 2009 in West Cork villages has encouraged the development of small community halls as theatre venues and receiving houses at other times of the year outside of the festival. The Fit-up Festivals in West Cork, North Cork and North East Galway now provide new contemporary plays to over 20 rural community halls in these areas which also helps to develop an understanding for contemporary theatre. Almost all of the plays presented at the Fit-up Festivals are by actor-authors.

3. The Character as Storyteller

In its return to the epic form, the actor-author reimagines theatre as a narrative. In order to tell their stories though the actor-authors engage the figure of the narrator in different scenarios with the character(s).

a. Mapping solo plays

The variety within the work of the actor-authors renders an attempt at drawing characteristics a hazardous venture. Yet, in observing the textual material, one may conclude that the object of their storytelling characters falls within the spectrum between autobiographical and fictional work. Biographical components have been popular in solo

performances in Ireland since the mid twentieth century. The earliest solo performance recorded in the twentieth century was staged at the Gaiety Theatre in Dublin in September 1960 by Micheál Mac Liammóir who adapted and performed *The Importance of Being Oscar*, using excerpts from Oscar Wilde's work to tell the story of Wilde's life. The first original script for a solo performer was staged at St. Patrick's Cathedral on 29 September 1969 as part of the Dublin Theatre Festival. *Mr. Handel's Visit to Dublin* (1969) was written by Dr Maurice Davin-Power and performed by Terence Healy, and centred on the life of Dean Swift. It may also be regarded as the first site-specific, or at least site-responsive play, performed in Ireland, as Swift was a former Dean of St. Patrick's Cathedral. This pattern of writing plays, particularly solo performance work based on historical or literary figures, continued right through the 1970s and 1980s with productions such as Eamon Morrissey's *The Brother* (1974), adapted from Flann O'Brien's *At Swim Two Birds*, Ulick O'Connor's *Brendan* (1977) based on the life of Brendan Behan and *Mr. Gulliver's Bags* (1984), also based on the life of Jonathan Swift. In 1984 one of the earliest solo female performances was staged by Sheila Flitton, in a play called *Beezie* (1984), presenting excerpts of the real-life story of Beezie Gallagher, the only resident of Lough Gill in County Sligo. This trend continued with Maggie Cronin's *A Most Notorious Woman* (1995) — based on the sixteenth century pirate Grace O'Malley (Granuaile), Eithne McGuinness's *Typhoid Mary* (1997) — about the mass poisoner Mary Mullen, Lynda Radley's *The Art of Swimming* (2006) — inspired by the extraordinary swimming records of Mercedes Gleitze, Tony Devlin's *1981* (2011) — which examines the lives of the hunger strikers who died in Long Kesh in 1981 and most recently Michael Patric's *Sean Moylan: Irish Revolutionary* (2023). Noel Ó Gallchóir presented the first, and possibly the only, actor-author play written and performed in the Irish language with *Idir Dhá Ceann na Himní* (2014), based on the Donegal writer Seosamh Mac Grianna (1900-1990).

Running in conjunction with these biographical plays, actor-authors also write plays strongly based on their own life experiences. It is tempting to address them as autobiographical plays, but in conversation with many of the actors, they reject the term. Rather, they concede that they may be inspired by childhood memories. For instance, Gerard Mannix Flynn performed his play *Talking to the Wall* in The Da Club in December 1993 and describes it as "drawn from the author's boyhood experiences" (conversation with author, no date). The central character of the play is James who will appear again in Flynn's play *James X* (2003), where he does battle with his memories of industrial school, reform school and prison. He, himself, has spent time in industrial school, reform school and prison, but the distance he articulates between the material he shares and his own experience suggests a rejection of a strictly autobiographical reading.

The highest percentage of autobiographical actor-author work occurs between 2010 and 2019 with 21 of the 63 actor-author plays (see Appendix 3). Gearóid Ó Caireallâin examines the ups and downs in his life since suffering a stroke at forty-eight in *The Wheelchair Monologues* (2012); Mirjana Randulic draws on her personal experiences for *Broken Promise Land* (2013); Ollie Braddell chronicles his Ulster Protestant family history in *Bastard: A Family History* (2014); and Sonya Kelly explains the difficulties in trying to get an immigrant visa for her partner in *How To Keep An Alien* (2014). *In One Eye, Out The Other* (2019) Tadgh Hickey examines his alcohol addiction, and Frank Farrell's *Turf* (2020) chronicles his forty years of working the turf bogs of the midlands.

In his essay, "Influences of Experimental Theatre on the Emergence of Self-Revelatory Performance", Stephen Snow contends that "to locate the emergence of personal self from behind the mask of character, we have to go back to the very beginnings of experimental theatre in America, in 1959" (28) to the experimental work of the American theatre director Richard Schechner and The Living Theatre company and of the emergence of Spalding

Gray, one of the earliest performers of autobiographical work. Snow considers that The Performance Group's production of *The Tooth of Crime* (1972) "marks the beginning of his [actor-author Spalding Gray's] journey into full autobiographical performance" (29). In *The Contemporary American Monologue: Performance and Politics*, Eddie Patterson outlines the contribution of other American solo-performers whose work "foregrounds the solo voice as a form of critical engagement with American society, exploring issues of race, class, sexuality, gender, ethnicity and personal identity" (8). In an interview with Paul Curley in 2017, Sonya Kelly explains that her autobiographical plays are directly influenced by such practitioners, especially Gray. Her play *Wheelchair on my Face* illustrates the autobiographical tendency of actor-authors, where the actor introduces himself/herself as the subject of the play. Alternatively, the actor may assume a fictitious name even though the story is inspired by real-life characters. This applies to the other three plays who draw from neighbours and family members (Kinevane and O'Rourke) to the inhabitants of a whole town (Murfi), but are fictionalised to varying degrees. In all of them, the performance hinges on three elements: the creation of intimacy, empathy, and comedy.

Common to all those plays is a clear geographical signposting: actual village and town names are presented and a vernacular associated with these localities in order to ground the stories into an Irish, local, knowable, comfortable context and create immediate connections with the audience. This means to draw the audience into the stories is further enhanced by the employment of comedic techniques. As a result, they produce empathetic responses by manufacturing intimacy between performer and audience. While comedy, empathy and intimacy have long been used by playwrights, these techniques, particularly used in tandem with each other, appear to suit the direct-address monologue approach employed by the actor-authors.

What shapes the specificity of each of their plays however resides not in any textual dimension but in the mode of performance. They are all telling a story, all in the first person – a point which grounds the impression of intimacy – but their performance relies on different skill sets. In approaching them through the somewhat arbitrary components of autobiography, physicality, and overt monologue, the analysis will bring forth the nuances they bring in terms of performance. Kelly engages with her background as a stand-up comedian; Murfi, a Lecoq-trained clown, employs miming techniques; Kinevane makes full use of movement and stage design; O'Rourke relies entirely on the power on words, delivering at a fast pace and expecting no response from the audience, duplicating the model of the seanchaí.

4. Case Studies

a. Sonya Kelly. *The Wheelchair on my Face* (2011)

The Wheelchair on my Face tells the story of a child getting her first pair of glasses. Nobody— her parents, her teachers, or herself — realised how myopic she was and how it affected so many areas of her young life. *The Wheelchair on My Face* is situated in Ireland in 1980s, which Kelly describes in her foreword to the play as a country,

> [w]riggling free of its theocratic vice grip, the ritualised hyper-feminisation of girls in the guise of purity rituals like the holy communion, the fear of not complying, growing up as a gay child, the fear of not being beautiful and the intoxicating first brush with counter-cultural idolatry. (3)

The premise of Kelly's story is the effect that early childhood myopia had on her life, but the play is also a social polemic of that time. It is confined to the months leading up to her first Holy Communion, which renders it an ordinary, familiar story to most members of the

audience over a certain age: national school preparation for the Holy Communion, B.C.G. injection for T.B., Star Trek, Eye Tests, ABBA, the Holy Communion, Margaret Thatcher and the Falklands war, and for Sonya, more eye tests.

The language is the vernacular of a middle-class Dublin suburbia. Kelly speaks in her own accent. Though she does not refer to specific locations, she paints a familiar picture of suburban middle-class Dublin: her school, where tennis is the main sport; dinner parties and barbeques on the lawn, with "wine and crunches of water biscuits", "pineapple on cheese", "Old Spice and Bluegrass Perfume" (9) and "Tiny Tears" (11) – these details conjure up a world easily recognisable to a conventional Irish audience.

Kelly achieves intimacy with her audience in several other ways: continual asides to the audience, breaking the fourth wall and involving the audience, and the use of pronouns "I" and "you". She also draws the audience in through comedy. Making her stage entrance with no glasses, she bumps into everything. The song, "I Can See Clearly Now", plays in the background, reinforcing contrapuntal comedic effect and hence creating complicity as well as introducing the central topic: herself.

> *She puts the bag down, settles herself and looks out towards the audience. Two Seconds pass. She lets out a scream in fright.*
> SONYA. God, I didn't see you there. Hi. I'm so blind. Well, I'm not now. I'm pretending for theatrical effect. You see, I can see fine now but I used not to be able to see so well. And for *me* to help *you* to understand what that was like I need to let you see the way I couldn't see . . . You see. (7)

The repetition of 'I', twenty-six times within the first two minutes, and the use of her name, Sonya Kelly, are aimed at establishing the authenticity of her *own* story, and this autobiographical exposition renders the experience of the performance more intimate, despite being performed in large venues. Her use of asides to the audience and her breaking of the fourth wall both contribute to the feeling that this is a conversation rather than a show.

b. Mikel Murfi. *The Man in the Woman's Shoes* (2016)

The Man in the Woman Shoes provides the most enlightening example of the genre of actor-author plays. It proves how such shows are meant to be self-contained and give complete autonomy to their creator: no set, no sound or light design, written, directed and performed by the presenter and easily toured as a "show in a bag". While researching in Sligo for his Bealtaine commission, a relative told him a story about his grand-uncle, Pat Farnon, who was a farmer/cobbler and, when he had finished repairing the shoes, would walk to town in them to soften them.

Pat Farnon is a mute. He lives in a "small country cottage" (1) on the side of the road somewhere outside the town of Sligo. It is October 1978, Sunday morning, and the Vatican are in the process of electing the successor to Pope John Paul 1: Murfi thus places the story within a time frame and in the context of a Catholic Ireland. Pat Farnon is on his way to deliver two pairs of shoes he has made; one pair for Kitsy Rainey, the manager of the town football team, and the second for his friend Huby Patterson. He will go to mass and to the local football match before returning home. The play is a love story, a journey, and a collage of colourful characters but it is also a story about communication: our ability to communicate with each other, the church's ability to communicate with the people, and different types of social intercourse in a small town.

The backdrop to the story is not solely a geographic location, but also a social one, that of economic simplicity:

> So … the house is small … an old cottage that I keep well enough … white walls and them wee green windows - that I put in myself. There used to be a thatch on it one time but then *tin* came in and tin then was all the rage … so … (*points at roof*) … I put that up… This is … this is … It's where I was reared. It's where I'm from at the beginning of every day and where I go home to when me day is done. I'll be took out of it in a box as the fella says. (2)

The town is not named but all the places he passes through on his way to town are situated adjacent to Sligo town, Murfi's original locality. "Slish Wood" and "Dooney Rock" (4), "Pearse Road", the "Cathedral" (9) and The Ritz Café (3) are actual places in and around Sligo town; Coyle, Gilmartin (5), Gilvarry, Gillespie (6), McElvanney (9), and Patterson (14) are all surnames recognisable in Sligo and the surrounding area. Despite its clear connections with Sligo, the rural and dated framing resonates beyond the local to represent a nostalgic image of Ireland, one that may not have existed but that corresponds to John Hinde's postcards.

The portrayal of the different characters through physical comedy underscores the almost caricatural nature of the congregation. Jimmy is "one of God's *special* people … that's what they say" (7); the water diviner, Huby Patterson, "always looks as if he has no neck" (16); Kemp Coyle "has a military air about him, he fought in some war or other and maybe he shouldn't be let out to direct the traffic but he's there all the same" (12); Magic Mick is "fierce fond of the porter God love him" and "can recall every detail of every football match he ever saw or *even* ones he heard on the wireless" (13) and give a running commentary to the town the following day; and Kitsy Rainey who manages the men's football team. None of these characters work in mainstream jobs: as such, they are marginalised in their society, but they are not looked down upon. What Murfi conveys is that, in the 1970s, in small towns in Ireland, it was acceptable not to conform. The oddity of the characters is emphasised by a physical or verbal tic that endears them to the audience. Jimmy repeats everything he says: "Ah no Peadar, leave Pat, leave Pat. Pat'll Walk … Pat'll walk. He's breakin' in shoes for Kitsy Rainey - leave him be, leave him be, leave him behind, leave him behind, drive on, drive on!" (7). Jimmy's limited verbal presence functions in a similar way to Pat's muteness, their struggles prompting empathy from the audience. Yet, this empathy is also manipulated in associating the characters' frailties, those characters that are touching because recognised

by all and familiar, with physical comedy: here the exaggerated clowning creates a distance in simplifying the characters and creating comic relief.

The performance hinges on this dual response of empathy and laughter. Pat Farnon's walk into town in Kitsy's stiletto shoes is hilarious, and shows how Murfi's physicalising of the host of "mad" characters who inhabit the town directed the text: the stories are at the service of the performance more than the performance responds to the text. Certainly, the depiction of the characters as liminal permits this safe distancing process. But Murfi is careful not to ridicule them, showing their limitations as amusing foibles rather than condemnations. Pat Farnon is not only a mute, but also a man of little education who lives on the edge of town; Kemp Coyle appears to be suffering from some form of post-traumatic stress; Magic Mick is a down-and-out alcoholic. Anyone who grew up in Ireland in the 1970s and 1980s would be aware that every city, town, and village had a collection of these types of individuals who were '*miádhs'*— from the Gaelic, meaning 'unlucky'— 'poor misfortunates', vulnerable people who had mental, addiction, and/or physical issues and needed minding in the community. They occupy positions at the lower end of society and although they appear to own very little materially, they understand the importance of savouring the simple things their community has to offer. Neither are they governed by societal mores, which frees them to talk to dogs, shout across the street, throw shoes, direct traffic, compete with the priest and a host of other potentially comic situations. Murfi makes use of this experiential proximity as well as the relative temporal closeness with this traditional Ireland to modulate "the mechanism of 'laughing with' and 'laughing at'" (Monks 20).

Unlike Kelly, Murfi as storyteller takes the form of a leading fictional character that also acts as narrator. While this signifies that the narration is also in the first person, it nonetheless participates in anchoring the stories in a theatrical frame, in the same way as

Pat's muteness. Pat explains that he cannot talk: "Oh, I know you can hear me and all, but that talk is all going on inside me head […] do you believe me?" (3). In doing so, Murfi is calling for the suspension of disbelief. It is only in the closing moment that the narrator reveals how the character struggles with his condition: "Out loud I say … *Grunts* ... In my head I say, 'Pat, be wise and pure and say … Yes … Yes, Kitsy I'll be yours'" (27). The fairy tale ending gives closure to a journey that would have been an uncomfortable portrait of rural Ireland if it were not for the dual approach chosen by Murfi. His tender portrayal escapes nostalgia through comedy, but he uses the full array of clowning techniques, including the white clown, in order to engage with the audience. I saw the play in large 600-seater venues, the Everyman in Cork and the Pavilion in Dun Laoghaire, as well as in Castlelyons and Ballyduff Community Halls, in its early days, with less than 20 audience members at each venue. Inevitably, the sense of intimacy was more strongly felt at the community halls, which raises the question whether actor-author work is not best served by small venues.

c. Pat Kinevane. *Underneath* (2014)

Pat Kinevane has explained that the decision to write his solo plays had to do with his desire to make full use of his physical talents while his body permitted it (Etienne "Interview with Pat Kinevane"163). Unlike Murfi, and thanks to the support of Fishamble, Kinevane employs all the traditional elements associated with a large-scale dramatic production including costume, set design, lighting, choreography and sound composition.

Underneath is a combination of a ghost story, and a murder story told from the grave. The play is set in the "Tumbledown Cemetery, Cobh, county Cork", where Kinevane is from. The main character, Her O'Sullivan, opens the play with the loaded question, directly

addressed at the audience: “you never know what’s around the corner, do ya?”. This refers not only to the trajectory of her character but has an unsettling effect on the audience. This foreboding impression is quickly dispelled however as Kinevane seems to step out of character to engage the audience as an MC – “You’re all very welcome. Catch your breath there and we’ll chat in a minute” (3) – before enquiring what select spectators think lies “around the corner”. This banter works on two levels. First it fulfils its role of establishing the parameters of the performance: in mixing narration and embodiment, Kinevane disregards formal rules, and will engage the attention of the audience by breaking the fourth wall while drawing their emotions into a tragic plot heightened by spectacular means (costume, light and movement aim to fascinate and render the spectral nature of Her).

Her is a local, of the same generation as Kinevane. She was born in 1965 in Cobh and, when she was nine, she was hit by lightning that caused her horrific facial injuries. This, in turn, led to her being ostracised in school and later in society. She befriends a student called Jasper who is from a well-to-do background in Cobh. He steals from her and treats her poorly. She moves to Dublin, creates a life for herself and becomes friendly with two prostitutes called Anka and Lidia. Jasper visits the prostitutes and has an altercation with Her. He murders her and hides her body in the tomb in Cobh. The case remains unresolved by the Gardai.

Kinevane refers to actual locations (Cobh, Cork city, Dublin), but the set represents, in a minimal way, the spiritual space that Her inhabits, the place where she has “never felt so happy, ever” nor so “safe” (4):

> *The setting is a black area. There is a black raised slab centre stage. Upstage right hangs a magnificent golden length of fabric. Another length drapes over the slab. Downstage left hangs an opulent golden scarf, needles and wool.*
> *Scattered about the space are a golden magazine, a golden lampshade, a golden wallpaper roll, a golden tea towel, a golden glove and two golden J-cloths.* (2)

The continuous contrasting colours of black and gold act as metaphors for the shallowness of appearance and the inevitability of death for all. The symbolist aesthetic of a story narrated from the grave is additionally served by an elaborate lighting design and by Kinevane's physical, dance-like, movements.

In a similar way to Murfi, Kinevane relies on the geographic and generational proximity of the character as well as her plight – she feels like a "mashed-up monsterface mangirl" (7); to create empathy. Comedy offers a counterbalance to the darkness of the play. Mummified in bandages of grey and black, gold face and white eyes, Her enters the stage, explains that she is dead, and the play set in a tomb in a cemetery, before cracking a joke at the expense of the British:

> Now picture this. Wembley stadium. Eighty thousand mixed crowd. On stage, the Queen and the Pope. She says, 'With one small gesture of one's hand one can make so many British go wild." And she does this. They go Waaaaa'. He says, 'With one small movement of my head, I can make all the Irish go crazy.' And he headbutts her! (3)

The structural pattern alternates comedy with pathos, stepping in and out of the narration. Anka and Lidia, her upstairs neighbours who work as prostitutes, provide ample material for comic relief: "I called them Aldi and Lidl! Great value, unbeatable prices . . . for the way we live today! (9). The play's numerous references to advertising, reality TV, fashion television and the RTE guide, are aimed at relating the story to a contemporary audience. In contrast, the description of her injuries leaves no place for levity:

> These eyelids almost welded together with the heat. This ear melted lower than the other. Burgundy scarring all along here and down my neck [. . .] Paralysed for a while. Terrible stammer. Could barely swallow, branchy marks all over this shoulder and arm. I was in hospital for three years in and out. (7)

More sobering in the description of how she was then treated, Kinevane makes her stutter and scars as the almost inevitable components of her murder. The play may contain easy banter, but it confronts gender-based violence in no uncertain terms

d. Seamus O'Rourke. *Indigestion* (2015)

Seamus O'Rourke's writing explores the socio-economic aspects that specifically face rural communities: the closure of local shops, restaurants and pubs in small villages and towns, the increase in mental illness, and the isolation experienced by many.

He has never received any funding and therefore self-produces his shows, relying completely on box-office income to cover production costs. In that precarity, he is representative of many other actor-authors. Unlike Kinevane and Kelly, O'Rourke cannot employ a director or designers. This financial imperative therefore confines him to storytelling performances in a minimalist setting, and shapes his artistic choices.

O'Rourke's work is therefore closest to Éamon Kelly's *seanchaí*-style storytelling. Like Kelly's collection of stories, O'Rourke does not attempt to physically embody the characters: he sits down on a concrete block, or stands on occasion, and talks to the audience, only attempting the odd accent to differentiate characters at times. The staging contains no set, no costume, no sound or music score, and no lighting design.

The stories are set in small villages and towns in county Cavan, in Swad, Swanlinbar, Kinlough, Milltown, and Ballyconnell, making the backdrop recognisable to locals but also familiar to all as the village system he paints can be any rural setting. The language he uses is vernacular, and sometimes spelt phonetically to emphasise the importance of linguistic naturalism:

> […] and then the sisters arrived down one Sunday and said they wanted to sell the house and the land and divide the whole lot up into four and I fucking lost the cool, because I'd have an ogeous bad temper like that and I let a slider of fucks into them and tould them to get the fuck from about the place and that I'd give them their share over the next few years, that I wanted to keep the house […] and Mary, the lesbian one was quiet enough, but the other two were thinking of investing in some shares at the time and wanted the whole thing to be sorted out there and then. (2)

In the first person, he tells stories about the tragic death of his father, his parents' alcoholism, his lesbian sister, and his own struggles with his weight and his depression, which he nicknames "indigestion". Anger fuels this fast-paced stream of consciousness:

> Me father died when I was seven… he was taking the roof off the byre because the iron was in shite with rust and he had the roof half off and there come a gust of wind and he had a sheet of iron in his hand and it took him clean of the roof into the yard at the back of the byre… the only bit of concrete we had about the house at the time and he was killed stone dead… and if that wasn't bad enough… Mammy threw a clatter of fucks into him for being up on the roof of a day like that… (1)

The scene closes with him kicking the concrete block to the floor, a powerful image for his father's death and his own precarious life on the construction sites.

Like Kelly, O'Rourke presents personal struggles fed by the experiences of his character: his suicide attempts, the constant struggle with his weight which attacks his self-esteem, the trips to counsellors and to hospitals. However, unlike Kelly, he insists on the fictionality of the material: the narrator repeats "I'm going to tell you a story", the artistic process prompting a distance from his own pathos. In fact, comedy is used in the same way as O'Rourke admits wanting to "bring the audience to the edge of the cliff and then give them a handrail" (email to author). Therefore, the pathetic situations are countered by self-deprecating humour, found in the narrator's struggles to overcome his anger and depression as much as his subjectivised version of them (his visits to his doctors, psychiatrists and his attempts to commit suicide). While working on a house in London, he came across boxes of pills and swallowed them all, then proceeded to put on his wellingtons and lie down in a trench in the back garden:

> The next thing I woke in the hospital… they were after pumping me out… I wasn't dead, I wasn't even near dead… sure most of the tablets I took was 'Rennie's' and fucking vitamin pills… I was healthier than the whole hospital put together… That's when I started calling my problem indigestion… at least it was a word ya could say… but not even a dose of 'Rennie's' could shift it. (8)

Despite his anger management issues and violent outbursts, his naivety wins over the audience by making them laugh.

Unlike the previously studied one-acters, the script is unusual in that it is divided into 25 titled monologues, non-sequential snapshots of his struggle and of those who helped him on his journey like “The Man in the Shop”, “Jacinta Power”, “Jack McGovern” and “Dr Brady” and sections like “My Recovery” and “Coping”. The separate stories eventually merge into an overall story, which jumps back and forth chronologically. While the other plays offered, if not always a character arc or a plot, at least a narrative continuity that encouraged audience engagement, O’Rourke flags the seeming disconnectedness of his stories. The stories, in mimicking a stream of consciousness, demand to be regarded as autonomous and unrehearsed, an intimate conversation between O’Rourke and his audience. In fact, the audience comes foremost in O’Rourke’s process: because he depends on income from audiences, he writes stories that are short (none of his plays are longer than an hour), and are layered with comedy.

Since 2006 Kelly, Murfi, Kinevane, and O’Rourke have made a significant contribution to the Irish theatrical canon, and these four case studies exemplify the variety within actor-author performances. What they share is the recourse to storytelling and direct address to the audience, an approach that eschews the traditional structures of plays. Their work since the 1990s shows an overwhelming focus on openly discussing deeply-engrained societal issues – mental health, addiction, homelessness, and isolation – and, in this, suggests a parallel with that of the theatre makers. Above all, what characterises their body of work – and differentiates them primarily from the other two categories discussed – is the structural presence of comedy: while their storytelling form of performance can be traced back to the Irish tradition of the *seanchaí*, this new generation borrows much from stand-up comedy in that the pathos of their tales is instantly countered by the employment of comedic devices –

be they at a narrative or performing level. Brendan Behan and Brian Friel had already recognised the power of comedy on audiences when they suggested that the playwright should seek to "make them laugh and then stick them" (Delaney 22). It appears this motto has been taken as a leading formula by the actor-authors.

The impact of the actor-author on Irish theatre is difficult to assess at the time of writing. Indications are that there may be a shift away from the twentieth-century playwrights' interrogation of a national identity or what Christopher Murray describes as "mirror up to nation" (*Twentieth-Century*) towards a focus on the individual. It is too early to gauge whether those plays, as a generic body of work, therefore reinforce some aspects of neoliberal thinking while also critiquing elements of contemporary Irish society. What is certain is that their audiences are growing in number, in great part because they are staged in venues that are often smaller and more affordable, in part because the plays talk to them directly in raising familiar issues in a familiar landscape through the easy form of storytelling, and in part because the presence of comedy in all the plays assures a good night out.

As actors are now writing their own plays to popular acclaim, the position of the playwright is rendered more fragile in its ability to reach its audience. The following chapter will explore the factors that have participated to this since the 1990s in particular and will investigate the contemporary Irish play in its relation with dramaturgic traditions.

Chapter 4. The Death of the Playwright?

This chapter will question the elusive presence of the literary play in the first two decades of the new millennium, and investigate how the plays of recent authors – Michael West, Ailís Ní Ríain and Shane Mac an Bhaird – relate (or not) to a legacy of Irish drama. Prompting this reflection is the observation that while dramatists who emerged in the 1990s (Marina Carr, Conor McPherson and Enda Walsh) have attained global acclaim that places them in the continuum of the great Irish playwrights, the immediate generation following them have yet to garner such enthusiastic plaudits, sometimes even at the national level. Looking at the cultural contexts in which they developed, the chapter will analyse how new writing is produced and, through select case studies, query whether there are elements common to contemporary Irish plays.

1. Defining the Irish Playwright

This section seeks to examine the influences that have formed and shaped the work of Irish playwrights, and to identify common thematic or dramaturgic characteristics that have run through from Yeats to the 'golden generation' and the playwrights of the new millennium.

a. What's an Irish play?

In *The Politics of Irish Drama,* Nicholas Grene acknowledges that since the beginnings of the Abbey theatre, Irish drama "has been so closely bound up with national politics that one has often been considered more or less a reflection of the other" (1). He apprehends however the idea of political drama beyond a mere "theatrical mimesis of the national narrative" (1) to engage with interpretation to address the "political interplay of text and context" in

Ireland and abroad (3). Foremost among the dramaturgic elements at play to create this "self-conscious stage representation of Ireland" (2), in that it carries the identification of an Irishness internationally, is the Stage Irishman, also defined as the Stage Irishwoman and Stage Irish priest. From Farquhar's Catholic hating Sir Harry Wildair, to Boucicault's Myles na Copalleen, through Synge's Christy Mahon and Keane's land-obsessed Bull McCabe, to Carr's traveller, Hester Swayne, a continuum of colourful and often violent characters have provided a political "representation of Ireland" – albeit a shortcut rapidly accessible to audiences and reinforcing their expectations of an Irish play.

According to Eamonn Jordan in *Dissident Dramaturgies: Contemporary Irish Theatre,* not only is "popular culture […] increasingly influential on the level of myth" (31), but it is particularly prevalent in Irish theatre. Looking back as far as "the older Irish dramatic tradition", he observes that a diversity that ranges from classical Greek myths to Irish myths (31): John B. Keane's *Sive* (1959) "exploits the myth of romantic love"; *The Field* (1965) "considers how myth can authorise murder when it comes to the threats of fundamental dispossession"; Brian Friel's *Dancing at Lughnasa* (1990) "employs traditional myths of authenticity, community, survival and again of origins"; Tom Murphy's *Conversations of a Homecoming* (1985) "builds on myths of collective bonding, belonging and renewal" (31). Such examples confirm that literary Irish plays share this thematic tradition; however, Jordan contends that "contemporary playwrights seem to be struggling dramaturgically with both contemporary contexts and how they might exploit, reformulate or reimagine the notion of myth" (33), suggesting that the contemporary world resists the inclusion of myths. Indeed, this is relevant to many of the playwrights of the new millennium, but this chapter will argue that a number of them have reconnected to this Irish dramatic tradition of myth.

In his 1992 essay "A Generation of Playwrights", Tom Kilroy questions the genealogy of Irish playwriting and the very notion of tradition:

> An Irish playwright even remotely concerned with tradition is faced with a tri-furcated past with such tenuous connections between the three strands that the very notion of tradition becomes questionable. Firstly, there are the Irish born playwrights of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries who turned to London, writing for the English stage, or imitations of it in Dublin. Secondly, there is the small group of playwrights around Yeats who set out to weld the fracture between the Anglo-Irish and Gaelic Ireland from a largely Anglo-Irish perspective. Thirdly, there are those playwrights, predominantly of Catholic background, who came to dominate the Irish theatre through the thirties, forties and fifties. (135)

Revisiting the chronology employed by Kilroy, I would suggest that the source of tradition begins with the opening of the Werburgh Street theatre in 1637. More importantly, I will argue that the possibility of "connections between the three strands" may not be as tenuous as Kilroy writes, as those can be identified in the work that has surfaced since the 1990s.

The concern of this chapter is centred on one observation. In the first two decades of the new millennium no playwright has surfaced to follow the success of Conor McPherson, Marina Carr, Enda Walsh, Mark O'Rowe and Martin McDonagh. While most of the playwrights who started writing in the new millennium have moved back to naturalism, the innovation evident in the plays selected indicate that their authors are following in the footsteps of Brian Friel and the playwrights of the 1960s, in the same way as Marina Carr and the playwrights of the 1990s, but also engaged with previous legacies. As such the chapter will identify whether the plays, *Dublin by Lamplight* (2004), *The Tallest Man in the World* (2013) and *Melt* (2017), contain the elements that we have identified as symptomatic of an Irish play: its political dimension, its recourse to myth, and its genealogy in the strands defined by Kilroy. In analysing the career and plays of Michael West, Ailís Ní Ríain, and Shane Mac An Bhaird, this chapter explores the external and internal factors that have accompanied – sometimes nurtured but also hindered – their development as playwrights. As previously discussed, the Arts Council's replacement funding system favours theatrical work that is postdramatic, that is work that does not emanate from a central authorial voice.

b. Kilroy's tri-furcated influences of tradition

i. Irish-born playwrights

John Ogilby, the first Master of the Revels in Ireland, oversaw the building of Ireland's first theatre, the Werburgh Street theatre in 1637, bringing the celebrated English playwright James Shirley to Dublin and premiering *The Royal Master* (9), a play overtly political in theme, but it is with Anglo-Irish playwright Henry Burkehead's *Cola's Furie's or Lirenda's Miserie* (1646) that Morash recognises a "glimpse" not only of "the frightening, haunted world of Ireland during the 1640s" but also "an emerging politicisation of theatrical spectacle" (11) – and one that was not available at the time in England due to the closing of the theatres. Later on, in the early eighteenth century of an Irish society founded on "dispossession and exclusion" (32) and haunted by the "spectre of William of Orange" (31), Irish theatre "was not only a place in which rights and liberties could be debated" (34). What those playwrights initiated was the caricatural figure of the stage Irishman, "a stock character as deployed in the English theatre" exemplifying "dim-witted, inferior, violent and detestable" traits (Leersson 172).

In the nineteenth century, Dion Boucicault, offended by such a negative and false representation, replaced the stage Irishman with a "portrait from nature" (McFeeley 87), introducing Fr Dolan in *The Shaughraun* (1874) "to specifically address Anglo-American fear of Catholicism and a potential Catholic tyranny" (Richardson qtd in McFeely 89). This identity would manifest itself in a host of new iterations of stage Irish characters – which this chapter argues became the mainstay of representing Ireland on stage for centuries after – and the use of comedy in the make-up of the character continued to provide "a more secure footing for creating a distinctive Anglo-Irish identity" (40). With Boucicault, the portrayal of the stage Irishman evolved into that of a "humorous invocation of a spalpeenish Irish

character: likeable, unruly, cute; unpolished but charming, slightly mischievous but fundamentally unthreatening, exemplified by Dion Boucicault's Myles na Gopaleen or Somerville and Ross's Flurry Knox" (Leersson 171). This malleable version has allowed for the character to be adapted to successive historical contexts into the twenty-first century.

There is no denying that Dion Boucicault was a "facile writer of melodrama" who used the "comic exaggeration of Irish characters" as "a commercial formula" (McHugh and Harmon 144), but more recent criticism suggests that his contribution has been underestimated. Commentators point to his creation of international audiences for Irish theatre in America, England and France (Morash 87), view him as a successor to the contemporary "theatre-makers" (Lonergan, *Irish Drama* 8) and highlight his development of the 'Stage Irishman' into a more realistic representation of Irishmen and Ireland (Watt 23; Roche12; Grene 17-18). His initiation of the playwright royalty system, which is of financial significance to Irish playwrights, is still in use today (Morash 87). Other playwrights followed his dramatic formula in Ireland and their work was even "more explicitly political than their predecessors" (112).[6]

ii. The Irish literary tradition

In the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century two cultures were fighting for survival: the Anglo-Irish and the Gaelic. W. B. Yeats, Lady Gregory and Edward Martyn set up the Irish Literary Theatre in 1897 with the central aims of eradicating the commercial theatre of the previous centuries, that is, theatre mostly built on comedies and melodramas, and to create "a type of theatre that had survived the eighteenth century only in amateur

[6] Morash mentions for instance that Hubert O'Grady had played the part of Conn in an 1877 revival of *The Shaughraun* and his plays, *Eviction* (1879), *Emigration* (1880), *The Famine* (1886) and *The Fenian* (1888) which were overtly political plays.

productions staged in country houses of the landed ascendancy – a theatre founded on patronage";

> The suggestion that there was a need to create, *ad ovum,* 'a Celtic and Irish school of dramatic literature' effectively erases a dramatic tradition going back at least to the seventeenth century – a tradition which, through plays like those of Charles Macklin, had helped create the notion that there was such a thing as 'the Celtic' in the first place. Because it chose to ignore the existing Irish theatre history, the Irish Literary Theatre was able – indeed it was compelled – to imagine afresh its relationship to Irish history. (Morash 115, 117)

Tom Kilroy's suggestion that the Anglo-Irish "set out to weld" ("A Generation" 135) the relationship between themselves and the Gaelic is questionable (as Leersen, Morash, and Murray argue). It is too simplistic to suggest that the two sections of society that were operating in a highly tense and volatile political arena would have a central objective of welding two cultures so politically and culturally opposite.

Yeats, Lady Gregory, Martyn, and Hyde controlled the theatrical culture of Ireland, powerful positions for an ascendency that was losing its foothold in society. Douglas Hyde gave a lecture titled "The Necessity for De-Anglicising Ireland" to the Irish Literary Society in 1892 that led to the founding of the Gaelic League in 1893. For Declan Kiberd, "there was a real shrewdness in Hyde's strategy. He launched his appeal for Gaelic civilisation as one coming from a man who could still feel the landlordly hankerings of a disappointed imperialist" (*Inventing Ireland* 140). What Hyde was interested in was the necessity "to found Irish pride on something more positive and lasting than mere hatred of England" and "Yeats agreed" (141). What the Irish Literary Theatre did do was present Hyde's play *Casadh an tSúgáin/ The Twisting of the Rope* (1901), which J.M. Synge considered "in some ways the most important of all those produced by the Irish Literary Theatre, as it alone had an influence on the plays that have been written since" (Roche, *The Irish* 25).

In addition to its borrowings to Celtic myth, it was also the "first peasant play" to be produced for the Irish stage, the first "set entirely in a cottage interior", and one of the

earliest in the Irish language although the Abbey production was translated into English (Morash 121). By 1911, the company would have used more or less the same set sixteen times, and by the middle of the twentieth century it would be "embarrassingly ubiquitous" (121). Hyde's play would become the forerunner for a host of simulacrums presented in the first half of the twentieth century most notably in the plays of the Catholic playwrights of the 1930s, 40s and 50s.

The play also contains what Synge considered as "the germ of a new dramatic form", a "figure which Nicholas Grene was to define as 'the stranger in the house' motif" (Roche 26). The stranger in the house can be found in many plays of the Irish literary movement, such as *The Land of Heart's Desire*" (1894), *Cathleen ni Houlihan* (1902), and Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World* (1907). This motif emerges in different forms over the remainder of the century, adding a more sinister and Gothic character to the dramatis personae of Irish drama.

For Grene, "the figure of the stranger in the house accorded with the Celticism of Yeats, Gregory and the early theatre movement in so far as it set the pull of otherworldly transcendence within a stylised ground of family normality" (75). To briefly illustrate this continuum, Brendan Behan creates two 'strangers' in *The Quare Fellow* in 1954, a play originally titled *The Twisting of Another Rope* in reference to Douglas Hyde's *Casadh an tSugáin* (Roche, *Contemporary Irish Drama* 44), and an unseen stranger in *The Hostage* (1958). John B Keane has two travellers visit in *Sive* (1959); Eugene McCabe centres his action on the visiting thresher Matt Lynch in *King of the Castle* (1964); Brian Friel has a group of 'strangers' visit *The Gentle Island* (1971). More recently, this motif appears in the plays of Conor McPherson and Marina Carr in the 1990s, and in Shane Mac An Bhaird's play *Melt* in 2017.

iii. Catholic writers of the 1930s-1950s

A great deal of criticism has been levelled at the Abbey theatre from the 1930s to the 1960s, particularly while under Ernest Blythe's directorship between 1941 and 1967. When Blythe took control, the Abbey had a policy of "nothing but new plays"; he "continued this policy but also wanted full houses" (Murray, *Twentieth-Century* 141). His objective was to "use the Abbey as an instrument to restore the Irish language, and to that end he encouraged government subsidy for the production of plays in Gaelic" (141). This is relevant on two counts. First of all, it signals the first reference to governmental financial support for playwrights in order to build a national repertoire; secondly, Blythe brought the number of Irish language plays produced on the national stage from five between 1901 and 1939 to sixteen plays between 1942 and 1945. Writing in 1959 Tom Kilroy notes that the Abbey has an annual grant of £800 and a "further £3000 for productions in Irish" ("Groundwork" 195), but this impetus did not survive Blythe's tenure.

Baintighearna an Ghorta by Irish Catholic writer Séamus De Bhilmot is representative of the category identified by Kilroy. The play was produced in Irish by the Abbey in 1938. It concerns a parish priest, who wants to raise money for a statue of the Virgin Mary, and a stranger, who turns out to be the devil and offers to buy it for him. George Shiels had over twenty plays produced at the Abbey between 1921 and 1949. Among them, *The Rugged Path* (1940) and *The Summit* (1941) are representative as they exist in what Murray describes as a "harsh, joyless world" which "was to be the norm in serious Irish drama for decades" (*Twentieth-Century* 140).

In a period of only six years from 1930 to 1936 Teresa Deevy had six plays produced at the Abbey – only Lady Gregory and Marina Carr exceed this number. Her first play *The Reapers* (1930) was critically acclaimed, followed by *Katie Roche* and *The Wild Goose* in 1936. Cathy Leeney contends that in these two plays "patterns are created which express the

problematic process of decision-making and the choice of alternative futures" *(Irish* 88) for the female characters, "where the oppressed are seen to be unable to escape the systems of control to which they have been victim" ("Ireland's 'exiled'" 151). This decision-making process was evident in John B. Keane's *Sive* (1959) and *The Change in Mamie Fadden* (1971), and surfaces later again in Marina Carr's *By The Bog of Cats* (1998). This lack of decision-making is not confined to the female characters, and is visible in the lack of ambition of the local characters in *The Weir*, or the social paralysis of Enda Walsh's Cork family in *The Walworth Farce* (2006) both of which will be discussed as case studies in this chapter.

c. Irish drama: commonalities

i. The political

In this section, the political is approached in relation to the Stage Irishman (including the Irishwoman and the Stage Irish priest). The evolution of certain stock characters such as the stage Irishman shows the lasting importance of a single figure standing as a representative for a group of Irish people, and adapting to different contexts, but also hints at the importance of having "at least one figure who stands as interpreter […] reading and explaining Ireland on behalf of the dramatist creator" (Grene *The Politics* 7).

For Roche, Myles na Coppaleen is the ultimate stage Irishman: a character "addicted as any stage Irishman to the drink" (*The Irish Dramatic Revival* 10), "he is excluded from the social world that Boucicault represents while remaining central to the dramatic activity. In this, he prefigures the tramp figures in the plays of Hyde, Synge, Yeats and Gregory" (11), and one may suggest that some of Beckett's tramp characters, Vladamir and Estragon and the heavy drinking, pompously pretentious Krapp, be added to Roche's list and a host of characters from the plays of Brian Friel, Tom Murphy and John B. Keane. Many of

Beckett's characters are "excluded from the social world" that they represent. Marina Carr's central characters in *By the Bog Of Cats*, are travellers; Walsh's Irish family in *The Walworth Farce* live almost hermit-like in a London society that is alien to them; Brendan, Jim and Finbarr create their own society in McPherson's *The Weir*.

The stage Irishwoman appears as far back as 1640 in Henry Burnell's *Landgartha* (1640) in the shape of Marfisa, the first ever female character in an Irish play, and is described as "in an Irish Gowne tuck'd up to midlegge, with a broad basket hilt Sword on, hanging in a great Belt, Broags on her feet, her hayre dishevell'd, and a payre of long neck'd big-rowll'd Spurs on her heels" (119). As the first Irish woman to be represented on stage, her entrance is all the more visually striking as it is reminiscent of the Gaelic warriors of old. Deana Rankin explores the character in its political dimension, asking what kind of Irishness she might represent "in a play which continually seeks to demonstrate the nuances of Irish identity" (Burnell 61). Indeed, Rankin explains: "If Marfisa trades on Irish Amazon mythology, she also responds more specifically to her local, contemporary Dublin context; for she offers […] a critical riposte to James Shirley's recent depictions of both Irish and women on the Werburgh Street stage", standing in "dignified contrast to his [Shirley] excruciating stage Irish bard in *St. Patrick for Ireland* [and in] stark opposition to the Machiavellian scheming and rampant infidelity of Shirley's Marpisa in *The Politician*" (61). It seems therefore that the earliest representation of the Stage Irish woman has strong links to the political and mythological, particularly the "powerful Celtic tradition of warrior queens" (61).

While the characters of Irish priests were much used since the seventeenth century to vilify Popish behaviour (from Thomas Shadwell's Teague O'Divilly to Boucicault's Father Tom in *The Colleen Bawn*), the early twentieth century saw an increase in the inclusion of priest figures: Yeats's Fr Hart in *The Land of Heart's Desire* (1912), T.C. Murray's Fr

Conway in *Maurice Harte* (1912), and Fr Coyne in *The Briery Gap* (1948), and Sean O'Casey's first clerical characters Fr Domineer and Canon Burren in *Cock-a-Doodle Dandy* (1949). In his study of Paul Vincent Carroll's play *Shadow and Substance* (1937), Murray demonstrates how the stage Irish priest allows a political reading in that it shifts into a character that embodies "the feeble consciences of the ordinary people […]. It is as if, once the weight of the British political and cultural authority was lifted, the people had to create an alternative and more oppressive super-ego" (*Twentieth-Century* 132). Yet, the stage Irish priests that followed tend to return to clerical clichés, many being ineffective, some heavily dependent on alcohol.

The importance of the priest character continued in the 1960s, 1970s, 1980s and 1990s in Friel's *Philadelphia Here I Come* (1964), *Making History* (1988) and *Dancing at Lughnasa* (1990) and John B. Keane's *The Field* (1965) and *Moll* (1971). In Marina Carr's *By the Bog of Cats* (1998), as we'll see, Fr Willow is a heavy drinking, gentle, harmless, half-idiot whose closest associate appears to be the atheist Catwoman. Drunken, ineffective, stupid men representing a fallen institution, the Stage Irish priest in the twentieth century appears to stand for the collapse of the power of the Catholic church in Ireland.

ii. Myth

In the *Politics of Irish Drama* Grene analyses "versions of pastoral" as incorporating dual interpretations of the political and the mythical. Because of its "greenness", its "littleness" and "its location as the offshore-island alternative to the metropolitan societies of Britain and America" Ireland is an ideal "site for pastoral" (211). The claim is reinforced by Jordan who concludes, citing John B Keane's *The Field* as a "blatant" example, that "many Irish playwrights have become serial pastoralists" (*Dissident Dramaturgies* 29, 30). This motif is

evident in the work of the 1990s playwrights – most obviously in Martin McDonagh's *Leenane Trilogy*, Conor McPherson's *The Weir* (1997) and Marina Carr's *By The Bog of Cats* (1998). Jordan also remarks that myths in Irish theatre involve both Greek and Celtic myths and "religious myths of redemption and sacrifice" (31). Interestingly, we have observed in chapters 2 and 3 that theatre-makers and actor-authors fully embrace myth; in contrast most playwrights of the new millennium tend to shy away from myths, and the three authors selected illustrate the diversity of responses to myths.

Grene, in his chapter "Strangers in the House", approaches myth in the early plays of the Abbey's founders – W.B. Yeats's *The Land of Heart's Desire* (1894) and *Kathleen Ni Houlihan* (1902), J.M. Synge's *The Shadow of the Glen* (1903), and Lady Gregory's *The Travelling Man* (1905) – drawing the point that "the figure of the stranger in the house accorded with the Celticism of Yeats, Gregory and the early theatre movement in so far as it set the pull of otherworldly transcendence within a stylised ground of family normality" (*The Politics* 75). Thus redefined and re-appropriated, the motif of the 'stranger in the house' has streamed through the work of contemporary Irish playwrights. In *The Weir* the mythical stories are related to the stranger in the pub, Valerie; *By the Bog of Cats* opens with the mystical Ghost Fancier; in *The Walworth Farce* a young Tesco cashier visits the family home.

iii. Dramaturgy

In an interview with Anthony Roche in 2002, Thomas Kilroy points to the influence of what he describes as the "Anglic tradition" in Irish theatre. Grouping Farquhar, Wilde, Shaw, Yeats and Beckett in this category, he considers that what differentiates them from other Irish playwrights is threefold:

> They have this high degree of literary consciousness, as opposed to theatrical consciousness […,] an emphasis upon the powerful personality of the writer, the individual writer. The work is an expression of personal individuality, personal vision, personal consciousness. […] There's also a marked emphasis upon the form and structure of the work. And finally there's a use of language, which is not simply a rendition of language, not simply language as an imitation of speech. Instead it is language used as play, language used as orchestration; something interesting is being done with the language. (153)

Without aiming to unpack each of his claims in relation to contemporary playwriting, Kilroy's points about the legacy of an Anglic tradition – "a high degree of literary consciousness"; "personal vision"; "a marked emphasis upon the form and structure"; "something interesting is being done with the language" – will guide our approach to the case studies of the 1990s and the millennium in order to demonstrate a dramaturgic tradition or a departure from it.

2. The Contemporary Playwright's Environment (1990s-)

Having defined elements common to most Irish plays (the political, myth, literariness) and mapped a lasting concern with tradition, this section will focus on the external elements that nurture or hinder the development of Irish dramatists since the 1990s. A reflection on the funding landscape is necessary before delving into individual case studies. Selecting Carr, Walsh and McPherson in the 1990s also illustrates the varied forces at work in the early career of this generation of playwrights. A play cannot exist in a vacuum, and a successful (or not) premiere often seals its fate: how, therefore, are contemporary Irish playwrights supported in creating new drama and bringing it to the stage?

a. The golden generation

Since 1989, Carr, McPherson, Walsh, O'Rowe and McDonagh have contributed over eighty plays to the canon of Irish theatre, with Fintan O'Toole describing them as the "golden" generation of playwrights ("Can Irish dramatists"). A brief quantitative list highlights the scope of their stage writing to date: Enda Walsh has written twenty-one plays and three operas; Marina Carr, twenty plays and two adaptations; Conor McPherson twelve plays and four adaptations; Mark O'Rowe ten plays and two adaptations; and Martin McDonagh ten plays. As these playwrights not only precede (and possibly influence) but also continue to write alongside the generation under scrutiny, I will examine Marina Carr's *By The Bog of Cats* (1998), Conor McPherson's *The Weir* (1999), and Enda Walsh's *The Walworth Farce* (2006) as apt representatives of their innovative variety.

Three important areas of support existed for playwrights at the end of the last century: the independent theatre sector, the Abbey, and international venues. This section will explore how the "golden" generation and the writers of the millennium had their plays produced, and the various subsidy systems that supported them in their endeavours.

i. Funding

As we have been framing this discussion in a historical perspective, one must remember that playwrights used to rely nearly exclusively on the box office. Though a commercial play is not always synonymous with a good play, Morash cites Farquhar to indicate that theatre participates to the building of community:

> 'a good play is not one which follows a prescribed set of rules, but one of which the audience approves. […] commercial success demonstrates that the play contributes to the common good.' This is a vitally theatrical idea. That which is right – whether politically or theatrically – is not laid down according to some set of authorities; it is tested, moment by moment, in the presence of a community who make up a theatre audience. (*A History* 36)

Plays are indeed commodities, written to be produced, performed and consumed, and to provide a living for playwrights. Historically the Irish playwright has always been at the mercy of external forces (the colonial rulers, the state, the Catholic church, the judiciary and the media) and internal forces (the National Theatre, theatre boards, producers, artistic teams), and their survival is based on their ability to gain private patronage but mostly to gain the favour of wide audiences. This picture of full theatres has faded in the twentieth century with the diversification of entertainment and media, and with the increasing price of theatre tickets. Before a playwright can make a professional living through royalties, they require the support (in commissioning and development) that will allow them to reach national and international recognition.

Producing a play is a costly process and can only be achieved with financial support from the Arts Council, either directly to the applicant – which is more common now than it was in the 1990s – or indirectly through the big theatres in Dublin, or the independent theatre sector. Understanding the financial realities is essential since "funding for theatre determines the who, what, why, where and how of practices generally" (Jordan, *Dissident* 14).

In the 1990s there was no direct funding system from the Arts Council to the playwright, resulting in a dependence by playwrights on the Abbey and the independent theatre companies. Over forty independent companies existed in the 1990s, many of them resident in cities and towns. Dublin had over 15 different companies operating in and around the city including the Abbey, Rough Magic, Fishamble, Calypso, Corn Exchange, Passion Machine and Performance Corporation. Druid operated in Galway, Corcadorca and Meridian in Cork, Red Kettle in Waterford, Island in Limerick, Gallowglass in Clonmel, and Blue Raincoat in Sligo. All of these companies depended on funding by the Arts Council and their local authorities, as box-office returns only provide a small ratio of their running and production costs. Grene points out, these "smaller independent companies […] have often been

associated with individual playwrights, even though that was not their original remit" ("Irish Theatre" 423).

A large percentage of independent companies did concentrate their output on one playwright. Established in the mid-1970s, Druid championed Tom Murphy, then Martin McDonagh, Enda Walsh and now Sonya Kelly; Fly-by-night produced plays by Conor McPherson; Corn Exchange by Michael West; Corcadorca by Enda Walsh; Tall Tales by Deirdre Kinahan; Red Kettle by Jim Nolan; Island Theatre by Mike Finn; Gallowglass by Colin Teevan; Blood in the Alley by Micheál Lovett. Many of these playwrights had a link with the company, either because they were local artists or, in the case of almost all of the above, because they co-founded the company. In their introduction to *The Palgrave Handbook of Contemporary Irish Theatre and Performance* Eamonn Jordan and Eric Weitz observe that:

> While the writing of plays remains central to the more established or conventional theatres, the number of productions originating from a text written in advance by a sole writer seems to be on the wane – and this is a pattern repeated across Europe. […] We have not, in any case, gotten to the point where there are discussions about the death of the director in ways that we have about the death of the playwright. (22)

In this funereal context, these independent companies prove crucial to sustain the development of play writing not only through championing one particular playwright but also through producing plays from a multitude of emerging writers.

Since their inception in 1975 Druid theatre company have premiered 37 new plays from 21 playwrights including Tom Murphy, Marina Carr, Enda Walsh, Martin McDonagh, Billy Roche, Vincent Woods, Lucy Caldwell, Sonya Kelly and others. From 1984 to their closure in 2008 Passion Machine presented 31 new plays by 16 different playwrights including Paul Mercier, Roddy Doyle, Nell McCafferty, Michael Harding and Deirdre Hines. Rough Magic have premiered work by 18 playwrights, Red Kettle 15, Corcadorca 9, Meridian 5, Pigsback 6, Galloglass 5 and Calypso 5. These 9 companies between them championed the work of

116 playwrights. Of the companies mentioned above only Druid, Fishamble (formerly Pigsback), and Rough Magic continue to present new work. The others folded over the years, due to lack of funding. By then, the golden generation had established its prominence over national and international stages, achieving a reputation that spares them the necessity of applying for funding and being assured of their plays receiving high quality production support.

ii. A variety of paths to ground-breaking productions

Conor McPherson wrote and directed his first play *Inventing Fortune's Wheel* in 1992 for University College Dublin's Dramsoc's "One World Week" for a one-off performance by Fly By Night, the theatre company he co-founded. *A Light in the Window of Industry* followed in 1993, *The Stars Lose Their Glory*, *Rum and Vodka* and *The Good Thief* (originally titled *The Light of Jesus*) in 1994 and *This Lime Tree Bower* in 1995. This extraordinary body of work for a young emerging playwright in such a short period of time caught the attention of the Bush Theatre in London, which invited him as writer-in-residence in 1996 and staged his new play *St. Nicholas* in 1997, making his breakthrough production in London rather than Dublin because he had support there.

Most of McPherson's early plays are monologues. Possibly to develop McPherson's range and to respond to the demands of his company, Stephen Daldry, the artistic director of the Royal Court Theatre, commissioned McPherson in 1997 to write a play stipulating that it had to be in dialogue format (Cummings 308). *The Weir* (1998) premiered at the 60-seater upstairs theatre at the RCT for a three-week run. It was so successful that it played for two years in London and then transferred to Broadway. Despite Daldry's stipulation, McPherson only adapted, rather than abandoned, the monologue as the play interweaves dialogues and

monologues, thereby creating a dramaturgic form not often seen on the Irish stage before. Yet, the play further departs from his early work in that it is the first to be set in a rural setting rather than an urban one, and to contain no violence, thus exhibiting acute formal and thematic changes.

The first production of Marina Carr's *Low in the Dark*, by Crooked Sixpence theatre company, who were linked to Dramsoc in UCD, took place at Project Arts Centre in 1989. Her very first play *Ullaloo* (1989) was not produced until 1991, at the Peacock, where "it met with exceptionally negative reviews, most of them sneeringly hostile" (Lonergan, *Irish Drama* 132). While evidence shows that Carr is the only playwright of the 'golden generation' to have worked with the Abbey from her early years, notably producing *The Mai* in 1994 and *Portia Coughlan* in 1996, a counterargument is that those plays were limited to the Peacock, the experimental studio stage of the Abbey. *Portia Coughlan* transferred to the Royal Court that year and was a hit with London audiences leading to U.K. and U.S. success.

Carr's breakthrough to the main stage of the Abbey was with *By the Bog of Cats* in 1998, directed by Patrick Mason, which effectively signalled her arrival as an important new voice, though it should be acknowledged that the set would not have fitted on the stage of the Peacock. Criticism has been directed at the Abbey with regard to Carr's late arrival on the main stage. The 1990s was one of the most prolific decades in the twentieth century for plays and playwrights. In addition to new plays by Friel, Murphy, Leonard, Kilroy and McGuinness, the Abbey also produced work by Sebastian Barry, Billy Roche, Michael Harding, Jimmy Murphy and Jim Nolan to name a few. Barry's *Prayers of Sherkin* was produced for the Peacock in 1990 and he would wait until 1998 for a second Peacock play, *Boss Grady's Boys*, and until 2009 for a main stage debut with *Tales of Ballycumber*.

Bearing in mind he wrote the extraordinary *Steward of Christendom* for the Royal Court in 1995, it shows the competition for space at the Abbey was intense. Excepting Carr, of the 'golden generation' in the 1990s only Walsh was fortunate enough to have a play, again at the Peacock, with *Sucking Dublin* in 1997. While Carr had earlier access to the Peacock, this brief overview suggests that in her access to Irish recognition by the Abbey, she came after a long list of male playwrights.

Enda Walsh wrote his first full-length play *Fishy Tales* (1993) for Graffiti, the youth theatre company in Cork. Beginning his long collaboration with Corcadorca, under the artistic direction of Pat Kiernan, with *The Ginger Ale Boy* (1995) at the Granary Theatre in Cork, his breakthrough came the same year with Corcadorca, *Disco Pigs*. Starring students Eileen Walsh and Cillian Murphy, and touring for two years, *Disco Pigs* gained national and international recognition.[7] In "The Plays of Enda Walsh", Murray outlines the impact of the play in Germany, where it prompted 42 productions between 1998 and 2001, and secured "valuable contacts within the German theatre; his *New Electric Ballroom* would be premiered in the Kammerspiele, Munich, in 2004" (14). While his plays are produced internationally, and many premiered outside of Ireland, he continues to work closely with Irish companies and to tour Ireland. After Corcadorca, his work has been produced by Druid, and more recently – *Ballyturk* (2014), *Arlington* (2016) and *Medicine* (2021) – by Landmark Productions.

b. The Millennium playwrights

i. Funding context

[7] The subsequent tour of the play included Edinburgh, London, Toronto, Budapest, Leeds, Copenhagen, Bonn, Berlin, Brighton, Melbourne, Adelaide Coventry, Bristol and Manchester.

The aforementioned reduction of funding to the independent theatre sector, which resulted in the closure of over 30 companies, can be regarded as a precipitating factor in weakening the position of the playwright over the past two decades. The Arts Council archive is difficult to access – and not comprehensive. However, my research into the funding lists from 2010-2019 on "Who we have funded" – which only mentions a fraction of those funded – indicates that the work of the theatre-makers has received most of the funding, followed by the development plays by actor-authors. In that period, less than a dozen grants were awarded for the production of a script authored by one writer (see Appendix 1). To illustrate the paucity of funding available to playwrights, let us consider two years of project funding, based on the information published by the Arts Council. In 2013, 3 million euro was distributed to 110 award winners – among these, 308,000 euro was granted to four playwrights for production of their plays: Amy Conroy, Carmel Winters, Paul Meade and Jim Nolan. In 2017, the project fund was in excess of 1.75 million euro and distributed to 46 successful applicants. The entire amount granted to playwrights was less than 90,000 euro. John McCarthy, Mairead Devlin, and Bairbre Ní Caoimh received development funding of less than 10,000 euros each; Deirdre Kinahan and Una McKevitt, both playwrights, received respectively 25,000 euro and 53,000 for projects that are clearly interdisciplinary and collaborative, and which could therefore be categorised under theatre maker work rather than literary plays. This stark chasm between the funding of the 5 playwrights that year is further evidence of the tendencies of the AC but also the fact that playwrights may be tempted to engage with different arts forms and collaborations if they want to be subsidised. The remaining 1.6 million euro was distributed to clear theatre-making projects, actor-author plays, and restaging classic plays and adaptations. Yet, the independent theatre sector is crucial for developing and supporting new playwrights, especially in a small country, and bringing them national and sometimes, international attention. Beyond this now diminished

number of platforms, there are two alternatives for playwrights – the Abbey theatre and the Royal Court in the UK – and the chosen are few.

ii. The role of the Abbey

The Abbey is the Holy Grail for not only the playwright but also actors, directors, and designers as it garners prestige and provides much needed employment. As a producing house the number of new plays produced for the Peacock and Abbey stages far outweighs that provided by the independent sector. From 1990 to 2000, the Abbey presented 87 new plays on their two stages an average of almost 9 plays a year. 2010 to 2020 shows a reduced average annual figure of 6 per annum, but it still shows the Abbey as a leading producer of new writing. As the national theatre, it receives 50% of AC funding – in 2008, 10 million out of an overall budget for theatre of 19 million; in 2017, 6.1 million out of a total 13.5 million. As the national theatre, it is expected to be the champion of Irish playwriting. Yet, few of the contemporary playwrights discussed in this chapter have graced the main stage of the Abbey. One might argue that, in focusing their attention on the celebrated, established Irish playwrights (Friel, Murphy, McGuinness), the Abbey missed the opportunity to develop a series of brand new voices; voices that were discovered and supported in the UK.

In the UK, since its inception in 1905, the Royal Court Theatre has championed the work of new playwrights, and its reopening in the 1950s marked the beginning of its identity as the writers' theatre, one which opened its doors to Irish playwrights (See Appendix 4) Focusing on the new millennium, the Royal Court has presented 10 plays by Irish playwrights since 2000 (including Carr and McPherson) – a rite of recognition that 'makes' a playwright internationally.

3. The Golden Generation: Case Studies

In selecting McPherson, Carr and Walsh, the argument that is put forward is dual. I suggest that their plays contain thematic elements of myth and political discourse as well as formal dramaturgic elements that link them back to Friel; yet, I also identify a move away from realism as a common innovative feature. In particular I will make use of Grene's suggestion that "every dramatist, every dramatic movement claims that they can deliver the true Ireland which has previously been misrepresented, travestied, rendered in sentimental cliché or political caricature" (*The Politics* 6). By this he does not refer to a critique of a national discourse necessarily but rather to an interpretation of Ireland, in the same way that the 'golden generation' has discarded conventional assumptions regarding plays as political vehicles. Grene contends that the "figures of stage interpreter, Irish genre scene and English/Irish marriage initiated by Boucicault are redeployed by Shaw and Friel" (18), and the case studies will show that these "figures of stage interpreter" are also "redeployed" by the 'golden generation' and the playwrights of the new millennium.

a. McPherson. *The Weir* (1997)

Set over one evening in a pub somewhere in northwest Leitrim or Sligo, the play contains four characters. Brendan, who owns the pub; Jack, the ageing mechanic and his friend Jim, an odd-job man; Dubliner Valerie who has purchased a house locally from the auctioneer, Finbar, who also has a thriving hotel business. Finbar brings Valerie to the pub to introduce her to the locals and over drinks and cigarettes Finbar, Jack, and Jim present monologues about ghost-like stories that happened to them. The play closes with Valerie's story, which centres on the tragic drowning of her daughter and what she believes is her daughter's attempt to contact her from the spirit world.

i. The political: criticism of rural Ireland?

McPherson tends to be considered as apolitical, and he himself acknowledged that he felt unencumbered by Irish history until 2008. Andrew Hazucha nonetheless re-reads *The Weir* as exhibiting McPherson's attention to "a veiled history of contested natural landscapes" (70), thereby suggesting that the play reveals not only the characters' psychological and emotional texture but also their relation to Ireland's "fractious history" (80). In itself, *The Weir* is a departure from his previous plays. In "Irish Theatre: A Writer's Theatre", Grene writes that the monologues in McPherson's plays prior to *The Weir* "are told by messed-up men in a world of drink-sodden urban grunge" (430). Indeed, McPherson's first plays were all based in an urban setting where working-class characters, excessive drinking and violence were the norm. By contrast, *The Weir* seems to claim its pastoral nature through its setting in an idealised rural Ireland, in "a small rural bar" (McPherson 5), a picture postcard for some, but also a place of loneliness and decay. The bar has only "three beer taps", "three stools at the counter", "a fireplace", "a stove", "an old television" and "a small radio on a shelf behind the bar", "some old black-and-white photographs", one of a "ruined abbey", "people posing by a newly erected ESB weir" (7).

Rhona Trench contends that "placing an image within a particular context on the wall of the pub activates the operation of community", and that the photographs therefore offer a "paradigmatic example of the journeying through narrative boundaries in *The Weir*":

> narratives reaching out to the possibilities of humankind's interconnectedness and separateness, of inclusiveness and exclusiveness, of individual and collective identity, continually appealing to what might be outside of and beyond the stories suggested in the photo frames. (173-174)

The characters who inhabit this idyllic location, from the "widow woman" to Fr Donal and Sergeant Walsh, prompt the sense of a small, tight-knit local community, and unmistakeably an Irish one. But can the characters, especially the local ones, be regarded as remnants of the Stage Irishman? Grene further posits that *The Weir* relies on "certain standard recurrent motifs", such as "the opposition of country and city, village and small town, persistent celibacy or late marriage among the men, woman as edgily desired sex-object in a heavily repressed society" (*The Politics* 261) – certainly the presence of two spaces underlies the action and characterisation. The West is not only the favoured background for McDonagh's biting representations on rural Ireland, but it is given an alternative portrayal in *The Weir*. For Jordan, it "embodies a consciousness that is driven by a feel for the authentic, for a recourse to a grounded sense of identity that is harmonious and not fractured" (Jordan *Dissident Dramaturgies* 117). If the play offers itself as a pastoral, it might be through this very accumulation of pastoral signs, which Jordan in "Pastoral Exhibits" to define *The Weir* as a "meta-pastoral" (351), that it can be read as a critique of a past-yet-present Ireland.

ii. Myth

As each of the stories unfolds, the veneer of the pastoral is gradually scraped away to reveal the underbelly of the community. Resentment and hostility are often expressed, in an uninhibited language, such as Jack's towards Finbar: "don't come in here for the first time in God knows, thinking we're fucking hicks. Cause you're from around here" (51). While plays in urban settings, and the plays of O'Rowe in particular, do not shy away from expletives, their effect in a pastoral setting is notable as such words were seldom used before the 1990s.

The stories told reveal the prejudices and secrets responsible for the tensions between the characters portrayed in the monologues. McPherson's main characters are equally flawed. Jack, having inherited his father's garage in the 1960s, and "swanning around" like "a man of substance" is now "spinning small jobs out all day. Taking hours to fix a puncture. Stops you thinking about what might have been and what you should have done" (67). Jack, Jim and Brendan appear to be in a state of paralysis, unable to do anything about their situations. They are all single with very little financial stability and no future prospects. Mythical rural Ireland therefore becomes a space of stasis, an Ireland that slowly diminishes the drive of its inhabitants to a standstill. According to Brian Devaney, this is a point common to many characters in pastoral plays: they are "trapped between a traditional rural mode of living and a far more progressive and modern interpretation of it" (583). The play explodes the myth of the pastoral west. The pastoral surface disguises a debauched underbelly of alcoholism and abuse, a clear example to metropolitan audiences about how far they have progressed from primitive rurality.

From Brendan who stands "behind that bar with my arms folded" (70) to Finbar, who inherited his father's estate, McPherson's depiction of Irish rural men in *The Weir* is damning, so that "the play can be read as an exposé of a disintegrating rural community in which youthful ambition is stunted by a pathological attachment to place" (Matthews 156). This focus on place – central to Irish drama – shows the myth of Ireland not only as a superficial rural background but as a silent presence exercising its inexorable pull on the characters. Jack's final monologue illustrates this but also permits a tentative epiphany: "I couldn't understand why she wanted to be running off up to Dublin. […] I don't know why it was a thing with me that I . . . an irrational fear, I suppose, that kept me here" (64). McPherson shows little empathy towards these men but "*The Weir* is identifiably,

recognisably, an Irish play (Grene 261)" and "the Irish play is a distinct and distinctly marketable phenomenon" (262) that proved successful: mythic Ireland still sells.

iii. Dramaturgy

In their introduction to *The Theatre of Conor McPherson*, Lilian Chambers and Eamonn Jordan posit that:

> In *The Weir* the ghost stories and personal narratives suggest a persistent haunting, a past that cannot be let go of, as memories retard momentum into the present, and alongside this, grief, fear, stubbornness, cussedness, or other forebodings impact on the choices in the lives of the play's characters. (13)

Irish literature is replete with ghost stories, fairy stories, haunted houses and strange visitors, from *The Land of Heart's Desire* to *The Dreaming of the Bones* (1931), that participate in a certain representation of Ireland as a place of myths. For Patrick Lonergan, in McPherson's plays "the metaphor of the ghostly is often used to dramatize the distinctions between how things appear to be on the surface of a society, and what is really the case" (*Irish Drama* 185). This idea of both conscious dramatization of a ghostly environment is articulated in Jack's monologue:

> And there's no dark like a winter night in the country. And there was a wind like this one tonight, howling and whistling in off the sea. You hear it under the door and it's like someone singing. Singing in under the door at you. It was this type of night now. Am I setting the scene for you? (*They laugh)* (31)

For Scott T. Cummings, the monologues enable the transformation of the characters so that their stories come to define and to save them:

> I have a story, therefore I am. This is the lifeblood and essence of McPherson's troubled heroes. Whatever misadventures overtake them and whatever ignominy or sorrow may come as a result, the fact of having a story and the act of telling it constitute a kind of redemption, a saving grace which imbues their profane lives with a touch of the sublime. (303)

This corresponds to a shift in language which occurs when the men commence telling stories, as if this retelling of the past brought them to a more polished and poetic world. Jack recounts a story that was told to him. Finbar is the hero of his own story. Jim instead acts out the dialogue between himself and the other characters in his story. Valerie and Jack's monologues are personal stories.

Each of the storytellers in turn assumes the character of the traditionally venerated position of *seanchaí* and by dint of telling their story their status is elevated, to storyteller, performer, someone to be listened to, not just by those present in the pub but also the audience in the theatre. Finbar, Jim, Valerie and Jack, like the *seanchais* of old, tell stories of local happenings and of the Otherworld, an Otherworld that also pervades Marina Carr's *By the Bog Of Cats.*

b. Marina Carr. *By the Bog Of Cats* (1998)

The play contains twelve characters. Hester Swane is a settled Irish traveller who lives with her daughter Josie in a small house near the caravan she grew up in on the 'Bog of Cats'. She is in her late thirties and still besotted by Carthage, who became her lover when he was sixteen, fourteen years earlier. He is due to marry Caroline, the daughter of a local farmer. Catwoman is a blind woman who wears a long furry cat coat and eats mice. She is able to talk to ghosts and has a sage-like perspicacity that everyone ignores to their peril. Carr's play is loosely inspired by the Greek myth of Medea, who murdered her children when her husband Jason left her for another woman.

i. The political: women's agency?

Following the Abbey production of *By the Bog of Cats*, Marina Carr suggests that her work is apolitical: "I don't think I've ever sat down to write a play to try and prove a moral point, to examine a strata of society. I always start with characters. I start with the heart, what people feel, and what they do" (qtd. in Patrick Kelleher). At the same time, she frames her focus on women's stories and female psychology as a necessary shift from male narratives in a post-*Hedda Gabler* and post-*Doll's House* modern society (ibid). Symptomatic of Carr's theatre, according to Melissa Sihra, is that "everyday life and social expectations fail to offer fulfilment" (11), and this applies in particular to the main characters, who are women. In *Dissident Dramaturgies* Jordan seems to deny a political reading to her portrayal of gender:

> Carr does not set in stone clear-cut oppositions between male and female, nor does she reverse previous gender stereotypes where women were weak and ineffective in the shaping of dramatic action in so many plays written by men: instead, in her work the women characters determine and are shaped by the dramatic action. (159)

Indeed, all the characters, regardless of gender – Carthage and his wife, his mother and his father-in-law – aim to remove Hester from their lives, so that her actions in the play consist in "not runnin' with me tail between me legs just because certain people wants me out of their way" (16). Regardless of gender issues, Hester's rejection, in a contemporary Irish context, aligns with where the travelling community are discriminated against and pushed aside and away from established communities.

In "Character, Writing, and Landscape in *Woman and Scarecrow* and Other Plays by Marina Carr", Cathy Leeney suggests that Carr's work is better understood away from traditional parameters:

> Frameworks for reading Carr's work—as realist, as Irish, as feminist in a materialist sense—may be seen as confining the plays to categories no longer, perhaps, as crucial as they once were, before the impact of globalized, technologized situations of environmental crisis. Carr's continuing focus on women in her plays creates the possibility of a renewal of the symbolic power of the woman figure onstage, growing out of this new context. (706)

In exploring this new context, Carr diversifies the roles traditionally given to women and has recourse to myths to establish women's perennial symbolic power.

iii. Myth

Carr borrows from Celtic and Greek mythology in her plays. If Hester's killing of her daughter is reminiscent of the murderous Medea (Jordan, *Dissident* 159), her links to the animal world grounds her in Celtic folklore. Her name Hester Swane belies the recurrent image of the swan, an animal that not only "symbolises death and the afterlife in myth and folklore" but is also associated with the feminine (Noonan, 60). Indeed, the world of her female characters is linked to, sometimes populated by death, and "the boundaries between the natural and supernatural worlds are porous" (60). The Ghost Fancier, a sort of Grim Reaper, comes to claim Hester; her fate seems to be sealed by the prophecy spoken by her mother, that Hester "will live as long as this black swan, not a day more, not a day less" (22). Carr plays with myths, so that Bernadette Bourke suggests subversion, degradation, and reversal of myth "in the Ghost Fancier who mistakes dawn for dusk", "in the grotesque figure of Catwoman who eats mice and has mouse fur growing out through her teeth", and in that "a girl child is sacrificed instead of the traditional boys" (129-130). As a character Hester also explodes the myth of the Irish mother, and exposes her as the perpetrator of infanticide. Her attachment is not to family, but to land – in this instance the bog – which becomes a place that she herself haunts until her death.

Of the 'golden generation' Carr's work seems most defined by intertextuality, notably borrowings from Greek literature. Her early work, *Low in the Dark* (1989) and *Ullaloo* (1991), is reminiscent of Beckett. Both plays lean towards the absurd, and Carr herself

admitted that she "was obsessed with Beckett at the time. He was just pouring off me" (Keating "Marina Carr"). In *Low in the Dark* one of the characters is called Curtains and is dressed as a set of curtains throughout the performance, while Baxter and Bone become pregnant even though they are male characters. For Sarahjane Scaife, who played Binder in the original production, the characters also expressed the tragic of their fate with a "Beckettian appreciation of the humour which is absolutely integral to our human condition" (13). Yet, *By the Bog of Cats* also appears strongly influenced by Friel's *Philadelphia Here I Come* in that the examination of the father-son relationship is inverted to that of the mother-daughter.

In *By the Bog of Cats* she creates what looks structurally like a conventional play (a three act play following Hester's character arc), but could be defined as a surreal play rooted in realism, or as Melissa Sihra explains,

> a kind of 'heightened realism', working on mythic, densely metaphoric levels, where lyrical narratives of memory and flashback, disrupt temporal and 'historical' linearity, effecting a repeated discordance between subjective 'truth' and speculative invention. ("Reflections" 94)

Clearly, suspension of disbelief is required to engage with the metamorphoses and supernatural beings conjured in the plays. Carr nonetheless enforces the power of realism, linking the characters to place, through the use of naturalistically-rendered dialects. Writing about *The Mai*, but this applies to *By Bog of Cats* as well, Eilís Ní Dhuibhne emphasises Carr's ease with language:

> Her ability to select and reproduce the richest aspects of dialects and idiolects, to exploit phrases, sentences, and proverbial expressions for their humour or beauty, and her skill in selecting words which can on occasion, convey elemental passion or the mystical attachment of people to their natural environment, and the most impressive aspects of her particular genius. (65)

The midlands dialect charges the language. Carr talks about "the charge the characters must carry" which Fouéré describes as "unspoken information which the audience receives

through the dialect" (581). It is also "the primal energy that drives Hester" (580). The dialect has resonances of an older Ireland and the Gammon language of the travellers evoking an indigenous group linked to the land, and carrying a poetic dimension.

c. Enda Walsh. *The Walworth Farce* (2006)

An Irish father, Dinny, and his two sons, Blake and Seán, dress up in costume every day to play out the story of how they left Cork to find themselves in a Council flat off Walworth Road in London, making changes to the script as it evolves. All three characters play multiple roles at a frantic pace, the momentum of which increases with the arrival of a local Tesco cashier, Hayley, who will enable the discovery of an unfolding horror story: Dinny's murder of his brother and his sister-in-law at an Irish wake over the contents of the will, a plot element that has shades of Irish representative plays from an earlier century but structurally motivates the characters to retell their stories.

i. The political: 'Three stooges' of Stage Irishmen?

The eighty or so opening stage directions show Walsh's precise vision of the characters and the space they inhabit. They also indicate the farcical, in the sense of exaggerated/magnified, picture he draws of his London-Irish characters. Dinny sits in an armchair at a table "with six cans of harp on it", wearing a "bad brown yellowing wig on his head" and "a tight ill-fitting suit that makes him look clownish". Dinny's son Blake "stands in his vest and underpants" ironing (5). Sean's "hair has been shaved so that he looks as if he's badly balding" (6). Walsh specifies that *"the three speak in Cork accents"* and that *"the performance style resembles The Three Stooges*" (7). The soundscape opens with an Irish

lullaby, then *"suddenly the tape recorder blasts out the Irish traditional song 'A Nation Once Again'"* (7). Though the action is set in London, Walsh offers a self-conscious representation of Ireland, one based on specific local pointers and clichés.

Walsh combines and modernises the traditional Stage Irishman with the outwardly comical American "Three Stooges", yet, the murder and mayhem are more akin to the violent Irish stereotype than the comic version, and he borrows much from Tom Murphy. Walsh's Dinny mirrors Murphy's Dada who "could flatten any man that came my way with my fists" (*A Whistle* 27), and is also an Irish immigrant living in England with his sons. In *The Politics of Magic*, O'Toole explains the brutality of such characters: "being a rural Irish peasant people, the Irish had little use for manners" and were a "savage" rather than a "civilised" race, which in a civilised society like Coventry or London manifests itself in an instinct to "throw themselves at an obstacle with extraordinary violence" (57-58). Dinny and Dada are anachronistic in that they are "people from a previous time living in a contemporary world" (59) and using violence and control to navigate it. Walsh's dysfunctional brutal family are not realistic "representations of Ireland" and "the world of this drama cannot so easily piggyback on the myth of exile and the trauma of diasporic experiences" (Jordan *Dissident Dramaturgies* 244). Walsh's play is a satirical attack on Murphy's *A Whistle in the Dark* and as Jordan observes, Walsh is "contesting the very sensibility of the world of Murphy's drama, deeming it to bear no resemblance to the reality of Ireland in a new millennium" (244).

ii. Myth

Fundamentally, the world of Walsh is one of joyous distortion, and his referencing theatrical traditions (the stage Irishmen, but also the stranger-in-the-house who becomes an unwilling

audience to their theatrics) within the diasporic London locale may be seen as the sole nod to myth, that of a fixed image of Ireland exploded into global snapshots:

> [i]f representations of Ireland are now recognised as multiple, refracted across the globe as much as across the island then, because we no longer have one shared place, one Ireland, we can no longer have a naturalistic theatre of recognition in which a world is signalled to us through objects and we tacitly agree to recognise it as our own. (O'Toole qtd. in Richards 11)

One may therefore argue that Walsh criticises the vision of a mythical Ireland, one vehiculated by theatrical tropes as well, by rejecting the naturalistic form of the traditional Irish play and satirising stereotypes. In the closing scene Dinny asks his sons "for what are we . . . if we are not our stories?" (82). Lisa Fitzpatrick observes that Walsh's,

> strange dramatic worlds are inhabited by dysfunctional characters who create their own private languages, as in *Disco Pigs*; or their own myths that structure and limit their lives, as in *Bedbound*, *The Walworth Farce* and *The New Electric Ballroom*; or who struggle against the silencing of stories, as in *The Small Things*. ("Enda Walsh" 439)

iii. Dramaturgy

The influence of the absurd on Walsh is made evident by the play's metatheatricality. Here in titling the play a 'farce' and using the play-within-a-play as the foundational structure. In an interview with Michael Billington Walsh clarifies the legacy of Beckett:

> Beckett's not a conscious influence . . . but he taught us all two great things. One is that he helped free drama from any obligation to be sociological; the other is that he showed us the power of real time. I'm hugely attracted to that and don't really understand theatre that deals with action over several days. And, although I may have started out being preoccupied by language, I'm now obsessed by form. ("Enda Walsh")

Beckett may not be a "conscious influence" but *Bedbound* (2000), *Ballyturk* (2014), and *Medicine* (2024) all centre on characters in claustrophobic spaces entertaining themselves

with their own stories. In *Walworth*, Walsh's vision is of a bunker-like space where the hermit-like agoraphobic characters create their own playground.

Claustrophobia is emphasised by an apparently linear structure in *The Walworth Farce* revealing itself to be in fact one of repetition. The characters are presented as performers preparing for the show: Blake irons his costume, Dinny polishes his shoes, while Sean organises his props (6). The cast are getting into costume, putting on face make-up, and checking the sound. Dinny turns the lights off and "*immediately turns them back on again*" (7) signifying the start of their play. But the rehearsal is repeated each day as they ritually try to improve telling their stories, a process of repetition with variations that echoes Pinter's pattern in his early plays. The arrival of Hayley, the 'stranger in the house', triggers a change in their routine in that they now have an audience: the characters are unable to allow her to leave as much as they are unable to stop acting, and conceal their eccentricities. They have to *perform* in front of her.

Lachman observes that:

> The key issue is the question of how characters in Irish drama relate to their own stories and fictions they live in—and consequently, of how they investigate, subvert, and circumvent the layers of artifice in the attempt to control them and reach a deeper, more authentic vision or understanding of themselves and the world around them. (111)

The characters have emigrated to England, in what appears as a forced exile insofar as Dinny's obsession suggests: "all talk of Ireland […] everything's Ireland. His voice is stuck in Cork so it's impossible to forget what Cork is. This story we play is everything" (22). In 'playing', the characters have amended their experience of Ireland, their 'Irishness' into non-referential words, as Blake admits:

> all them pictures have stopped. I say his [Dinny] words and all I can see is the word. A lot of words piled on top of other words. There's no sense to my day 'cause the sense isn't important any more. No pictures. No dreams. Words only. (*A pause*) All I've got is the memory of the roast chicken, Sean. (22)

Lisa Fitzpatrick argues that although "the language may reflect Walsh's fascination with Cork speech patterns and accents, his darkly absurd characters in their strange worlds do not comment on or reflect Irish society" (451). There is very little in terms of discussion of Ireland, and where Ireland is mentioned, Walsh's intention is dramaturgical – and more often than not at the service of comedy – rather than critical, for instance here with an occasional reference to the global issue of immigration:

> DINNY. Ireland's a terrible hole and you'll get no argument from me . . . but I'll say this about it . . . it gives fools a fighting chance. […] The truth be told the Irishman is not the master builder of yesteryear. That title belongs to the men of Eastern Europe. (9-13)

The three authors studied here have clearly been influenced by their forefathers – especially Friel, Murphy and Beckett – but have appropriated the idea of the political and the use of myth to serve their dramaturgic development. Their work defines contemporary Irish drama, an achievement symbolically acknowledged by their presence, at long last, on the stage of the Abbey, a space reserved for Irish classics. In considering the playwrights that followed them in relation to a legacy of literary Irish playwriting, the next section asks whether the playwrights of the millennium have irretrievably broken with tradition.

4. The New Millennium Playwrights

In the first two decades of the twenty-first century no playwright has emerged to comparable critical and popular acclaim as the 'golden generation'. It is possible that the 'new millennium' playwrights do not write with similar structures to their predecessors. By that I mean they are less likely to lean on myth, language and surrealism, and more likely to provide realistic settings and language or very experimental theatre. It is also possible that funding systems have changed irrevocably, that the disappearance of the independent theatre

company system has had long-lasting effects, and/or a leaning towards a more postdramatic form of theatre has changed the landscape of theatre, thereby relegating the playwright to a lesser role. There have been fine plays written by numerous playwrights during the period and while their work has been well-received by audiences and critics, in most cases they have found it difficult to have new work produced.

Insofar as the playwrights of the 1990s continue to write for the stage, it may appear arbitrary to divide their work from that of what I have defined as playwrights of the millennium – and the first case study, Michael West, who wrote plays in the 90s would validate it. However, the divide is not superficial but motivated by the features prevalent in these new plays and absent in the plays of the 'golden generation': a move away from realism into other aesthetic tendencies, and the visible influence of an Irish playwriting tradition. Using the same critical perspectives of the political, myth, and dramaturgy the case studies will not only explore plays that are not published, but also new and neglected authorial voices.

An Irish influence is visible, and not contested, in the plays of West, Ní Ríain and Mac An Bhaird, in particular through what Leerssen terms the "antirealist, antibourgeois, anticonventional" qualities of the Celtic Twilight writing which aimed to produce a literary programme at the end of the nineteenth century by blending three elements:

> a folklore interest in the popular, oral culture of the Irish peasantry; an antiquarian, mythological interest in the ancient legends and epic poems of the Gaels; and the occultist interest in a higher, spiritual enlightenment beyond the realm of positive, practical knowledge. (49)

Dublin by Lamplight (2004) is replete with references and images relating to the founding of the Abbey theatre a hundred years earlier but also to Yeats's Noh theatre. The opening stage directions of Yeats's *The Only Jealousy of Emer* suggest some of the characters to be

"masked, or their faces made up to be masks", which would provide a similar aesthetic to *commedia dell'arte*. The influences of some of the other Anglo-Irish playwrights are also evident. The "strangers in the house" in Synge's *The Shadow of the Glen* and Yeats's *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* and *The Land of Heart's Desire* reappear as a 'stranger' in *Melt* (2017). Ailís Ní Ríain's language in *The Tallest Man* is inherently poetic.

In effect, one might consider that five strands of Irish playwriting tradition have been threaded into the plays written in the millennium. The first strand can be traced back to Boucicault and is concerned with what Grene addresses as the idea of "reinterpreting Ireland" (18). The second one is linked to the Anglo-Irish playwrights, as discussed by Kilroy, and the use of Irish myths and an emphasis on literariness. The third one is illustrated by Sean O'Casey who dramatised his contemporary Irish history and made use of naturalist aesthetics: As Grene explains, "[i]t was fourth wall naturalism of a special sort, admired not just for its dramatic skill in creating a life-like illusion but for its near literal reproduction of the life of the people itself" (*The Politics* 134). O'Casey's characters mirror the stage Irish characters of Boucicault, but the heroic Juno holds a direct contrast to the stage Irishmen of Captain Boyle and Joxer. His tenement houses "were experienced by their first audiences in the 1920s as a world of the here and now" (133). *The Tallest Man in the World* (2013) and *Melt* are both plays in the "here and now". The fourth element is to be found in Friel's work, in what Kilroy identified as his "use of the stage as a place of illusion, play-acting, make-believe" (qtd. in Roche *Brian Friel* 8). These elements of "illusion" and "make-believe" pervade the case studies of the millennium playwrights: characters in the process of performing in *Dublin by Lamplight*, a character that cannot stop growing in *The Tallest Man*, and a creature discovered in the bowels of the earth in *Melt*. Finally, the golden generation has paved the way in re-appraising their links with these Irish traditions by

shifting away from a number of them, and the millennium playwrights seem to have followed their example in a radical manner.

a. Michael West. *Dublin by Lamplight* (2004)

Michael West developed his plays almost exclusively with Dublin-based theatre company The Corn Exchange, founded by artistic director Annie Ryan, following his early plays *A Play on Two Chairs* and *Scene Around Six* (The Three Joes Company, 1990). He gained critical recognition nationally with the touring of *Foley* in 2000, a one-actor play that requires sustained physicality from the actor. In a review of *A Play on Two Chairs* in 2012 Jesse Weaver sees the play "as the first tentative steps of a theatre artist experimenting with the intricacies of physical stage grammar as divorced from the constraints of narrative. It makes no pretensions towards being a play in the traditional sense" (*Irish Theatre Magazine*). This desire towards experimentation, both physical and textual (the latter being illustrated also through West's adaptations of classical plays), developed in productions driven equally by these two components, such as *Foley*, *Dublin by Lamplight* (2004), *Everyday* (2006), and *Freefall* (2009).

In his introduction to *Dublin by Lamplight* Michael West outlines his and Corn Exchange's objectives:

> Dublin, 1904, is associated with two cultural touchstones: the founding of the Abbey Theatre and the setting for James Joyce's *Ulysses* [. . .] Annie Ryan, the artistic director of Corn Exchange, was keen to explore a similar collision stylistically: between the brutal enactment that is *commedia dell'arte* and the Lyrical narrative that is Story Theatre.
> Early twentieth century Dublin seemed uniquely suited . . . from the poverty to the politics, the literature to the excrement, the period is fetid with myth-making and obsessed with the birth of a nation. Theatrically it was like imagining a silent movie with dialogue. (3)

The play is written for an ensemble *commedia dell'arte* performance, with six actors playing the parts of thirty characters. The play takes on the one day of the visit of the King to Dublin and of a new play premiere by an Irish playwright, culminating in an IRB bomb explosion.

i. The political: "Tonight you're going to act for Ireland" (13)

Centring on the founding of the Abbey Theatre, which is set on the 16 June 1904, *Dublin by Lamplight* is a satirical representation of Ireland. In addition, as Nicholas Grene points out, the recourse to *commedia* was a subversive nod to the Abbey:

> The performance style of exaggerated stylised gestures and the *commedia* make-up gave an alienating edge to the production, all the more piquant because so antithetical to the low relief naturalistic style for which the early Abbey actors were famous. ("The Physical and Verbal Theatre" 94)

In doing this, West borrows his theatrical leanings from the European rather than the Irish tradition. In correspondence with me, Michael West clarified:

> The great thing about the style is to anchor the characters in the stock types and keep that firmly in view — which then leaves you free to borrow and adapt from whatever you find, rather than chasing 'historical accuracy'. (mail to author, July 2/2024)

Historically *commedia* was used to express controversial ideas, where actors masked under comedy types could contest the authority of the church (see Peter Jordan). For West it presented itself as an ideal vehicle to satirise jointly the Anglo-Irish founders of the Abbey and the wealthy patronage of Annie Horniman through the character of Eva St. John. The play works on the dichotomies between rich and poor, educated and uneducated, art and economics. The blinding of artistic zeal of the privileged in contrast to an all-encompassing poverty of the working class is explained by Willy, as he strolls through the streets of Dublin in a self-referential monologue:

> WILLY. Dublin was a fine city this day of Our Lord MCMIV. Famous for its wit. Its intimate charm. Perhaps a little light in its appreciation of the performing arts.
> *He sings.*
> I'm trotting o'er the cobblestones of Dublin.
> Bedecked in memories of yesteryear.
> A tram runs by with a ting-ting-ting.
> A little boy begins to sing,
> I'm trotting o'er the cobblestones of –
> *He steps in dog shit.*
> *He exits passing two Dung Dodgers in overalls*. (14)

As a "representation of Ireland" this play succeeds, not in the depiction of Irish characters as other case studies in this chapter do, but in the setting, which is most obviously Dublin and the characters who are direct references to historical people. As Grene observes two of the central characters are Frank and Willie Hayes—for Fays—and Eva St John, belligerent political activist and the theatre's angel, who is a combination of Maud Gonne and Annie Horniman ("The Physical" 92). The play is therefore a satirical spoof on the founders and financial supporters of the Abbey, emphasised by the "performance style of exaggerated stylised gestures and the *commedia* make-up" which consciously opposed the "low relief naturalistic style for which the early Abbey actors were famous" (94). In content and aesthetics, the play's satirical edge invites a political reading. At the same time, if it gently mocks Irish national history in its accepted narrative, the metatheatrical dimension of the play renders any sharp critique ineffectual. As Willy shouts that "it is time to act for Ireland", his meaning is towards performance rather than political action.

ii. Myth

West has stated that the period of Yeats and Lady Gregory's foundation of the Irish Literary theatre and the Abbey "is fetid with myth-making" and he made full comedic use of the romanticised myth of the founding of the Abbey theatre (email to author). The play places

the exalted position of the Anglo-Irish founders of the theatre (represented in the character of Eva, inspired by a "combination of Maud Gonne and Annie Horniman") in the landscape of poverty-stricken Dublin:

> EVA. We're not doing any more plays Willy. It's not right. Not in the face of suffering.
> WILLY. What do you know about suffering? You've never had to haggle and scrounge. You've never had to sacrifice anything. You've never wanted for anything in your whole life.
> EVA. William!
> WILLY. This isn't a platform for your social profile, your meetings and your *cumanna* and your committees. This is the noble call. A chance to make our mark on history. Our chance to create a national drama to be proud of. (59)

Willy's understanding of national drama is a further wink at the contemporary Abbey as he explains that "it's not about the plays, it's about the building" (59), which in 2004 was a political hotcake because the Abbey were deciding to move location.

iii. Dramaturgy

Dublin by Lamplight is based on an idea Michael West had of commemorating the centenary of the founding of the Abbey theatre. As such, as we have seen, it makes satirical nods to real-life historical figures of 1904. West clarifies the intertextual identities of the characters as he worked on them with the cast:

> Martyn's name and character were slightly borrowed from Edward (who had dingy rooms on Nassau St) and from Joyce's Mr Duffy in A Painful . . .
> Maggie is a bit of Mary Boyle; and Evelyn from *Dubliners*; and her name and character were also inspired by Margarete in Goethe's *Faust*. . .
> Jimmy Finnegan is another nod to Joyce — and there are many names and nods around the place. (email to author)

Willy Hayes's play is titled *The Wooing of Emer* – advertised comically in error as *The Wowing of Emer* – its central characters Emer and Cuchulain providing the link to the Celtic mythology so championed by the founders of the Abbey. Further references to Boucicault's

play *The Corsican Brothers* (32), Wilde's "Reading Gaol" and his "little tent of blue" (34) and Yeats' *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* (55) illustrate the intertextual make-up of the play and its comedic approach.

In view of his fruitful work with Annie Ryan, West's personal vision lends itself to collaborative conversations. In the director's note for *Dublin by Lamplight*, Ryan sheds light on the mechanics of the production:

> When a Commedia character narrated his or her own action, it gave another dimension to the Commedia style, offering more potential for transformation. Equally, the intensity and energy of Commedia gave good old Story Theatre a sharp kick in the pants of its usual spooky, slow motion lyricism. It was a happy coupling. (Director's note n.p.)

The late 1990s offered a progressive time for alternative forms of theatre in contrast to the naturalistic style of the preceding century. *Dublin by Lamplight* deconstructs theatrical conventions by using *commedia dell'arte* and storytelling as dual techniques of presentation, and representing an Ireland becoming more European – the *commedia* form suggestive of the exotic influences of Italy. West exhibits a "marked emphasis on form" in intermingling dialogue and narration, with each character providing a narrative in addition to a naturalistic dialogue which is associated with plays in the Abbey:

> EVA. Eva Str. John, actress, benefactress, activist, took her breakfast in the morning room, a little earlier than usual. Four slices of dry toast . . .
> NORA. No crusts.
> EVA. . . . and an apple. (10).

Unlike Carr, McPherson, and Walsh, who embrace naturalism through the phonetic reproduction of Hibernian accents and dialects, West uses English in its received pronunciation, an accent which is commonly used by actors in English theatre and the Irish theatre of the Anglo-Irish. The orchestration of dialogues, and the melodramatic nature of the exchanges, suggest a genealogy with Boucicault and the Abbey plays from the 1930s-1950s:

> MAGGIE. As she passed under the railway arches, Maggie breathed the sweet rank smell of alcohol that seemed to swim out from the warehouses. She held her collar closed against the rain. Now Frank was her only hope. If she stayed here without him she'd end up in the Laundry, or somewhere in disgrace. (67)

In looking back at the myth of the Abbey and the independence, West revels in nods to various theatrical traditions and to contemporary discourse.

b. Ailís Ní Ríain. *The Tallest Man in the World* (2013)

Originally from Cork and a music graduate of University College Cork, Ní Riain's first play *Tilt* was produced at the Granary in 2007 with little response. Yet, In 2009 *Tilt* was translated into Swedish and ran for five weeks at the Gotenberg Staadtheater and, later that year, at Berlin's Deutsche Theater, hence signalling on the continent the emergence of a new Irish theatrical voice. In 2009 *Cell* premiered at the 24/7 Festival in Manchester. In 2012 Ní Ríain was commissioned by Cut to The Chase Productions to write the script and compose the score for *Treasured* at Liverpool's Anglican Cathedral to commemorate the 100th Anniversary of the sinking of the Titanic, which was registered in Liverpool. This was an unusual production as, being a site-specific or site-responsive piece and based on documented research, it was more akin to the work of the theatre-makers rather than the traditional play of the playwright. In 2013 *Desolate Heaven* was produced in London by Theatre 503 and *The Tallest Man in the World* was produced by Corcadorca at the Triskel for the Cork Midsummer Festival.

In *The Tallest Man in the World* Aílís Ní Ríain creates two juxtaposing playing spaces: that of a realistic relationship between Erin and her father Felim, in a provincial university city, and Culcheen, an island off the coast of Ireland, whose main attraction is the Gulliver-like Eamonn who suffers from acromegaly. The play takes place in the present where each

of the characters are institutionalised in different ways: Felim is in a recovery unit for alcoholics; Erin is in a mental institution where she was sent for abducting and murdering a child; Eamonn is a tourist attraction in a cottage on Culcheen. Erin loves her father and has craved sexual contact with him since she was fourteen, an obsession that results in her mother eloping with a student of hers as she feels she can't compete. Her departure prompts Felim to drink heavily and eventually to leave his home when Erin makes a sexual advance towards him. His rejection sends Erin into a (self-)destructive spiral leading to the abduction and murder. Eamonn, who is in love with Erin from afar, is trapped by his growing popularity as a money-making attraction for the island.

i. The political: down with clichés?

The play is very much set in the contemporary and sheds a tragic look on the period: Erin's teenage lust and attempted seduction of her father, gang rape, addiction, and suicide. Eamonn, the 'tallest man', acts as a metaphor for an older, more innocent Ireland being overcome by a consumerist, Celtic Tiger society. From his room he has "seen every change, brick by brick" (7), a knowing witness. As the main attraction on the island due to the "tallest man tours" and the "souvenir stands", he has "paid for it all" and will "continue to pay" (7).

In his insightful essay "A Dark Rosebud on the Irish Stage: Ailís Ní Ríain's *Tallest Man in the World*", Thierry Dubost questions the play's political nature by asking, "is the *Tallest Man in the World* an Irish play?". Dubost initially observes that "the characters names give an Irish touch to the play": indeed, Erin, Felim, Deirdre, Eamonn, Dan, Dr Downs and Mrs. Keane are easily recognisable Irish names but,

> in spite of an occasional reference to an Irish accent or Irish-speaking modes, for a foreign spectator, *The Tallest Man in the World* does not bring to mind exotic forms

> of Irishness, which one could associate, for instance, with old or updated versions of the stage Irishman. (100, 101)

Dubost argues that the play doesn't *seem* Irish and his point is valid particularly "for a foreign spectator" that is a non-Irish audience member. Because for there to be what Grene identifies as a "self-conscious stage representation of Ireland" (*The Politics* 2), "Ireland has to be recognisably Ireland" (50). How, then, is *The Tallest Man in the World* "recognisably Ireland"? The name of the central character, Erin, is the dative tense of the Gaelic word for Ireland and is the "female personification" for the country (Wright 60). Culcheen is introduced in scene 2, as an interviewer has "travelled over from the mainland like many before her to see [Eamonn] on the island of Culcheen" (7). To Irish people the word "culchie" is a derogatory term used by city people to describe country or rural people. It has connotations of slowness, lack of intellect and lack of progress. These references and the use of Hiberno-Irish – for instance, "Tis up there in that cottage on the hill you'll find the tallest man in the world" – clearly signal the Irishness of the play. As for a potential critique of Ireland, it is suggested in the opposition between the characters and how they are colonised. Before he was thirteen Eamonn was the tallest person on the island, and once "word started getting around, there's a giant on Culcheen" (22) everything changed. The islanders, recognising the value of Eamonn as a tourist attraction, "tied [him] down": the all-seeing Eamonn was thus literally bound to fixity: "I couldn't leave even if I wanted to" (7), an image of his lack of progress as a direct effect of urban contemporary Ireland.

Just like Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World* (1907) and Friel's *The Gentle Island* (1971) (Grene 217), *The Tallest Man in the World* may be defined as anti-pastoral. The island of Culcheen, in a contemporary context, is subject to the same social pressures of progress as everywhere else. The islanders' treatment of Eamonn, "as an individual turned into an object […] contributes to the portrayal of a grim society" (Dubost 104). The island

needs income, and will forego ethical values to sell its major asset: "The only school on the island" was "in poor repair" (27) when Mrs Keane, the "Head" of the school, decided to go to the mainland and let everyone know about the "giant on Culcheen". Eamonn's life changes in that instant. The media follow him everywhere invading his privacy, creating a freak out of him. The islanders make a prisoner of him. It is telling that Ní Ríain chose an island as the location for Eamonn as the islands are the most rural of rural Ireland, the "real Ireland" which Declan Kiberd calls a "myth [which] was given a further lease of life in each generation, by the urbanised descendants of landless labourers or by failed small farmers keen to create a compensatory fable of rare old times" (*Inventing* 492). But even this pastoral Ireland is presented in the play as a myth since visitors to Culcheen look around them in amazement: "it's always the same; none of them expect the island to be this modern, this shiny, this slick" (7). As Kiberd observes, affluence has come to the islands and "rural Ireland slowly acquired many of the trappings of a sophisticated urban lifestyle" (495). Through the character of Eamonn, Ní Ríain does more than pitting old Ireland against post-Celtic Tiger Ireland though. She points to a central concern in her plays, that of difference, using the giant as a magnified illustration that "[p]eople don't like difference. It scares them. That fear separates them from me, separates me from the rest of the world" (22).

Ní Ríain's dystopian take on Irish society is expanded in her portrayal of the mainland, and how her central characters, a father and daughter, may exhibit differences that lead to their own fears. They are university-educated, erudite, articulate, and conscious of the weight of the past:

> FELIM.
> I'm ambitious.
> Alert.
> Always top of the class.
> My past propels me forward at a frightening pace, A pathological pace.
> Impatient to break from my toxic roots,
> To shake the family madness
> Before they yank me down entirely. (16)

The gloss of the social circles in which Erin evolves cannot hide the societal difficulties that remain at the core of people's lives. Felim is dying with cirrhosis of the liver from alcohol abuse. Erin is in a mental asylum for causing the death of a child. Incest, murder, suicide, infidelity and addiction are evident in both of their lives. The "toxic roots" and "the family madness" – that is a sense of legacy – appear impossible to overcome – "shake" – for both of them. When Erin is gang-raped, she reports the rape, attempts to press charges, receives death threats, but "middle-management man's boss has his meaty fingers in many pies" and she has no option but to retract her statement (28). "Instead of justice" Erin is reduced "to needlepoint deadtime" (29).

The institutions of family, Church and state come under scrutiny. Dubost outlines the importance of "communal identity" as a political motif in the play:

> If, like Esslin, one considers that the stage mirrors communal identity, there is no denying that *The Tallest Man in the World* is a political play. Some spectators may even feel uncomfortable with its challenging content. Still, the play cannot be reduced to a list of themes that happen to be controversial […] Beyond a series of disturbing elements, its major political feature may actually be rooted in what [Declan] Hughes had rejected: "something that still binds *us* together". (106)

This "something that still binds *us* together" may be found in Felim's feeling of abandonment:

> Now life has truly fallen asunder. I'm desperate for a drink
> And desperate for a day away from it. Desperate for a life,
> Desperate for a home,
> Desperate for my daughter, Desperate for company,
> Desperate for my wife, And desperate to be held.
> This is the loneliest place in the whole fucking world. (33)

Ní Ríain's representation of the Irish male through Felim as a weak alcoholic and Eamonn as an immobile male living with his mother with no agency is in direct contrast to her portrayal of Erin who is endowed with agency. All three, however, share different forms of

loneliness and abandonment in a play concerned with "alienation, the impossibility to belong, to speak and to be heard, or to engage in a relationship with someone, in a world where togetherness—Hughes's 'us'—no longer resonates" (Dubost 106). If Eamonn is trapped "in a tiny house, on a tiny island, off the island of Ireland" (22), he is not the only character experiencing isolation as Felim is trapped in a treatment centre and Erin in a mental asylum.

Christopher Murray suggests that in *Philadelphia Here I Come* Friel "supplied an Irish Hamlet for his time, a character longing for contact but driven back repeatedly upon himself since the world he inhabits is no longer the stable world of authority and security it once was" (*Twentieth-Century* 169). It could be argued that Ní Ríain has supplied a Hamlet for the twenty-first century in Erin. Abandoned by her mother and her father before she was fourteen Erin is in a constant search for a loving relationship. She wants her father's love but he rejects her. She falls in love with a married man and he chooses his wife over her.

Dubost concludes that the play "is far from concerned with defining the nature of its Irishness" (102). Maybe within Ní Ríain's lack of definition lies a more political question. If Ireland no longer has the model of the Catholic church, the guidance of the "parish priest and a schoolmaster", the nurture of family and community, where does it turn to for a moral compass? How does society arrest the shift that reduces people to "needlepoint deadtime" (29)? Eamonn is the shining light of hope: "They can keep me here, make money from me, hold me down forever until I see her again and hold her. Among all this a peace must be found. Among yearning this great something must be salvaged. Eventually is a word of hope" (9). In this strange freak of a man Ní Ríain invests an inherent decency, an almost mythical – because lost elsewhere in the play – innocence.

ii. Myth

Talking about her site-specific work *Treasured* in 2012 in an interview for The Contemporary Music Centre in Dublin Ní Ríain has explained the relation of myth within her work:

> Myth-making is a big part of it and why we have the necessity to make myths and why myths make better truths than the actual truths. Why it's necessary to build on angles, latch onto stories that make us feel something or reassure us that humanity is either ok or not. (3.51- 4.14)

In *Tallest Man,* she embraces this element by making Eamonn a giant. Giants have always played a central role in Celtic and Gaelic myth, and "the prevalence of giants in Irish mythology […] features the likes of Fionn Mac Cumhail, mythical creator of the Giants Causeway" (Korbonitz qtd in McGreevy). Ní Ríain's description of Eamonn as a giant is experimental in that, much like Kane's army of rats crossing the stage, it represents a challenge in production. Corcadorca chose to literally minimise the figure of Eamonn in a production that had the three actors positioned, sitting, in a triangular shape. In missing the financial resources to expand the production, Kiernan privileged the relationship of the three characters and the physical and communicative space between them. A more literal and pricey staging would permit the full effect of seeing this giant growing on stage providing a notable contrast to the difficult topics, like rape and murder, being presented.

For Dubost, "Ní Ríain's interest in calling into question established national myths seems limited" (103), especially in relation to female sexuality. Like Hester Swane, Erin dispels the myth of many historical representations of Irish women on stage by murdering a child. Ruthless, she revels in manipulation:

> I control her completely
> Because I can,
> I make her do unspeakable things- Abuse her
> Refuse her
> Accuse her of doing things
> I know are not true.

> This time I'm calling the shots. This time I'll do all the hurting. (34)

She is capable of every indecent action of the cruellest male characters that preceded her, and more. Her sexual hunger is represented as a defining and fateful characteristic. She attempts to seduce her father, commits adultery with a married man, has a lesbian affair and is overtly explicit with her doctor. Through Erin, Ní Ríain offers a new portrayal of the contemporary Irish woman, unrealistic in its excesses but breaking new ground from the usual representations of Irish women as wives or mothers, controlled and defined by men. Erin, in a twenty-first century that still bears the shackles of a Catholic approach to gender roles and family unit, is a tragic female figure but one that revels in breaking taboos.

Lisa Fitzpatrick argues that "in the absence of shared moral codes, shared mythologies – other than individualistic ones – become problematic, perhaps impossible" ("Nation and Myth" 171). When the interviewer asks Eamonn "are you still growing?", he answers "a part of me is […,] my capacity to love" (9). At fifteen, "lonely as you could imagine", Eamonn fell in love with the thirteen-year-old Erin. Ten years later he is still consumed by this young love. Perhaps, apart from their common history, the only object that the characters share is an absence, the absence of the loved one in a play which multiplies narratives of unrequited love: Eamonn loves Erin, who loves Felim, who loves his ex-wife Deirdre.

iii. Dramaturgy

Ní Ríain's language is poetry:

> ERIN.
> He takes me dancing,
> He's light on his feet.
> Swishin' 'n swirlin' me as the brash brass screams.
> Swirlin' and twirlin' me in my blood red heels that are so high they elevate me to another world. (27)

There are shades of Yeats's "A Drunken Man's Praise of Sobriety":

> Come swish around, my pretty punk,
> And keep me dancing still
> That I may stay a sober man
> Although I drink my fill. (268)

Claiming its poetic nature, the play echoes Yeats and the literary intentions of the early national theatre, but also suggests similarities with Sarah Kane. Themes of abandonment, Celtic myth and unrequited love are constant in *The Tallest Man in the World.* In this the play is reminiscent of Sarah Kane's work, experimenting with form "in a drama which is less accommodating and which resists being pigeonholed" but also tackling "a peculiar combination of political and social issues with surreal and dreamlike settings and images" and "their candid way of tackling topics such as sex and violence" (Gutscher 11). Much like Kane (see Saunders 92) love is a recurring motif, and one that explains and forgives all for the characters.

Hence Erin sees no transgression in transferring her emotional love to her father into the sexual act. When asked why she killed the boy, Erin similarly shirks any guilt: "I've done nothing wrong. I've loved" (11). Erin's emotion and lust however pave the way to her isolation, though social mechanisms that led from her transgressions to her imprisonment are implied rather than articulated. This absence of space between action and punishment further emphasises the idea of limited communication, as if the characters were so far apart they could not reach each other or because every last word had already been spoken. Ní Ríain chooses to focus on the aftermath, after devastation, in a language that intersperses dialogues and narrative cues:

> DAN. Grab hold of the now Felim. It's all we have.
> FELIM. He asks about my wife, Deirdre.
> Shame floods my face.
> 'Long gone.'
> Do we ever learn?
> DAN. Some do.

Most don't.
You still can.
FELIM. He asks about my daughter.
DAN. Fancy tracking her down?
FELIM. 'I'd prefer a hole in the head.'
DAN. That bad?
FELIM. 'Worse.'
Again he laughs.
Easy, unencumbered. (5-6)

Felim's narration of memories creates a different time and space, a chorus of isolated voices come together, first in illustrating Felim's haunted psyche but also in creating a community of concerns and encouragement – a means maybe for each isolated character to experience togetherness:

FELIM. Been on it for weeks.
Can't keep a meal down.
Going to try and lay off it for a while.
Get myself back to a meeting.
Sit my arse on a chair and listen to someone talk sense, instead of these stupid voices going 'round in my head.
ERIN. If you don't pick up the first drink.
EAMONN. You can't get drunk.
FELIM. Such reasoned logic.
Such rationalised wisdom.
ERIN. It's the first drink.
EAMONN. That does the damage.
FELIM. And I thought it was the tenth.
ERIN. You thought wrong.
EAMONN. It's the first.
ERIN. That does the damage. (11)

The rhythm and repetition of the cues create a melodic pattern that defines Ni Ríain's style.

Alliteration, assonance and musicality form the basis for her language, and poetic images adorn her script. Her intermingling of sound and poetry as primary components of her dramaturgy are evident not only through stage directions that signal the aural landscape, but also in the cues themselves: "blaring brass banish my doubt"; "the bugles bloat into the early hours" (28). The opposition between Erin and her father resides in their use of language as much as their conflictual history. While Erin revels in the aesthetic sonority of words,

defining her sexual encounter with a married man as "shrouded in lust-need, smothered in wishful pillow-talk, submerged in this complicity of sin" (14), Felim's language is factual, clipped, on the point of monosyllabic:

> FELIM. I meet Deirdre by chance. She's beautiful. Smart. Sharp. I make a move. It pays off. We talk. We plan. We make great love. […] We graduate. Get jobs. Get married. Get pregnant. Have a daughter. Erin. Such a beauty. Such a live-wire. So clever. So pretty. So smart like her mum. Bit needy. […] Incredibly needy. I take her for walks in the woods, her eyes ignite with wonder. Through them I see everything for the first time. I feel blessed. We have cuddles and chats, I read to her, tuck her in at night. She's protective of me. I see a mad jealousy growing in her-barging in. Interrupting. Demanding. Creating Havoc. Her moods. Her games. Her tantrums. Her manipulations. Her ultimatums. (16-18)

In this explanation of what led to the destruction of the family, the semantic repetitions of the personal pronouns and intensifiers on the one hand, and the abundance of one- or two-word cues on the other, create the impression of a musical sheet where each line is given a specific duration. In this musical context, the simplicity of word use is essential to create instantaneous meaning.

The rhythm of her dramatic language, the images Ní Ríain creates, and the controversial topics which she explores signal her as a powerful new voice. In interrogating a legacy of tradition with previous generations, Felim and Erin share a number of similarities with their Irish character predecessors: a heavy dependence on alcohol, like Friel's Frank Hardy in *Faith Healer*; a propensity for violence like Murphy's Dada in *A Whistle in the Dark*; and child murderer like Carr's Hester Swane.

c. Shane Mac An Bhaird. *Melt* (2017)

Shane Mac An Bhaird's first play *Some Specimen* received a rehearsed reading in the New Theatre in 2013 as part of the company's "Five Writers in Search of a Producer" production. The event was attended by Lynne Parker, the Artistic Director of Rough Magic, who offered

Mac An Bhaird a position on their Seeds Programme. Though Mac An Bhaird's own company ThatLot had produced his play *Traitor* at the Dublin Fringe Festival in 2016, it was Rough Magic's subsequent production of *Some Specimen* – retitled *Melt* at the 2017 Dublin Theatre Festival at Smock Alley – that brought him to the attention of the Dublin theatre public. Druid Debut's rehearsed reading of *The Mouth of the Birch* in 2020 did not yield a staged production. Since then, two of his plays, *The Delirium Archive* and *Swallow Your Pride, Art MacCooey*, were commissioned but only given rehearsed readings respectively by Rough Magic in 2022 and The Patrick Kavanagh Festival in 2023.

Set in a harsh uncompromising landscape, in a run-down experimental ecology lab in Antarctica, two Irish scientists, Professor Boylan and his postdoctoral researcher Charlie Cook, are studying a hole that has been drilled three kilometres deep into the ice. During a storm that isolates the scientists from the outside world, they make an unexpected discovery. Deep in the bowels of the earth they find and bring to the surface a crying baby, who evolves over the timespan of the play into a young woman and, by the final scene, into an old woman. A third character, Boylan's ex-wife Professor Elaine Hansen, is in contact with the pair over a number of skype calls.

i. The political: global catastrophe vs. Stage Irishness

In his introduction to *Rough Magic Theatre Company: New Plays and Adaptation*, Patrick Lonergan states that "*Melt* is a play in which the rules of science and the conventions of theatre go head to head in a plot that defies both" (xiv). The central theme of the play is climate change and the damage we are inflicting on the world around us. It is political in the sense of the playwright bringing attention to the source and impact of global warming. Though the play is set in Antarctica the characters do participate in a representation of

Ireland defined by Grene as symptomatic of the political in Irish drama, and the trope of 'stranger in the house' is central to the action.

Boylan, Hansen and Cook are educated characters, and as such the twenty-first century representation of a new generation of Irish men and women. Their work is funded to carry out important experiments that have worldwide consequences, and they are respected within their fields. Stage Irishness nonetheless appears in the opening scene as Boylan enters and almost immediately "takes out a bottle of whiskey and three glasses and places them on the table" (293). Unlike American labs that have "all the new equipment", "the greenhouses", "the canteen", the Irish research laboratory is "primitive" (294). In this context, Boylan confesses to using University funding to spend "seven hundred and eighty two euro" on "thirty four bottles of Irish whiskey", which he considers "essential to my work" (295), before concluding, "I'm taking my whiskey with ice recently. I think it's the most significant change living in Antarctica has made to me" (296). This is the Stage Irishman of old: heavy drinking, cunning and intelligent that seems to shape the character as fundamentally as his scholarship. His ex-wife, Professor Hansen, who only ever appears on a computer zoom screen on stage, shows traits of the millennial Stage Irish Woman. She has Cook spy on her ex-husband for her benefit as she plans to report Boylan's unprofessionalism to persuade the university to swap his funding to her own project. She is ruthless and unswerving in her ambition to succeed.

The tenet of the play is to shine a light on climate change, but Mac An Bhaird also creates a world every bit as farcical as Walsh's flat in London with two Irish academics carrying out experiments by dropping down a hole with a torch and a hammer. Everything about the staging, the hole, the winch, the primitive equipment and two drunken Irish men is meant for comedic effect:

> *COOK takes the bottle to BOYLAN. As he does so, COOK wobbles, teetering on the edge.*

BOYLAN. You know I can do fantastic things for your career? I mightn't look it now, but my name holds some weight - I still have influence and reputation. […]
COOK. Really... the honour is all... and if there is anything I can do for you...
BOYLAN. Listen, I'm not saying that you need my help, you're your own man.
COOK. Symbiotic... like intestinal bacteria.
BOYLAN. But if I can... what we're doing here will ask some sacrifices, has already I'm sure... […] The research we'll be doing is unorthodox.
COOK. I wouldn't expect anything less...
BOYLAN. It's very unorthodox.
COOK. I thrive on unorthodox. Let's drink to unorthodox.
COOK leans over the hole and shouts in.
COOK. To unorthodox! I thought it would echo.
COOK slugs the whiskey from the bottle. I think I'm going to be sick. (300-301)

The farcical set-up of the "Irish" scientific base camp and its drunken occupants suggests a lack of real concern for climate change. As they perch at the edge of the hole, because their research centres on calculating how long it would take to hit the bottom, Boylan reminds Cook that "the important thing to remember about this hole, is that never, under any circumstances – should you ever, fall in" (299). Boylan functions as what Grene terms the "interpreter", the "stage Irishman, acting out the false stereotypes of foreign expectations" (*The Politics* 7), and performs as the central comedic agent for duos reminiscent of Laurel and Hardy scenes:

BOYLAN. You're a bright lad. When you push the lever up, the winch lowers me down … do you have that? Do you have that?
COOK. Into the hole.
BOYLAN. Yes into the ice sheet. So lever up and …
COOK. You go down.
BOYLAN. And if you pull the lever down … if you pull the lever down?
COOK. Professor Boylan comes up?
BOYLAN. The Irish education system is working wonders. (303)

Perhaps too expectedly, Cook drops Boylan into the hole, and pulls the lever the wrong way. Boylan, the washed-up professor of ecology, the passionless Cook, and the ambitious Hansen are not Irish saviours of the environment, as the use of comedy makes plain. Yet in a

rare moment of scientific vision Boylan analyses the global problem in an almost poetic manner:

> The ice is hollowing … no, consuming is the correct word, it's consuming a store of itself. All the climactic data, oxygenated isotopes, that subtle gradation of the earth's flavour accumulated over millennia, it's all being eroded by the process of break-up. The earth is forgetting itself. Wiping the slate clean. I'm thinking of calling it 'environmental amnesia'. (309-310)

For the issue of consumption – be it of eggs, or of mother Earth – and of over-consumption and global erasure in the contemporary period is the core question Mac An Bhaird poses in this tragicomedy. At the source of the problem, he directly identifies corruption and big oil companies. Hansen's ecological project focuses on the decline of the angel shark. As she is about to meet a representative from Shell, she admits the conundrum of the situation and the hypocrisy of her own position: "I know … I'll have to hold my nose on that one I'm afraid – they're on the cusp of committing funding. It can't be avoided I'm afraid" (321). Good publicity for them, and funding for her; Mac An Bhaird exposes collusion and alludes elsewhere to the Corrib gas controversy in Mayo in 2015, where there was strong local opposition to Shell's plans to build an onshore terminal in Mayo.

The character of Veba carries a political function as she can be regarded as the 'stranger in the house'. For Grene,

> Whatever the intentions of their creators, these dramatic strangers in the house were bound to be construed politically in the context of the time. The dramatic motif of the stranger in the house brings into play axes of inner versus outer, the material against the spiritual, familial, domestic life opposed to a life of individually chosen destiny. (*The Politics* 53)

Described as a "creature", mystery surrounds her presence in the middle of the ice as a baby. She is portrayed as a representative of nature, mother earth, an embodiment of fertility. Boylan recognises that "a creature like this, you want to hold it, protect it, let it heal you". He's afraid that once the scientists become aware of Veba that "they'll dissect her, make her into a sample. I should have left her in the ice" (329). Yet, as a 'creature' she is

dehumanised, and they ultimately test whether she exists or, as Cook suggests, is “a phantasm”, an “hallucination” or “an unknown manifestation” (326). As a result, she is subjected to the scientists’ experiments as they burn her with a lighter and cut her with a knife to check her reactions to pain and serve their dreams towards “humanitarian” recognition and the “Nobel prize” (332). If we consider, with Grene, that the stranger in the house is an “agent testing that ‘home’, finding out its hidden weaknesses or malaise, drawing away one or more of its family members to death or danger outside” (*The Politics* 52-53), Veba brings the worst out of the two scientists and eventually shatters the artificial home the two characters had created in Antarctica along with their scientific credibility.

As Veba grows into a little girl, a grown woman and finally an old woman, their behaviour towards her remains cold and distant and they prove unable to communicate or understand her. In the end their relationship has declined into one of fear of the stranger they brought into their home. Veba is indeed a puzzling creature whose human nature can be questioned: for instance, she lays two large eggs. But she is also seen as a nurturer, hunting for food to sustain them, despite the degradation she suffers from them, such as masturbating Cook so his semen can fertilise the eggs. As she has been gone three weeks to gather food, on the point of starvation, Boylan and Cook eat one of her eggs. Realising what they did on her return, she breaks the egg in anger and leaves. Her final act of jumping into the hole to return to where she came from is symbolic of our inability to understand, nurture or maintain the strange or surreal. Though silent, she functions again as a stranger in the house, having revealed their core weaknesses and beckoning an apologetic Boylan to follow her:

> BOYLAN. It was me. I ate it. It was me who destroyed your egg.
> *Veba carefully gathers up the pieces of the broken egg. She carries it to the edge of the hole.*
> You shouldn't have left me with it. You should have known not to trust me.
> I'm sorry. You don't know how sorry I am. I would do anything to take it back... anything. (*pause*)

VEBA jumps into the hole.
BOYLAN. I can't.

Boylan apologises to an old woman, a Shan Van Vocht figure, for not minding her eggs. But there are undertones of the political figure of Kathleen Ni Houlihan – a metaphor for the provinces of Ireland – and her "hope of getting my beautiful fields back" (Yeats 253) in contrast to destroying her land now.

ii. Myth

For Lisa Fitzpatrick, one of the difficulties facing Irish theatre is the absence of "a binding mythology with which to express and unify conceptions of Irish identity for the contemporary stage", because

> mythologising a society that has so rapidly become a globalised region in a federalised Europe creates obvious difficulties for dramatic form and for audience reception. Myths are built from individual acts, it is true: but those acts, to function at the level of myth, must take on a wider significance; must tap into a shared symbology or system of meaning. If they fail to do so, they remain random meaningless deeds. ("Nation and Myth" 170, 178)

Jordan (*Dissident Dramaturgies* 158) and O'Toole (*Critical Moments* 188) have similarly observed that contemporary playwrights have neglected myth as grounding material for their plays. Myth is not evident in *Melt*, but Mac An Bhaird does lean heavily on folklore and on mythical undertones present in canonical Irish plays to develop the narrative, notably around the character of Veba.

Veba is found as a baby three kilometres deep in the earth having thawed from the ice. The child brings to mind the taking of the "human child" in Yeats's poem "The Stolen Child", especially since Boylan has lost his own child, Rosie, when she was only three in a drowning accident. He notices a resemblance in the child he has found to his lost daughter,

"with wispy brown hair. Just like my Rosie's […] Its uncanny. She looks just like her" (*Melt* 326-331). Almost immediately the baby has grown into a six-year-old child, bringing to mind the child in Yeats's *The Land of Heart's Desire* (1894) who comes to take Mary Bruin. Grene asserts that Yeats's play is "typically 'Celtic twilight' in picturing a scene where the mythology and folk belief of a pagan past are marginal memories in a Christian and materialist present" (*The Politics* 55).

In Yeats and Lady Gregory's play *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, an old woman visits the Gillane house, encouraging one of the sons to join the 1798 rebellion. She turns into a beautiful young woman on leaving the house. Nicholas Grene sees in this "the convention of the *aisling*, the dream-vision of Ireland which was the main form of political poetry" in the seventeenth century. He explains that,

> the motif of the *puella senilis*, the old woman transformed into the young girl with the walk of a queen and used in the dramatization of the vision […] has been traced back to the Celtic ur-myth of blood sacrifice to the sovereignty goddess Eire in which the danger or death of a young man can rejuvenate the old crone to make her a fit mate for a new sovereign. (*The Politics* 63)

In *Melt* the motif of the *aisling* appears to be revisited, as the baby turns into a young woman and then an old woman. As a representation of the divine feminine, Veba is fertile – she produces two eggs and fertilises them from the younger of the two men – but betrayed by the male characters who are no fit sovereigns. Though Mac An Bhaird provides no clear intention, one may infer that her return to the centre of the earth will rejuvenate her until she is found by more worthy men. Or maybe a more illuminating reading offers itself through the Irish folklore story of Oisin and his return from Tír na nÓg resonates. Once Óisín returns to Ireland and touches the ground he turns into an old man. Veba's final act is to return, like Yeats's changeling fairy child in *The Land of Heart's Desire,* "to where nobody gets old and crafty and wise" (39).

iii. Dramaturgy

The play is structured in two acts which cover a timespan of almost six weeks. Veba is introduced as a baby in act 1 – the first seismic event for the two scientists – and in act 2 the storm gathers momentum throughout, threatening the lives of Boylan and Cook. It is fear of dying of starvation that drives them to breaking and eating one of Veba's eggs and leads to her and Boylan's suicides.

In the limited space they inhabit and the hostility of the wider outside environment, the play contains echoes of Beckett's Hamm and Clov and their "no nature" surroundings. Boylan and Cook's "tiny, run-down experimental ecology lab in Antarctica" (292) is perched over a very deep hole, at the end of the pole and the world outside is "out of kilter": there is "snow in Dublin. Almost a foot of it in July" (333). Boylan's method of final communication, in what turns out to be a suicide note of sorts, is a taped message, echoing Krapp's use of the tape-recorder in *Krapp's Last Tape* (1958). While Beckett's influences are obvious in the dramaturgy – even the central character is called Samuel (Boylan) – it is Friel's influence which is more impactful.

Richard Rankin Russell argues that Friel's "portrayal of human beings who often isolate themselves from family, community and environment is a perennial problem for him" (*Modernity* 27). The isolation of the Mundy sisters in *Dancing at Lughnasa* (1990), the exile of Hugh O'Neill in *Making History* (1989) and the alienation and eventual suicide of Frank Butler in *Living Quarters* (1977) certainly find thematic echoes in *Melt*, but more constitutive elements are identifiable. In Friel's *Translations* (1980) Lieutenant Yolland, the representative of the British army and the 'stranger in the house', falls in love with the Irish speaking Maire. He cannot understand her, nor she him, yet through repetition, movement and the use of a common language, neither English nor Irish, they fall in love:

> MAIRE. Don't stop – I know what you're saying.
> YOLLAND. I would tell you how I want to be here – to live here – always – with you – always, always.
> MAIRE. 'Always"? What is that word – always'?
> YOLLAND. Yes-yes; always. (52)

In *Melt* it is Cook who is the English speaker and Veba the 'stranger':

> VEBA (*mimicking Cook*). Don't! For the love of … don't laugh at me. Don't! For the love of … Don't laugh at me.
> *COOK joins in with Veba.*
> VEBA *and* COOK. Don't! For the love of … Don't laugh at me. Don't! For the love of … Don't laugh at me. Don't! For the love of … Don't laugh at me. (*Melt* 342)

Friel's language allows a sense of play to develop between Maire and Yolland, which leads to an ease between them and their falling in love. Veba's birthing scene, where she is assisted by Cook, is a mirror of Maire and Yolland's language, movement and play, albeit with more modern connotations. At the end of their scene Yolland, inadvertently discussing the "maypole", provides an embarrassing accidental sexual undertone. This episode seems replicated in *Melt* when Cook woos Hansen: as she hugs him, he accidently presses the button on his umbrella and "fhump, it shoots open", leaving him staring at "my inappropriately opened umbrella, cursing it" (312).

Boylan's final monologue emerges as a taped message but despite this nod to Beckett, its contents and the use of language are closer to *Philadelphia Here I Come* when Gar hangs on to a memory of a day spent fishing with his father:

> BOYLAN. We were happy once … Weren't we? I'm sure of it. I remember … There were gorgeous days, days worth living, days that might have been enough. I remember the three of us … Rosie … she was still bubbling away in your belly. All future …We were looking out across Paris from the tower … Will you remember? What if you don't remember …? Rosie was still a thought, a tickle of pure potential … before any … before … You were looking out at the city with this queer look on your face. I didn't know what it was at first, what you were thinking … but just now… you see, just now I think I've it figured, with Rosie growing in you, you were thinking that all of this … all of this damned madness might be bearable if we stick together. If we could just hold on to each other maybe … *Cook turns off the recording.* (360-361)

Friel repeats this technique, of using a memory from the past that informs the present, in Casimir's monologue in *Aristocrats* (1979), and Mac An Bhaird uses it, mostly with reference to Boylan in similar 'memory' monologues.

In 2023 I directed a week-long workshop of Shane Mac An Bhaird's new play *Swallow Your Pride, Art MacCooey* (2023) prior to a very well received public reading at the Patrick Kavanagh Festival. In almost thirty years working in Irish theatre, it is the closest to a Friel play I have read. The play revolves around Art MacCooey, a celebrated eighteenth-century Ulster poet best known for his *aisling* poem "Úr-Chill An Chreagáin". Mac An Bhaird is applying under the Arts Council Project Funding system to support a production in 2025. Bearing in mind that his last production was seven years ago any possibly of a production would be greeted positively. Ailís Ní Ríain's last produced play was twelve years ago. In contrast, and quite possibly as a result of the lack of producing opportunities, her career as a composer has thrived. The first part of my conclusive remarks about the demise of the Irish playwright is therefore concerned with their environment. As of September 2023 Mac An Bhaird, Ní Ríain and West can apply for funding to the Project Award – Strand 3 New Work, a brand new strand developed by the Arts Council specifically to support new plays. Could it be a sign that the Arts Council has come to the realisation that preceding schemes have participated in the near death of the playwright?

We have already discussed the impact of the cuts that occurred in 2008. Correspondence with David Parnell, Head of Drama at the Arts Council, sheds light on the rationale regarding new playwriting behind Strand 3 New Work:

> a number of companies that may have focused on more traditional plays (e.g. Bedrock, Storytellers, Yew, Gallowglass. Red Kettle, Meridian) lost their funding.
> At the same time, a majority of new and emerging artists tended to be making work in the postdramatic style (although there were exceptions such as Decadent, Hatch, and Landmark).
> This may have given the impression that the Arts Council was reducing its support for new plays and for playwrights as a matter of policy, but it wasn't.

> It was hoped (and expected) that those companies still in receipt of funding, e.g. Druid, Rough Magic, Fishamble, the Gate and, of course, the Abbey, would still support the development of new plays and present them. Obviously this became increasingly difficult for them as ongoing cuts to their own funding continued to bite. Meantime, we adjusted the Project Award into four strands, in order to continue to support the presentation of mid-to-large scale 'classic work'. As it happened, not too many new plays came through this.
> We have now adjusted the Project Award again, so that Strand 3 – New Work – can also include new plays written by playwrights. (email to author 23 Sept. 2024)

This new strand promises to be a vast improvement on the status quo. The emerging playwright will still need to depend on their own ability to apply for funding, a skill which is earned through vast experience. The playwright will also need to have access to a limited company – there are some independent producing companies beginning to emerge – in order to deal with the administration of the fund. But what this statement signals is that there is a willingness to support the development of new dramaturgy and of the literary play. What this thesis has shown through its analysis of various funding strands is that there has been since the 1990s "competing demands and the ongoing stretching of theatre as an artform between the classical and the contemporary". In this tight budgetary context, it is somewhat reassuring for playwrights and practitioners that the Arts Council claim to be "constantly trying to listen to concerns from within the sector and adjust their programmes accordingly" (Parnell, mail to author). As his company Teac Damsa receives annual funding from the dance board, Michael Keegan-Dolan, whose work I address in chapter 5, avoids the pitfalls of criteria-changing grant applications.

In researching this chapter my central objective was to examine whether Michael West, Ailís Ní Ríain and Shane Mac An Bhaird offer a continuum of a particular legacy of great Irish literary playwrights. The evidence suggests a genealogy that goes back to the Anglo-Irish playwrights of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

If their plays are "representations of Ireland" (Grene), the theatrical image they give of Ireland has rejected "mammies and tweed and potatoes and bogs to a curiously featureless,

sterilised suburban nowhere" (Fitzpatrick "Nation and Myth" 169), repositioning – or sometimes avoiding – any political reading within or in relation to the post-Celtic Tiger nation by locating the action in no particular landscape or in weird places, a feature prevalent in the plays of Enda Walsh already. Ní Ríain and Mac An Bhaird both position their plays in "featureless, sterilised" nowheres where the family, local and national structures have completely disintegrated and where conceptions of Ireland are critical and derisory, and West's stage within the stage in another absence of location that encourages his comedic approach.

Their relation to myth – and especially Celtic myths – is more complicated. Fitzpatrick suggests a "resurgence of interest in the possibilities of Irish mythology as material for theatre", while O'Toole "sees no life in the myths of old as they are inappropriate as public myths" (quoted in Jordan *Dissident* 34). The case studies show this ambivalence and indicate that these writers are reimagining the use of myth, making tentative references to folklore and literature as primary material to conjure a mythical dimension. In West's case, it is not only the idea of nation building but also the myth of the creation of the Abbey that moves (in both senses of the word) the characters. In the *Tallest Man* Ní Ríain seems to eschew the appeal of myth to offer instead the images of a predatory woman, a giant, and a drunk as potential new myths for an Ireland defined as a prison and possibly the myth of unrequited love. In Mac An Bhaird's *Melt*, the character of Veba has (perhaps underdeveloped) mythical potential and is reminiscent of other literary figures. Richard Kearney explains that "myths were stories people told themselves in order to explain themselves to themselves and to others" (3). In essence isn't that what all three playwrights are attempting to do?

Each of them has a distinctive voice, evident in the dramaturgic material: their language is poetic or shows a "range of experiments in language and dialect" (Fitzpatrick "Nation and

Myth" 170), their characters unforgettable, and they make use of innovative techniques. What became apparent was that they push the boundaries of experimentation to an extreme far distant from the naturalistic foundations of their predecessors – Carr's ghostly happenings in the bogs of the midlands, McPherson's pub-stories and Walsh's murderous Irish family in London are all acceptable within the storytelling framework. In *Dublin by Lamplight*, this is achieved by the *commedia* style, which distances the audience from any empathy towards the characters, and metatheatricality which invites a self-referential reading of the play. In the *Tallest Man*, Ní Ríain flirts with surrealism through the character of Eamonn who grows so tall that he grows out through his house and whose mother is so small she lives in a matchbox. This same texture of magic realism exists in Mac An Bhaird's character Veba who is found as a baby three kilometres deep in the earth and turns into an old woman within five weeks.

Friel and Murphy both admitted to attempting to move away from realism but failed in the main. Their finest scripts are in very naturalistic settings with very ordinary people. Irish audiences will accept the spiritual world as part of any story – as the popularity of ghosts in plays belies – but a man who cannot stop growing and a baby buried in the ice may be pushing the suspension of disbelief to the extreme. If the success of the playwrights of the twentieth century was linked to their ability to present a "mirror up to nation" (Murray *Twentieth-Century*), then examining the work of the millennium playwrights suggests that they have moved too far from naturalism and too close to surrealism, and inevitably too far from "nation".

Chapter 5. Dance Theatre: Bridging Artistic Divides?

In *Dance Theatre in Ireland: Revolutionary Moves,* Aoife McGrath provides a comprehensive description of the emergence of dance theatre as a genre in Ireland, finding its first iteration in Yeats's dance plays, and exploring how Michael Keegan-Dolan's Fabulous Beast Dance Theatre integrates body and voice in their performances to experiment with "a use of powerful visual images that was to become a signature feature" (16). Jess McCormack, in *Choreography and Verbatim Theatre: Dancing Words,* focuses on the initial process of translation that is at play in choreography – "transferring ideas/language/images into a physical language" (3) – and discusses how dance theatre from its inception has been concerned with breaking down "boundaries between different art forms […] by combining and layering fragments of spoken text, movement, objects and images" (2). With the work of Keegan-Dolan's companies – this combining of art forms, using the verticality of the stage and inviting actors and musicians to join his dancers – dance theatre in Ireland appears to flirt with the *Gesamtkunstwerk.* The aim, McCormack suggests in "Choreography as a Translation Process", is not solely aesthetic as she links the development of dance theatre directly to Bertolt Brecht and Pina Bausch, and contends that choreography "creates a dialectical space which reveals something about reality" and that dance theatre as a genre "challenges the concept of stable meaning" (13). In addressing contemporary narratives with myths, Keegan-Dolan queries the underbelly of Irish society and offers his work to a political reading. The reference to Yeats's *Four Plays for Dancers* as a pioneer needs questioning therefore, since they were performed at the Hawk's Well rather than the Abbey. For O'Toole this signals a divide between "refined choreography […] in an aristocratic drawing room in London" and "rough theatre […] for Irish plebs" on the other ("Culture Shock"). Keegan-Dolan's dance theatre work appears to be bridging that

gap, using choreography and other art forms to address “the dirty business of history and society”.

1. Contexts

The 1990s saw the emergence of a number of modern dance companies including John Scott’s Irish Modern Dance Theatre (1991), David Bolger’s CoisCéim Dance Theatre (1995) and Keegan-Dolan’s Fabulous Beast (1997) (McGrath 10). McGrath links the growth of these dance theatre companies with Ireland’s Celtic Tiger, and with the emergence of a new expression and outside vision of Ireland, best illustrated by *Riverdance*, a moment that also saw the election of Ireland’s first female President Mary Robinson, Jack Charlton’s Irish international football team, and the “undermining of the moral authority of the Catholic Church” (5).

Dance theatre, as a separate genre from dance, appears to have its roots in the “development of new and non-classical forms of dance in Europe” called *Ausdrukstanz* (modern expressive dance), which surfaced in the late 1920s (McCormack 2). In the 1970s, influenced by early practitioners such as Mary Wigman, Kurt Jooss and Rudolph Laban, Pina Bausch and Anne Teresa de Keersmaeker further developed the genre and “explored the possibility of creating meaning and self-expression within dance”, bringing dance practice to the attention of the theatre community (2). The current state of dance theatre, that is an expressive dance form that employs text, developed in the UK, in the 1980s and 1990s. Companies such as DV8, Physical Theatre, Volcano Theatre Company and VTOL Dance Company were taking source material of interviews, short stories and Shakespeare’s sonnets “and developing choreographic processes to translate these texts into movement” (3). Unlike their counterparts in the U.K., Irish dance companies have eschewed the route of translating

texts and verbatim work into movement. Instead their work tends to combine new texts, inspired from recognisable classics, with contemporary dance techniques to develop a form of storytelling through movement and dialogues.

In the context of Arts Council funding in Ireland, dance has always been the 'poor relation' in Irish theatre and was not even recognised as an art form by the Arts Council until 2003. In 1979 "dance received a mere 14.3% of the funding awarded to drama" and by 1989 this had been "reduced to a paltry 215,000" punts, or "7.1% of the drama funding" (McGrath 9). While it is difficult to compare such diverse economic contexts, Keegan Dolan's companies, first Fabulous Beast (1997-2016), then Teac Damsa, receive yearly strategic funding of around 250,000 euro. While this assures that his projects are produced, it by no means represents a vast amount. He needs to apply for additional funding to sustain productions that necessitate a great number of dancers (a hard core between 8 and 12), musicians (half a dozen), as well as sometimes professional actors.

2. Defining Keegan-Dolan's work

Although trained at the Central School of Ballet in London, author, director and choreographer Keegan-Dolan has made no secret of his distaste for ballet. In an interview for the *Financial Times*, he debunks the mystique around ballet: "the way I was trained was that classical ballet was some sort of a pinnacle, but it isn't: it's just a style of dancing where people tend to point their feet and in the other style people tend to stamp their feet" (Levene "Michael Keegan-Dolan"). Hence, he developed the other style, of expressive dance, while making use of his traditional training to make references to the presence of two dance practices, of two worlds, of the classical and the contemporary. This inner combination is

telling as this morphing of languages and this ease in navigating different elements of performance may be what best defines his work.

Michael Keegan-Dolan has been at the vanguard of changes in dance and dance theatre presentations in Ireland since the late 1990s. *Sunday Lunch* and *The Good People* (1997), his first productions premiered at the Firkin Crane and were pure dance pieces. Yet, *The Good People* was already very theatrical, employing minimalist props such as an umbrella, a bucket, and a hurley. Keegan-Dolan is the first in Ireland to have developed this cross-practice of dance and dialogues. Consequently, his works *Giselle* (2003), *The Bull* (2005) and *Swan Lake/Leac Na hAlla* (2017) serve as primary case studies to explore dance theatre in Ireland. In devoting a chapter to Keegan-Dolan, this thesis not only celebrates his work as a new form of theatre but also acknowledges that while he may have been referenced in the previous chapters due to his connections with elements of theatre markers, actor-authors, and literary playwrights, he does not fit neatly in any of these categories. Yet, his work is very symptomatic of contemporary Irish theatre, from a chronological perspective but also because it further elaborates the diversity of forms that emerged since the 1990s.

Aoife McGrath perceives Michael Keegan-Dolan as a playwright in order to argue that "the pivotal shift of perspective from the 'authorial' to the corporeal recognised in [their] work […] is particularly remarkable given the overwhelming literary tradition of Irish theatre practice" (1).[8] Strangely the converse argument seems to have even more weight. In considering Keegan-Dolan's essential training as a dancer, moving his work towards rather than away from the "authorial", realigns himself with the "overwhelming tradition of Irish theatre practice", towards the textuality of dramatic theatre. Lehmann argues that "the dramatic process occurred *between* the bodies, the postdramatic process occurs *with/on/to*

[8] McGrath also considers David Bolger in her appraisal of dance theatre practitioners.

the body" (163) and Keegan-Dolan's work appears to be situated in both categories. In an interview with John O'Mahony, Keegan-Dolan reveals his dependence on verbal language as the source of his creative impulse:

> My primary instinct is story-telling. […] It's just part of me. Language is functional. It all has to be functional for movement to be functional – it has to create a character, it has to create a feeling, it has to lend itself to some other bigger thing, it can't be purely movement. ("Ballet in the Bog")

The "other bigger thing" is what brings him to other categories of creators. For instance, he adapts the classical ballet *Giselle* to develop a performance that spotlights issues such as incest, homosexuality, and fear of the immigrant, all relevant in the socio-political context of contemporary Ireland. In *Giselle,* the dramatic conflict between the central characters is created textually in Act 1. In contrast, there is almost no text in Act 2: Keegan-Dolan uses dance to conjure the "image of the agony" of Giselle's death and the grief of Albrecht and Hilarion, thereby focusing on the theatricality of dance rather than on drama.

For Aoife McGrath, the "focus on the authority of the word routinely confined the body to a function of interpretation rather than creative articulation, and has contributed to the marginalisation of theatrical dance in Ireland" (1). The insinuation that "the authority of the word" has sidelined dance theatre as an essentially choreographic practice – and the funding of those companies within the dance budget confirms this angle – would theoretically exclude Keegan-Dolan as a playwright. However, his work increasingly includes textual material and is regularly based on myths. At the same time, his recourse to collaborations and art forms in devising shows suggests that he also shares commonalities with theatre makers. Finally, his latest work, *How To Be A Dancer In Seventy-two Thousand Easy Lessons* (2022), echoes the work of actor-authors in that he takes his life as the primary basis for the story he tells, in the first person, breaking the fourth wall in a direct address to

the audience. In fact, the only element that would exclude it is the intervention of dancer Rachel Poirier, who works as illustrator, translator, sidekick, all in dance form.

3. Case Studies

In the case studies below, one aim is to showcase through the long quotations not only the content of the plays but how the movements and visual innovations are scripted. This is of particular import since those texts have not yet been published and, like ANU's scripts, they provide a precise blueprint for a wide array of performers rather than reading material.

a. *Giselle* (2002)

Written in the mid-nineteenth century, *Giselle* is a classic romantic ballet. Set in the Rhineland, the story centres on the love of Duke Albrecht for the peasant girl Giselle. Attempting to win the love of Giselle, Albrecht assumes the identity of a peasant. When his cover is blown by Hilarion, who also loves Giselle, she stabs herself to death. In Keegan-Dolan's version, *Giselle* is set in the town of Ballyfeeney – allowing a pointed vernacular representation of the Irish midlands – and has become "a story of tragedy and forgiveness" (*Giselle* 1) only loosely tied to the original ballet. Giselle is a cleaning lady, Hilarion is her brother, and Albrecht is a bi-sexual Bratislavan line-dancing teacher who, "with two classes each evening, Monday through Thursday and three classes on Friday and Saturday, at ten euros a class and five euros for children, is taking home a small tax-free fortune" (16). Keegan-Dolan's play is the polar opposite of the classical ballet. The production is darkly comic, sinister, with echoes of Martin McDonagh's work. It is a fairy-tale for adults with strong language and scenes of an overtly sexual nature.

The play is divided into two acts. Act 1 is driven by text: dialogues but also a narration that establishes the background of Giselle's family. Act 2 is exclusively danced. Giselle is already on stage, cleaning the floors, while the audience find their seats. The rest of the cast of nine emerge from the audience to access the stage as the performed prologue unfolds, but this is not the most striking or innovative aspect to the play's overture. Instead, it is the vertical quality of the performance: Giselle's father Tommy has climbed to the top of an ESB (Electricity Supply Board) pole "and is perched precariously on its summit" (2). In addition to his role, Tommy also functions as central narrator, joined occasionally by the other cast members dressed in brown coats in choral interventions. Giselle never speaks, expressing herself solely through dance. The relation to the original ballet is related, hilariously, through a story of matrilineal legacy that involves all cast members to conjure the story through movement and text:

> ANN DEVINE. When Giselle's mother was a little girl, she saw Mary Murphy, the famous ballerina from Cork float across the stage as a swan and her life was never to be the same again. She fantasized endlessly about becoming a great ballerina herself.
> Pat Dunne. *(Cycling in a circle as he speaks)* She ran away from home borrowing her grandmother's bicycle to pedal the one hundred or so miles to the city….
> NURSE MARY (*as Augusta's grandmother*). (*Shouts after her*) Where are you going with my bicycle Gussie?
> *(Bring, Bring! Bicycle bell rings)*
> PAT DUNNE…where she secretly but unsuccessfully auditioned for the National Ballet Company.
> ALBRECHT (*as the National Ballet's artistic director*): NEXT!
> (Bicycle bell rings)
> ANN DEVINE. Defeated, Gussie returned home to Ballyfeeney where the next few years passed very slowly.
> BRIDGET. Then one hot night in June, she did something, 'dirty,' in the back of a young Tommy McCreedy's Baby Blue Ford Cortina; And the next thing she knew; she was pregnant. *(Bicycle bell rings)*
> FAT MARY. Tommy didn't talk much on their wedding day, and after they were married, he stopped talking altogether. Never again did he point his little cock in the direction of Augusta's arse.
> HILARION. Gussie christened her son after an important character in her favorite ballet.
> AUGUSTA. I'm calling him, Hilarion!
> *A white balloon held by Hilarion bursts with a loud bang.*
> (Bang)

> NURSE MARY. Occasionally she travelled back to the city to see the National Ballet Company where she was secretly enjoying intense sexual relations with an ageing Mexican ballet dancer named….
> BRIDGET as Mexican Ballet Dancer.
> *He jumps on to the tables where Gussie is waiting on all-fours. As he fucks her from behind, she blows up a white balloon which is held between her lips and supported by the performer who plays Fat Mary.*
> Jose! For years I pleasured her beyond the expectations of her wildest dreams. I fathered her daughter!
> AUGUSTA. I'm calling her Giselle.
> (Bang)
> *The balloon is burst by Giselle who stands by Gussie and smiles to the audience. (Bicycle bell rings).* (5-6)

Keegan-Dolan depicts the McCreedys as a dysfunctional contemporary Irish family that includes two children by different fathers, a father who spends his life "perched precariously" on an electricity pole (2), a mother who commits suicide, and a son who is sexually abusing his sister, Giselle. The society of contemporary Ireland is highlighted as abusive, unemployed, sinister. In the end, Giselle dies of an asthma attack triggered by her discovery that her lover has sexual intercourse with the male dance teacher.

According to Keating, "the reception of the *Midlands Trilogy* as a statement about globalised modern Ireland, its cultural complexity and its re-evaluation of nationalist history, troubled Keegan-Dolan a little bit" (Keating). Clearly, his Giselle has references to the tragic, and still mysterious story of Ann Rose Lovett, the 15-year-old girl who died giving birth in a grotto, four months after the outcome of the divisive abortion referendum. For McGrath, Keegan-Dolan devised *Giselle* "as a space for a multiplicity of alternative readings of corporealities in Ireland" (*Dance Theatre* 143): in other words, the layered art forms and narratives invited potential (political) readings rather than certainties about his own.

b. *The Bull* (2005)

The Bull consists of twenty scenes and a wordless epilogue. Though the script contains substantial dialogic material, the opening note specifies that "language will be kept to an absolute minimum; many scenes will be ultimately performed in silence or with accompanying music only" (1). In *The Bull* Keegan-Dolan loosely borrows from the Irish epic, 'The Táin Bó Cuailnge,' in Thomas Kinsella's translation (1). Like *Giselle*, the play's opening offers a striking image: in this case, a naked Fergus – the central actor, but also narrator – whose coffin is being unearthed from a bog by a crowd intent on getting their hands on the book of *The Bull*, with which he was buried, and beating him up.

As he tries to protect himself by reminding them that they cannot kill him since he is already dead, he proffers the book and shouts he will tell its story whether they want it or not, and begins what is clearly a contemporary retelling of the myth of Cú Chulainn:

> *(Alan and Maeve seated in the peat, far apart from one another)*
> FERGUS. Twenty-seven minutes past the twenty third hour! October thirty first! In the year two thousand and five!
> Their electrician had failed to show up yet again, to get their new under floor heating working. Their thirty-three-thousand-euro bed, long since ordered, has not arrived. Their plumber has put his foot through the Italian plastered ceiling and their carpenter has not hung the fourteen doors on their seven bedrooms and on their seven adjoining bathrooms.
> *(They look for heat in each other)*
> The need for heat becomes a need for sex!
> Alan imagines the pale-skinned, blue-eyed face of their new Latvian *putzfrau*, on all fours, her arse in the air, looking back at him, smiling. Maeve fantasises being mounted from behind by the very lovely Fergus O'Rourke, lead dancer in the Irish musical, Irish dance extravaganza; CELTIC BITCH
> *(Alan and Maeve indulge in their separate fantasies as they have sex together)*
> They hump and bump, twist and turn, grunt and groan, squeeze and pull, thrash, kick, flap, flail.
> MAEVE. Ride me you bad bastard! (Drum Clack – Bernie) […]
> ALAN. Who do you think you are? Before you married me, you were nothing. (Drum Clack)
> MAEVE. Me! Nothing! Hang on a second there; you were the one, 'who was nothing,', 'who had nothing-.' […] If it wasn't for me and my family, we wouldn't have been able to get married. (Drum Clack)

> ALAN. All of the money for that wedding came from ME and MY family. (Drum Clack)
> MAEVE. Money! What money? (Drum Clack – Bernie) […]
> ALAN. Let's see who has nothing now! (Drum Clack – Vinnie) […]
> FERGUS. Alan starts with the bank statements. *(Alan searches desperately in the peat)*
> ALAN *(screaming)*. YOU FUCKING WHORE! BLONDE BITCH! ALWAYS HIDING THINGS ON ME!
> FERGUS. Maeve gets out the silver-plated dessert spoons.
> MAEVE *(screaming).* FUCKING CUNTY BOLLOX, USELESS IMPOTENT FROG!
> *(Fergus closes the coffin.)* (2-3)

At the end of Fergus's narration, the epic characters have wounded themselves to death, and only the Morrigan survives, perched on Fergus's coffin.

In tackling one of Ireland's most revered epics, Keegan-Dolan's script of *The Bull* is replete with sexually explicit language and images. This irreverence was prompted by Keegan-Dolan's reading of Kinsella's text, as he admits that he "was really quite shocked at the violence in it. And then I became excited by the disparity between the version we're told as children and the version as translated" (McKeown). In his introduction Kinsella observes that:

> A strong element in the sagas is their directness in bodily matters; the easy references to seduction, copulation, urination, the picking of vermin, the suggestion of incest in "How Cuchulainn Was Begotten" and so on. This coarseness was a source of some uneasiness to Lady Gregory (I left out a good deal I thought you would not care about for one reason or another' she wrote to the people of Kiltartan) but it seems very mild to a modern reader. (xiv)

If the original version "seems very mild" to the modern reader, Keegan-Dolan's loosely based treatment of "what was originally a saga of heroism and honour" became "a ruthlessly comic anatomisation of greed, stupidity and corruption as the two families, their pets, their lovers, even the cast of an Irish dance show (The Celtic Bitch), are slaughtered in a deliriously accelerating torrent of tribal bloodlust" (Mackrell). To articulate the vulgarity of the greed and obsession with sexuality which characterised the Celtic Tiger, the dialogue leans heavily on sexually explicit words and the visual representation of a violent sexuality may appear gratuitous. Unlike *Giselle*, which revisited a 20-year-old story to address the

responsibility of the state and the Catholic ethos in the death of young Ann Lovett, *The Bull* attacks the greed, avarice, and vulgarity of the Celtic Tiger during the Celtic Tiger.

c. *Loch na hEala* (Swan Lake) (2017)

Swan Lake was the first production of Keegan-Dolan's new company, Teac Damsa. It is a contemporary Irish take on the ballet of the same name that addresses the abuse of children by the Catholic Church in Ireland. The performance again combines narrative – by the Holy Man – and dialogic structures with dance as an alternative mode of expression. In this play, Finola cannot speak because she has been turned into the black swan, this animal metamorphosis occurring for the children of Lir (one of them being Fionnuala) at the hands of their stepmother. As we have seen, In Celtic folklore the swan is associated with death, so that the transformation functions at two levels of intertext.

The play juxtaposes two plots, that of Jimmy's love for Finola, and that of the Holy Man's destruction of Finola:

> THE HOLY MAN. When I was a little boy I had a vision of the Mother of Christ and by the time I was twelve I was devoted to the Virgin Mary. At fourteen I was going to mass every day … at eighteen I entered the seminary and at twenty-four, I was a Holy Man. I was stationed in this town-land 'here,' and amongst my many duties I was put in charge of 'religious education,' at the local girls' school and that is where I met Finola.
> She was almost seventeen. And she was beautiful. […] on this one particular night I stayed too long. It was already dark outside. Her mother was in bed. Finola thought I looked sad and decided to sing for me.
> FINOLA (*sings*). Oh where have you been my blue eyed son.
> Oh where have you been my darling young one
> THE HOLY MAN. But I wasn't sad. I was yearning for her.
> I took her face in my hands and kissed her gently on the forehead, then on the cheek, and then on the lips. She tried to move away but I held on. I kissed her again and she started to cry and was about to scream so I pushed my hand into her mouth. She bit my hand. I remember thinking, how could something so holy bite so hard. I covered her mouth with both my hands and pressed my forearm against her throat.
> We fell on the floor.
> I pushed my body on top of hers so she couldn't move.
> And then I heard a noise.

> I looked up and saw Finola's three younger sisters standing at the door, staring into the room, looking at me.
> And a dark force descended over me and I said without thinking;
> If any one of you speaks a single word about what has happened here, by the power of God, you will all be turned into filthy animals.
> (*Quieter and very focused directly to Finola)*
> If you speak one word about what has happened here you will be turned into a filthy animal until the end of time.
> And I left. […] The next morning, I was summoned to the school because Finola and her three sisters had disappeared. A search went on for days, then weeks, then months but the girls could not be found. Suspicion grew all over the town, the police questioned all the likely suspects, but no one ever thought to question me.
> That night, as soon as I had left the house, Finola went to scream to wake her mother to tell her what I had done but no words left her mouth because she no longer had a tongue.
> (*Their teeth start falling from their mouths and long white feathers rip through their skin. Their feet turn black and scaly and webbing grows between their toes. Their hands shrivel up and disappear into the bones of their arms, as their arms become wings. They are in terrible pain. Their Mother wakes and chases the frightened swans out of the house and into the darkness. Finola and her sisters run wildly through the space ending back where they started at the beginning of this scene*). (14-16)

While the religious orders were protected from prosecution following the conclusions of the Ryan Report on institutional child abuse, Keegan-Dolan renders explicit the source and the consequences of the abuse, including the faith held by families towards the figure of the priest, and the in-humane treatment of the victims. In effect, the silent ballet of the white and black swans, alternatively playing together and fleeing before the priest – eventually dying – carries a more emotional response than narratives of abuse previously presented on stage in that the abuse of the Church is shown, in its immediate effects, tarnishing innocence and destroying families.

The character of Jimmy is inspired, though more anecdotally, by the famous 2000 case of the death of John Carthy in Longford. In an interview with David Jays for *The Guardian,* Keegan-Dolan establishes this connection: "Circumstances in his life, nothing extraordinary, conspired and he had depression. After an unfortunate sequence of events" – involving a reluctant house move, a gun, a siege – "he ended up by being killed by the armed unit of the Garda" ("Tarred and Feathered"). In the play, Jimmy's depression is

evidenced as he cries himself to sleep. Climbing out his bedroom window one night, he walks through the fields and forests that lead to the edge of Swan Lake:

> *Jimmy carefully places the gun under his chin and with tears streaming down his cheeks he closes his eyes and breathes out one last time. Then something beside him moves. He opens his eyes and sees a white swan, standing before him.*
> *He puts the gun on the ground and slowly stands.*
> *The silent beauty of the creature consumes all his heart. He moves closer and as he does the swan slowly transforms into a beautiful woman, the white woman of his dream the night before. She smiles at him. He smiles back.* […] *He wraps his arms gently around her shoulders and squeezes her warmly to protect her from the cold night.* […] *A beautiful dance begins; no words are spoken, as three more swans appear, one following the other, changing from birds into three young women. They watch cautiously as Finola dances with this gentle stranger. They move together in perfect unison as birds do and encircle the couple many times.* (13)

The aestheticism of the dance holds a symbolic meaning, emphasizing the beauty of the innocent in a world sullied by priests. The dance provides a commentary on the action where the dialogue remains allusive and fragmented. At the end of the play, as Jimmy lies dead, shot by Gardai, Finola's kiss of life enables him to stand once more. They are joined in a tender dance of death, her representation as a swan making this no miraculous action. As all cast members dance and smile, the Holy Man is left alone, grounded in the terrestrial in a return to the opening of the play: there, as the Goat Man, he is tethered to a pole, wearing nothing more than his underwear, and bleating. Is Keegan-Dolan suggesting a Pagan alternative to priesthood?

Following *MÁM* (2019) and as *Nobodaddy* is about to open at the 2024 Dublin Theatre Festival, one may suggest that the work of Keegan-Dolan will gather further scholarly attention. In this chapter, the aim has been to assess his position within contemporary Irish theatre, thereby including him in a reflection on theatre rather than choreography. As such, and because my field of expertise is drama, I have not commented on dance (which allies beauty and commentary) but rather on the thematic content of his work through three examples. What these have in common is an urgent critique of Ireland

through its abuses – be they financial or sexual – and its violence as a milieu – be it the Church or the Gardai. This critique is articulated via a textual and choreographic intertextual threading that finds its sources in local stories, Celtic folklore, and ballet. Beyond the political discourse, which is found in the work of other theatre makers (in a broad sense), his work strikes by its visual poetry. As the textual is not his primary language, but rather one that is used for its ability to complement and shadow other expressive means, Keegan-Dolan is not the next Friel. However, he renews in a most spectacular way with more ancient and international forms of theatre – for instance using a chorus – to revive the Irish stage.

Conclusion

As a theatre director almost all the work I do is text driven and in theatre locations. For directors like me it is a fundamental *a priori* assumption that there will be a continual flow of new playwrights, writing new scripts that need to be developed, produced and, most of all, directed. When I set out to research this thesis the primary objective was to provide an insider's perspective that might help to elucidate certain areas of Irish theatre and in doing so be of possible interest to future students. A secondary objective was to try to understand the landscape of my own profession and the position of the Irish playwright within it. What I did not envisage was how much of an impact it would have on my thinking and my work practices.

The change in the theatrical landscape has come about because of the work of the theatre makers, the actor-authors, and dance theatre practitioners. ANU, Brokentalkers, Pat Kinevane, Michael Keegan-Dolan, and their fellow artists have been at the vanguard of Irish theatre over the first two decades of the millennium, attracting national and international critical acclaim. They have contributed enormously to, firstly, the construct of contemporary Irish theatre and, secondly, the renegotiation of the relationship between the performer and the audience.

In all cases, in redefining the theatrical forms and their thematic content for the new millennium, they have all sought to renew forms of engagement with the audience. What all these productions have in common is that they bluntly look at society. By proposing performances based on facts (historical or personal), positioning the audience in historically-significant locations, these artists – who are predominantly directors, actors, and dancers, rather than authors – have delved into a communal history, memory, and trauma, thereby expanding definitions of political drama from a national mirror to interventions with the

local and the personal. They are addressing Irish history in its relevance to present lives and perceptions.

Are they then presenting such a vast contrast to the Irish literary playwright whose legacy is international? In discussing four classic plays, Brian Friel's *Faith Healer* (1979) and *Dancing at Lughnasa* (1990), Frank McGuinness's *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards The Somme* (1985) and Tom Murphy's *Bailegangaire* (1985), Eamonn Jordan observes that they are "history or memory plays that focused on issues of identity, place, home and authority" (*Theatre Stuff* xxxvii). Arguably the same may be said about the work of the theatre makers, dance theatre practitioners, and actor-authors. When one considers the extraordinary body of work that has been created in the new millennium by theatre makers ANU and Brokentalkers, by Michael Keegan Dolan's companies, and by actor-authors, is there an urgent need to redefine what we consider to be the definition of an 'Irish playwright'? Or is legacy the single decisive factor in setting the literary playwright apart?

Orlaith MacBride, Director of the Arts Council from 2011 to 2019, asserts that the "abiding constancy" in Irish theatre is the text, "that allows and enables different interpretations" (email to author August 2024). While an ardent supporter of the work of the theatre makers, she questions the idea of legacy:

> But can *Hammam* or *These Rooms* or any of Louise's work be re-performed by a different company in a different context? Probably not in that it is so clearly tied to a moment, a group of actors, Louise's aesthetic and vision. There is no script that will survive in a way that will allow it be performed in a different context. (Mail to author August 2024)

Even when a script is published, as in the case of *The Boys of Foley Street,* it is not a text for future performance (as any reading will make blatantly clear) but more a necessary blueprint

that provides thematic and linguistic pointers to what the performance involved other than the experiential. Similarly, the scripts of Michael Keegan-Dolan, currently still unpublished, are rehearsal scripts, containing text for the actors and details of dance and visual movements. As for the work of actor-authors, the scripts are written specifically for their specific talent as actors, and sometimes tell their personal stories, both elements making it exceedingly difficult for another actor to perform the texts (both published and unpublished). Maybe within a society the role of theatre is to deal with the here and now through the "lens" of the past in whatever way that is presented to us. There will always be theatre makers like Lowe and Boss, Cannon and Keegan, dance directors/choreographers like Keegan-Dolan, and actor-authors like Kinevane and Murfi. It is the playwrights that might need extra attention.

The research I have conducted suggests that playwriting is holding its own, as more plays were produced between 2010 to 2019 than between 1970 to 1979 – the main increase occurring in the 1990s and early noughties. If plays are more numerous, they tend nonetheless to have smaller casts and be of shorter duration. Both points may be explained by the funding landscape. As we have seen, the Project Funding system is in a constant state of development by the Arts Council but currently does not nurture playwriting as, when funding is bestowed, it leaves to playwrights the task of producing the play rather than just writing it. As mentioned In Chapter 4, the Strand 3 New Play initiative will provide the foundation for potential support for the presentation of new plays by playwrights, however, the playwright will still have to find a producer. While Strand 4 provides funding for large scale productions of classic plays the Arts Council might consider funding for large-scale *regional* productions to encourage emerging playwrights in rural areas.

Although I have not addressed this factor in the thesis – as it is a peripheral one – it is worth noting the influence of theatre reviews, or rather the impact of the demise of theatre

reviews. In earlier years the playwright, the director and the actors would wait anxiously for the newspaper reviews of the new play after opening night. A good review from Fintan O'Toole or Emer O'Kelly could do wonders for a new playwright. Those informed newspaper reviews are almost obsolete now outside of Dublin and in relation to smaller or regional productions. The critic has been replaced by online social media reviews, which can often be biased towards comedy and which do not carry the imprimatur of the theatre critic of old. After all, young Harold Pinter was saved from oblivion by an enlightened critic, when *The Birthday Party* dismally flopped. How many new Irish plays fare poorly for lack of an enlightened critic that would bring box office returns and the recognition of the profession?

What prompted this thesis was the pervading neglect of new Irish authors who write plays for a theatrical venue in the traditional form. My every instinct from thirty years of working in Irish theatre and six years researching this thesis is that Irish theatre is in danger of waiting for a great deal longer before the next Friel or the next Carr reaches our national stage. However, the diversification of theatre practices developed since the 1990s has also proven that the admired voice of the literary playwright is not unique in holding the mirror to Ireland, and that Irish theatre still sells. In the opening scene of Friel's *The Communication Chord* (1989), Jack questions Tim on his PhD, allowing Friel to explain the importance of words: "All social behaviour, the entire social order, depends on our communicational structures, on words mutually agreed on and mutually understood. Without that agreement, without that shared code, you have chaos" (18). In contemporary Irish theatre, the prominence of the literary play has waned – as it now shares the stage with the theatre makers' docu-verbatim "words", the vernacular "language" of the actor-authors, or Keegan-Dolan's fusion of language and dance – and the structure of the fourth-wall theatregoing experience has been shaken up to engage audiences anew. No chaos has

erupted from these new and enriching agreements as to what constitutes Irish theatre today, despite the hard questions being raised. Still, I will continue to nurture the work of the solitary playwright in its unequalled poetry.

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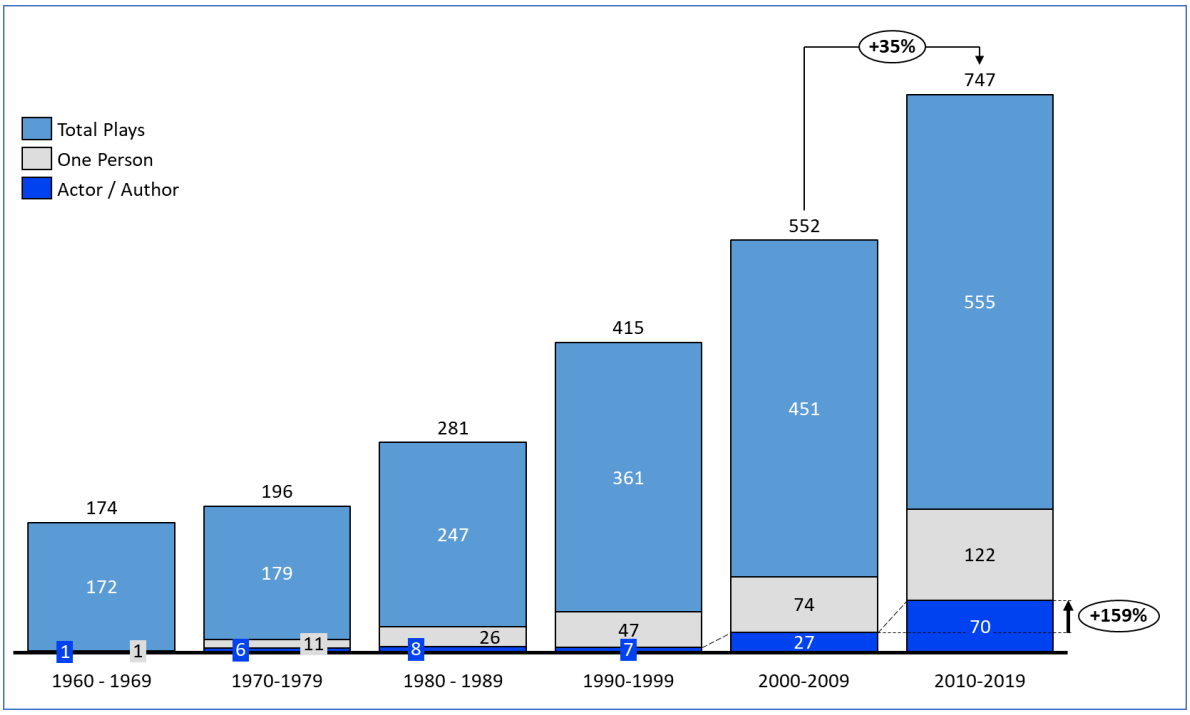
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Appendices

Appendix 1: Arts Council Project Funding Awards Breakdown 2009-2018

2009	**Project Awards**;	Theatre Makers:	9
		Playwrights:	3
2010	**Project Awards;**	Theatre Makers:	11
		Playwrights:	6
2011	**Project Awards;**	Theatre Makers:	16
		Playwrights:	1
2012	**Project Awards;**	Theatre Makers:	15
		Playwrights:	5
2013	**Project Awards;**	Theatre Makers:	20
		Playwrights:	6
2014	**Project Awards;**	Theatre Makers:	34
		Playwrights:	6
2015	**Project Awards;**	Theatre Makers:	27
		Playwrights:	8
2016	**Project Awards;**	Theatre Makers:	26
		Playwrights:	6
2017	**Project Awards;**	Theatre Makers:	34
		Playwrights:	10
2018	**Project Awards;**	Theatre Makers:	36
		Playwrights:	15
Totals:	**2008-2018**	**Theatre Makers:**	**300**
		Playwrights:	**65**

Appendix 2: Growth in Actor-Author Plays 1960-2019



Insights:

- Year-on-year the overall number of plays increased by 35%. In comparison, actor/author plays increased at a rate of 159%
- In the same period, the proportion of actor/author plays to overall plays increased from 5% to 9%.

Appendix 3: Content and Theme of Actor-Author Plays 1960-2022

Period	Title	Actor Author	Venue	Subject	Secondary Subject	Total Plays	One Person	Actor Author	Female	Male	Total Female	Total Male
1960-1969						**172**	**1**	**1**	**0**	**1**	**0**	1
1969	*Mr. Handel's Visit to Dublin*	Maurice Davin-Power	St. Patrick's Cathedral, Dublin.	Biographical								
1970-1979						**179**	**11**	**6**	**0**	**6**	**0**	11
1974	*The Brother*	Eamon Morrissey	The Peacock	Series of Stories								
1975	*In My Father's Time*	Eamon Kelly	The Peacock	Series of Stories								
1977	*Brendan*	Ulick O'Connor	The Peacock	Biographical								
1978	*The Rub of the Relic.*	Eamon Kelly	The Peacock	Series of Stories								
1979	*The Story Goes…*	Eamon Kelly	The Peacock	Series of Stories								
1979	*From the Vikings to Bang Bang*	John Molloy	The Peacock	Historical								
1980-1989						**247**	**26**	**8**	**1**	**7**	**4**	**22**
1980	*English That For Me*	Eamon Kelly	The Peacock	Series of Stories								
1984	*Shem the Penman*	Paddy Scully	Lyric, Belfast	Character's Journey								
1984	*Mr Gulliver's Bags*	Eamon Morrissey	The Peacock	Biographical								
1984	*Beezie*	Sheila Flitton	The Damer Hall	Biographical								
1985	*How To Roast A Strasbourg Goose*	Sydney Bernard Smith	Unknown, DTF.	Historical								
1988	*America 87*	Eugene O'Brien	Players Theatre, TCD	Character's Journey								

Period	Title	Actor Author	Venue	Subject	Secondary Subject	Total Plays	One Person	Actor Author	Female	Male	Total Female	Total Male
1988	*Bat The Father Rabbit the Son*	Donal O'Kelly	Mansion House	Relationships								
1989	*Memoirs of A Midget*	Karl MacDermott	Beál Bocht Pub	Biographical								
1990-1999						**361**	**47**	**7**	**3**	**4**	**9**	**38**
1992	*Chrysalis*	Sylvia Cullen	Triskel, Cork.	Personal Journey.								
1993	*Talking to the Wall*	Mannix Flynn	The Da Club	Biographical.								
1995	*A Most Notorious Woman*	Maggie Cronin	The Garage Monaghan	Biographical.								
1995	*Catalpa*	Donal O'Kelly	Garter Lane Waterford	Historical								
1995	*Checking For Squirrels*	Eugene O'Brien	Andrews Lane Dublin	Personal Journey								
1997	*Typhoid Mary*	Eithne McGuinness	Bewley's Café	Biographical.								
1999	*Misterman*	Enda Walsh	Granary, Cork	Personal Journey								
2000-2009						**451**	**74**	**27**	**13**	**14**	**25**	**49**
2001	*A Close Shave With the Devil*	Ena May	Focus Theatre	Mental Illness								
2001	*Normality*	Mia Gallagher	Dublin Writers Museum	Mental Illness								
2001	*Redser*	Billie Traynor	Dublin Writers Museum	Relationships								
2001	*Stone Ghosts*	Sue Mythen	Dublin Writers Museum	The Body								
2001	*Summer Fruits*	Deirdre Kinahan	Dublin Writers Museum	Personal Journey								
2001	*The Going Away Present*	Judith Ryan	Dublin Writers Museum	Mental Illness								
2001	*The Red Sandals*	Ena May	Dublin Writers Museum	Mental Illness								

Period	Title	Actor Author	Venue	Subject	Secondary Subject	Total Plays	One Person	Actor Author	Female	Male	Total Female	Total Male
2002	*Pam Ella*	Alice Barry	Andrew's Lane	Relationships								
2002	*Hurricane*	Richard Dormer	Old Museum Arts Centre, Belfast	Biographical								
2003	*Tom Crean*	Aidan Dooley	New York International Fringe Festival	Biographical								
2003	*Entertainment*	Alex Johnston	Project Arts	Comedy								
2003	*James X*	Mannix Flynn	Project Arts	Biographical								
2003	*Swallow*	Michael Harding	Dublin City Gallery	Mental Illness								
2004	*Jimmy Joyced*	Donal O'Kelly	Bewley's Cafe	Biographical								
2005	*Sarah's Comfort*	Niamh McGrath	The Linen Hall, Belfast	Biographical								
2006	*Forgotten*	Pat Kinevane	Bealtaine Festival	Political								
2006	*Hedy Lamarr and the Easter Rising*	Michael James Ford	Bewley’s Café	Biographical								
2006	*Play About My Dad*	Michelle Read	Project Arts	Biographical								
2006	*The Art of Swimming*	Lynda Radley	The Arches, Glasgow	Biographical								
2006	*The Mental*	Little John Nee	Axis, Ballymun	Mental Illness								
2006	*Tintype*	Frankie McCafferty	Kilkenny Castle	Mental Illness								
2007	*Mimic*	Raymond Scannell	Cork Midsummer	Relationships								
2008	*Absolution*	Owen O'Neill	Assembly Rooms, Edinburgh	Serial Killer								
2008	*Greenstick Boy*	Maggie Cronin	Queens Studio, Belfast	Relationships								

Period	Title	Actor Author	Venue	Subject	Secondary Subject	Total Plays	One Person	Actor Author	Female	Male	Total Female	Total Male
2009	*Journey to the End of Night*	Dylan Tighe	Denzille Lane Cinema	Biographical								
2009	*Life After Love*	Billie Traynor	Bewley's Cafe	Relationships								
2009	*Language Unbecoming A Lady*	Myles Breen	Belltable Limerick	Gay								
2010-2022						**555**	**122**	**63**	**28**	**35**	**54**	**68**
2010	*Fruitcake*	Alice Barry	Bealtaine Festival	Mental Illness								
2010	*Ten Days With Mad Mary*	Yasmine Akram	Project Cube	Personal Journey								
2010	*The Year of Magical Wanking*	Neil Watkins	Half Moon, Cork	Biographical								
2011	*1981*	Tony Devlin	Roddy McSorley Club	Biographical	Political							
2011	*Eternal Rising of the Sun*	Amy Conroy	Project Arts	Personal Journey								
2011	*The Wheelchair on My Face*	Sonya Kelly	Bewley's Cafe	Biographical								
2011	*Silent*	Pat Kinevane	Mill Theatre	Mental Illness	Political							
2012	*The Dubliners Dilemma*	Declan Hughes	City Arts Centre	Biographical								
2012	*The Sand Park*	Seamus O'Rourke	Cornmill, Carrigallen	Personal Journey.								
2012	*A Dangerman*	Dick Walsh	Smock Alley	Political								
2012	*Solpadeine is my Boyfriend*	Stefanie Preissner	Project Cube	Biographical								
2012	*Aillilú Fionnula*	Donal O'Kelly	Theatre Upstairs,	Political								
2012	*Morning*	Andy Hinds	The New Theatre	Relationships								

Period	Title	Actor Author	Venue	Subject	Secondary Subject	Total Plays	One Person	Actor Author	Female	Male	Total Female	Total Male
2013	*The Wheelchair Monologues*	Gearoid O Cairreallsáin	Cultúrlann McAdam Ó Fiaich	Biographical								
2013	*The Chronicles of Oggle*	Peter Gowen	The Mall Arts Centre, Youghal	Mental Illness	Political							
2013	*Small Plastic Wars*	Pat McGrath	Bewley's Cafe	Personal Journey								
2013	*Pondling*	Genevieve Hulme-Beaman	Smock Alley Theatre	Mental Illness	Political							
2013	*Broken Promise Land*	Mirjana Randulic	Theatre Upstairs,	Biographical	Political							
2013	*Beowulf The Blockbuster*	Bryan Burroughs	Bewley’s Café	Classic								
2013	*Counter Culture*	Katie O'Kelly	Bewley’s Café	Political.								
2013	*Postscript*	Noelle Brown	The New Theatre	Biographical	Political							
2013	*Deep*	Raymond Scannell	Half Moon Theatre, Cork	Historical								
2014	*Bastard: A Family History*	Ollie Bradell	Project Arts	Biographical	Political							
2014	*Charolais*	Noni Stapleton	Bewley’s Café	Relationships								
2014	*How To Keep an Alien*	Sonya Kelly	Project Arts	Biographical	Political							
2014	*Idir Dhá Cheann na hImní*	Noel Ó Gallchóir	An Coire, Tir Chiara	Biographical								
2014	*In My Bed*	Veronica Dyas	The Arch Cope Street Dublin	Biographical	Political							
2014	*My Name Is Saoirse.*	Eva O'Connor	Discover 21, Edinburgh.	Personal Journey								
2014	*The Centre of the Universe*	Johnny Doran	Bewley’s Café	Biographical								

Period	Title	Actor Author	Venue	Subject	Secondary Subject	Total Plays	One Person	Actor Author	Female	Male	Total Female	Total Male
2014	*To Space*	Niamh Shaw	Science Gallery Studio	Political								
2014	*Underneath*	Pat Kinevane	Lime Tree, Limerick	Political	Political							
2014	*Padraig Potts Walking Tour of Ireland*	Seamus O'Rourke	Cornmill, Carrigallen.	Biographical								
2015	*Indigestion*	Seamus O'Rourke	Cornmill, Carrigallen	Mental Illness	Political							
2015	*The Matador*	Shane O'Reilly	Bewley's Café	Personal Journey								
2015	*Oh What A Lovely Rose*	Erica Murray	Smock Alley	Personal Journey								
2015	*Jellyfish*	Alice Malseed	Project Cube	Personal Journey								
2015	*Going Spare*	Siobhán Donnellan	Theatre Upstairs,	Personal Struggle								
2015	*Evening*	Andy Hinds	Viking Theatre	Personal Journey								
2015	*Big Bobby, Little Bobby.*	Camille Ross	Smock Alley Theatre	Mental Illness.								
2016	*The Humours of Bandon*	Margaret McAuliffe	Bewley's Café	Biographical.								
2016	*The Olive Tree*	Katie O'Kelly	The New Theatre	Political								
2016	*The Wickedness of Oz*	Kate Gilmore	Bewley's Café	Personal Journey								
2016	*The Man in the Woman's Shoes*	Mikel Murfi	Hawkswell	Personal Journey								
2016	*Violet Gibson*	Alice Barry	Granary, UCC	Biographical								
2017	*My Left Nut*	Michael Patrick	Bewley's Café	Biographical								
2017	*Kicking all the Boxes*	Liz Fitzgibbon	Bewley's Café	Personal Journey								

Period	Title	Actor Author	Venue	Subject	Secondary Subject	Total Plays	One Person	Actor Author	Female	Male	Total Female	Total Male
2017	*Mary and Me*	Irene Kelleher	Vault Theatre, Edinburgh	Personal Journey								
2017	*Radio Rosario*	Little John Nee	Mick Lally Theatre	Personal Journey								
2017	*Sequin Dreams*	Michelle Moran	Bewley's Cafe	Personal Journey								
2017	*Spliced*	Timmy Creed	St. Michan's Park, Green Street, Dublin	Biographical	Political							
2017	*Test Copy*	Roseanna Purcell	Nenagh Arts Centre	Biographical								
2017	*The Egg is A Lonely Hunter*	Hannah Mamalis	Project Cube	Personal Journey								
2017	*The Half of It*	Karen Cogan	Secret Location	Mental Illness.								
2017	*I Hear You And Rejoice*	Mikel Murfi	Hawks Well, Sligo	Relationships	Marginal Character							
2017	*Charlie's A Clepto*	Clare Monnelly	Axis, Ballymun	Relationships	Political							
2018	*Appropriate*	Sarah Jane Scott	Bewley's Café	Biographical								
2018	*Before*	Pat Kinevane	GBS, Carlow	Political	Political							
2018	*Brendan Galileo for Europe*	Fionn Foley	Bewley's Café	Political.	Political							
2018	*Diary of a Martian Beekeeper*	Niamh Shaw	Smock Alley Theatre	Personal Journey								
2018	*Here and Now*	Veronia Dyas	The Complex	Homeless.	Political							
2018	*I Am Tonie Walsh*	Tonie Walsh	Project Arts	Gay	Political							
2018	*Infinity*	Nessa Matthews	Smock Alley	personal Journey								
2018	*Ireland's Call*	John Connors	Bewley's Café	Relationships	Marginal Character							

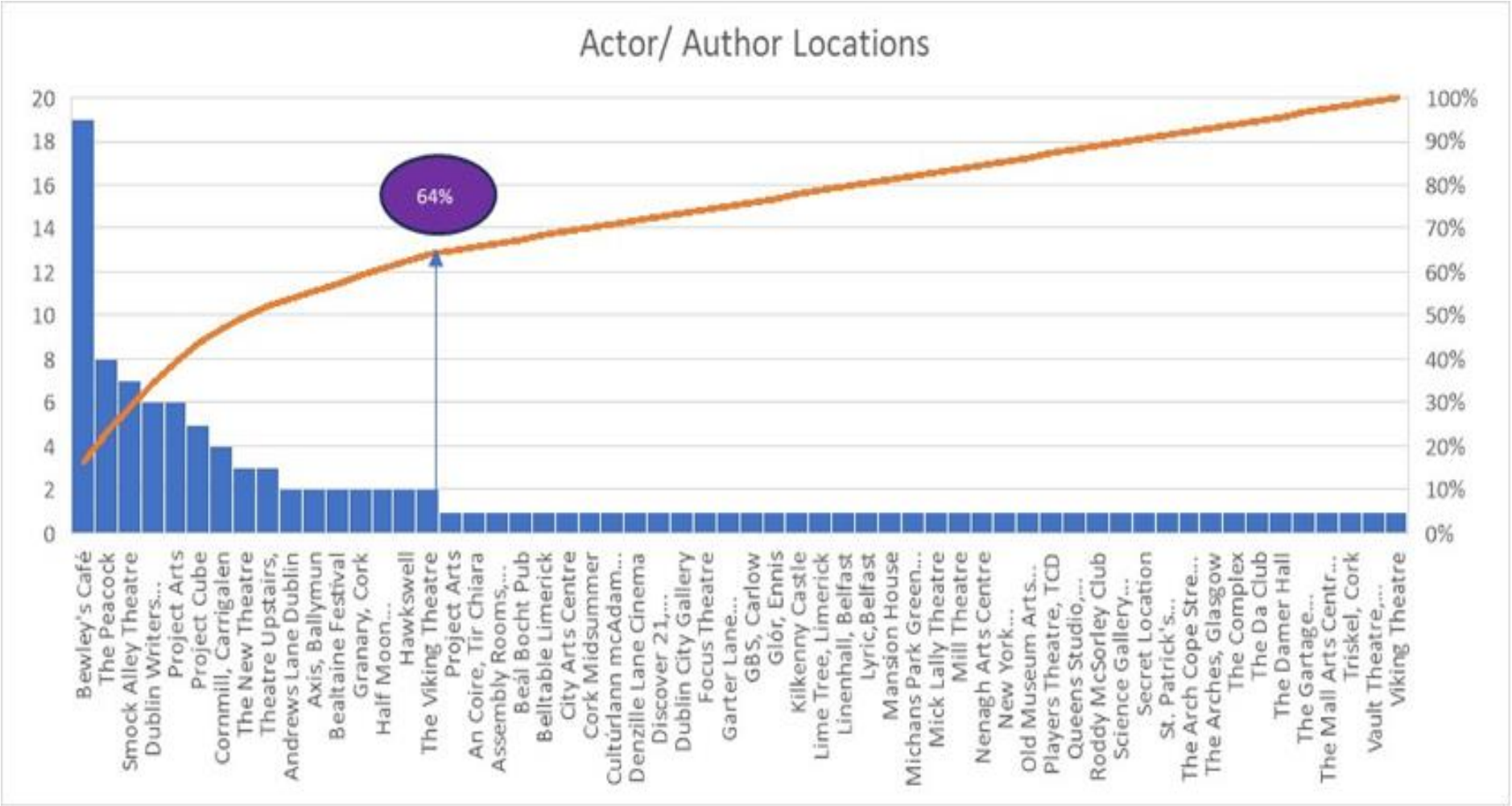
Period	Title	Actor Author	Venue	Subject	Secondary Subject	Total Plays	One Person	Actor Author	Female	Male	Total Female	Total Male
2018	*Not A Funny Word*	Tara Flynn	Smock Alley BB	Personal Journey								
2018	*Seahorse*	Christiane O'Mahony	Project Cube	Personal Journey								
2018	*And Thank You*	Seamus O'Rourke	Cornmill, Carrigallen.	Personal Journey	Marginal Character							
2019	*Sweet About Me*	Jacinta Sheerin	Glór, Ennis	Personal Struggle	Addiction							
2020	*The Story*	Timmy O'Mahony	West Cork fit-up Festival	Personal Journey	Marginal Character							
2021	*The Handyman*	Seamus O'Rourke	The Viking Theatre	Personal Journey	Marginal Character							
2022	*The Ballad of Mossy Flood*	Seamus O'Rourke	The Viking Theatre	Personal Journey	Marginal Character							

Subject	Number of Plays
Personal Struggle/Journey/ Socio-political	32
Biographical	32
Mental Illness	13
Political	11
Relationships	10
Historical	3
Homeless	3
Gay	3

Appendix 4: The Royal Court – Irish Productions, 1905-2015

The Royal Court Theatre — Irish Playwrights.		
Play Title	**Year**	**Playwright**
Major Barbara	1905	George Bernard Shaw
The Doctor's Dilemma	1906	George Bernard Shaw
Maurice Hart	1912	T.C. Murray
The Bogie Man	1912	Lady Gregory
The Gombeen Man	1913	R.J. Ray
The Supplanter	1914	John Bernard McCarthy
Endgame	1957	Samuel Beckett
Famine	1969	Tom Murphy
Within Two Shadows	1972	Wilson John Haire
Echoes From A Concrete Canyon	1975	Wilson John Haire
Footfalls	1976	Samuel Beckett
That Time	1976	Samuel Beckett
Faith Healer	1981	Brian Friel
Rat in the Skull	1984	Ron Hutchinson
The Hitch-Hiker	1984	Eileen Dillon
Goodnight Siobhán	1990	Jeanne Crowley
The Steward of Christendom	1995	Sebastian Barry
The Beauty Queen of Leenane	1996	Martin McDonagh
A Skull in Connemara	1997	Martin McDonagh
The Lonesome West	1997	Martin McDonagh.
The Weir	1997	Conor McPherson
Trust	1999	Gary Mitchell
Dublin Carol	2000	Conor McPherson
The Force of Change	2000	Gary Mitchell
On Raftery's Hill	2000	Marina Carr
Loyal Women	2003	Gary Mitchell
Shining City	2004	Conor McPherson
Alice Trilogy	2005	Tom Murphy
O Go My Man	2006	Stella Feehily
Woman and Scarecrow	2006	Marina Carr
Leaves	2007	Lucy Caldwell
Bang!Bang!Bang!	2011	Stella Feehily
Hangmen	2015	Martin McDonagh
33 plays 19 Playwrights		

Appendix 5: Venues where Actor-Author plays were premièred



- 64% of the actor/author plays were delivered by just 16 theatres