CORA Cork Open Research Archive
Cartlann Taighde Oscailte Chorcaí

Title	Risings and cancelling: Implicit censorship on a free Irish stage
Authors	Etienne, Anne;Fitzpatrick, Lisa
Publication date	2024-01-23
Original Citation	Etienne, A. and Fitzpatrick, L. (2024) 'Risings and cancelling: Implicit censorship on a free Irish stage', in Etienne, A. and Megson, C. (eds.) Theatre Censorship in Contemporary Europe - Silence and Protest. Exeter: University of Exeter Press.
Type of publication	Book chapter;book-chapter
Link to publisher's version	https://doi.org/10.47788/WHXD7915
Rights	© 2024, the Editors and the Contributors. This is an Accepted Manuscript (draft, post-peer-review, pre-copyediting version) of a chapter published by University of Exeter Press in Theatre Censorship in Contemporary Europe - Silence and Protest on 24 January 2024, available online: https://doi.org/10.47788/WHXD7915
Download date	2026-10-10 16:39:49
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/17163

UCC
University College Cork, Ireland
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

Chapter 3

Risings and Cancelling: Implicit Censorship on a Free Irish Stage

Anne Etienne and Lisa Fitzpatrick

a Bishop can make himself felt without showing himself – Sean O'Casey (1956)

In opposition to its British counterpart, Ireland could boast both a National Theatre and a stage free from official censorship in the early twentieth century.[1] Even following Irish independence in 1922, theatre – unlike publications and cinema – remained untethered by any centralized censorship system. However, the absence of apparatus does not equate to the absence of censorship, and Joan FitzPatrick Dean's taxonomy of stage censorship shows that the most pernicious interventions proved all the more effective because they operated outside of the law (2004: 27-32) and were motivated indirectly by a staunch Catholic ethos, if not directly by a prominent Church representative (2001). In this sense, O'Casey's comment cited in the epigraph to this chapter is apposite – a Bishop need not be visible to be influential. In the twenty-first century, the influence of 'a Bishop' on artistic freedom has waned, but recent public events in Irish theatre conjure the image of levers that have functioned as mechanisms of exclusion. This chapter asks how the contemporary repertoire is shaped by exploring case studies through the lens of censorship, thereby attempting to identify contemporary agents of censorship in the Republic of Ireland (RoI) and Northern Ireland. In this way, we examine the strategies of censorship in programming and funding decisions across the island as

> implicit operations of power that rule out in unspoken ways what will remain unspeakable. In such cases, no explicit regulation is needed in which to articulate this

> constraint. The operation of implicit and powerful forms of censorship suggests that the power of the censor is not exhausted by explicit state policy or regulation. (Butler 1997:130)

The examples chosen for this investigation are the #wakingthefeminists (#WTF) campaign that offered vocal criticism of the Abbey's 2016 Centenary programme, which was almost devoid of women artists.[2] In 2022, the struggles of the theatre companies Aisling Ghéar in Belfast and Corcadorca in Cork to maintain the Arts Council funding essential to the delivery of their artistic programmes offer a springboard to consider the operation of cultural norms and judgements of artistic value on the work of theatre artists across the island. This chapter explores the impact of these largely invisible forces of implicit censorship in three aspects of theatre in Ireland: gender equality, language, and regional representation.

1. Women Writers and the 'National Tradition'

The invisible or unofficial censorship of work by women has a long and complex history in Irish theatre practice and Irish culture more broadly. As Linda Connolly points out, Irish Studies as a discipline has often overlooked Irish Women's Studies and the cultural focus on compelling metanarratives and on nation building has tended to sideline women, whose lives and whose writing may prioritize domestic and private life (2004: 148). Connolly is one of a number of practitioners and scholars who, from the late 1980s, investigated and challenged the exclusion of women writers from the national canon. Eavan Boland's reflection on her experience as a woman poet in the Irish national tradition exposes some of the difficulties encountered by Irish women artists. Boland describes the Irish national tradition as 'constraining' and points to 'poetic ethics' as 'often the concealed agenda of a poetic

tradition' (1987: 148). There is a problem in recognizing women poets, she argues, because women in Irish art tend to be emblematic and difficult to disentangle from the figure of Woman-Nation; the dominance of the Woman-Nation makes actual women invisible. Accusing Irish poets of 'evading the real women of an actual past […] whose silence their poetry should have broken', Boland asks how 'real women with their hungers, their angers, endured a long struggle and a terrible subsistence […] How then did they re-emerge in Irish poetry as queens, as Muses […] That could happen only if Irish poets complied with the wishful thinking of Irish nationalism' (155). The apotheosis of this phenomenon is, perhaps, the original *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing* (1990), which infamously excluded almost all women writers in pursuit of a national metanarrative.

The criticisms of the *Field Day Anthology* are significant because they are one of the earliest concerted responses to the 'Bishop', that invisible apparatus of censorship shaping what should and should not be included in the national repertory. The activist response to the *Anthology* is significant for bringing to public attention a burgeoning academic dialogue about the place of women artists in Irish culture. That issue is beyond the scope of this chapter, but is addressed in an interdisciplinary body of criticism (Fitzpatrick and Hill 2022; Hill 2019; Innes 1993; Leeney 2010; Meaney 1991, 2010; Ryan and Ward 2003; Sihra 2007, 2018; Sullivan 2002) – and in theatre such as Glass House Productions' ground-breaking *There are No Irish Women Playwrights* in 1992-93. Glass House created a festival of readings of twelve plays by women writers in response to a bookseller who said there were no women playwrights. While the situation had improved by 2015, many of the same problems have persisted. In 2004, celebrating its centenary year, the Abbey Theatre, Ireland's National Theatre, stoked controversy with its programme which excluded women from the main stage, and included just a one-night performance of Augusta Gregory's short comedy *Spreading the News* and a production of Marina Carr's *Portia Coughlan* in the Peacock

Theatre – the studio space. This excision of women's voices from the main stage was ironically heightened by the theatre's staging of W.B. Yeats's *Kathleen Ni Houlihan* (1902), a powerfully political play in which Ireland is personified, first as an Old Woman, and finally as a Queen, rehearsing all of the Irish nationalist tropes of the Woman-Nation. Viewing the controversy from this juncture, it appears that the Board of the National Theatre and then Artistic Director Ben Barnes were unaware of the gendered nature of the programming. The absence of women playwrights from the list was made invisible by its seeming to be a fact of nature. While there was some public debate on the issue in 2004 and afterwards, it appears to have had little lasting impact since the centenary of the Rising that led to the foundation of the Irish Republic, in 2016, was celebrated with another male-dominated programme at the Abbey Theatre. By 2015, however, when that programme was unveiled, a new generation of theatre scholars had emerged (Cathy Leeney, Anna McMullan, Melissa Sihra), several of them specializing in women's writing and in feminist performance more widely; and the advent of social media offered a platform for rapid and effective communication across Ireland and overseas. The Waking The Feminists movement was born under the hashtag, #WTF.

2. #WTF

#WTF was initially an angry online response to the publication of the 2016 Abbey Theatre programme, titled 'Waking the Nation', on 28 October 2015. Within two days, there was vigorous discussion on Twitter; on 30 October, the theatre director Maeve Stone tweeted a reference to 'Waking the Feminists' as an ironic comment on 'Waking the Nation', and this was adopted as the hashtag for the protests. Designer Lian Bell quickly emerged as a key spokeswoman, rallying actors, designers, writers, and directors to challenge the male-

dominated theatre sector and to demand meaningful change in a short space of time. Video footage from the #WTF event at the Abbey on 12 November, approximately a week after the programme was published, captures both the anger of the demonstrators and the lived experience of women theatre artists in Ireland. Three young actors assert that this is 'a conversation we've all been having, in private, in smaller sectors trying to make smaller change, and now finally it's reached a very big public forum' (O'Brien and Geraghty 2015). Actor Donna Dent discloses that, in twenty-seven years, she has only ever been cast in one play by a woman, has never worked with a female director, and has worked with only a very few female designers. Yet, she notes, stage management and crew are often female. She asks:

> How much talent have we lost to sexism? Why were we offered a debate, why aren't we being offered an apology? Because if any institution, let alone a National Theatre, something that's funded by the public, was homophobic or racist they'd be shot down, but sexism is still considered a petty crime. (Cited in O'Brien and Geraghty 2015)

#WTF offered a place for women (and men) to express their anger and frustration with the unrepresentative nature of Irish theatre, and particularly of the most highly funded, the prestigious Abbey, the first state funded national theatre in Europe. The speed of the reaction and the numbers of male and female artists who responded indicates a previously publicly unspoken dissatisfaction with the status quo. The scale of the protest made it impossible to dismiss it as feminist trouble-making or a fringe concern. On 12 November 2015, the main stage of the Abbey hosted a passionate discussion in front of a packed house of artists and theatre makers, scholars and critics, just two weeks after the story broke; tickets sold out in seven minutes, and the speeches were broadcast to crowds gathered in the street outside the theatre (Barry 2015). The event seated the thirty leaders of the protest on the stage, and

invited women to speak and share their experiences as professional artists. While the focus was firmly on gender, writers from minority ethnic communities, queer writers, and working-class writers pointed out the intersectional nature of the discrimination and its impact on a National Theatre that should be representing the diversity of the nation. Responding quickly, the Arts Council of Ireland pledged action, and within months had commissioned a report, titled *Gender Counts*, into the gender breakdown in Irish theatre over the preceding decade. Published in 2017, the report analysed gender in Irish theatre from 2006-2015, identifying 1,155 productions, and 9,205 individual roles. It focused on the top ten funded theatre organizations in the state to discover that the four highest-funded organizations had the lowest female representation, including the two largest Dublin theatres, the Abbey and the Gate. Overall, there was an inverse relationship between the amount of funding, and female representation: 'The gap to achieving gender parity ranges between 41 and 8 percentage points in the roles studied' but was greatest in the most prestigious roles and in the most prominent organizations (Donohue and others 2017: 7). The report included practical measures to be taken to actively address and change the situation.

Complicating this picture, retrospectively, were allegations that emerged first on Twitter during the #MeToo debate in 2019, about the behaviour of the long-time Artistic Director of the Gate Theatre. The #MeToo movement in Ireland was not directly related to #WTF. However, the discussions and investigations that #MeToo prompted revealed further layers of bias as contributing factors to discrimination against women theatre-makers on the island. The allegations against the Gate Theatre were subsequently investigated and published in the national press, the Director resigned and retired, and the Board of the theatre was disbanded. The case revealed long-time sexual harassment of female staff at the theatre, as well as incidents of harassment and inappropriate behaviour towards young and early career artists such as Grace Dyas, who first broke the story. This theatre was one of those identified in

Gender Counts as having the lowest level of gender equality in its programming and hiring. These revelations and others led to the Irish Theatre Institute report *Speak Up: A Call for Change*, supported by the Arts Council (2021), which establishes the responsibility of employers to have appropriate training and policies in place to deal with bullying and harassment, including methods of monitoring and reporting violations. Overall, #WTF and #MeToo have motivated public and private reflections on working methods in the arts sector, bullying and harassment, and the urgent need for dignity at work for the most precarious workers.

Given this background of underrepresentation and of bullying, how might the concept of censorship illuminate the complexity of the situation? Why was (and is) the work of women writers being invisibly censored, especially on the main stages? What complex ideological and market forces underlie the decisions being made by dramaturgs, producers, boards of directors and artistic directors, as they curate their repertory?

3. Nationhood and citizenship: a 'concealed agenda'

As seen in the instance of the Abbey Theatre and #WTF, a form of invisible and semi-conscious or even unconscious censorship appears to mitigate against women's full participation and recognition in the Irish theatre. Existing scholarship on this subject points insistently to the problem of the iconic woman-nation: if women are subsumed silently into the iconography of nationhood then moving, thinking, speaking female characters disrupt that easy identification. The influence of the Roman Catholic Church and its social teaching over many decades, particularly after independence, insistently associates women with the private, domestic, family sphere; and the 'stultifying social conditions' and 'atmosphere of stringent

censorship [of publications] and moral rectitude' only exacerbated this (Pilkington 2001: 147).

The Church's authority also guided social attitudes that limited what respectable living women as well as female dramatic characters could do and say. Theatre is a public art, dependent on being out of the house and collaborating with men as well as other women; it was not regarded, historically, as a respectable career for a woman. Recent scholarship on the reclaimed interwar playwright Teresa Deevy has uncovered evidence of her influence on other writers, and her active engagement with at least one aspiring playwright, as well as her extensive professional networks (Kealy 2020; McCarthy and Kealy 2022). This involvement in public life, beyond the fact of writing itself, illustrates the significant social pressure mitigating against women's full participation in an artistic life in the theatre. Given the state's insistence on women's place in the home, and the concomitant dearth of support services for married women seeking to continue their careers, few women writers would have been able to continue working in theatre after starting a family.[3] It is therefore unsurprising that both male and female playwrights tend to position their female characters in the private world, and to reinscribe rigid gender stereotypes of feminine passivity. This often has the effect of reducing women characters to minor parts – mothers, wives, sisters, girlfriends of the main, male characters.

The impact of these factors are further intensified by the founding ambitions of the Abbey Theatre: 'to put on stage the deeper thoughts and emotions of Ireland' (Gregory 1913), which is cultural nationalism in action. The role of the theatre has been insistently framed in academic and critical discourse as a 'mirror up to nation' (Murray 1999) and as a means of 'cultivating a people' (Pilkington 2001), with theatre interpreted both as commentary on the progress of the state, and responsible for representing the 'nation' to itself. This is not only a historical phenomenon: cultural commentator Fintan O'Toole has argued repeatedly that the

arts must intervene to make sense of Irish society including the traumas of the 2010 financial crash and the uncovering of the abuses in industrial schools and Magdalene Laundries that came to light at the turn of this century. The arts in Ireland are understood to have a social and political responsibility linked to their representation of, and response to, the enactment of citizenship in the state both in the legislature and in the social practices of the population. It is a theatrical tradition very much concerned with identity.

In itself, such demands on the arts do not exclude women, as evinced by the success of artists like Garry Hynes, Louise Lowe, Caitriona McLaughlin, Lynne Parker, and many eminent writers and actors. But citizenship is a gendered concept, and women's citizenship is more tenuous than men's, all the more so when the discourses of nationalism and decolonization dominate. As the literal mothers of the nation, women occupy a particular role in nationalist ideology, where they are most often positioned as wives and mothers giving birth to the next generation of citizens, and thus to be defended by the male citizen soldiers, rather than as active citizens in their own right. As Enloe argues, women's engagement in politics and their critiques of colonial rule may well lead them to critique gender relations in their own culture, yet the mythic originary culture is very often a touchstone for nationalist and decolonizing actions. Therefore, there is frequently a process of silencing debates which are important to women (Enloe 1990: 60) – such as the debate about the 1937 Constitution, when women's protests were ignored (Luddy 2005). Alongside women being sidelined as citizens, women's art has also been sidelined as art for and about women, not for and about the nation: part of the often 'concealed agenda of a poetic tradition' as Boland terms it.

This can result in conscious or unconscious bias on the part of commissioning houses, literary managers, and artistic directors when making quality-based decisions about work to produce. Writing by women may appear to be insufficiently engaged with the major questions of the day; when challenged about the proposed 2016 programme, the Abbey's

Artistic Director Fiach Mac Conghail replied: ‘sometimes the plays and ideas that we have commissioned by and about women don’t work out … Them the breaks’ (Twitter, 29 October 2015). It is difficult to imagine the same wording being used in a comment on theatre by and about men. The comment suggests that the work is ontologically out of the mainstream: by being by and about women, it is understood to be focused on a particular and non-normative category of citizens. At the initial launch of the programme, Mac Conghail had spoken about naming his programme ‘Waking the Nation’, the aspiration to interrogate the legacy of 1916 and reflect on how the nation has fared in the century since: ‘We turned to writers like Sean O’Casey, like Sean P. Summers, David Ireland, indeed like Philip McMahon to help us interrogate that’ (2018). It is extraordinary but not surprising that Mac Conghail and his Board assumed that a satisfying interrogation of the nation over a century could be achieved without women’s voices, or indeed the voices of an increasingly diverse population.

Anecdotally, critics, authors, and theatre-makers have suggested that literary boards and artistic directors tend to assume that male characters are understood to interest everyone, while female characters are only of interest to women. Caroline Williams of Glasshouse Productions responds to an *Irish Times* review from 1991 that dismissed one of the company’s shows as ‘one for the Sisters’ (Williams and others 2001). And as Boland argues, men’s writing about family and home life is interpreted metaphorically in the light of nationhood, while women’s deployment of similar tropes is taken literally. If female characters in the dominant dramatic works are largely emblematic, or interpreted as such, then work that disrupts such interpretations may be judged as less good. Work by women – even when it is performed – is less likely to be remounted, published, anthologized, making it less available to the scholars, students, and theatre practitioners who would ensure its afterlife on stage in Ireland and internationally.

In response to #WTF, Fiach Mac Conghail attended the event on 12 November 2015 and acknowledged to the audience that the movement 'has presented a professional challenge to me as a programmer and has made me question the filters and factors that influence my decision making' (cited in Kelleher 2015). This was a retreat from his unfortunate first response, when he tweeted 'I don't and haven't programmed plays on a gender basis' (Kelleher 2015). His admission that the protests had caused him to reflect is a useful illustration of the invisibility of the gender imbalance on the Abbey's stage. When he took on the post of Artistic Director, Mac Conghail pledged to introduce affirmative action; but in fact during his tenure the number of Abbey productions of plays by women fell from 14% to 12.3%, against a national average of 20%. During Mac Conghail's tenure, a number of women playwrights turned their focus to the independent sector (Sonya Kelly, Deirdre Kinahan), or overseas (Stella Feehily, Nancy Harris, Ursula Rani Sarma), while long-established playwrights like Augusta Gregory and Teresa Deevy were overlooked, and Elaine Murphy's comedy *Shush* was explicitly marketed as a 'girls night out' rather than a play that might speak to the contemporary nation. However, Mac Conghail can be credited for examining his preconceptions, and he is one of a number of Artistic Directors who were prompted to reflect upon their unconscious bias by the #WTF movement.

By late 2015, Mac Conghail had signalled his intention to resign the following year. The Abbey Theatre hired its new Artistic Directors from overseas – Neil Murray and Graham McLaren (National Theatre of Scotland) – and established a clearer set of guidelines to address equality and diversity on the stage.

4. The Abbey: new model, new protest

The new directors envisaged the National Theatre to challenge 'assumptions around the words "national", "theatre" and "Ireland"', a driving concept aimed at redefining the workings of the Abbey and maybe our conception of it (Abbey Theatre 2015).[4] Coming from the itinerant model of the National Theatre of Scotland and in the wake of the #WTF movement, their vision amounted to a promise for a national stage with a more inclusive programme that addresses issues of gender equality and of regional access to the theatre's productions.[5]

By 2019, a protest elicited an alternative picture of the changes effected at the Abbey: on 7 January, 312 actors and theatre makers sent an open letter to Josepha Madigan (the Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht), the Arts Council, the board of the Abbey Theatre, and the *Irish Times*, expressing concern about the direction of the National Theatre and the economic consequences of its break with the Irish literary canon (see O'Toole 2019). In the following weeks, more than four hundred signatories put their names to the letter. That the artists chose to complain directly to the government at the same time as publicly via the *Irish Times* is reminiscent of the campaign led by George Bernard Shaw and his fellow writers against the Lord Chamberlain in 1907. However, they bypassed dialogue with the directors because their complaint concerned their diminishing employment and pay rates after two years of the new Abbey management, which prompts our examination of economic factors as forces apt to affect artistic programming.

At the root of the protest lies Murray and McLaren's increasing use of the Abbey as a receiving rather than a producing venue, which had dire financial repercussions for 'Ireland-based' actors:

> The changing artistic model of producing fewer in-house productions and presenting or co-presenting more has caused devastation amongst our ranks. Although the

> management's strategy of offering diversity to their own audiences is admirable in theory, it offers up several problems in practice. The National Theatre reducing its own production output means less diversity, and reduced employment, not more. There will not have been an Ireland-based actor in an Abbey Theatre production on an Abbey stage since *Jimmy's Hall* ended on 8 September 2018 until *The Country Girls* opens on 23 February 2019. That is five and a half months without an Ireland-based actor directly employed by the Abbey. (Abbey Theatre 2019b: 10)

The directors may well have translated their understanding of a contemporary, diverse Ireland into staging more recent plays, by hitherto shunned playwrights, working with new companies, and promoting gender equality. However, their programming decisions also responded to a financial deficit of €1.4 million inherited from previous seasons – a controversial amount later clarified by the Board of the Abbey (Falvey 2019b): 'These losses were incurred by the programming model that the signatories' letter appears to advocate – a predominance of large-scale Abbey Theatre self-produced shows with little access for smaller independent companies and artists' (Falvey 2019a). In adopting a different model – which diminished the proportion of in-house shows in favour of co-presentations and associations – the Abbey initiated less onerous collaborations with (also funded) Irish artists, planned for re-runs after the first year, and invited international productions that had proven box-office successes.[6] As a result, the 312 signatories acknowledged that, after two years of Murray and McLaren's regime, 'the institution [was] financially buoyant – and due congratulations for this' while protesting pay rates (Abbey Theatre 2019b: 10).

In terms of core funding, the Abbey receives the lion's share in Arts Council subsidies: from €6.1 million in 2017 to €7.5 million in 2022 – these figures represent roughly ten per

cent of the annual Arts Council budget, and fifty per cent of the entire drama budget (Joint Committee 2019). Such substantial financial support befits the National Theatre, but comes with conditions attached. In fact, Murray and McLaren's appointment and vision for the Abbey are arguably direct responses to the review commissioned by the Arts Council in 2014:

> It recommended a re-prioritisation of the Theatre's activities, to address a lack of touring and of community and education work, the under-involvement of visiting companies, and the under-utilisation of the Peacock Theatre as a space for artistic experimentation.
>
> In the period since, the Abbey has implemented the review's recommendations. In July 2015, the Board appointed Neil Murray and Graham McLaren as its Co-Directors, effective from July 2016, with ownership of the programme from January 2017. They were given a clear mandate to increase the activity levels of the Abbey, while maintaining financial sustainability. (Abbey Theatre 2019a: 2)

It seems unsurprising that 'he who pays the piper can have a very big influence on the tune' (Peter Hall cited in Thomas, Carlton, and Etienne 2007: 240) and, arguably, the stakes are higher in the case of the Abbey as a symbol of the nation. Yet, the initial mission of the Arts Councils is to allocate public money to support artists rather than to influence programming decisions, or even to withhold funding. Such a punitive course had been taken in England in 1968 during the build-up to the private performance of Edward Bond's *Early Morning* at the Royal Court, which placed the Arts Council's action in the territory of censorship. More recently, in 1999, the Arts Council of Northern Ireland (ACNI) had withheld funding for Dubbeljoint's production of *Forced Upon Us*, co-written by Christine Poland and Brenda

Murphy (a former IRA prisoner), after making the unprecedented demand to read three drafts of the script – a procedure identical to that of the English censor for licensing a play. The ACNI claimed that their decision was based on artistic merit. However, the topic of the play (a nationalist perspective on the Royal Ulster Constabulary), and the fact that it provoked parliamentary questions about 'freedom of expression and political vetting of the arts' (McNamara 1999), leave little doubt that, in that instance, the ACNI acted beyond the remit of its function, as both drama expert and political censor by axing the play's funding. The company folded a few years later.

In December 2022, Corcadorca closed its doors in Cork; in Belfast, Aisling Ghear lost its annual funding in June 2022, appealed the decision unsuccessfully, and launched a judicial review. While these companies depend on different national budgets, they share in common not only the loss of annual funding but also their nomination in two categories of the Irish Theatre Awards in February 2023: whatever motivated the decision-making of the funding bodies, it appears unlikely to be caused by the artistic merits of the companies. On what grounds, then, does the Arts Council become a mechanism of exclusion rather than support?

5. Aisling Ghéar

From the perspective of the Arts Council, the first stumbling block revolves around the budget allocated to the arts, and comparatively Northern Ireland is the pauper, at only £5.44 per capita in 2022 against £10.35 in Wales (its closest comparator), and £25.90 in RoI. The situation has worsened because 'Government investment in the Arts has fallen by 30% in cash terms in the last decade from £14.1m to £9.5m', putting additional pressure on lottery revenue to complement – to the tune of one third of total budget – funding provided by the Exchequer (ACNI 2021: 4). In practice, this means that the ACNI has no choice but to

implement austerity and such measures partly explain the relentless decrease of Aisling Ghéar's annual funding from £77,229 in 2013 to £62,818 in 2021-22.[7] However, at the same time, other organizations have seen their subsidies rise, signalling its priorities.[8]

Growing out of the Irish language community in West Belfast, Aisling Ghéar was established in 1997 by author Gearóid Ó Caireallán; artistic director Bríd Ó Gallchóir joined in 1998. Aisling Ghéar is the only Irish-speaking professional theatre company in Northern Ireland, holding as such a unique role in developing theatre in Irish and sustaining the Irish language community and culture. Over twenty-five years, they produced and toured plays – including Brian Friel's *Translations* in a bilingual version, but also Marie Jones, Samuel Beckett and Dario Fo in Irish – as well as children's shows and site-specific work.

In 2022, the ACNI failed Aisling Ghéar's application on two criteria: 'artistic excellence and creative innovation', because *Minimal Human Contact*, written by Naoise Ó Caireallán, had been part of Aisling Ghéar's Annual Funding Programme (AFP) bids in 2020-21 (when the COVID-19 pandemic closed the doors of all theatres) and in 2021-22 (when social distancing dictated half capacity in venues);[9] and 'organisational capacity and governance', because the minutes of the board meetings had not been submitted. As Bríd Ó Gallchóir explained, the production had to be postponed until 2022 because the company would be able to fill Smock Alley Theatre in Dublin and Cultúrlann in Belfast and to expect one hundred per cent box office returns due to the international popularity of Naoise Ó Caireallán – aka Móglaí Bap of the hip-hop band Kneecap: 'the actual costs of the show are banking on box office, which often wouldn't be the case' (Ó Gallchóir 2022). The show's success and critical recognition vindicated the company's artistic excellence and creative innovation. In addition, the governance issue could have been resolved by a quick reminder as tends to be the case with long-established companies and drama officers. In the end, Aisling Ghéar only received a 'soft landing' of £15,704 from AFP and £32,110 from project

funding, a strand that the ACNI encouraged for future support and which, ironically, was awarded for *Minimal Human Contact* (Ó Gallchóir 2022).

Critics have described drama in Irish as precarious and underground (O'Leary 2017; Coilféir 2018; Huddleson 2023), a status amplified by the scarcity of theatre companies. In Dublin, Amharclann de hÍde, created in 1992, ceased operations in 2001; Aisteoirí Bulfin, an amateur group running since 1967, worked sporadically and has not produced a show since 2015. With Aisling Ghéar, the only professional Irish-language company remaining in Ireland is Fíbín, in the Gaeltacht. As 'the' Irish language theatre company in the North of Ireland, Aisling Ghéar fulfils a pivotal function in bridging 'a recognised gap in the Irish language sector [:] the need to support individual artists working through the medium of Irish' – a commitment to promote Irish included in the Good Friday agreement (Department for Communities 2022: 80). This concern is arguably reflected in the ACNI's inclusive vision of 'improving relationships between and within communities' and 'ensuring that everyone living here – regardless of social, economic, community or ethnic background – has the opportunity to access and engage fully with the Arts' (ACNI 2021: 6). And yet, by removing annual funding, the ACNI renders the company's standing more precarious and hinders audience engagement with Irish language culture. But whose engagement? In the Republican newspaper *An Phoblacht*, Pam Brighton, co-founder of Dubbeljoint, had already suggested in 1999 that the stark disparity in funding

> has an effect on the access to drama for people living in the working class areas of Nationalist West Belfast. To give such an excessive increase in funds to the Ulster Orchestra which most working class people will find boring demonstrates the elitist mentality of those Unionists and Castle Catholics who are attempting to sidestep the issues thrown up by the last thirty years. (Cited in Kelly 1999)

Brighton's point remains valid in terms of audience class division. In her study of *Forced Upon Us*, Helen Freshwater approaches the position of the Arts Councils in terms of a conflict of values: 'The funding body will necessarily experience a split between responsibility to the audience that receives the end product and the wider community whose tax contributions pay for the grants' (2009: 133).

It is hazardous and unfair to assign a political agenda to the ACNI's decision. On the one hand, the Irish government has identified a potentially 'systemic' funding inequalities 'affecting […] indigenous language/culture communities (Irish and Ulster-Scots)' as the Department of Communities expressed its support for more funding to be committed to culture in Irish (Department for Communities 2021). In that light, the ACNI's resolve to cut the core funding of a small theatre structure is tantamount to excluding a whole community from access to contemporary playwriting in Irish. In England, the governmental recognition of its multi-ethnic make-up and its concomitant inequalities had led the Arts Council to draft positive discrimination criteria about race into its funding applications. The tick-boxing exercise functioned as both an eye-opener and a funding proviso, making it clear that, in the 2000s, 'the arts should be instrumental in supporting public policy' (Freshwater 2009: 133). On the other hand, the ACNI's priorities do not address one particular department so that, according to Ó Gallchóir, its decisions are its own, grounded on the claim that it is apolitical. Maybe, like the Lord Chamberlain's Readers who licensed *Fin de partie* before censoring *Endgame*, the ACNI's adverse ruling comes down to an individual blunder. After all, how else could they account for their announcement that the 'AFP of £13,012,490 will support the core and programming costs of those organizations who are *central* to the arts infrastructure in Northern Ireland today' (my emphasis) and reject the company's application five months before the passing of the much-awaited Identity and Language (Northern Ireland) Act 2022?

7. Corcadorca

One of the rare theatre companies to continue to receive annual funding outside Dublin, Corcadorca was founded in 1991 by artistic director Pat Kiernan to foster new Irish writing and explore the international canon in site-responsive productions. Like most companies at the time, Corcadorca initially developed with and around the work of a playwright – here, Enda Walsh – premiering *The Ginger Ale Boy* (1995) and *Misterman* (1999), and reaching national and international recognition with the touring of *Disco Pigs* (1996-98).

In the Republic of Ireland, the Celtic Tiger (referring to Ireland's exceptional economic growth from the 1990s to the mid-2000s) saw total state funding for the arts multiply between 1994 and 2008, the Arts Council's budget increasing from £13.3m to €82m. Figures decreased with the recession but the closure of Corcadorca Theatre Company in 2022 concludes a year when the Arts Council retained a €130m provision. After thirty-one years of activity, Pat Kiernan, bowed out: its artistic programme growing against diminishing subsidies, he felt unable to apply for further funding. His is not a rare predicament. Many of the structures which started to receive annual funding in the 1990s ceased operation in the 2000s – for example, Storytellers and Calypso Productions in Dublin, Red Kettle in Waterford, Meridian in Cork, Island Theatre Company in Limerick, Bickerstaffe in Kilkenny, and Galloglass in Clonmel. But if we draw a funding map of Ireland, Blue Raincoat in Sligo and Druid in Galway remain the only theatre companies outside of Dublin to be awarded annual funding, which gives a regrettable impression that artistic development anywhere else does not merit a yearly programming budget. With the demise of Corcadorca, Cork lost in one sweep its only company and a hub that nurtured local and regional artists, thereby sustaining its theatrical ecosystem.[10]

In his foreword to the extensive Theatre Review carried out in 1995, the Chairman of the Arts Council exposed the funding dilemma at play when confronted with the flurry of new companies, plays, and theatre projects: 'to cut and concentrate, or dripfeed and starve' (Benson 1995). In monetary terms, the 2022 figures confirm the concentration on the Abbey, the Gate, Druid, and the Dublin Theatre Festival. The Arts Council has been loath to cut subsidies outright, even though, following the 1995 review, it completed 'the regrading of the 32 production companies receiving annual support' – a collapse which aimed to ensure that the money went to the artists rather than inflated administrative costs (de Valera 1998; see Meaney 1999). The successive plans rather exhibit a tendency to 'dripfeed' exacerbated by the recession and, from the 2010s, implemented by its privileging project funding over annual funding.

Corcadorca benefited for the first time in 1995 from a Grant to organisation, a Project grant, and the now defunct Playwrights' Commission scheme.[11] From then on, their core annual funding steadily increased to an apex of €240,000 in 2008, dipped to €150,000 during the recession, and regained a tentative momentum in 2016. Those figures alone fail to give an adequate picture that would explain how the company eventually starved, as they would need to be evaluated against the budget requested by the company to sustain its running and production costs. In 2018, for instance, the Arts Council's annual funding of €180,000 showed a €10,000 decrease from the previous year and fell €30,000 short of the requested amount;[12] it also came with the warning shot that alternative funding streams may be best suited to the company – this subtle push towards project funding was experienced by a number of companies.

Despite Corcadorca's track record, in 2018, the company's artistic standards and the strategic sustainability of its model ranked disappointingly when scored against the priorities set out in *Making Great Art Work*, the Arts Council strategy for 2016-25 – a document

informed by the Department of Arts' 'Value for Money and Policy Review of the Arts Council'. In its introduction, the strategy identifies the artist and public engagement as driving priorities (Arts Council 2015: 14). In examining Corcadorca's legacy in these areas, one may ponder that the vision of the strategy is not only to fund the arts but also to '[steer] their development' – a term that may capture positive connotations (such as encouragement of diversity) but hardly denotes neutrality (10).

Over the years, Corcadorca's critical and commercial appreciation varied yet, in 2018, the company received seven nominations in the Theatre Awards. Beyond such measures of artistic value, a major activity of Corcadorca was geared towards the artists: it launched the careers of playwrights Enda Walsh and Ray Scannell, actors Cillian Murphy and Eileen Walsh, and collaborated with new generations of artists such as Kevin Barry, Pat McCabe, Ailís Ní Ríain, or Éadaoin O'Donoghue. This impetus pertained to the establishment in 2011 of its Theatre Development Centre: located in the Triskel Arts Centre, the black box studio hosted a year-long programme of weekly residencies, which concluded every Friday with a public and free presentation of work-in-progress. The scheme was soon complemented by a mini-festival, SHOW, where sector professionals and audiences could sample the most honed productions.

Audience engagement encompasses quantitative measurement as well as societal considerations (spatial and demographic, inclusive of diversity). A wider spatial audience base can be achieved through touring, and it was therefore an expectation of the Arts Council for regional companies to achieve a national or international impact. However, after *Disco Pigs* (1996-98), Corcadorca toured very little: in 2016, their midsummer show *Request Programme* toured to the festivals of Galway, Kilkenny, and Dublin; in 2022, they brought Enda Walsh's *The Same* to the Irish Arts Centre in New York. For one, Kiernan preferred to expand his Cork audience, an audience that grew with the company – though not

exponentially. Nonetheless, the primary concern for reaching audiences, and in particular audiences that would stay away from theatre venues (for social or geographic reasons), was a deciding object in creating a company that pioneered site-responsive theatre in the RoI: to bring drama to the audience and explore how the words resonate throughout the city. In 2020, rather than finding digital solutions to the restrictions implemented in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, their travelling show *Contact* offered performances to various socially distanced communities across the city. Furthermore, the site-responsive nature of their work often posed an inherent problem to touring, even more so as Kiernan's ambition lay in big theatre events: for instance, the run of *The Merchant of Venice*, a promenade production that – with the generous endowment of Cork European Capital of Culture – took thousands of spectators through the city in 2005.

The paradox may be articulated in the tension between the artistic vision and the expectations of the funding body: be ambitious – more productions, bigger audiences – but with less funding. This 'dripfeed' effect was experienced during their last promenade performance, Kevin Barry's adaptation of *Guests of the Nation*, in June 2022, when the production budget had dried up and props had to be purchased out-of-pocket by the creative team. In the end, as Kiernan contends, 'Simply we didn't have the resources to meet the demand to implement the strategies and policies of funding requirements' (Leland 2022). It is striking that the statement makes no reference to creative considerations: eventually the Arts Council's assessment that the company's working model (one artistic director and one manager) would not prove sustainable sounds like a self-fashioned prophecy, as the human resources were starved by the same administrative and goal-related demands required from much bigger organizations. Given its unique position within the theatre ecosystem in Cork, and by extension in Ireland, Corcadorca's closure leaves a 'devastating hole' that raises

questions regarding the application of the Arts Council's artist- and audience-led engagement plan.

The operation of a largely unconscious 'concealed agenda' and its impact on women theatre makers is an example of the operation of implicit censorship which marginalizes voices and creative work that disrupts settled assumptions and metanarratives. But addressing the issue requires more than adding more women's voices to the repertory. An annual programme has a limited amount of space, so the entire selection process must be examined if it is to reflect more closely the composition of the audience base and, in the case of the national theatre, the composition of the nation. This means revising assumptions about the audience's interests, including the assumption that men's writing is better and more interesting than women's, or that only people of colour will want to watch plays about visible minority communities, both of which are based on limited readings of artistic work. It also means revising assumptions about what makes a play or a performance 'good', and worth staging. What criteria are used to select O'Casey over Deevy, Summers over Kinahan, or Ireland over Gregg? This is not a question that criticizes the work of those male writers, but rather it seeks to critique a process of selection which is not transparent, and which appears to be significantly in thrall to an outdated conception of nationhood and citizenship as primarily masculine.

While the Abbey has the capacity to weather public controversies and the Arts Council's admonishment, other professional companies lack the infrastructure to draft policies and seek exterior financial sources that the Arts Council now insists on as evidence that they do merit annual funding: this recalls the Thatcherite entrepreneurial approach to the arts. Having historically thrived, the artistic impact of Aisling Ghéar and Corcadorca has been thwarted rather than supported by the funding bodies. In amending the theatrical ecosystem, the Arts Council bodies perform an implicit censorship 'that works precisely through its

illegibility', presiding over what will be shown allegedly on artistic merit (Butler 1999: 134). This becomes all the more suspicious when companies with a record of national and international regard fail on that score and when they have been filling a gap in the sector – in theatre in Irish, and in theatre in the South of Ireland. The Arts Councils work behind the scenes, like the infamous bishop, holding the power to silence, not specific productions, but whole theatre companies. While the #WTF rising against the Abbey shed light on the systemic exclusion of women artists, the doors of small structures close in a deafening silence.

References

Abbey Theatre. 2015. 'Future Directors of the Abbey Theatre Appointed', n.d.

____ 2018. *Annual Review 2018*

____ 2019a. 'DRAFT 2. Statement from the Abbey Theatre to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht', 30 January, 1-6.

____ 2019b. 'A report by the Abbey Theatre to the Minister for Culture, Heritage, and the Gaeltacht, in response to the issues raised in the open letter of 7 January 2019', n.d., Appendix 2: 10-12

Arrington, Lauren. 2010. *W.B. Yeats, the Abbey Theatre, Censorship, and the Irish State* (Oxford: Oxford University Press)

ACNI (Arts Council of Northern Ireland). 2021. 'Response to the NI Executive, Consultation on the 2021-22 Draft Budget', 25 February

____ 2022. 'Arts Council of Northern Ireland announces Annual Funding Programme awards for 2022-23', 1 July

Arts Council. 2015. *Making Great Art Work,* Arts Council Strategy (2016-2025)

‘Arts Council accused of censorship’. 1999. *Irish Times*, 7 August

Barry, Aoife. 2015. ‘Fury, apologies, and calls for respect as feminists shake the Irish theatre world’. *The Journal*, 12 November

Benson, Ciarán. 1995. *Arts Council Theatre Review 1995-1996*

Boland, Eavan. 1987. ‘The Woman Poet in a National Tradition’, *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review*, 76.302: 148-58

Butler, Judith. 1999. *Excitable Speech. A Politics of the Performative* (London & New York: Routledge)

Coilféir, Máirtín. 2018. ‘Contemporary Theatre in the Irish Language’, in *The Palgrave Handbook of Contemporary Irish Theatre and Performance*, ed. by E. Jordan and E. Weitz (London: Palgrave), pp. 135-49

Connolly, Linda. 2004. ‘The Limits of “Irish Studies”: Historicism, Culturalism, Paternalism’, *Irish Studies Review*, 12.2: 139-162

De Valera, Síle.1998. ‘Funding of An Chomhairle Ealaíon: Motion’. *Seanad Debates*, Houses of the Oireachtas, vol. 154, no. 6, 18 February

Department for Communities. 2021. ‘The Art of Recovery - Survive: Stabilise: Strengthen’, *Report of the Culture, Arts, and Heritage Recovery Taskforce*, 9 August

____ 2022. ‘Recommendations for an Irish Language Strategy’, *Report of the Expert Advisory Panel*, February

Donohue, Brenda, and others. 2017. *Gender Counts: an analysis of gender in Irish theatre 2006-2016*. Dublin: Arts Council / An Chomhairle Ealaion.

Falvey, Deirdre. 2019a. ‘Abbey Theatre uproar: 300 actors and directors complain to Minister’, *Irish Times*, 7 January

____ 2019b. ‘Abbey Controversy: theatre to review lower pay on productions’, *Irish Times*, 11 January

‘First Act: Neil Murray and Graham McLaren Directors Abbey Theatre’. 2017. *Totally Dublin*, 3 April

FitzPatrick Dean, Joan. 2001. ‘Irish Stage Censorship in the 1950s’, *Theatre Survey,* 42.2: 137-64 <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0040557401000072>

____ 2004. *Riot and Great Anger: Stage Censorship in Twentieth-Century Ireland* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press)

Fitzpatrick, Lisa and Shonagh Hill. 2022. *Plays by Women in Ireland 1926-1933: Feminist Theatres of Freedom and Resistance* (London: Methuen Drama)

Freshwater, Helen. 2009. *Theatre Censorship in Britain* (London: Palgrave Macmillan)

Gentleman, Amelia. 1999. ‘Dubbel trouble’, *Guardian*, 5 August

Hill, Shonagh. 2019. *Women and Embodied Mythmaking in Irish Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press)

Houlihan, Barry. 2021. *Theatre and Archival Memory: Irish Drama and Marginalised Histories 1951-1977* (London: Palgrave Macmillan)

Huddleson, Richard. 2023. ‘Brave New Worlds? COVID-19 and Irish-Language Theatre Produced under Lockdown in Northern Ireland’, *Theatre Research International,* 48.1: 67-81. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0307883322000414>

Innes, Catherine L. 1994. *Woman and Nation in Irish Literature and Society* (NY: Harvester Wheatsheaf)

Joint Committee on Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht díospóireacht. 2019. ‘Abbey Theatre: Discussion’, Houses of the Oireachtas, 30 January

Kealy, Una. 2020. ‘“Resisting Power and Direction”: The King of Spain’s Daughter by Teresa Deevy as a Feminist Call to Action’, *Estudios Irlandeses,* 178-92 <https://doi.org/10.24162/EI2020-9406>

Kelleher, Patrick. 2015. 'Waking the Feminists: Irish Theatre's Equality Debate'. *University Observer*, 26 November

Kelly, Ned. 1999. 'Arts Council in funding bias row', *An Phoblacht*, 15 February

Leland, Mary. 2022. 'Corcadorca, a pioneer of Irish theatre, loses its uphill struggle', *Irish Times*, 23 November

Leeney, Catherine. 2010. *Irish women playwrights 1900-1939: gender and violence on stage* (New York: Peter Lang)

Luddy, Maria. 2005. 'A "Sinister and Retrogressive" Proposal: Irish Women's Opposition to the 1937 Draft Constitution', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 15: 175-95 <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0080440105000307>

Mac Conghail, Fiach. 2018. *RTE Radio 1 News*, 28 October

McCarthy, Kate, and Una Kealy. 2022. 'Writing from the Margins: Reframing Teresa Deevy's Archive and her Correspondence with James Cheasty, c. 1952-1962', *Irish University Review*, 52.2: 322-40 <https://doi.org/10.3366/iur.2022.0570>

McDiarmid, Lucy. 2005. *The Irish Art of Controversy* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press)

McNamara, Kevin. 1999. 'Forced Upon Us', *Hansard*, House of Commons, Vol. 337, col. 41, 1 November

Meaney, Gerardine. 1991. *Sex and Nation: Women in Irish Culture* (Cork: Attic Press)

____ 2010. *Gender, Ireland, and Cultural Change* (NY & London: Routledge)

Meaney, Helen. 1999. 'Arts report highlights need for change in funding', *Irish Times*, 30 January

O'Brien, Bryan and Paula Geraghty. 2015. 'Waking the Feminist Event Takes Over the Abbey Theatre', *Irish Times*, 12 November

O'Casey, Sean. 1956 [1994]. 'Bonfire under a Black Sun', in *The Green Crow* (London: Virgin)

Ó Gallchóir, Bríd. 2022. Interview with Anne Etienne, 5 August

O'Leary, Philip. 2017. *An Underground Theatre: Major Playwrights in the Irish Language 1930-80* (Dublin: UCD Press)

O'Toole, Fintan. 2019. 'If the national theatre is not world class or keen on Ireland's dramatic canon, what is it for?', *Irish Times,* 15 June

Pilkington, Lionel. 2001. *Theatre and State in Twentieth Century Ireland: Cultivating the People* (London & New York: Routledge)

Ryan, Louise and Margaret Ward. 2005. *Irish Women and Nationalism: Soldiers, New Women, and Wicked Hags* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press)

Sihra, Melissa (ed). 2007. *Women in Irish Drama: A Century of Authorship and Representation* (Palgrave).

Sihra, Melissa. 2019. M*aring Carr: Pastures of the Unknown* (Palgrave)

Sullivan, Moynagh. 2002. 'I am, therefore I'm not (woman)', *International Journal of English Studies,* 2.2: 123-34 <https://doi.org/10.6018/ijes>

Williams, Caroline, Katy Hayes, Sian Quill, and Clare Dowling. 2001. 'People in Glasshouses: An Anecdotal History of an Independent Theatre Company', in *Druids, Dudes and Beauty Queens,* ed. by Dermot Bolger (Dublin: New Island Books), pp. 132–47

Notes

[1] For further reading on theatre censorship from the turn of the twentieth century to the 1960s, see Arrington (2010), FitzPatrick Dean (2001 and 2004), Houlihan (2021: 125-162), McDiarmid (2005: 87-122).

[2] The slogan 'Oestrogen Rising' was visible on some placards, thus connecting the feminist protest to the Easter Rising.

[3] The added complications of being unable to access family planning services into the 1980s, combined with a cultural preference for larger families, obviously heightens difficulties for women combining motherhood and work outside the home.

[4] Murray and McLaren's motivation might best be expressed in the questions they raised about the Abbey in an interview for the talks series 'First Up': 'Is there a different way to do things at the Abbey? Is the Abbey ready for change? Does the Abbey want to change? […] But also what was absent? Where were the women? What happened to that part of the story? How do we make that the new story? How do we reflect an Ireland that looks completely different to the Abbey's glory days' ('First Act' 2017).

[5] The Abbey Theatre's Annual Review 2017 indicates attention to the issue of gender in relation to both the authoring and directing of productions.

[6] The Abbey's Annual Reviews 2017 and 2018 show the Board's satisfaction at the programme, which contained a number of shows previously presented in other Irish or international venues (the first of which, Walsh's *Arlington*, had premiered in 2016 at the Galway International Arts Festival): 'Abbey Theatre audiences responded very positively to the 2018 programme, and this was reflected in the continuing growth in the numbers attending' (Abbey Theatre 2018: 5).

[7] Those figures were obtained on 18 January 2023 following an email query to the ACNI.

[8] The AFP for the Lyric Theatre and the Ulster Orchestra rose from £970,000 to £1m, and from £1,780,000 to £2m, respectively.

[9] This point on capacity was published in August 2021 in the Taskforce report: 'The reality is that a social distancing requirement, even at one metre, makes it is [*sic*] highly likely that many cultural venues and activities will be unviable' (Department for Communities 2021: 19).

[10] This assertion needs nuancing: Graffiti is a long-established youth theatre company, and Brokencrow has been operating from three locations (Cork, Waterford, and Dublin) where its members reside.

[11] The appellation of the core annual funding strand was adjusted as new AC plans were drawn up, ranging from 'grant to organisation', and finally 'strategic funding'. Similarly, we have used the generic term 'project funding' to differentiate from core annual funding, but the current term used by the Arts Council is 'Arts grants'.

[12] Some figures were obtained from the published archives of the AC; others were accessed directly by Anne Etienne in her capacity as Board member of Corcadorca Theatre Company. The Tesselate mentoring scheme, led by Corcadorca in collaboration with the Everyman Theatre and the Cork Midsummer Festival, was initially funded under the category of theatre resource-sharing support. In 2018, its cost was ear-marked within the company strategic funding, which accounts for the actual decrease in funding.