

Introduction

This special issue is devoted to modern and contemporary Irish theatre. The editors are delighted to introduce this diverse range of scholarship and one piece of creative writing. The articles deal with work set in different eras and contexts, by writers of varied genders and from distinct cultural and social backgrounds. Further, these texts and performances rely on not just different ways of writing and creating theatre, but rely on dissimilar styles, genres and ideological dispositions. This special issue remains without the anxiety of comprehensiveness and untroubled by the absence of a unifying thematic focus.

Manoel Carlos dos Santos Alves argues for the ways that Oscar Wilde's satirical *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895) negotiates between the classical unities (space, time, action) that are found in Aristotle's *Poetics* and Hegel's views on the dramaturgical need for characters to be antagonistic, incompatible and oppositional, based on a "profusion of subjectivities," complicated by internal and external conflicts. Interestingly, there seems to be few traces of Wilde's Irishness in this British-set upper-class comedy. Indeed, Wilde's hugely important play does not provide a template for modern or contemporary Irish theatre set in bourgeois settings. Instead, Irish theatre has been more comfortable in peasant or working-class surroundings, affluent drawing room settings are more noted by their paucity. That said, Wilde's work, read from a Hegelian viewpoint, affords an opportunity to wonder whether characters in Irish theatre are characters innately operating in worlds that can be negotiated, resisted, undermined, or where there are forces that predetermine, invalidate, quarantine, deny, or exclude all possibility of individual or collective action. As Wilde's play astutely and satirically complicates matters; agency is impacted upon by chance, failures prompt success, solidarity is shaped by conniving, and social transgressions incite less freedom and more complicity.

Alexandra Poulain reflects on the meditation of artistic responsibility while asserting the significance of the play *The Player Queen* (1922) to the elaboration of William Butler Yeats's theatrical aesthetics. Produced in the context of the centenary of his award of the Nobel Prize for Literature, Poulain's essay calls attention to the fundamental role that drama played in his work and to this remarkable achievement as a writer. Her analysis is directed towards the importance of paying attention to momentous changes that might happen before the eyes of an artist by reflecting how the poet in the play, Septimus, fails to make himself heard by the townspeople because he is not fulfilling his duty of "translating

the shapeless chaos of reality into intelligible forms”. Poulain also demonstrates that the dynamic of this play drives “a wedge in the patriarchal edifice” through the triumph of the female character who names it. Decima, Septimus’s wife, impersonates the real Queen, who escapes fearing the townspeople’s urge for revolution. The Player Queen not only acquires a position of leadership and influence but also manages to halt the popular insurrection and uses this new role to rid herself of Septimus. This compelling examination pays close attention to the violence that affects all the interactions of this farce and how the “Biblically-sanctioned misogyny” of the medieval world is depicted in the violent episodes perpetrated against women. Through the lenses of gender politics, Poulain argues that by allowing the Player Queen to ascend to power and neutralise her abusive husband, the play does not dismantle the patriarchal system but manages to show how it could be cracked.

Salomé Paul’s article articulates the obligation and necessity to reach back to the past, specifically that of Greek theatre, by way of understanding some of the later works of Marina Carr. Paul applies Fiona Macintosh’s notion of “epic tragedy” in relation to Carr’s responses to and interrogations of Greek drama, and the myths and politics that substantiate these writings. Reflections by Paul consider the diptych *Hecuba* (2015) and *Girl on an Altar* (2022), the former, which is reliant on Euripides’ *Hecuba*, while the latter is a response to Euripides’ *Iphigenia at Aulis* and Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon*. The essay also explains how Carr’s 2021 play *iGirl* was prompted in part by Carr’s earlier experimental work on *Phaedra Backwards* (2011). Accordingly, in Carr’s work notions of plot are contested by both a “new form of dramatic speech and dramatization of a narrative.” Carr’s *Hecuba* is seen as a challenge to the traditional demonisation of Hecuba due to misogyny and the character’s breaching of submissive gender norms. As significantly, the analysis of *Girl on an Altar* argues for Carr’s need to reach beyond Ireland and to interrogate the “pillar myths of the Western identity by furthering the epicisation of tragedy”. Carr’s contemporary dramaturgy is very much intertextual, interculturally diverse and fundamentally interrogative. The essay argues that Carr’s process of “epicisation” of tragedy –with a degree of indebtedness to Brecht and Shakespeare– is very much a contestation of Aristotle’s distinctions between the epic and tragic.

Rachel Fehily’s radio play *Grieving Time* is a heartfelt response to the loss of a life partner and family member, just prior to and at the start of the coronavirus global pandemic. The radio play was broadcast by RTÉ (Ireland’s National Television and Radio Broadcaster). Grief troubles the play in various ways, as life goes on in the face of death and loss; day-to-day tasks need doing, children grow into young adults, and simple walks in the park with a dog offer a consolation of sorts. Movement in a public space also provides for moments of encounter and reflection. The coronavirus brought death to many globally,

and lockdowns generated much social isolation and resistance. However, an inability to be together with loved ones while they passed away remains a lingering distress for many people, and it was not just a feature of Ireland's lockdowns, but something experienced the world over. There is no good age to die. The writer re-encounters her own grief and loss and gains a degree of distance by having a male character serve as the focus of her drama.

Wei H Kao looks at Frank McGuinness's *Baglady* (1985), which is one of the many monologues written by Irish male and female playwrights over the last 50 years. At one point in the 1990s it seemed as if the Irish playwriting tradition was becoming over reliant on the monologue form, but that is no longer the case. *Baglady* features sexual abuse, child murder, homelessness, gendered violence, the absence of familial and communal support, shame and silence. McGuinness's female character must self-reconcile and embrace her fragility; agency is disclosure and not silence; recovery is about finding self-assurance in the fragments of a memoried past that can be named. This work was first performed in 1985, long before the major awarenesses and disclosures about sexual abuse circulated in the public realm. McGuinness's play is a reminder that activism is not a recent activity amongst theatre artists.

Lisa Fitzpatrick's essay looks at issues of citizenship and gender silencing in a post-Conflict Northern Ireland through the lens of two productions, Vittoria Cafolla's *The Shedding of Skin* (2021) and Rosemary Jenkinson's *Silent Trade* (2023). Both works were directed by Paula McFetridge, Kabosh's Artistic Director. Fitzpatrick identifies two strands to the company's work: "Troubles" and post-conflict writing in relation to violence, and another whose focus is on "LGBTQIAP+ rights, asylum, poverty". Companies like Kabosh facilitate cross-community awarenesses, diversity, and inclusion, accommodating a multiplicity of histories, and endeavour to move beyond a two-community mode of analysis. In both plays, Fitzpatrick identifies a "resistance to neoliberal narratives of peace". A focus on sexual assault and gender-based violence against women and girls and on the trafficking of those not born in Northern Ireland features in Jenkinson's *Silent Trade*. Local and non-local citizens are coerced into prostitution by traffickers, moneylenders and criminals, some of whom are former paramilitaries. Yet, it is a middle-class family that threatens Precious with exposure, prison, deportation, and harm to her the family members back in Nigeria. She is exchanged between trafficker and pimp, extending the trade of woman within the patriarchal economy. However, Precious remains resilient and friendship (solidarity) keeps her spirits up. And while silencing is regarded as an oppressive strategy, Precious variously challenges attempts to keep her invisible.

Cafolla's work is seen by Fitzpatrick as being "constructed of women's testimonies of war, gathered from documentary sources, play texts, novels, and newspaper reports.

The Furies recount snippets, sharing horrors, sometimes laughing as they do so”. Rape as a weapon of war is not just local but overlaps with international and historic contexts. The play foregrounds misogyny, gender violence, silencing, and marginalization, which again are countered by challenges, articulacy and resistance to patriarchal and institutional norms. Such defiance is not just consistent with women’s dramaturgical practices across the island more generally, but also have many commonalities with women’s writing globally, in the face of intersectional inequalities. Fitzpatrick rightly articulates how “Irish Studies has been concerned with previously silenced histories of the Magdalene Laundries, the Mother and Baby Homes, the systemic abuse of children by members of religious orders; rape and sexual violence in the War of Independence, the Civil War, and the conflict in Northern Ireland”.

Helena Young analyses Brokentalkers Theatre Company’s production of *Woman Undone* (2018), co-written by Mary Coughlan and co-Artistic Directors of the company, Feidlim Cannon and Gary Keegan. Partly inspired by Coughlan’s autobiography, *Bloody Mary, My Story* (2009), this work re-imagines seminal early-years life-moments of Coughlan, a renowned Irish Blues singer. As with so many other contemporary plays, audiences encounter sexual abuse, trauma, addiction, suicide ideation, mental breakdown and recovery. Traumatic memories are staged non-realistically; Coughlan is not only present onstage as a performer, but also as facilitator, demonstrator and witness, whilst she guides and directs other performers in the shaping of reenactments, with a dancer, Erin O’Reilly, playing Coughlan’s younger self. Cross-gender casting complicates Coughlan’s re-encountering four male figures from her early life. Moreover, the piece, as Young argues, exemplifies the more collaborative nature of contemporary Irish theatre making, as performers, scenographers, composers, light, costume, sound and animation artists are collectively involved in developmental work. Furthermore, Brokentalkers are inclined to utilise a performance dramaturgy that is inspired by postdramatic theatre and serves as a challenge to the conventional heavily text-based traditions of Irish theatre. Today, many theatre companies are collectively creating theatre that is not just about contextual engagement but functions as telling and self-conscious activism.

Maha Alatawi’s essay looks at two very different plays by Conor McPherson, *The Night Alive* (2013), set in contemporary Dublin, and *Girl from the North Country* (2017), located in Deluth, Minnesota, United States, in 1934. As asserted in the article, the inclusion of music and song in plays by Sean O’Casey, Tom Murphy, Deirdre Kinahan, Brian Friel, Marina Carr and Mark O’Rowe is an essential component to the Irish tradition of writing. Reflecting on the multiple inclusions of songs by Marvin Gaye, Father John Misty, Talk Talk and Villagers in *The Night Alive*, the essay argues how music

not just influences audiences' understandings of and responses to characters and their circumstances, but also defines the nature of the spaces in which they exist and shapes an understanding of time. Considerations of space in McPherson's writing, and within the Irish tradition of writing more broadly, allow issues of belonging, ownership, shelter, sanctuary and eviction to surface. *Girl from the North Country* is inspired by Bob Dylan's music back catalogue, and the initial project was prompted by an invitation from Dylan's record label to McPherson, wondering if he could write something in response to Dylan's music. McPherson's play transports Dylan's songs back to a time before they were first written and recorded. Such music generates mood, sentiment, joy and dissonance. *The Night Alive* is set during the post-Celtic Tiger period of austerity that ran from 2008 to 2015. Such austerity was of course very different to America's Great Depression from the late 1920s and throughout much of the 1930s. Both plays exemplify an Irish tradition of writing which is more comfortable writing from a position of lack rather than plenty, poverty rather than opportunity.

Zixin Huang's essay demonstrates differences between the monologue format and solo performance through the analysis of *Silent* (2011) by Pat Kinevane and Panti's (Rory O'Neill's) *Woman in Progress* (2009). Kinevane has a long and successful history of writing and performing in work directed by Jim Culleton, Artistic Director of Fishamble: The New Play Company. Theirs is a different type of collaborative process to that of *Brokentalkers* but is nonetheless driven by the awareness of scripts undergoing a long developmental process. *Silent* exposes homophobia, guilt, failures of families to protect or accept differences, and the inability of a health service to deal with the marginalised, particularly the homeless, many of whom have addictions and untreated trauma. Panti's reflections on her own life combines humour, self-evaluation and self-acceptance, defying and overcoming the homophobia that Tino's brother, Pearse in *Silent*, could not achieve. Solo performance, in contrast to monological forms of theatre, or at least monologues as generally performed in Irish theatre, which are more about a low-key form of delivery with the emphasis on storytelling, whereas solo performance relies far more on a heightened sense of theatricality. In addition, often solo performance offers an amplified sense of presence and gives visibility to marginalised experiences, by way of exposing inequality and discriminations associated with class, race, and sexual orientation. *Silent* and *Woman in Progress* are notable not just for their foregrounding of the performativity of gender, but also how both performers engage with audiences by way of shattering the illusion of the fourth wall. Interacting with spectators, asking them to say their names out loud, surveying how many may have had mental health issues in Kinevane's piece, or Panti asking a spectator to read aloud a letter she wants to share with

her younger self, Rory. As Huang argues, with both *Silent* and *Woman and Progress* there are multiple ways of undermining heteronormativity and hegemonic practices. Panti is not just a writer/performer, she is also a very astute and media savvy public advocate, particularly in her public-facing role in the Marriage Equality referendum (2015) and in promoting of LGBTQIA+ rights more broadly.

Critical responses to older canonical writers like George Bernard Shaw (as well as Wilde and Yeats) are not just about unearthing the ongoing relevance of such writers to contemporary cultures, and not just about re-engaging with the work with contemporary lenses and awarenesses but are as much about articulating what remains visionary and exemplary about work clearly shaped by a different time period. This is particularly pertinent for a writer like Shaw, who was born and reared in Ireland, who engaged a great deal with Irish culture and politics, but whose international reputation is not fundamentally coupled to the island of his birth. Justine Zapin unpicks *The Tragedy of an Elderly Gentleman*, the penultimate play of Shaw's five-part play-cycle *Back to Methuselah* (1921), a work that asks specific questions about identity, religion, nationalism and colonialism, territory covered in Shaw's other plays, *John Bull's Other Island* (1904) and *O'Flaherty V.C.: A Recruiting Pamphlet* (1915). Of course, as Zapin notes, landscape in its theatricalization in Irish theatre is invariably political. And just as scholarship more broadly has evolved to reflect on the significance of space, Shaw's work offers something dynamic, using many of the old associations with place and then reconstituting them. Unlike the majority of Irish plays, which are more likely to be set in the past, Shaw's play imagines an absurdist, utopian future in 3000 A.D, where political, national, religious, gender and class distinctions are no longer relevant. Only age distinguishes in complex, hierarchical ways. If Marina Carr's work takes us to Greek precedents, Shaw propels his audiences long into the future. There is something liberating and unsettling in thinking along those lines.

In the section "Voices from Brazil", Ronei Vieira Nogueira explores and Robson Corrêa de Camargo the convergence of Samuel Beckett's literary works with the imagery of the Brazilian particular *khôra*, the Cerrado, in the state of Goiás (Mid-west Brazil), through the performances of Máskara –a group from the Federal University of Goiás. Over their 20-year journey, Máskara has staged five productions based on Beckett's texts, infusing elements from Goiânia's landscape and the vibrant colours of the Cerrado. The piece delves into the reflections of Brazilian director Robson Corrêa de Camargo and philosopher/indigenous leader Ailton Krenak, examining how the unique essence of Beckett's creations resonates within the context of Goiás. By interweaving Beckett's literary and dramatic essence with the cultural context of Goiás, Nogueira contemplates the fertile

ground where the idiosyncrasies of Beckett’s work find resonance in this Brazilian setting, illuminating the symbiotic relationship between Beckett’s themes, such as the setting of ruins, of silence, of the unspeakable. Máskara’s performances shed light on how intricately blended with the Cerrado these elements are to create a unique theatrical experience. The discussion encapsulates the interplay of five performances based on Beckett’s writings, they are: *Waiting for Godot*, in two versions (2005 and 2023), *Companhia* (2009), *Quê Onde* (2010), *Curta Beckett* (2014) and *CascandoBeckett: Uma Imagem Como Outra Any* (2016 and 2022). When analysing the use of lighting by Máskara, Nogueira emphasises that Beckett is coloured by elements from the Cerrado such as earth red, blood red, shades of sunset and forest fires, sky blue and cesium blue, ipês and graffiti of all colours, meaning simultaneously, oppression and poetry. Through the lens of Máskara’s interpretations, this article showcases the translocation of a Beckettian spirit into local imagery, contributing to a “glocal” theatre of divergent cultural landscapes.

Each of the contributions here, articles and creative work, variously dramatize trauma, loss, marginalisation, invisibility, rank, authority, and corruption. If characters face systemic silencing and degradation, denial of rights and responsibilities, there is ample evidence of characters, individually and collectively, coping, comforted by resilience, solidarity and resistance.

The Guest Editors

Eamonn Jordan, Alessandra Rigonato and Michelle Alvarenga

*In Memory of
Zé Celso Martinez (1937-2023)*

*Brazilian playwright, actor and director.
Founder of Teatro Oficina.*

