“A Quiet Cultural Revolution”: The Amateur Theatre Movement in Ireland, 1952-1980

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Introduction

A Quiet Cultural Revolution

In the middle decades of the twentieth century, amateur theatre in Ireland flourished to such an extent that by the end of the century it was firmly established as a ubiquitous feature of life in cities, towns, and villages across the island. Such was the unprecedented rise of amateur theatre during this period, that in his seminal work *A History of Irish Theatre* (2002) Christopher Morash identifies it as a "quiet cultural revolution" (192). The sheer numbers involved in amateur theatre represented a wave of activity of revolutionary proportions. In 1954, Gabriel Fallon estimated that every year approximately 12,000 members in 800 amateur drama societies produced work that was viewed by 300,000-400,000 people ("Let's get it all" 4).[1] A report published by the Arts Council of Ireland in 1995 suggested that the popularity of amateur theatre had not declined in the preceding decades: it described amateur theatre as "one of the most widespread and enthusiastically supported activities in the arts area in Ireland" and estimated that approximately 16,000 members of drama societies performed to over 400,000 people on an annual basis (*Views of Theatre* 249). When taken in isolation, the numbers fail to reveal the impact that amateur theatre has had on peoples' lives in Ireland. For example, in an engaging account of his involvement in amateur theatre in the area around Newry from the 1940s to the 1980s, Mick Waddell enthusiastically outlined its transformative power:

> There can be few greater thrills than the sense of anticipation as the curtain opens on a first night and few more rewarding experiences than to have an audience in the palm of your hand with the ability to make them laugh one minute and cry the next … Maybe it will, for an hour or two some dark winter's night, transport an audience to another time and place and transform a plain country hall into a glamourous West End theatre or to the bright lights of Broadway. (47)

[1] Gabriel Fallon was an actor with The Abbey Theatre from 1920-1927 and a director on the Abbey Theatre Board of Directors from 1959-1974. In 1958, he was nominated as Patron of the Amateur Drama Council of Ireland (ADCI) – a post that he resigned from in 1963 (Smith "Festival Glory" 105).

Further to what Waddell experienced as a transformative power, amateur theatre presented thousands of participants and audience members with alternative views of life and humanity. When asked in an interview with Morash and Nicholas Grene what he felt was "the general importance of the amateur theatre movement", theatre critic and teacher John Devitt observed that, "It was trying to create some sort of mirror image of what it's like to be human and live in the social world…"(52). Thus, even a cursory glance at the history of amateur theatre in mid-twentieth-century Ireland reveals a cultural movement that wielded a profound impact on communities, individuals, and on Irish society as whole.

It is surprising that amateur theatre in Ireland in this period has remained largely unconsidered within academic discourse. As Elizabeth Howard writes in *The Palgrave Handbook of Contemporary Irish Theatre and Performance* (2018), "despite the growth of amateur theatre activity during the twentieth century and its position as a community-based cultural phenomenon, to date it has remained on the periphery of academic interest" (165). As outlined in detail below, the presence of amateur theatre has often been acknowledged in historical and critical accounts, but no extended analysis of its role or impact has been advanced. The primary aim of this study is to retrieve amateur theatre from the periphery of Irish theatre historiography through an analysis of the origins and impact of what Morash justifiably describes as a revolution in Irish culture. In pursuit of that aim, it addresses a number of pressing and unanswered questions: Who fomented and drove the amateur theatre movement and what were their motivations? Where did it extend to, and in what places was its influence felt most forcefully? Finally, and perhaps most importantly: what was the nature of that influence, and what effect did it have on Irish society? These questions are broad in their focus for now. However, the purpose of the remainder of this introductory chapter is to outline the parameters of this study; to provide clear definitions of the terms with which it operates, and to establish a narrower set of aims and objectives. First, however, it is necessary to determine the image of amateur theatre in Ireland in the twentieth century that has been constructed by the existing historiographical and critical literature on Irish theatre. That image suggests that while amateur theatre in Ireland has not been the focus of a dedicated study, its presence and influence has nevertheless been repeatedly acknowledged.

Amateur Theatre in Ireland in the Twentieth-Century

In Morash's analysis, the history of amateur theatre in Ireland in the twentieth century can be divided into two phases. The first began in the final years of the nineteenth century with the Irish literary revival and the wave of cultural nationalism "which saw the frenzied formation of cultural societies of all kinds – from Gaelic League branches to 1798 commemoration committees" (193). As P.J. Mathews argues in *Revival: The Abbey Theatre, Sinn Féin, the Gaelic League and the Co-operative Movement* (2003), the cultural activity of this period was driven by a locally-oriented ethos of self-help and voluntarism. The most prominent cultural institution to emerge from that wave of activity was Ireland's national theatre, the Abbey, and most accounts of the formative years of the company reference its amateur origins. Few, however, have assessed the implications of its amateur status in the way that Mary Trotter does in *Ireland's National Theatres* (2001):

> After the tremendous success of the performances of [William Butler] Yeats's *Kathleen In Houlihan* and [George William] Russell's *Deirdre* in St. Teresa's Hall, the Fays and the actors of the Irish National Dramatic Company continued to work together and decided to form a permanent society to be called the Irish National Theatre Society. The actors of the company were all members of nationalist organizations around Dublin – Inghinidhe na hÉireann, the Celtic Literary Society, and the Gaelic League – and (except for their organizers, the Fays) were amateurs who saw their work in the theatre as primarily a nationalist enterprise. … This amateur status gave the company political freedom, while undermining the possibility of competition over actor status among the company members. (103)

Trotter's account suggests an exciting *milieu* of amateur cultural societies that were united by shared political aspirations and powered by an endemic spirit of voluntarism. The evolution of the Irish National Theatre Society into the Abbey Theatre was a landmark, not only for cultural nationalists and for the subsequent development of professional theatre in Ireland but, as Eileen Kearney and Charlotte Headrick show in *Irish Women Dramatists, 1998-2001*, it was a boon for contemporaneous amateur theatre companies:

> In 1904, when Annie Horniman, an English-woman, presented the National Theatre Society with its own building, soon known as the Abbey Theatre, their permanence

> was secured. Not surprising, perhaps, is the stimulus this dramatic society gave to both professional and amateur groups. In 1902, Bulmer Hobson and Leis Purcell (David Parkhill) founded the Ulster Literary Theatre, in 1908 the Cork Dramatic Society was born, and in 1914 the Irish Theatre appeared. Many plays also emerged from the numerous amateur groups that flourished during this period. For instance, the Kilkenny Dramatic Club produced [Alice] Milligan's *The Daughters of Donagh (1904);* the National Players, Miss L. McManus's *O'Donnell's Cross* (1907); the Independent Theatre Company, Eva Gore-Booth's *Unseen Kings* (1912); the Countess of Roden's Company Mary Costello's *A Bad Quarter of an Hour* (1913); the Little Theatre, Dorothy McArdle's *Asthara* (1918); and Ira Allen's Company, Sheila Walsh's *The Mother* (1918). (5)

As can be seen from the accounts of Trotter, Kearney and Headrick – and from the multitude of histories of the Abbey Theatre – the revolutionary period leading up to the 1916 Rising and the War of Independence (1919-1921) was one in which amateurs populated both the cultural and political spheres.[2] Furthermore, as the references to Ulster, Kilkenny and Cork in the list of productions provided by Kearney and Headrick show, amateur theatre activity was not restricted to Dublin. Further testament to this can be found in Robert Goode Hogan and Richard Burnham's *The Art of the Amateur, 1916-1920* (1984), which lists performances of popular patriotic plays by amateur groups in counties Leitrim, Wexford, Carlow, Cork, Tyrone, Roscommon, Longford, Westmeath, Louth, Offaly and Kilkenny (239). In a withering assessment of the significance of those productions, Hogan and Burnham state that they will "have no interest to anyone other than the local historian" (239). Notwithstanding that analysis, what those productions show is that, at that time, amateur theatre activity was relatively widespread in the regions as well as in Dublin.

The end of the War of the Independence in 1921 and the foundation of the Irish Free State ushered in a new political era that led to the second phase in the development of amateur theatre identified by Morash. He points out that because the myriad cultural societies established in the opening decade of the century were predominantly politically motivated,

[2] See Kavanagh, *The Story of the Abbey Theatre: from its origins in 1899 to the present* (1950); Robinson, *Ireland's Abbey Theatre: A History, 1899-1951* (1951); Hunt, *The Abbey: Ireland's National Theatre, 1904-1978* (1979); Fitz-Simon, *The Abbey Theatre: Ireland's National Theatre, The First 100 Years* (2003), and Welch, *The Abbey Theatre: Form and Pressure* (2003).

"most either evolved into more strictly political groups or simply disappeared before 1920. The few that did survive were usually outside the ambit of nationalist politics…" (*A History* 193). Amateur theatre activity continued, but with a different set of factors contributing to its growth and evolution:

> By the mid-1930s, changes were taking place in rural Irish society that would redraw the country's theatrical map. The automobile was opening up the countryside, making the old rail routes less important, while a rural and small town middle class, made up of teachers, clergy, doctors, and shopkeepers were consolidating their roles as community leaders. A generation earlier, their efforts had been channelled into the maelstrom of nationalist politics; however, by the time Fianna Fáil entered into electoral politics in 1927, the Irish political landscape was beginning to settle into a reasonably stable shape, and people began to direct their organisational skills in other directions. Some turned to the Gaelic Athletic Association, some to lay religious confraternities … but others were forming amateur theatre companies. (*A History* 193)

The social and economic conditions outlined by Morash gave rise to what he describes as the 'cultural revolution' that was amateur theatre in the middle decades of the twentieth century.

A mark of the extent to which amateur theatre activity had grown by mid century was that in 1946 there were regional amateur drama festivals in Killarney, Waterford and Limerick in Munster; New Ross, Bray, Dublin, Dundalk, and Cavan in Leinster; Belfast, Bundoran and Enniskillen in Ulster, Sligo and Tubbercurry in Connacht; and a festival in Athlone at the meeting point of east and west demarcated by the Shannon river. When, in 1953, the All-Ireland and Ulster Drama Festivals were established in Athlone and Belfast respectively, the previously discrete activities of regional festivals were consolidated into a cultural movement that extended across the island of Ireland. The impact of the amateur theatre of that period is typically framed in the existing literature in terms of the ameliorative role that it played in community life. In *Ireland: A Social and Cultural History* (2004), Terence Brown points out that "for most people in Ireland in the post-war period, the amateur dramatic movement, which burgeoned in the 1950s in festivals and competitions, was their only point of contact with artistic activity of any kind" (224). Similarly, in an interview with Cathy Leeney for *Theatre Talk: Voices of Irish Theatre Practitioners* (2001), theatre director

Garry Hynes recalled that the first play that she ever saw was John B. Keane's *Many Young Men of Twenty* (1961), performed by an amateur group in Monaghan where she lived at the time (Hynes,"Garry Hynes" 195). Hynes reflected on the function that amateur theatre fulfilled for her parents and, by extension, for the community:

> My parents would occasionally go to things like the amateur drama festivals in Loughrea, in the way that Irish people who didn't live in Dublin occasionally went to plays. That was very much in the context of the amateur theatre. That's where people got their theatre entertainment, at least when I was growing up which was after the fit-ups and things like that. (Hynes,"Garry Hynes" 195)

Coupled with Brown's analysis, Hynes's account evidences the way that, in regional communities, amateur theatre provided exposure to an aspect of culture that might not have otherwise been available. In an interview with Karen Carleton in the same publication, Tomás MacAnna made the point that, "Amateurs kept theatre alive when there was nothing else. I remember adjudicating plays down in Scarriff, in New Ross, where busloads of people would be coming in to see the plays. Listowel Players when they travelled with *Sive* had busloads of people, like a football match, wonderful!" (287).

When the amateur theatre movement grew into an island-wide network of cultural activity, its influence extended beyond the boundaries of individual communities. Accordingly, numerous historians cite the systemic impact that it had on Irish drama: in particular the role that it played in maintaining a repertoire of plays by Irish playwrights. Morash writes that the Abbey playwrights George Shiels, Brinsley MacNamara, Rutherford Mayne, Lennox Robinson, T.C. Murray, and later Louis D'Alton formed a core group of writers who provided the main repertoire for the "plethora of small amateur theatre companies then springing up all over the country…" (192). For some commentators, the widespread preference for those writers on the amateur circuit was a distinguishing, and not necessarily positive, feature of amateur theatre. In a somewhat damning indictment of the capabilities of amateur societies, both Morash in *A History of Irish Theatre* and Paul Murphy in *Hegemony and Fantasy in Irish Drama* (2009) suggest that the plays of Shiels et al. were popular with amateurs because they were technically and thematically simple. Morash writes that a play like Shiels's *Professor Tim* (1925), "contains nothing to daunt an enthusiastic amateur: it requires only a couple of basic sets, no special staging effects, no virtuoso acting

skills, and can be played in an Irish actor's own accent" (192). Similarly, of *Professor Tim* Murphy writes that its "popular appeal" made it simultaneously a target for professional critics and "stock-in-trade for amateur companies throughout Ireland" (82). The idea that professional theatre critics and amateur societies differed on questions of taste and discernment emerges in other accounts. In *That Neutral Island* (2007), Clair Wills writes that in the 1940s "while Abbey theatre writers such as Shiels and D'Alton increasingly came in for criticism in the pages of respectable literary journals for initiating the decline of the Irish national theatre into melodrama and farce it was just these characteristics which endeared them to local festivals" (103). Citing Wills in *Experimental Irish Theatre: After W.B. Yeats* (2012), Ian Walsh concludes that the amateur theatre movement helped to "cultivate a taste for much of the drama that was on offer on the Abbey stage, drama that was formally conservative and parochial in its concerns" (35). If the preferred repertoire of regional amateur societies galvanised their communities from the alternative tastes of a broader cultural *milieu,* then this was not necessarily viewed as a bad thing by all interested parties at the time. Brown surmises that "local Catholic clergy were occasionally to the fore in the encouragement of amateur dramatics, certainly because they saw the social benefits to be derived from community effort, but also one suspects because they saw in local drama an alternative to the questionable offerings of Hollywood" (167).

As referenced above, the plays and playwrights most favoured by amateur theatre societies have been used as evidence of a movement that was lacking in innovation and, therefore, unworthy of significant attention. Hogan and Burnham, for example, justify the exclusion of the majority of amateur activity from their somewhat ironically titled text, *The Art of the Amateur*:

> In this history we have paid little attention to the proliferation of amateur theatrics outside of the major cities of Dublin, Belfast and Cork. The reason is that the overwhelming bulk of amateur theatricals was neither significant nor interesting. Overwhelmingly, the choice of plays was limited to patriotic pieces, a la Boucicault, which had been staged hundreds of times, or to revivals of contemporary dramas which usually had been first done by the Abbey. Only very occasionally would an amateur society, like the Northern Rosario Players, discover a new play, and they would then play it to death. Mainly throughout the country, the amateurs restricted themselves to the very tried, if not always true" (239).

Evidently, for Hogan and Burnham, metropolitan, professional companies were a wellspring of creativity from which plays and practices would trickle down to regional amateurs. Even in rare cases, such as the Rosario Players, when amateur societies might produce something new, they did not have the wherewithal to use it in a judicious manner. Accordingly, Hogan and Burnham focused on what they saw as the source as opposed to the destination of innovation in writing and theatre practice. Leaving aside whether or not such a position is justified, there are areas of inquiry where the interconnectedness of the amateur and professional spheres is undeniable. In *Louis D'Alton and the Abbey Theatre* (2004), for example, Ciara O'Farrell writes about a revival of D'Alton's usually popular *They Got What they Wanted* (1947) at the Abbey in 1950 that did not do well at the box office. Surmising as to why the play had been unsuccessful, the director of the Abbey Ernest Blythe offered that "the play has been done much more widely and frequently by amateurs throughout the country than was realized in the Theatre" (150). O'Farrell concludes that "The success of the play in provincial Ireland manifested by its numerous productions on the amateur circuit, could quite possibly have checked its growth on the professional stage" (150). While some might have wished to view amateur theatre, and provincial amateur theatre in particular, as separate from what constituted 'theatre' in Ireland, the presence of that sphere of cultural practice created ripples that could be felt, economically at least, by professional companies. If the failure of *They Got What they Wanted* at the box office suggested that the economic effect of amateur societies on professional playwrights was negative, then it should be noted that this was not always the case. Morash writes that, on the contrary, "amateur companies provided an important source of income for professional playwrights" (*A History* 195). While the royalties for a single performance were paltry (between three and five guineas per night), "cumulatively, amateur royalties could add up to the living that Abbey productions alone could not provide" (*A History* 195). Although, as Morash points out, some writers such as Paul Vincent Carroll were forced to leave Ireland to make a living writing for film and radio, others, such as Shiels and Murray, who were popular on the amateur circuit were able to remain at home and sustain a living as professional playwrights based on the royalties from amateur productions (*A History* 195).

Several histories of Irish theatre reference the role that amateur theatre has played in the education and training of theatre artists. However, while acknowledged as important to the development of those artists, amateur practice is often framed as an earlier and less-developed phase in the teleological development of the nascent theatre professional. In the

field of writing on Irish theatre in the twentieth century, this is by far the most common way of defining the impact of amateur theatre – albeit most often by way of one or two cursory lines. One such example of amateur theatre fulfilling a formative role can be found in a chapter on Eva Gore-Booth in Cathy Leeney's *Irish Women Playwrights, 1900-1939* (2010). According to Leeney, in Manchester Gore-Booth became involved in what we would now call adult education and ran meetings of the 'Elizabethan Society', which staged productions of Shakespeare's plays with factory women and girls. Leeney writes that "Her familiarity with the practice of theatre, even if it was with amateur performers, grounded her playwriting in terms of staging and performance, and counters the classification of Gore-Booth as a solely literary dramatist" (61). The aforementioned account of the career of Louis D'Alton by Ciara O'Farrell covers the same historical period as Leeney's text, and it describes the formative effect that regional audiences had on the playwright. D'Alton adjudicated at countless amateur theatre festivals around Ireland and O'Farrell explains that his commitment to regional amateur theatre arose in part from "a feeling of enormous satisfaction in helping those who had not yet achieved his level of theatrical craftsmanship", and partly from feeling "indebted to the small towns and villages that proffered him both a welcome and an income when launching his career as a playwright and producer…" (13). In *Modern Irish Theatre* (2008), Mary Trotter writes that while the audiences in those towns and villages could be 'rowdy', they were also: "intelligent, informed theatregoers whose impact on Irish theatre mid-century was profound. And, despite the poor conditions in which the plays were often produced, they gave new playwrights the opportunity to develop their work through production…" (131). It should be noted that it was not only the artists of this period that were influenced by amateur theatre. In *Ernest Blythe in Ulster: The Making of a Double Agent?* (2018), David Fitzpatrick points out that Blythe, one of the most influential administrators in the history of Irish theatre, founded two amateur theatre societies: one in Newtownards in 1913 (113), and another with the farm labourers of Lispole, west Kerry in 1914 (120). That earlier involvement in theatre might well have had some bearing on his decision in 1925, as Minister for Finance of the Irish Free State, to introduce a much-needed annual subvention for the Abbey Theatre.

In *Twentieth-Century Irish Drama: Mirror Up to Nation* (2000), Christopher Murray declares that it is now "generally agreed" that in the middle decades of the twentieth century there occurred a "second renaissance" in Irish playwriting led by Brian Friel, Tom Murphy, Hugh Leonard, and John B. Keane (162). Murray declines to mention the role played by

amateur theatre in that renaissance of writing but – with the exception of Friel whose theatre education was gained at the Tyrone Guthrie Theatre in Minneapolis (Friel, *Brian Friel in Conversation* 104) – most accounts of the early careers of those playwrights cite the formative influence of the amateur theatre movement. In *The Theatre of Tom Murphy* (2017), Nicholas Grene informs us that, as a teenager, Murphy was a member of his local amateur drama group, Tuam Theatre Guild (profiled in chapter one), and that "Murphy's real path to a career as a writer came through amateur drama" (4). In Des Hickey and Gus Smith's *A Paler Shade of Green* (1972), Murphy recalls getting involved in amateur theatre while working as a teacher in Mountbellew: soon it had claimed his "entire social life" (225), and according to the playwright it was during this period that he penned his seminal early-career work, *A Whistle in the Dark* (225).

In an interview with Pat Donlon for *Theatre Talk,* Hugh Leonard described the somewhat different influence that amateur theatre had on his development. When asked about his mentors and influences the playwright recalled that he "used to act in amateur theatre and I loved playing Harold Mahony in *The Far Off Hills* [by Lennox Robinson]" (254). If not quite all-consuming in the way that it was for Murphy, Leonard described amateur theatre as "… a way of getting over shyness. … Basically I was always a playwright but the acting was something to do in the evenings. It was a social activity and I enjoyed it" (254). Of the writers of what Murray describes as a second renaissance in Irish theatre, John B. Keane is perhaps most strongly associated with amateur theatre. This is partly due to the popularity of his plays with amateur societies and partly due to the fact that his breakthrough play, *Sive*, was premiered to widespread acclaim by his local amateur group, The Listowel Players, having been rejected by the Abbey. Two chapters of Gus Smith and Des Hickey's *John B.: The Real Keane* (1992) are dedicated to the rise of *Sive* to national prominence through the amateur festival circuit, and Anthony Roche notes in *Contemporary Irish Drama* (2009) that "Keane's emergence coincided with the beginnings of the influential and popular amateur drama festivals in Ireland…" (3). In an era prior to the development of college and university courses, amateur theatre provided a training ground for some of the most influential figures in modern Irish theatre. However, the quality and nature of that training was, at times, subject to critique. Writing in *Beckett and Behan and a Theatre in Dublin* in 1967, the director Alan Simpson noted the "great profusion of amateur dramatic societies throughout the country" and the fact that there were "very few professional actors who have not come into the theatre

through the amateur movement" (26). That state of affairs was, according to Simpson, not without its problems:

> This, however, has also led to a neglect of basic training: few Irish actors can sing properly, or perform any of the minor athletic accomplishments like fencing, simple dancing or acrobatics, which are part and parcel of the training of their foreign colleagues, and I think there is only one professional actor in Dublin who has had a ballet training. This lack of painstaking preparation for professional life – and, indeed, for individual presentations – is very apparent in the theatre in Ireland. Productions and performances alike tend either to be so inspired as to blind one to their faults, or to be down-right incompetent. (26)

Based on Simpson's account, the *ad hoc* nature of theatre training at that time led to performances that succeeded on the basis of unplanned, and perhaps unintentional, moments of inspiration rather than on a systematic approach. A further point to consider was that, while amateur theatre was beneficial to theatre practitioners in the early part of their careers, too close an association with amateur theatre could prove to be damaging to the career of the aspiring professional. In her essay on M.J. Molloy, John B. Keane and Hugh Leonard for the *Oxford Handbook of Modern Irish Theatre* (2016) Lisa Coen argues that "Keane's great popularity with amateur drama competitions could arguably be cited as a reason for the late acceptance of the playwright by the national theatre" (316). Coen makes the point that the international success of both Keane and Leonard was achieved in spite of their popularity with amateur societies (307).

Most references to amateur theatre in histories of theatre in Ireland refer to the activity of the middle decades of the twentieth century. However, some references to later developments can also be found. *Theatre Ireland* magazine – published from 1982 to 1993 – granted almost equal weighting to amateur and professional activity in the overviews of the theatre landscape in Ireland that were a regular feature of the publication. In a testament to the ways that the efflorescence of amateur theatre in mid twentieth-century Ireland spawned a subsequent generation of playwrights, the director Peter Sheridan recalled that while there had not previously been a tradition of amateur theatre in his family, when he was fifteen (in 1967) his father started a local amateur drama society in the Seville Place area in Dublin called the Saint Laurence O'Toole Dramatic Society – later shortened to the SLOT Players (Sheridan, *Theatre Talk 443*). As a beneficiary of the mid-century flowering of amateur

theatre in Ireland, it is fitting that Sheridan would bring the writing of John B. Keane – a writer strongly associated with the amateur theatre movement – to a new generation as director of the film adaptation of Keane's play *The Field* in 1990. The infrastructure of amateur societies, festivals, and venues that had grown in previous decades continued to flourish in the latter decades of the century, and in some places it proved to be more resilient than its professional counterpart. In *The Stage in Ulster from the Eighteenth Century* (1997), Ophelia Byrne notes that "Through the difficult years of the 1970s, when most of the professional theatres were forced to close, the amateur drama movement steadfastly continued to operate at community level" (78). Tom Maguire's *Making Theatre in Northern Ireland* supports Byrne's assertion through an account of the early career of the playwright Martin Lynch:

> When the Group Theatre in Belfast's city centre reopened to amateur companies, Lynch decided to take the work there. With *They're Taking the Barricades Down* (1976), *A Roof Under Our Heads* (1976) and *What About Your Ma, Is Da still Working?* (1976) he was able to attract a working-class audience from across the city eager to see their lives represented on the stage. So, although Lynch's professional career as a playwright began in 1981 with the Lyric Theatre's production of *Dockers*, he already knew from direct experience what worked with his audience in performance (26).

Lynch's engagement with working-class characters and audiences was part of a broader trend whereby, in the latter decades of the twentieth century in urban areas in particular, theatre artists used amateur theatre as a platform for previously marginalised voices and for alternative methodologies. Maguire provides a particularly rich account of those developments. Writing about *The Stone Chair* – a piece devised by Lynch with members of the Short Strand community in Belfast in 1989 – he states that:

> [Lynch's] experience of professional (often middle-class) actors playing working-class characters was that they had difficulty in understanding some of the dimensions of what was being portrayed; whereas non-professional working-class actors were not only alive to these dimensions but passionately committed to the work itself. (123)

Maguire raises a similar point in relation to *Binlids* (1997): a devised co-production between JustUs Community Theatre and Dubbeljoint Theatre Company based on the real experiences

of women in nationalist West Belfast of the British government policy of internment without trial. The piece featured both amateur and professional performers and in Maguire's analysis:

> A further dimension is set up for spectators in watching *Binlids* insofar as they are aware of the external identity of the amateur members of the cast, simultaneously present with the identity of the dramatic character. In watching someone whose own life experience is the basis of the dramatic role or who is acting on behalf of a family member, friend or neighbour to tell their story, spectatorship becomes a powerful act of solidarity with the teller of the story… (58)

Based on Maguire's analysis, the peripheral status of amateur theatre practice in relation to the mainstream of theatre made it conducive to the presentation of unconventional stories and techniques. Furthermore, according to Fiona Coleman Coffey in *Political Acts: Women in Northern Irish Theatre, 1921-2012*, the peripherality of amateur theatre offered an outside or alternative route into the theatre industry for those who were previously excluded from it:

> …women's opportunities in theatre remained severely limited throughout the mid-twentieth century. … It would not be until the 1970s brought new arts-funding initiatives that encouraged the development of amateur and community theatre companies that women would slowly emerge as leaders in Northern drama. These initiatives would give rise to the celebrated voices of Christina Reid, Anne Devlin, Jennifer Johnston, Marie Jones, and establish the foundation of several prominent women-led theatre companies during the 1980s and 1990s. (80)

While community theatre was an amateur or semi-professional alternative to the mainstream of professional theatre, it is worth noting that it was also viewed by its proponents as being fundamentally different to the mainstream of amateur theatre. This can be seen in Father Des Wilson's recollection – quoted in Bill McDonnell's *Theatres of the Troubles* (2008) – about the perennial need to reinvigorate the ideals of the community theatre group, The People's Theatre, that he founded in Belfast in 1973:

> I was very excited by the possibilities of The People's Theatre; but we found that you'd start off with a fairly radical outlook, and the writing would be fairly critical, maybe not radical, but certainly critical. As time went on however, it tended to become more and more like an amateur dramatics' society. So you'd finish up with

> people doing a pantomime or a play like 'The Far Off Hills'. And then somebody would have to step aside and radicalize it again. (39)

Evidently, Wilson drew a sharp distinction between the contrasting roles of, on the one hand, community theatre and, on the other, the kind of amateur practice that relied heavily upon staples like Lennox Robinson's ideologically conservative play. In *Playing the Wild Card* (2003), David Grant defines community drama using the following criteria:

> Community Drama must be rooted in the local community; it must tend toward the benefit of that community; it must actively involve the participation of local people; it must reflect local themes and experience, [and] professional involvement should be aimed at leaving skills in the community. (5)

Arguably, when viewed in the terms outlined by Grant above, there is little to distinguish community drama from amateur drama. A point upon which they differ, however, is that "Community Drama places more emphasis on process than on product" (Grant 5). Furthermore, Grant notes that, based upon the case studies profiled in the survey, community drama in Northern Ireland, "could be defined as non-professional theatre with professional support in disadvantaged areas of Belfast and Derry" (5). The close involvement of professionals in the production of community theatre is a point of distinction between it and amateur theatre as is the tendency for the former to be located almost exclusively in urban, disadvantaged areas.

While the majority of societies that comprised the amateur theatre movement were not radical in a way that suited the aims of The People's Theatre, this does not mean that it was not a source of innovation. In *Buffoonery and Easy Sentiment: Popular Irish Plays in the Decade Prior to the Opening of the Abbey Theatre* (2011), Christopher Fitz-Simon draws a distinction between the commercially-driven professional theatre of turn-of-the-century Dublin and the 'art' theatre of which the amateur precursors to the Abbey Theatre were an example:

> When, in 1903, Frank Fay and his brother William undertook to form the acting company of the National Theatre Society from the existing membership of seriously-minded amateur and semi-professional performing groups, they would find, for a

> time, an artistic milieu in which to create a more literate 'national' drama than anything which might have been imagined on the stage of the lamentably commercial Queen's Theatre. (30)

Even in the middle decades of the century when amateurs were not as deliberately committed to an iconoclastic aesthetic as the founders of the national theatre, they still proved capable of adding fresh insight into the plays that they produced. In *Theatre Talk,* MacAnna recalled his experience of adjudicating regional amateur drama festivals:

> I adjudicated nearly every Theatre Festival in Ireland until very recently. … Funny enough, in an amateur performance, even if you know the play – and as an adjudicator, I always made sure I knew the play – you might see something and say: "I never realised that about the play" or "That is most extraordinary, that point had never occurred to me" or you might see some little touch that the director put in that was marvellous. (287)

If the case that MacAnna advanced for amateur innovation is somewhat anecdotal, then more concrete evidence is presented in Lionel Pilkington's chapter on "The Little Theatres of the 1950s" for the *Oxford Handbook of Modern Irish Theatre*. According to Pilkington, the innovative and avant-garde work that emerged from Ireland's Little Theatre phenomenon in the 1950s drew heavily on "the country's prodigious amateur theatre movement, [and] the extraordinary porous boundaries that existed between amateur and professional theatre …" (288). Pilkington cites the example of the Bernadette Players (or 'Bernos'): a well-known amateur theatre group in 1950s Dublin that had ties to the professional theatre through both its members and its methodologies. As Pilkington writes, in addition to:

> …the close links between the Bernadette Players and professional institutional theatres like the Abbey, the Gate, and the Gaiety, there was a close overlap between the Bernos' pantomime-like topical revues (such as *Snow White and the 7 Corkmen* and *Aladeen and the E.S.B.,* December 1955) and the late-night satirical revues that were such an important part of the repertoire of the Pike Theatre Club and the Lantern Theatre. (290)

What the preceding discussion of amateur theatre in Ireland in the twentieth century shows is that while amateur theatre in Ireland has not been the focus of a dedicated study, its importance to Irish theatre, culture, and society has been repeatedly acknowledged. However brief some of the references to amateur theatre in the existing literature are, when taken collectively they form a striking, albeit partial, picture of a cultural phenomenon. That picture shows a movement that brought theatre to communities that might otherwise have been deprived of it; that built and maintained a repertoire of plays that became familiar to a body of people that greatly exceeded the audience for professional theatre in size; that provided training and experience to successive generations of theatre practitioners, and that acted as a platform for expression and artistic innovation. The problem with the picture of amateur theatre that we have from the current literature is that it is superficial. We know that amateur theatre brought theatre to regional and rural audiences, but we have little understanding of what its significance was for the people that comprised those audiences, or for those who took to the stage. We know that amateur societies displayed a preference for a specific set of playwrights and repertoire of plays but, aside from assumptions about the accessibility and ideological conservatism of those plays, we know little about the context in which they were so popular and impactful. We know that amateur theatre provided experience for would-be professionals, but we have little understanding of how the experiences of those artists in an amateur milieu shaped their work as professionals. Was it the case, for example, that they maintained or abandoned the conventions and methodologies of amateur practice in order to embark upon a professional career? Furthermore, by focusing on amateurs that became professionals, are we adopting a myopic view of a sample of individuals within a broad movement of artists? We know that amateur theatre provided a platform for innovation, but what form did that innovation take? Where innovation in amateur theatre is identified, should it be measured according to the conventions and standards of professional theatre or should a separate rubric apply? It is not possible to adequately address all of these questions in a study of this size, but the purpose of listing them in this manner is to show the depth of what, to date, has remained an untrammelled area in the field of Irish theatre studies and historiography. One of the primary tasks of this study is to capture the wide-ranging impact of the amateur theatre movement in Ireland, while at the same time maintaining a focus on specific areas of enquiry (outlined below) that allow for a satisfactory degree of detail and analysis.

The Amateur Theatre Movement

This dissertation outlines the origins, contours, and impact of the amateur theatre movement in Ireland from the foundation of the All-Ireland and Ulster Drama Festivals in 1953 to the establishment of Field Day Theatre Company in Derry in 1980. It presents an analysis of the role and influence of the amateur theatre movement in Irish theatre and society. This study adopts a materialist theoretical framework in order to show that amateur theatre was a means through which communities across Ireland initiated, and in many cases resisted, the effects of a period of significant modernization and social change. Furthermore, the influence of the amateur theatre movement on Irish theatre is presented primarily in terms of the way that it shaped the contrasting qualities of amateurism and professionalism in theatre practice during a period in which a growing number of occupations and leisure pursuits were professionalised. This study adds to our existing knowledge of Irish theatre and society in two ways. Firstly, it provides a more detailed and much-needed account of the efflorescence of amateur theatre that occurred in Ireland in the middle decades of the twentieth-century. Secondly, it adds to our understanding of the mutually-defining qualities of amateurism and professionalism: qualities that are shown to be a central component of how both amateur and professional works of art are received by the public.

Before proceeding any further, it is necessary to clarify the meaning of a number of terms that are key to the analysis outlined herein. Firstly, this dissertation focuses on what it terms the amateur theatre movement. According to Raymond Williams, artistic movements are one of four kinds of cultural formation that are distinct to the capitalist mode of cultural production. For Williams, movements are a type of cultural formation, "in which artists come together in the common pursuit of some specific artistic aim" (*The Sociology of Culture* 62). He lists a number of different aims which might unite cultural movements, but a common feature of all of them is that they form as a break away from market-based, corporate, and/or governmental institutions. Furthermore, he points out that they are identifiable by having at least "some kind of organization" and that in this regard they often have "constitutional rules" (*The Sociology of Culture* 65). As referenced above, this dissertation focuses on what Morash identifies as the second phase in the development of amateur theatre in twentieth-century Ireland: the 'cultural revolution' that gathered pace from the 1930s onward. Within that broad period, however, it takes as its starting point the historical moment when the wider 'revolution' described by Morash was consolidated into a movement: the establishment of the

All-Ireland and Ulster Drama Festivals in Athlone and Belfast in 1953. Although organised by two separate administrative bodies – the Amateur Drama Council of Ireland (ADCI) and the Association of Ulster Drama Festivals (AUDF) – the All-Ireland and Ulster Drama festivals consolidated the previously discrete activities of regional festivals into an island-wide movement in which amateur theatre societies from the north competed at the southern state finals and vice versa. In other words, while the two finals festivals reflected the existence of the separate political states of the Republic and Northern Ireland, amateur societies across the island of Ireland were united by a movement – the aim of which was to promulgate and strengthen amateur theatre. That sense of common purpose is reflected in the respective constitutions of the organisations. The stated aims listed in Item 1 of the constitution of the AUDF are:

> …to foster and encourage amateur drama through the holding of festivals of drama, the organisation and support of drama conferences and schools, the promotion of co-operation and co-ordination between Ulster Drama Festivals and the fostering of relations with cognate and similar organisations in Northern Ireland and other regions. ("AUDF")

Similarly, the ADCI listed the following as the 'Objects of the Council' in Article 2 of its first constitution:

(a) To foster, develop, promote and encourage Amateur Drama in Ireland.
(b) To co-ordinate the Amateur Drama Movement in Ireland.
(c) To represent the interests of Amateur Drama in Ireland and to negotiate when necessary with Departments of State or other interested bodies in matters concerning Amateur Drama. (*Curtain Call* 189)

Evidently, both organisations fulfilled Williams's criterion of sharing a common aim: the fostering, development, and encouragement of amateur drama in Ireland, regardless of how 'Ireland' might have been defined politically or territorially. Furthermore, both saw it as their role to negotiate with state bodies in the interests of amateur theatre: a further distinguishing characteristic of artistic movements in Williams's analysis. Thus, in the broader field of amateur theatre activity in Ireland in the twentieth century, this study focuses on the amateur theatre movement that was founded upon an island-wide network of festivals. The amateur

societies that comprised this movement were oriented around the festival infrastructure, either by entering into or, in other cases, consciously rejecting festival competition. Whether inclined to embrace or avoid festival competition, the decisions that amateur societies made regarding play choice, staging, and performance practices were informed by the standards, conventions, and ideas that were disseminated through the festival network. Without specifically defining it as a movement according to the terms outlined herein, the majority of references to 'amateur theatre' in the existing literature on Irish theatre refer to this particular sphere of amateur activity. Such is the scale and ubiquity of the amateur theatre movement in Irish life that it is what most people refer to when they use the term 'amateur theatre'. As a consequence, the broad variety of forms and traditions that exist within the general sphere of amateur theatre and performance in Ireland tend to be elided. As a result, the discrete characteristics and contributions of amateur forms including but not limited to musical theatre, Irish-language theatre, community theatre, opera and youth theatre are often overlooked. Those forms have origins, traditions, and conventions that are distinct from those of the amateur theatre movement, and they have made different, though no less important, contributions to Irish culture. Although they each are worthy of dedicated studies in their own right, they do not fall within the remit of this dissertation.

Amateurism and Professionalism

A striking feature of scholarly references to amateur theatre in Ireland in the twentieth century is that none of them seeks to put forward a precise definition of amateur practice, or of the amateur practitioner. Perhaps it is the case that, for the writers of those accounts, the definition of amateur theatre is sufficiently self-evident to preclude explanation. Even a brief consideration of the precise definition of the 'amateur' in theatre, however, reveals it to be strikingly ill-defined as a term of description. For example, in a 2011 article for the *Guardian* newspaper Jane Scott lists a number of ways in which the practice of the majority of struggling theatre professionals is indistinguishable from that of their amateur counterparts:

> Both groups rehearse in the evenings and weekends in order to fit around their paying jobs. Both use ticket income to pay for the essentials of set, props, costumes and the rest, but usually have little left over in wages/expenses. Both perform for the love of putting on theatre. Often both include performers or creatives who are trained, the difference being in amateur theatre that those people have decided to make a decision

> to leave the world of theatre and perform as a hobby, while the professional performers remain hopeful and keep their Spotlight subscription. (Scott)

Most definitions of amateur and professional practice rely on comparisons between exemplary cases of each, whereby the skill of the amateur lead actor is measured against that of the West End or Broadway star and found to be grossly inferior. Scott's approach is different because it focuses on the business of making theatre (as opposed to an ideal standard), and shows that for the most part it is much the same for amateurs as it is for professionals. It is worth noting that, according to Scott, those who identify as professionals rely upon a belief that they are professional – as can be seen in their belief in the necessity of a Spotlight casting-service subscription – rather than objectively measurable indicators of that status. A similar pattern emerges in more formal attempts to define the terms amateur and professional, whereby ostensibly straightforward and objective indicators are found wanting and subsequently supplemented with less tangible criteria. Over the course of several texts spanning approximately two decades, the sociologist Robert Stebbins has engaged extensively with the sociological meaning of the terms amateur and professional.[3] The core of Stebbins's understanding of the amateur and the professional can be traced to his 1977 essay "The Amateur: Two Sociological Definitions", in which he provides both a macro and micro-sociological definition of the 'modern amateur'. Beginning with a macro view, he argues that the amateur can be defined as part of a professional-amateur-public (P-A-P) system of functionally interdependent relationships (585). For Stebbins, amateurs are functionally linked to professionals in seven ways, which can be summarized as follows: firstly, they share the same conventions of production and administration; secondly, amateurs receive training from professionals; and third, amateurs maintain a broader and more historically informed knowledge of their chosen field in contrast to professionals, who tend to specialize. The fourth, fifth and sixth functional links between amateurs, professionals, and their publics depend upon the broader and less specialized knowledge of their field that amateurs possess. For Stebbins, the amateur: "…restrains the professionals from overemphasizing technique and other superficialities in lieu of a meaningful performance or product, he [sic] insists everywhere on the retention of good taste, and he [sic] furnishes professionals with the stimulus to give the public the best they can…" (587). Finally, the

[3] See *Amateurs: On the Margins of Work and Leisure* (1979); *Amateurs, Professionals and Serious Leisure* (1992), and *Serious Leisure* (2007).

seventh functional relationship concerns career: "The professionals [sic] who falls within a P-A-P system inevitably starts out in the amateur ranks and, unless he abandons his pursuit entirely or dies in this role, he returns to those ranks again at a later stage in his career" (588). Stebbins provides a methodical account of the varied points of intersection between amateur and professional practice on a macro-sociological level. However, there is a tendency in his analysis to view the output of professionals as products and, while this is not necessarily problematic in and of itself, Stebbins frames the role of the amateur as a consumer rather than a producer of those products. Amateurs receive training from professionals; they provide personnel for the professional ranks; and, even where they appear to have the most agency – through their broader knowledge of the field – they use that knowledge to provide feedback as part of a professionally-driven process of production. Such a framing of the amateur is problematic in the context of amateur theatre in Ireland where, as the chapters which follow show, amateur societies were responsible for the production and/or reproduction of a modern Irish culture.

In the second part of Stebbins's article he presents a micro-sociological definition of the amateur and, in keeping with the pattern identified above in Scott's article for the *Guardian*, it relies heavily upon a set of criteria that are primarily subjective. Stebbins identifies five "attitudes" – variations in which separate amateurs from professionals: confidence, perseverance, continuance, preparedness, and self-conception (596). Of those five attitudes, it is feasible that variations between amateurs and professionals might be observable and measurable in 'continuance', which Stebbins defines as "the awareness of the impossibility of choosing a different social identity … because of the imminence of penalties involved in making the switch" (597). He points out that in some cases such penalties are enforced by legal contracts, and he distinguishes continuance commitment from the value commitment that amateurs have. The other four attitudes, however, are primarily contingent upon personal perspective. On the topic of confidence, Stebbins advances the questionable claim that "The amateur, more than the seasoned professional, doubts his abilities..." (596). On perseverance he notes that "any professional, seasoned or green, knows he must stick to his pursuit when the going gets tough" (597): a claim that could just as readily be applied to amateurs. Stebbins defines preparedness as "a readiness to perform the activity to the best of one's ability at the appointed time and place" (597). Leaving aside the most basic fundamentals of theatre practice such as being physically and mentally present, both amateurs and professionals could just as easily act, or 'put on', their readiness to perform to an

observer such as Stebbins, regardless of their true physical or mental state. Finally, on the topic of self-conception Stebbins concedes readily to the subjective and arbitrary nature of 'amateur' and 'professional' as descriptors:

> Moving on to self-conception, it need only be mentioned that professionals and amateurs conceive of themselves in these terms. Just what the content of these conceptions are for each group in each field must be discovered through research. But, self-identification as one or the other is perhaps the most reliable operational measure for separating them available at present. (598)

The purpose of highlighting the more subjective elements of Stebbins's analysis is not to undermine the definition of the modern amateur that he presents, but rather to draw attention to its duality. What Stebbins's approach reveals is that even though there appears to be clear and objective indicators of professional and amateur status, there are nevertheless qualities of amateurism and professionalism that can only be described with reference to subjective concepts like 'attitude' or 'spirit'. That duality can be seen in the amateur theatre movement in Ireland, wherein the ostensibly objective and straightforward means of categorization that are used to distinguish amateurs from professionals prove to be vulnerable to even the mildest interrogation.

A precise definition of what constitutes amateur practice has eluded people involved in amateur theatre in Ireland in the past. In 1932, for example, sixteen amateur societies from around Ireland met in Dublin and formed the Drama Association of Ireland, which had as its aim "the encouragement of drama in Ireland and … the organisation of an Annual Dramatic Festival or Festivals" (Henry 4). The Leinster branch of the association held a non-competitive, one-act play festival in May of the following year but attendance was poor and support for the endeavour dissipated. Five years later, in a letter to the editor of the *Evening Herald* signed "Love and Land", a reader reflected on the failed attempt to form a representative association of amateur societies, stating that: "The only difficulty with this Association was to define what was an amateur, and I think that is why the whole thing fell through" ("Drama in Ireland" 5). Not content to rest on past failures, the reader proposed a solution: "As regards defining the amateur, I suggest that any company having a player or players with more than five years' experience not be allowed to play and that we again call a meeting of all those who are anxious and form an association when the other matters could be

discussed" ("Drama in Ireland" 5). No explanation was included as to why five years represented a significant milestone, or whether the five years referred to work in the amateur or professional fields. Evidently, it was the reader's intention that such matters would be discussed in detail at a meeting of the new association. However, when an association of the kind proposed by the reader, the ADCI, was eventually formed five years later its constitution deferred the question of how, precisely, an amateur should be defined. Article 25 simply stated that: "The Council shall be the sole arbiter of the status – Amateur or Professional – of any member of a Dramatic Society" (*Curtain Call* 193). The constitution of its northern counterpart, the AUDF, avoided addressing the issue entirely, with no mention of how a society or individual might be considered to be amateur or professional. By 2018, the ADCI constitution had undergone several amendments and it provided a clearer indication of how it would measure amateur status for the purposes of membership of the association (meanwhile, the AUDF remained consistent in its avoidance of the question). Section 6.1 of the 'General Rules' states that "All ADCI festivals are open to amateur groups with amateur producers [directors] only," while section 6.2 states that "An amateur is one who does not earn and has not earned, the majority of his/her living from theatre work and who is not paid for producing or taking part in the festival play either as an actor or part of the production team ("AUDF"). We might wonder how in contentious cases a person's job history and earnings could be accurately assessed by an association such as the ADCI. Furthermore, in light of the precarity of professions in theatre and of the tendency, identified by Stebbins, for retired professionals to revert to the amateur ranks, the exclusion of persons that have ever earned the majority of their living from theatre appears somewhat draconian. Nevertheless, the point is that from its inception the ADCI has attempted (with questionable results) to advance a working definition of the amateur. Notably, both the ADCI and the AUDF require its members to identify as amateur in a way that corresponds with the process of self-conception identified by Stebbins as an important indicator of amateur or professional status. As Stebbins states, "self-identification as one or the other is perhaps the most reliable operational measure for separating them available at present (598)" and, on that basis, this study uses the term 'amateur' to refer to those groups that identify themselves as such by way of their membership of the ADCI or AUDF, their participation at festivals, or simply their title. Crucially, however, Stebbins also states that the question of "just what the content of these conceptions are for each group in each field must be discovered through research" (598), and with that in mind this study directs itself toward that process of discovery.

This study argues that qualities of amateurism and professionalism can be present in both amateur and professional groups. It accepts the self-identification of groups as either amateur or professional, while maintaining an awareness of the vagueness of the terms with which they define those identities. Furthermore, it investigates how the discrete qualities of amateurism and professionalism have informed the actions and trajectories of those groups, and calls for a reassessment of how we view those qualities. Writing in *Theatre Research International,* Claire Cochrane points out that "throughout the twentieth century advanced capitalism brought with it a rapidly escalating emphasis on professionalism both in the economic sense and in the sense of enhancement of specialist skills" (234). She argues that, "'Professional' now carries with it connotations of ultra-competence", and that "The amateur is non-professional and by implication incompetent" (234). A consequence of that privileging of professionalism across an ever-increasing range of fields of endeavour has been an elision of the way in which amateurism has continued to be valued as a quality of behaviour and action in the arts. Thus, there are prominent examples in Irish theatre – some of which will be cited in the chapters which follow – of amateur societies that have achieved outstanding success by way of their professionalism, and professional companies that have built their identities as internationally renowned theatre groups upon a carefully tailored amateurism.

If the idea that amateurism might be an enabling quality for professional theatre companies appears questionable at first, then it is worth considering the historically contingent and changeable nature of our understanding of the amateur. In an essay titled "The Amateur Spirit" published in 1904, the literary critic and Harvard University lecturer Bliss Perry outlined what he saw as the contrasting characteristics and qualities of amateurism and professionalism. Perry begins the essay with a description of how they are actualised in sports such as golf and rowing, before expanding the scope of his analysis to consider their role in modern society. For Perry, professionalism had been manifested in the "true, patient, scientific spirit, whose service to the modern man was perhaps the most highly appraised factor when we of the western world tried to take an inventory of ourselves and our indebtedness, at the dawn of the twentieth century" (23). Furthermore, according to Perry, a defining characteristic of professionalisation was its tendency towards specialisation, whereby "To win distinction in academic work is to come under the dominion of exact knowledge, of approved methods. It means that one is disciplined in the mechanical processes and guided by the spirit of modern science…" (32). Foreshadowing the major geopolitical changes and conflicts that would ensue in the decades that followed, and in

further praise of professionalism, Perry argued that "Ours must be, not 'a nation of amateurs,' but a nation of professionals, if it is to hold its own in the coming struggles – struggles not merely for commercial dominance, but for the supremacy of political and moral ideals" (28). He qualified his praise of professionalism, however, by suggesting that its singular focus and efficacy should be counterbalanced by a spirit of amateurism:

> The spirit with which we confront the national tasks of the future should have the sobriety, the firmness, the steady effectiveness, which we associate with the professional. Yet is it not possible, while thus acknowledging and cultivating the professional virtues, to free ourselves from some of the grosser faults of the mere professional? The mere professional's cupidity, for instance, his low aim, his time-serving, his narrowness, his clannish loyalty to his own department only? How often he lacks imagination! How indifferent he may show himself to the religious and moral passion, to the dreams, hopes, futilities, regrets of the breathing, bleeding, struggling men and women by his side? … To counteract all such provinciality and selfishness, such loss of love of honor in the love of gain, one may rightly plead for some breath of the spirit of the amateur, the *amator*, the 'man who loves;' the man who works for the sheer love of working, plays the great complicated absorbing game of life for the sake of the game, and not for his share of the gate money; the man who is ashamed to win if he cannot win fairly – nay, who is chivalric enough to grant breathing-space to a rival, whether he win or lose! (29)

Perry presents a dichotomy between, on the one hand, a professional spirit of achievement (in sport, economics, and science) and, on the other, an amateur spirit of empathy and understanding for "our fellow man". The person possessed of the latter is, according to Perry, the exemplary *amator* or "man who loves": a figure who embodies human values in the face of an encroaching and dehumanizing modernization. While it would be difficult to argue against the need for such an exemplar of humanity in modern life, a revealing feature of Perry's essay is the absence of clear and objective criteria by which such a figure might be identified. Central to Perry's idea of the ostensibly anti-modern amateur is a distinctively pre-modern, chivalric morality that distinguishes him or her from the professional, who merely 'knows' rather than who feels. The suggestion is that while many can be taught to 'know', only some have the ability to 'love' – or, to have a moral appreciation of life that lies beyond quotidian and materialistic concerns. In other words, some people are possessed of qualities

that make them more qualified than others to undertake what Perry terms the "national tasks of the future" (29). This can be seen in his assessment of the history of American political office, which:

> … in spite of many exceptions, on the whole, [has been] the apotheosis of the amateur. It is the readiest justification of the tin peddler theory, – the theory, namely, that you should first get your man, and then let him learn his new trade by practicing it. "By dint of hammering one gets to be a blacksmith," say the French; and if a blacksmith, why not a postmaster, or a postmaster-general, or an ambassador? (16)

Professionalism, in Perry's analysis, is encapsulated by systematic adherence to procedures that have been firmly established on the basis of collective knowledge. Perry acknowledges the efficacy of professionalism, but he argues that it can be most beneficial to society when applied by a person prepossessed of the spirit of the amateur. He advises that when appointing someone to a role, you should first identify the person with that essential spirit – you should "get your man" – before schooling him in the relevant conventions of practice. While on the one hand presenting a case for the person guided as much by human values as by unfeeling procedure, Perry's process of selection relies precariously upon 'qualities' rather than qualifications. The most immediate problem with such a scenario is that people might be accepted or rejected for positions of power on the basis of characteristics that are assumed to be inherent to them. Although, perhaps, unintentional; Perry's definition of the amateur bears the hallmarks of a social hierarchy wherein those with the requisite qualities (or 'quality') can readily identify their 'equals'. As to why Perry would (consciously or otherwise) favour such a system, we might speculate as to the anxiety felt by members of his social class (or of his gender) during an epoch when industrialism and capitalism made opportunities for upward social mobility more widespread. Thus, Perry's essay foregrounds a number of important points in relation to how amateurism and professionalism function as terms of definition. It shows that the figures of the amateur and the professional reside at the interfaces of work, leisure, the individual, and society. For Perry, the *amatore* or amateur embodied freedom at a time when, for the author at least, it appeared as if a person's role in life was increasingly subject to strictures and procedures. As we have seen, what Perry articulated as a societal threat to human values might also have been felt, consciously or subconsciously, by the author as a threat to his social status in the context of a capitalist system that made the boundaries between social classes appear more porous. In short, the question of what

constituted the amateur for Perry was not merely a question about the nature of work and leisure in society, it was a question about the nature of society itself, and of how the individual negotiated their role and status within it.

A Materialist Theoretical Framework

A foundational text for historians interested in amateur theatre is Claire Cochrane's 2001 essay for *Theatre Research International*, titled: "The Pervasiveness of the Commonplace: The Historian and Amateur Theatre". Cochrane issues a strident call for an end to aesthetic value judgements on the part of historians which, in her assessment, have led to the exclusion of popular and non-institutional art forms from the historical record:

> Constrained by limited material resources and what may appear to be a wilful resistance to would-be agents of artistic progress, communities of amateur theatre (viewed from the dominant critical perspective) subsist on stores of reach-me-down texts and performance conventions from what, in this context, must be regarded as élite professional theatre. Faced with a kind of ersatz theatre which has little concern for 'real' theatre, the professional historian exercises her aesthetic judgement and turns away. (234)

Cochrane refers to amateur theatre in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland as areas of potential interest for the historian committed to exploring the contribution of the 'commonplace' to culture. In 2011, Cochrane applied the historiographical approach suggested in the essay to her ground-breaking monograph *Twentieth-Century British Theatre: Industry, Art and Empire*. A feature of the book that distinguished it from previous histories of theatre in Britain was the attention that it paid to regional and amateur theatre. In this way, it provided a blueprint for theoretical approaches to the study of amateur theatre in other contexts. Cochrane states that in histories of British theatre, in general:

> … regional or 'provincial' theatre has been subordinate to the metropolitan grand narrative and is thus effectively 'other'. The historical flaw in this approach is that despite the huge population of London, the majority of the British people do not live there, although inevitably every aspect of their lives, including the theatre they are able to access, is affected by the power that emanates from the centre (2).

In order to provide a revised focus on regional theatre that accounts for the significant influence of London, Cochrane deploys the geographical concepts of the 'core' and the 'periphery'. The core/periphery framework enables an exploration of the ways in which resources are controlled by the centre or 'core' of legislative and economic power, thus impacting upon "… the material conditions within which theatre, as with any other industry, is positioned in a specific regional context" (Cochrane, *Twentieth-Century* 14). Drawing on Henri Lefebvre's *The Production of Space* (1991), she shows that in addition to the readily traceable effects of economic and political decisions, centres of power produce other, less tangible resources that wield a profound influence on the periphery :

> Knowledge, influence, access to important and/or exclusive networks have tended to be located in the dominant centres of power and wealth, or their intellectual outposts, and thus create Lefebvre's 'dominant form of space', which extends across national spaces, infiltrates the periphery and is capable of suppressing and limiting independent creativity. (14)

Prior to the rise in popularity of amateur theatre in Ireland in the early decades of the twentieth century, amateur theatre societies could primarily be found in what Cochrane refers to as the 'intellectual outposts' of metropolitan centres of power. As Wills writes, "Amateur dramatics had a long and respectable history in the major cities – Dublin, Belfast and Cork – and some purchase in regional centres such as Galway and Limerick" (102). As the century progressed, however, a series of social and economic changes lent an increasingly regional character to amateur theatre. When commissioned to write a survey of amateur theatre in Ireland for the *Bell* magazine in the 1940s, Michael Farrell termed it the 'Country Theatre', and when the All-Ireland Festival was established in 1953, the location chosen for the event was Athlone: a large town located in the geographical centre and regional heartland of Ireland. Thus, the core/periphery framework that Cochrane adopts is equally applicable to the study of amateur theatre in Ireland in the period under discussion. As the chapters which follow show, a core/periphery dynamic between the metropolitan centres of Dublin, Belfast, and London and regional Ireland permeated the amateur movement. The effects of that dynamic are tracked through the flow of plays and performance conventions, the influence of key individuals, and through the relationship between those involved in amateur theatre and those working in professional theatre.

Cochrane's decision to describe British theatre in terms of a metropolitan core on the one hand, and a regional periphery on the other, is based primarily on the emphasis that she places on economic factors in her theoretical approach. Her contention in *Twentieth-Century British Theatre* is that social and economic factors "impose structures which might override other conceptual frameworks for historical analysis" (2). Thus, her analysis is "grounded in the material conditions which are the product of the economic and legislative framework of the nation state", and she asserts that "economic interests whether exploited, contested, disregarded or even willingly sacrificed have been key to the fluctuating fortunes of all models of theatre practice" (4). This study places a similar emphasis on economic and material factors in its analysis of the broader developments that led to the formation of the amateur theatre movement. The starting point for the dissertation – the establishment of the Ulster and All-Ireland festivals in 1953 – was chosen because it represents a confluence of material and cultural factors that drove the formation and subsequent growth of the amateur theatre movement. The festivals were the culmination of earlier material and social developments such as the effects of the Second World War, progressive improvements to the travel infrastructure, and a burgeoning regional middle class. At the same time, however, they were a precursor to the seminal economic, social and cultural developments of the 1960s. The economic 'opening out' of the Republic of Ireland to foreign trade (on a state level) and material goods (on an individual level) during that decade was accompanied by a concurrent receptiveness to new ideas on a community level. The effects of those ideas were evident in the identities that amateur societies attempted to forge through amateur theatre. Communities of amateur theatre makers around Ireland experimented with 'modern' identities in ways that reflected a broader attempt to negotiate the strictures and opportunities for social advancement presented by a period of significant economic and social change. In the same way that for Bliss Perry the terms amateurism and professionalism acted as conduits for his anxieties about modernization, they became similarly valent terms in the period under discussion here. As amateur societies moved between contrasting identities, their actions were labelled as amateur or professional in a way that reflected resistance to the wider range of opportunities for social mobility presented by the expanding economy. By tracing the evolution of those terms alongside the development of the amateur theatre movement, this study arrives at a better understanding of how they proved to be empowering or disabling according to the context in which they were deployed. The end point of this study, 1980, marks the foundation of Field Day Theatre Company and the landmark premiere of its first

play, Brian Friel's *Translations*, in Derry. Amateur theatre continued to enable communities to negotiate, resist, and drive social change in the manner that emerged and developed over the course of the preceding decades. However, as argued in chapters three and four, the emergence of regional professional theatre companies such as Druid Theatre Company and Field Day in the 1970s and 1980s marked a significant change in the nature and function of amateurism and professionalism in theatre. The success of those companies demonstrated the extent to which amateurism – associated as it was with a place-bound authenticity – was considered to be a desirable characteristic of theatre groups and individuals.

The theoretical approach undertaken herein adopts the core/periphery framework that Cochrane uses, and places a similar emphasis on material factors in its analysis of the formation and growth of the amateur theatre movement. It is my contention that an understanding of the evolution of the amateur theatre movement cannot be gained without a consideration of the parallel changes to the economies and social structures of the Republic and Northern Ireland in the late 1950s and 1960s: a transformation that was directed by institutions based in centres of power such as Dublin and Belfast. My intention is not to suggest that the evolution of the amateur theatre movement depended solely upon centrally-directed economic developments. This study adopts Cochrane's materialist emphasis, but it also incorporates elements of an idealist approach in a manner suggested by Raymond Williams in *The Sociology of Culture* (1981). Williams advocates for a modified materialist approach to cultural analysis which holds that 'cultural practice' and 'cultural production' "…are not simply derived from an otherwise constituted social order but are themselves major elements in its constitution" (13). A central component of this approach is that instead of viewing culture as "the 'informing spirit' which was held [in the idealist model] to constitute all other activities", it sees it as "the *signifying system* through which necessarily (though among other means) a social order is communicated, reproduced, experienced and explored [emphasis in original] (13). What Williams's modification of a more strictly materialist approach enables is an analysis of the amateur theatre movement that not only shows its growth as a result of material developments, but shows the ways in which the movement itself contributed to those developments. From this perspective, the economic 'opening out' of the Republic of Ireland via policy-making in the 1950s can be seen as leading to the formation of the All-Ireland Drama Festival and to the subsequent consolidation of the amateur theatre movement into a network of festivals. At the same time, however, amateur theatre can be seen as preparing communities ideologically to institute

those changes. The ideological aspect to the analysis which follows leads necessarily to a discussion of both explicit and implicit attitudes towards events. Hence, in support of an overarching materialist approach, and where appropriate, this study draws upon theories conducive to the analysis of attitudes as opposed to just actions. The chapter which follows draws upon Lionel Trilling's *Sincerity and Authenticity* (1971) in order to arrive at a better understanding of how, as can be seen in the case of Bliss Perry, amateurism was in some cases viewed as a truer or more authentic quality than professionalism. In addition, chapters two and three use Baz Kershaw's definition of "protective acts" in order to establish the role that more locally-oriented amateur societies played in enabling communities to resist the hegemonic influence of the prevailing culture. Central to that analysis is a certain degree of speculation as to the attitudes that people held towards the groups and performances under discussion.

Tracing the economic and material structure underpinning the growth of the amateur theatre movement is a relatively straightforward proposition when it comes to researching well-documented economic developments that occurred on a state level, but it is more complicated in the case of amateur drama societies, few of which kept records of any kind. This study addresses that problem by focusing on the plays performed by amateur societies, around which a separate economy of cultural value developed. Often the only information about amateur drama societies presented in articles, advertisements, programmes, and other sources is simply the name of the group and the play that it is performing. The validity of play-choice as a focus of analysis is not only suggested by its accessibility; it is a point of interest and concern that emerges from the amateur movement itself as early as the 1940s. At a time when traditional modes of living were increasingly subject to change, so too was the repertoire of plays performed by amateur societies. The economic 'opening out' of Ireland was accompanied by a steady increase in the number of foreign and experimental plays at amateur theatre festivals. Under pressure from an influx of foreign work, the relative qualities of the Irish playwriting tradition were subject to intense scrutiny and revaluation and, as a result, critics, commentators and adjudicators advanced strident cases for the relative merits of tradition or experimentation in play choice. A central proposition of this study is that the newly contested repertoire that resulted can be seen as a manifestation of the parallel contestation of modes of living in a modernizing nation. Plays were valued according to the extent to which they endowed drama groups and audiences with traditional or modern identities. Underlying the contestation of the repertoire, there was a struggle to claim the

agency to be 'modern' in a changing society – a struggle that was also reflected in assessments of what constituted amateur and professional behaviours. Thus, the methodological focus on plays adopted here is materialist in the mode suggested by Cochrane in so far as it tracks the circulation of ideas via the influx of playscripts and performances. However, it combines idealist and materialist modes in the manner suggested by Williams by presenting the amateur theatre movement as a cultural practice that enabled communities to 'produce' new modes of thinking, living, and seeing the world through performance.

Chapters and Case Studies

This dissertation maps the introduction of international or 'outside' ideas into Ireland via the flow of foreign and experimental plays through the amateur theatre movement. This is a useful way of tracking broad changes to the amateur movement and Irish society, but it is less effective at describing the effects of those changes at a grassroots level. With that in mind, chapter one adopts a broader overview of the emergence and evolution of the amateur theatre movement, and chapters two to four focus on individual case studies. Chapter one presents an analysis of a process of 'festivilization' that was instigated by the establishment of the All-Ireland and Ulster drama festivals. It focuses on the ways in which the contested repertoire in the first two decades of those festivals reflected the negotiations that were taking place in communities between traditional and modern modes of living. This chapter adopts a macro perspective of the movement, but nevertheless narrows its focus at certain points to consider individual groups such as Tuam Theatre Guild and the Bart Players. Tuam Theatre Guild is most often cited in relation to Tom Murphy who, as referenced above, was a member of the society. More important than Murphy's connection to the group, however, is the fact that in the 1950s the Theatre Guild was considered to be, in Morash's words, "…one of the most adventurous amateur companies in the country…" ("Murphy, History and Society" 28). Furthermore, the group's propensity for adventure arose from a departure from a more traditional repertoire. As Morash writes: "In the 1940s they were staging Shaw, but by 1958 they had progressed to plays like *The Burnt Flowerbed* by the Italian playwright Ugo Betti (once memorably described as 'the Kafka of drama'), and they were on their way to victories in the All-Ireland Festival with Jean Anouilh's *Antigone* (1964) and Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* (1965)" ("Murphy, History and Society" 29). Thus, Tuam Theatre Guild is an example of the ways in which foreign plays enabled regional communities to experiment with ways of being both modern and 'professional'. The Bartholomew or 'Bart' Players was

founded in Belfast in 1953, and has since established itself as one of the most respected amateur theatre societies in Ireland. It has won the premier award at the Ulster Drama Festival on three occasions, appeared several times at the Dundalk International Festival, and twice at the All-Ireland Drama Festival. From 1967 to 1977 it published a series of seasonal pamphlets titled *Stage Whispers* that included articles on the group's history. Of particular interest for the purposes of this study are the detailed accounts of the decision-making process that determined the plays that the society produced. Like Tuam Theatre Guild, the Bart Players broke with tradition as part of a professionalism that it cultivated but, as revealed in the first chapter, in a quite different manner from its southern counterpart. While chapter one evidences the increasing growth of a centrally-directed order in the amateur theatre movement, then chapters two to four present examples of how that order was, or might have been, resisted. Chapter two outlines what it terms the 'protective acts' performed by St. Patrick's Drama Society in Newtownards and chapter three builds upon that analysis through a focus on the '71 Players in Derry. Those acts of protection were performance events that aimed to consolidate the values and resources of the community and that prioritised local values over those imposed as part of wider societal and cultural trends. While still anchored by a focus on the meanings and identities produced by play choice, those chapters adjust the focus of the analysis in order to take the significance of performances (as opposed to just plays) into account. In the case of St. Patrick's, this includes an account of variety performances that were partially scripted or improvised, and in both cases it incorporates a discussion of the broader context for performances, including the preparatory and gathering phases, and interventions on the part of audience members. The account of St. Patrick's relies heavily upon a local and personal history of the group written by a Mr. McGuigan. If considerable weight is placed upon this single source, then some justification for doing so can be found in the stark absence of written records pertaining to societies like St. Patrick's: that is, amateur groups that rarely or never appeared at drama festivals and that consciously or unconsciously rejected the hegemonic conventions of performance that were disseminated through drama festivals. Although not by any means the most successful or renowned group in the history of the amateur theatre movement, the '71 Players merits inclusion in this study by dint of the extraordinary social and political circumstances from which it emerged in Derry in the 1970s. The group was established by a parish priest, Edward Daly D.D., in order to address the social fallout resulting from the Troubles in the city, and it is an informative example of the various ways that amateur theatre could be used to protect and consolidate a community under threat. What emerges from the analysis presented in

chapter three is that the values that the '71 Players chose to protect were not always those of the wider political or theatrical spheres, but those of their immediate community. The final chapter of this study stays with the subject of resistance through an analysis of the premiere production of John B. Keane's *Sive* by the Listowel Players. This chapter presents a retelling of the much-repeated story of *Sive,* wherein it is no longer viewed as the embryonic work of a nascent professional, but as a hybridised blend of the contrasting qualities and functions of amateurism and professionalism outlined in the previous chapters. It argues that the innovation evident in *Sive* was a striking precursor to the hybridised amateur/professional identities that were central to the rise of regional professional theatre companies such as Druid and Field Day.

Research Methods

The methodological starting point for this study was to compose as complete a picture of amateur theatre practice in Ireland as possible from the existing historiographical and critical literature. As outlined above, the result was a fragmented and incomplete, but nevertheless inspiring, picture of a cultural movement of some significance. The next step was to draw on a range of sources in order to gain a more detailed picture of the amateur theatre movement in the time period under consideration. I constructed a list of the plays performed in the first two decades of the All-Ireland using festival programmes found in the papers of Brendan O'Brien.[4] For the plays performed at the Ulster Drama Festival, I consulted festival programmes held in the Linen Hall Theatre and Performing Arts Archive in Belfast. The O'Brien papers include correspondences between O'Brien and numerous prominent theatre professionals that evidence the close ties between the amateur and professional spheres. Furthermore, the Linen Hall Archive led to the discovery of material that was crucial to two of the case studies included in this dissertation: the unpublished local history of St. Patrick's, Newtownards and *Stage Whispers*; the seasonal series of hand-printed pamphlets produced by the Bart Players.

Local histories have been of immeasurable value to this study. Three of the amateur societies profiled in the following chapters – Tuam Theatre Guild, the Listowel Players, and

[4] Brendan O'Brien was the director of the All-Ireland Drama Festival from 1953 until his death in 1992. His papers and correspondences are in the possession of his son Gearoid, who is an historian and Senior Executive Librarian at Athlone Library.

the ’71 Players – were first brought to my attention by Gus Smith’s *Festival Glory in Athlone* (1977). Along with Gearoid O’Brien’s *All-Ireland Drama Festival Athlone 1953-2002: 50 Glorious Years of Drama* (2002), Smith’s text is an essential source for the researcher of amateur theatre in Ireland. Other local histories of regional drama festivals and societies exist – for example, the histories of the Western Drama Festival, titled ‘*The Actors are Come Hither’* (1993), and the Ballymoney Drama Festival, titled *The Golden Years* (1989) by S. Alexander Blair – but invariably such publications had limited print runs and they are often quite difficult to locate.

While the sources listed above provided information on the material culture of amateur theatre – the plays and publications that were produced by groups – an equally important objective was to find evidence of the meanings that emerged from those processes of production. With that in mind, I consulted a range of sources offering opinions and analyses of the plays that societies performed, and of the performances themselves. Newspaper and magazine articles were of particular use in this regard. The *Irish Times* sent a reporter to the All-Ireland on an annual basis throughout the 1950s and 1960s, and the *Irish Press* and *Irish Independent* also published intermittent reviews and reports of both regional and national amateur theatre festivals. Farrell’s series of articles for the *Bell* in the 1940s offer an account of the motivations and activities of amateur theatre societies during the embryonic period of the amateur theatre movement. Similarly, John Healy’s *No-one Shouted Stop!* – first published as a series of articles in the *Irish Times* – outlines the grassroot effects of the economic developments that occurred in the Republic in the 1940s and 1950s. Lying somewhere between a local history and a magazine, the one-off publication *Curtain Call: A Complete Review of the Amateur Stage in Ireland* produced by the ADCI in 1954 offers a fascinating insight into the perspectives of prominent professional practitioners who were involved in the amateur theatre movement at that time as adjudicators and mentors, and who played a central role in its development.

A defining characteristic of amateur societies in the period under discussion is that, generally speaking, they did not keep archival records and this adds to the value of personal accounts such as those written by McGuigan. It also foregrounds the value of personal interviews for the purposes of research which seeks to retrieve for the historical record forms of artistic or cultural practice that have not been documented in a consistent or sustained manner. I have sought, where possible, to interview informants with knowledge or direct

experience of the events covered in the four chapters which follow. However, a deep well of untapped knowledge and experience resides in the memories of successive generations of amateur theatre practitioners and audience members. The task of comprehensively collecting and archiving the insights of those practitioners was beyond the resources of the present study, but would be a worthy focus for future research. I employed a dual strategy in order to locate informants for this study. The first aspect of that strategy was to search sources such as Smith's *Festival Glory in Athlone* for the names of members of the societies under discussion. I discovered, for example, that Bishop Edward Daly was the founder of the '71 Players, and that Patricia King was a prominent member of Tuam Theatre Guild. I then searched the internet for their contact details and found them on webpages listing the Diocesan role of Daly in Derry and King's membership of the theatre group. The second aspect of the strategy was to work from the present to the past by contacting contemporary members of administrative bodies and festival committees. I consulted lists of regional and national festival directors published online by the AUDF and the ADCI as well as the lists of directors of those organisations and of the Drama League of Ireland (DLI). I sent emails to the people on those lists, introducing the research topic and requesting interviews or further information. This second aspect of the strategy led me to discover people whose experiences were not always directly related to the case studies under discussion, but whose insights had a profound influence upon my reading of the impact of the events under discussion. In addition to the informants that I found as a result of the dual strategy outlined above, in some cases I happened upon interviewees and contacts as a result of circumstance. Several people were recommended to me in the course of conversations while attending the Amateur Drama Festival in Athlone from 2014 to 2017, and the Drama League of Ireland One-Act Festival in Galway in 2015. I carried out interviews with those who responded to my request for information via written questionnaire, telephone conversation, or face-to-face interview where appropriate. The transcripts of the interviews cited in the dissertation are included as part of the appendices. The people interviewed for this study are just a small sample of a cohort of people – my own parents and grandparents among them – that have made a unique and largely undocumented impact on Irish theatre and culture. The considerable task of accounting in some way for the import of their actions has been a central driving force for the chapters which follow.

The Field of Research into Amateur Theatre

This study enters into a burgeoning international field of research on amateur theatre and performance. In their introduction to an issue of *Contemporary Theatre Review* dedicated to amateur theatre and performance, Nadine Holdsworth, Jane Milling, and Helen Nicholson write that "If, as Shannon Jackson observed, the late twentieth century was marked by a social turn in contemporary performance, the amateur turn is its twenty-first-century counterpart" (6). As referenced above, Claire Cochrane has been a forerunner of this contemporary turn, and her British academic counterparts Nicholas Ridout and Michael Dobson have followed her lead. The 'passionate amateurs' that are the focus of Ridout's 2013 monograph *Passionate Amateurs: Theatre, Communism, and Love* embody a resistance to industrial capitalism "on behalf of values, practices, and experiences, often those of a premodern, preindustrial, rural life…" (6). Ridout excludes from his analysis the kind of amateur theatre-makers profiled in this study on the basis that they lack the 'communist potential' which he frames as a key characteristic of the passionate amateur (11). For Ridout, the amateurs studied herein take for granted "the complimentary relationship between work and leisure" and adhere to the "conditioned amateurism of the recreational hobby" (11). Although specifically concerned with what he sees as the communist potential of amateurs, Ridout's text nevertheless encourages an appreciation of the unique qualities of amateur practice, not least when he outlines the 'passion' of amateurs who "work together for the production of value for one another (for love, that is, rather than money)" (15). In *Shakespeare and Amateur Performance* (2011), Michael Dobson argues that the Shakespearean canon "has been not just read but lived out over the last four hundred years" by amateur players (11). The idea that amateurs have contributed to a 'living' canon of Shakespearean plays resonates with the role that the amateur theatre movement in Ireland has played in maintaining a native canon. Finally, an Arts and Humanities Research Council of Britain (AHRC) project titled *Amateur Dramatics: Crafting Communities in Time and Space* (2013-2017) has contributed to a recent spate of publications on amateur performance, including the aforementioned special issue of *Contemporary Theatre Review,* and a monograph by Holdsworth, Milling and Nicholson titled *The Ecologies of Amateur Theatre* (2018). The project, which involved a total of six researchers from three different universities, has helped to establish the terms by which amateur theatre might be understood,

and it has significantly enriched the field of research into amateur performance.[5] As the preceding outline demonstrates, it is a burgeoning field into which the present study makes a timely and, I hope, a worthy entry.

[5] The researchers involved in the project were: Professor Helen Nicholson, Royal Holloway, University of London (Principal investigator). Professor Nadine Holdsworth, University of Warwick (Co-Investigator). Dr Jane Milling, University of Exeter (Co-Investigator). Dr Erin Walcon, University of Exeter (Post-doctoral researcher). Cara Gray, Royal Holloway, and Sarah Penny, Warwick (PhD Students).

Chapter One

Festivilization: The All-Ireland and Ulster Drama Festivals

- Introduction -

This dissertation presents an analysis of the role played by the amateur theatre movement in Irish society while adding to our understanding of the contribution that it has made to the development of Irish theatre and culture. There are, perhaps, few better starting points for the pursuit of those aims than the All-Ireland Amateur Drama Festival and the Ulster Drama Festival. For amateurs with the desire, resources, knowledge and the commitment to practice theatre on a competitive basis in Ireland, victory at those finals represents a pinnacle of achievement. There is, of course, the immediate burst of glory that success brings, but an All-Ireland or Ulster win is also invariably the long-awaited outcome of countless hours of thankless toil: of many minor victories and major setbacks. If the aim of this dissertation was to merely outline the contribution of the amateur theatre movement to Irish theatre, then this chapter could look no further than the wealth of noteworthy productions that comprises the history of the festivals since their inaugural year. Some of that work has been carried out histories such as Gus Smith's *Festival Glory in Athlone,* Gearoid O'Brien's *All-Ireland Festival Athlone 1953-2002,* and to a lesser extent by anniversary programmes for the Ulster finals ("47th Ulster Drama Festival"). However, while drawing attention to some noteworthy productions, this study analyses the role that the amateur theatre movement has played in Irish society as well in the field of theatre. Amateur theatre festivals, both regional and national, have a presence in the seasonal life of communities that transcends the specific spheres of culture and entertainment. In the same way that those with no interest in sport in Ireland are vaguely aware of the significance of the Gaelic Athletic Association (G.A.A) and rugby finals that take place on a an annual basis, there are many people with no interest in drama who nevertheless have some sense of the perennial presence of the All-Ireland and Ulster finals. Like the routine natural events that mark the changing of the seasons, for many those festivals sit comfortably in the background: their significance only noted in the fleeting manner than one might take note of falling leaves or shorter evenings. This is what Claire Cochrane, in reference to amateur theatre in Britain, has termed the "pervasiveness of the

commonplace", which she claims "has troubled historians in other disciplines" for the reason that "what for one era is unremarkable and unremarked is for another, later age, part of the texture of a vanished past" ("The Pervasiveness" 237). Though unremarkable to some, and unremarked upon by many, amateur drama festivals have formed a significant part of the fabric of social and cultural life in Ireland since the middle decades of the twentieth century. Much more than the professional practice which has been the focus of the vast majority of Irish theatre historiography, amateur theatre in Ireland has been a significant feature of the seasonal flow of life in communities.

In order to gain an adequate view of the broader societal impact of the amateur theatre movement, this chapter adopts an overview of the ideologies and outlooks that contributed to the evolution of the All-Ireland rather than a more detailed, chronological view of individual groups and events that comprise the respective histories of the festival finals. That being said, in certain parts it does use groups such as Tuam Theatre Guild and the Bart Players as illustrative examples of broader trends. The aim is to arrive at a picture of amateur festivals which incorporates, on the one hand, their tremendous significance for devotees of the amateur theatre movement and, on the other, the broader role that they have played in Irish society. Another important point to note is that this chapter uses the All-Ireland and Ulster festivals as representative sample of festival competition as a whole in the period under discussion. What this allows is a concise account of the 'festivilization' of amateur theatre that would not be possible if every regional festival was included as part of the analysis.

In keeping with Claire Cochrane's assertion, quoted in the introductory chapter, that "economic interests whether exploited, contested, disregarded or even willingly sacrificed have been key to the fluctuating fortunes of all models of theatre practice" (4), a central proposition of this dissertation is that material considerations are key to gaining a better understanding of the evolution of the amateur theatre movement in Ireland. The late 1950s and 1960s was a period of significant economic change, and this chapter argues that the consolidation of amateur theatre into an island-wide movement in 1953 should be understood in relation to the material changes of that period. This chapter is divided into three sections. Section one outlines the concurrent and interlinked evolution of the amateur theatre movement and the economies of the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland from the 1950s to the 1970s. It traces the foundations of the All-Ireland and Ulster Drama Festival to the An Tóstal and Festival of Britain campaigns. A key point that emerges is the leadership role

taken by a burgeoning regional middle class in both the amateur theatre movement and in Irish society, north and south. It argues that, in the same way that the An Tóstal and Festival of Britain campaigns looked beyond native shores in a bid to improve the domestic economy, primarily middle-class community leaders looked outwards towards national and international metropolitan centres for ideas about what constituted a modern way of living.

The ideology that emerged as a result of the shift in outlook described in section one is the focus of the opening part of section two. It was an ideology that valued individual freedom and competitiveness over more traditional, communal values. Furthermore, it was central to the middle class culture which would come to dominate Irish life in the latter decades of the twentieth century. The dissemination of that ideology through the amateur theatre movement is tracked in this chapter through the influx of foreign, experimental plays: a methodology suggested by the widespread concern with the topic of play choice on the part of adjudicators, commentators, and critics. Section two focuses on the plays performed at the All-Ireland and Ulster festivals over their first two decades: from 1953 to 1973. This timeframe allows us to track the overall trends in play choice alongside the economic changes that occurred in both the Republic and Northern Ireland over the same period. From the 1970s onward, the plays performed at the All-Ireland invariably followed the pattern established in the latter part of the timeframe under consideration. As will be discussed in detail in later chapters, in the 1970s the qualities of amateurism and professionalism which fomented and evolved in the amateur theatre movement were manifested in new and significant ways through a wave of regional professional companies led by Druid Theatre Company in Galway and Field Day Theatre Company in Derry. In the amateur theatre movement, the plays that drama societies chose to perform were seen to have a significance which extended beyond what was presented on stage. Plays imbued drama groups and audiences with particular identities, so that the performance of a foreign, experimental play was not merely an attempt to present new ideas on stage; it was an attempt on the part of a drama group to present an image of itself as innovative, informed, and modern. The idealist analysis presented in section two builds upon the more materialist approach of section one. It thus presents a blend of both theoretical approaches in a manner suggested by Williams in *The Sociology of Culture* (13). Section one shows the role that centrally directed, top-down economic policies played in leading to the formation of the All-Ireland, thus supporting Cochrane's perspectives: firstly, on the central importance of economic interests in the fluctuating fortunes of (in this case, amateur) theatre practice and, secondly, on the

core/periphery framework underpinning the control of material and cultural resources (in this case, in Ireland). However, section two suggests that the outward-looking ideological perspective which was an essential precursor to those policies was produced in the cultural realm and on a community level.

While section two outlines the transformative effect that plays could have upon the identities of drama groups, section three shows the ways in which that transformative power was restricted and controlled. From the pressure of those restrictions, an important concept emerges: that is, the mutually-defining and co-existing qualities of amateurism and professionalism. It was not the case that amateur drama groups aspiring towards new and creative ways of being 'modern' could simply choose to perform a foreign, avant-garde work. Firstly, there were material restrictions on the access that drama groups had to such plays, so that invariably they were only accessible to the privileged members of university drama societies, or to those with the resources to attend theatre or access booksellers in other countries. Thus, at a time when Irish society was opening out to new ways of being modern, it appears that the full range of opportunities emerging from this process was only available to a privileged élite. Furthermore, innovation in the amateur theatre movement was subject to material conditions. Nevertheless, in the absence of material resources, both drama groups and audience members could 'perform' their modernity or membership of the élite – either through successful performances of foreign, experimental plays in the case of drama groups or through an appropriate response to those plays in the case of members of the audience. This led to the introduction of a moralistic tone around the subject of play choice in the amateur theatre movement – if access to new and empowering identities could not be restricted through material means alone, then an alternative set of restrictions would need to be applied. The question of whether drama groups (in theatre) or individuals (in society) were modern or not relied increasingly upon the degree to which their performances of identity were judged to be authentic. Those who were perceived to be lacking the necessary material or intellectual resources to embody modern values were viewed as custodians of a traditional and essential Irish identity. Their role, whether assigned or adopted voluntarily, was to preserve a true or authentic spirit of amateurism in a cultural movement and a society that was bowing increasingly to the ideals of an individualistic and materialistic professionalism. Operating somewhere between those positions was the archetypal modern agent or actor: the individual or group with the agency to move freely between traditional and modern modes of being in a way that was convincing to those in power. The mastery of the mutually-defining

qualities of amateurism and professionalism reflected in that ideal subject position would become a guiding principle, not only for amateur drama societies but for an increasing number of professional theatre companies in Ireland in the latter decades of the twentieth century.

- Section One –

Economic and Social Change

Terence Brown points out that the late 1950s and early 1960s were a major turning point in the economic fortunes of the Republic of Ireland, and that "In the collective memory 1958-63 is seen as the period when a new Ireland began to come to life" (230). In the years since the founding of the Irish Free State in 1922, successive government administrations had adopted protectionist economic policies with the aim of asserting the independence of the fledgling state. Those policies depended as much upon the subscription of the people to a nationalist ideology as they did upon their capacity to generate material wealth. As Peter Shirlow writes:

> …Fianna Fáil promoted an allegory of devoted national interests, centred on an espousal of land redistribution, indigenous industrialisation and extended welfare provision. The self-identified party of the 'plain people of Ireland' articulated a programme of economic recovery that was tied to an unleashing of nationalist sentiment and state intervention, the objective being to serve the cross-class interests of industrial workers, small farmers and an embryonic bourgeoisie" (91)

According to Shirlow, Fianna Fáil's policies "were explicitly linked to a pretension that a merger of national identity and economic isolationism would serve both cross-class and sovereign interests" (91). However, by the 1950s it was clear that those policies had failed. Roy Foster writes that, "the extent of Ireland's economic dependence on British markets made nonsense of Irish 'sovereignty'", as did the scale of emigration: "in the decade from 1951 to 1961 more than 400,000 left – many to Britain – bringing the population down to 2,800,000 by 1961" (578). In Shirlow's analysis, the supposedly paternalized Free State economy did not anticipate the effects of the emergence of consolidated land holdings, the capitalisation of agriculture, and the propensity of the bourgeoisie to invest surplus capital in foreign banks (92). The result was a socio-economic regime that failed to satisfy "the

material demands of a significant section of an electorate increasingly influenced by the prosperity evident in the USA and – though to a lesser extent – Britain…" (Shirlow 92). By 1958, industrial wages were fifty-percent lower than in Denmark and Britain, and eighty-percent lower than in the USA (Shirlow 92). Evidently, the Irish government had overestimated the extent to which people were prepared to sacrifice personal gain in the interests of the fledgling state. Compounding the problem was the fact that even a cursory glance beyond Ireland's shores to Britain and the USA revealed glaring disparities in material wealth. In the late 1950s, a reversal in Ireland's economic fortunes was instigated by a Fianna Fáil government led by Taoiseach Sean Lemass. Lemass implemented a plan for economic revival, devised by the economist T.K. Whitaker, that involved measures such as increased investment in productive industry, the granting of greater agency to the Central Bank to guide investment by commercial banks and, perhaps most importantly, the encouragement of foreign investment with a menu of attractive incentives. The *First Programme for Economic Expansion* was implemented from 1958 to 1963, during which time the economic growth rate achieved four percent: a rate that continued during the years of the *Second Programme* from 1963 to 1970 (Foster 580). Between 1960 and 1969, 350 new foreign companies were established in Ireland and, as Foster writes, "By 1971 the population had grown by 100,000; the national growth rate was the highest in western Europe, and the emigration trend had apparently reversed" (580). Perhaps the most impactful change to the economy that resulted from this period was the reorganisation of the occupational structure. As Ruane and Todd write:

> In 1960 over a third of the population of the Republic was still employed directly in agriculture (37%) and less than a quarter (24%) in industry, while the ratio of trade to GNP was 64.5%. By 2011 the percentage employed directly in agriculture was 5%, in industry 20.9%, and in services 74.1%, while the ratio of trade to GDP was 186.5% in 2010. (186)

A related development was the expansion and growth of the middle class. The definition of middle class adopted herein utilises occupation as a means of distinction, and it is derived from the Goldthorpe schema used by Breen and Whelan in *Social Mobility and Social Class in Ireland* (1996). This schema holds employment relations in the labour market to be of central importance to the allocation of individuals into social class categories. Members of a particular social class are considered to share similar "market situation" (e.g. levels of

income, economic security and chances of economic advancement) and "work situation" (e.g. authority and control) (Goldthorpe et al 40). Breen and Whelan identify seven categories of social classification:

> I + II Service class; professionals, administrators and managers; higher-grade technicians; supervisors of non-manual workers.
>
> III Routine non-manual workers; routine non-manual employees in administration and commerce; sales personnel; other rank-and-file service workers.
>
> IV (a) Small proprietors, artisans, etc. with employees. (b) Small proprietors, artisans, etc. without employees. (c) Farmers: farmers and small-holders and other self-employed workers in primary production.
>
> V: Lower-grade technicians, supervisors of manual workers.
>
> VI: Skilled manual workers.
>
> VII: (a) Non-skilled workers; semi and unskilled manual workers (not in agriculture, etc.). (b) Agricultural labourers: agricultural and other workers in primary production. (21)

For ease of reference, Breen and Whelan aggregate the seven class categories above into three groupings: Professional and Managerial Class: Classes I + II, The Intermediate Class: Classes III + IV +V, and The Working-Class: Classes VI + VII (22). Ruane and Todd point out that: "The transformation in the economy and educational system from the 1960s saw a corresponding transformation of the class structure. Internal growth and recruitment from the classes above and below has made the middle class the single largest class, more layered than in the past, spread across all sectors of the economy, and culturally hegemonic" (187). The ascendancy of the middle class to a culturally hegemonic position is of particular relevance to the concurrent growth and development of the amateur theatre movement in Ireland overs the same period of time. The transformation of the Republic in the 1960s not only relied upon economic policies; it involved a significant shift in outlook or ideology. The active encouragement of foreign direct investment (FDI) in the late 1950s represented a sharp turn

away from the paternalistic economic nationalism that had dominated the ideology of the state since its foundation. As Shirlow points out, in a strikingly short space of time "consumption and administration was becoming a dominant mode of social relations" (93). Brown writes that consumption patterns changed profoundly, and that "motor-cars, houses, and foreign holidays became major preoccupations if not passions" (248). Furthermore, those consumption patterns and their attendant attitudes were not just restricted to urban areas and, as Brown observes, "the attitudes of urban consumerism and the social forms of the nuclear family penetrated the countryside as prosperity increased and television, the motor-car, and secondary-level schooling altered the patterns of daily life" (250). In short, the transformation of the Republic in the late 1950s and early 1960s was more than a question of increased employment and material wealth. It involved a swift and impactful shift in ideology whereby modern values based on individualism and consumerism were readily adopted in favour of more traditional, communal ideals.

Following the partition of Ireland in 1921, successive Unionist administrations in Northern Ireland adopted economic policies that were similar in approach to the paternalistic nationalism of their southern counterparts, with the exception that they were exclusively devoted to the cross-class interests of Protestants. This was not simply a case of discrimination on the basis of religion, but of preventing the formation of multidenominational class alliances that could threaten the viability of the newly formed state. With the onset of de-industrialization in the 1960s and the attendant rise in unemployment across the state however, the paternalistic relationship between the Unionist ruling class and the Protestant working class was undermined. At the same time, an emerging minority of educated Catholics in Northern Ireland were inspired by international social movements to advocate for changes to the discriminatory political and social structures that were in place. The subsequent outbreak of the Northern Ireland Troubles led to the imposition of direct rule by Britain. The strategy of the state under direct rule was to contain the Troubles while facilitating cross-border trade and economic co-operation along with the absorption of middle-class Catholics into a new political consensus (Shirlow 99). In 1998 the Good Friday Agreement (or Belfast Agreement) led the establishment of a devolved government, and by that time significant changes to the class structure in Northern Ireland had been instituted. As Shirlow observed:

> …the middle classes, irrespective of their religious affiliations, increasingly share similar lifestyles and socio-economic pursuits, which are mutually agreeable and less antagonistic. The emergence of a sizeable Catholic middle class is indicative of social mobility, but may also attest to a form of socio-cultural realignment. In turn, middle-class Protestants are now more likely to embrace – or at least tolerate – various all-Ireland institutions. (99)

Owing to a stronger industrial base, Northern Ireland was at a more advanced stage of modernization than the Republic by the early 1960s and, furthermore, its internal politics and connection to Britain led it to forge a different relationship with the outside world. Nevertheless, the state experienced a similar expansion of the middle class that led to both intra-state and cross-border collaboration in the pursuit of material goals. The result was that, by the 1990s, Shirlow would write that "In terms of a collective identity, it is now evident that the middle classes, North and South, increasingly possess a transnationalised identity in which relationships with London, Brussels, Washington and Tokyo predominate over a previously strong association with their respective parts of Ireland" (105). While undoubtedly driven by material interests, it is unlikely that the consensus needed for such a shared vision could be achieved without recourse to the cultural realm. Hence the significance of the cross-border reach and fluidity of the amateur theatre movement, and the importance of its role in disseminating an all-island ideology oriented around middle-class values and aspirations.

Cultural Change

In order to ease the reception of the *First Programme for Economic Expansion* in 1958, the Fianna Fáil government of the Republic had to advance a liberal, materialist agenda in a way that was not perceived as a betrayal of the more traditional and communal values that the state had been founded upon. An early example of that allegorical blending of tradition and modernity was a tourism campaign launched by Bord Fáilte (the Irish tourist authority) in 1953 called An Tóstal. The plan was to schedule a range of events (mostly in Dublin) showcasing Irish culture and to encourage communities around Ireland to hold their own events on a voluntary basis. Although it predated the *First Programme* by five years, An Tóstal was an important precursor to the ideological blending of tradition and modernity that the reception of the *First Programme* hinged upon. As Morash writes:

> …it [An Tóstal] marks the beginning of a new way of thinking about Irish culture. Earlier government-sponsored cultural events had been motivated by the doctrine that Irish culture was, like the Irish language, 'the soil of a people's genius, and a mark and guard of nationality' (as Thomas Davis had put it in the 1840s); by contrast, the 1953 Tóstal festival was part of a dawning recognition that culture could be more than just the spirit of a nation; it could also be its bankroll. (*A History* 210)

The number of amateur theatre societies in Ireland had been growing steadily since the 1930s and through the 1940s. Just over a decade before the Tóstal was launched, Farrell had written in the *Bell* that "at no time has there been so much of it [amateur theatre]; or so much talk of drama and plans for drama" ("The Country Theatre" 388). Astutely aware of this readymade network of skilled volunteers, the Cultural Director of the National Council of An Tóstal, Cecil Ffrench-Salkeld, orchestrated the establishment of the first All-Ireland Drama Festival. As outlined in detail in chapter six of Smith's *Festival Glory in Athlone*, he first convinced the members of the local branch of An Tóstal in Athlone to host the competition, and then managed to secure a guarantee against losses of five hundred pounds from the Arts Council of Ireland.[6] An Amateur Drama Tóstal Council (which would later evolve into the Amateur Drama Council of Ireland, or ADCI) was established, with representatives from the Athlone branch of An Tóstal and the festivals in Cavan, Ballyshannon, Limerick, Clare, Kerry, Tubbercurry, Bray, Dublin (Fr. Mathew Festival) and Dundalk. The council met in Athlone in October 1952 to draw up rules for the All-Ireland, and at that meeting it was decided that drama festivals in Northern Ireland should also be invited to participate. The first All-Ireland, held in April 1953, saw a total of thirty plays performed over ten days. It was divided into five sections: Three Act Open, Three Act Rural, One Act Open, One Act Rural, and Verse.[7] Groups competing at the All-Ireland were nominated by the nine regional festivals that comprised the Amateur Drama Tóstal Council . Although An Tóstal was key to the

[6] See An Chomhairle Ealaíon/Arts Council of Ireland Secretary Dr. William O'Sullivan's letter sent to ffrench-Salkeld, 12 December 1952 (O'Sullivan).

[7] From 1953 to 1978 the Rural category was reserved for societies from communities of up to 1,500 in population. In 1978 it was renamed the 'Confined' section. A year previously the population rule had been abolished, and groups could now opt to compete in the Confined section or in the more advanced 'Open' competition according to their level of experience. Groups that chose to compete in the Open category had to do so for two years. Similarly, an All-Ireland winning group in the Confined section was obligated to compete in the Open section for two years following its success. For more, see Aileen Coughlan's 1979 article for the *Irish Times* titled "Changes Afoot" (8).

establishment of the first All-Ireland, the rapid growth of the drama festival in subsequent years suggests that the tourism campaign was merely a catalyst for the consolidation of amateur theatre into an expansive cultural movement. By 1961, the All-Ireland had grown to three weeks in length to accommodate the fifty-six entrants nominated by fourteen regional festivals, while An Tóstal had become a distant memory.[8] Such was the popularity of the All-Ireland that people began queueing for season tickets at 4.45 a.m. ("Heavy Booking for Festival" 4).

The circumstances leading to the establishment of the All-Ireland mirrored those surrounding the foundation of the Ulster Drama Festival, owing largely to the government of the Republic mimicking some of the economic strategies of Britain. Before An Tóstal provided an impetus for the establishment of the All-Ireland, the 1951 Festival of Britain had acted as a catalyst for the foundation of the Ulster Drama Festival. The Festival of Britain was conceived in the immediate post-war period and was intended to be a both a celebration of Britain's victory in the Second World War and a proclamation of its national recovery. The Festival included nine official, government-funded exhibitions in England, Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales as well as twenty-three designated arts festivals (Conekin 4). In addition, approximately two thousand cities, towns and villages across Britain organised their own festival events (Conekin 4). In a monograph dedicated to the Festival, titled *The Autobiography of a Nation* (2003), Becky E. Conekin writes that it was:

> …not only an event – or rather, series of events – designed to demonstrate to the world Britain's proclaimed economic resurgence, it was also an *attempt* at national recovery – an attempt to bolster the low numbers of tourists, who could stimulate the national economy by bringing hard currency to circulate throughout Great Britain. (26)

Like An Tóstal, the Festival of Britain sought to assert a new, or renewed, set of economic relations between Britain and the outside world – particularly in the context of housing shortages and the continuation of wartime restrictions and rationing. The Council for the Encouragement of Music and Arts (CEMA) Advisor on Amateur drama in Northern Ireland,

[8] An Tóstal was officially discontinued in 1958. However, in Drumshanbo, Co.Leitrim a Tóstal festival is still held on an annual basis ("An Tóstal festival Showcases Drumshanbo").

Sydney Hewitt, organised an amateur drama festival in Bangor as part of the festivities taking place across Britain, and this served as inspiration for the first Association of Ulster Drama Festivals (AUDF) finals which followed two years later. The AUDF had been established in 1949 in response to a surge in amateur theatre activity in Northern Ireland following the Second World War. In 1947, drama festivals were taking place in Ballymoney, Portadown, Larne, Dungannon, Newry, Derry, Stewartstown, Enniskillen, and Bangor ("47th Ulster Drama Festival") and attendance at those festivals was high. For example, the nightly attendance at the Ballymoney Drama Festival in 1948 - in a town of approximately 3,300 people - was 490, and the total attendance for the festival was 4,919 (Blair 7). The popularity of those festivals fuelled the subsequent establishment and growth of the Ulster Drama Festival: a *Belfast Telegraph* article covering the competition in 1957 surmised, with some justification, that amateur theatre was "a movement embracing hundreds of societies with thousands of members" ("A big theatrical occasion"). The first AUDF committee was comprised of representatives from the Ballymoney, Larne, and Newry drama festivals along with Sydney Hewitt and George Loxton: President of the Ulster Drama League and Chairman of the CEMA Drama Committee.[9] The AUDF festivals adopted a points system whereby the six groups that accrued the most points on the regional circuit would qualify for the Ulster Drama Festival. In contrast to the various sections of the All-Ireland which included one-act plays and verse dramas, each of the groups competing at the Ulster Festival were required to perform plays of two acts or more. Although they were run by separate associations and had separate finals, groups from the north would compete in festivals in the south and vice-versa. Formal links were established between the ADCI and the AUDF in the form of festivals in the north that were affiliated to both organisations. Newry and Carrickmore, the first festivals to claim dual affiliation, were those closest to the border and groups competing at those festivals could qualify for both the Ulster and All-Ireland finals. Those cross-border ties were a source of pride for both associations. In 1974 the Newry and Carrickmore festivals were suspended owing to the danger of travelling arising from the Troubles. In an effort to maintain the links between the AUDF and ADCI, the associations agreed to a reciprocal arrangement whereby they would each nominate a group to appear at the finals of their

[9] Along with the Association of Ulster Dramatic Societies (AUADS), the Ulster Drama League (UDL) operated during and after the Second World War with the purpose of co-ordinating activities of the numerous amateur drama societies that were active in Northern Ireland during that period. It appears, however, that they had limited success in helping to avoid clashes in the regional festival calendar or in the establishment of a centralised finals festival – both of which were issues that led to the formation of the AUDF in 1949. ("47th Ulster Drama Festival")

respective counterparts on a non-competitive basis ("Festival of Amateur Drama Opens"). That arrangement continued until 1980 when it was felt that it was no longer needed, and in subsequent years the number of festivals with dual affiliation grew exponentially. In 2018, the festivals affiliated to both associations were Enniskillen, Carrickmore, Newry, Newtownabbey, Portadown, and Strabane.

The festivilization of the amateur theatre movement – that is, the consolidation of the movement into an island-wide network of festivals oriented around the Athlone and Ulster finals – was instigated in part due to the impetus provided by An Tóstal and the Festival of Britain. However, it would be a mistake to define that process exclusively as the result of centrally-directed, 'top-down' policy decisions. For a start, the idea to monetise cultural events was familiar to local amateur drama societies long before the launch of either campaign. A well-worn cliché about amateur theatre events was that in many communities they were poorly-managed, opportunistic and tokenistic proxies for the business of collecting donations for local causes. Farrell's reports for the *Bell* suggest, however, that by the 1940s not all amateur theatre events corresponded to that stereotype. A noteworthy example was the Bundoran festival, which was in its second year when Farrell visited in 1945. In his report, he frames the festival not as an event but as an "enterprise" – the purpose of which was to attract visitors to the seaside town ("A Donegal Festival" 526). Farrell attributed the success of the festival to a number of factors, including:

> …an urban spirit of co-operation and enterprise, which could be seen not only in the support given to the Drama Festival by priests, businessmen, hotels, and Urban Councillors [sic], but in the proceedings of local organisations, the outlook of local journalists, the appearance of a bright, clean, well-managed town, and the social idealism revealed in the local paper. ("A Donegal Festival" 526)

Evidently, the drama festival in Bundoran formed part of a community-wide effort to generate business in the town: one that was orchestrated via the local newspaper and that incorporated related activities such as keeping the streets in good order. A noteworthy feature of that community-wide effort was that it was led by an upwardly mobile cohort of business people and local luminaries. We have already seen in the introductory chapter that Morass cites the pivotal role played by "a rural and small town middle class" (*A History* 193) in the rise in popularity of amateur theatre in the twentieth century, and this claim is echoed by

other commentators. In *That Neutral Island*, Wills points out that local amateur dramatic societies really began to thrive during the Second World War, when "the difficulty of travel [owing to fuel rationing] made it harder for the provincial middle class to manage the journey to Dublin or Cork for entertainment…" (101). Similarly, in Desmond Fennell's analysis of the origins and continued success of the amateur theatre movement for the *Irish Times* in 1961, he noted that:

> Nowhere else in a population of this size are so many people engaged in drama for the mere love of it … the success of the movement can be attributed to the growth of a communal and civic sense, to the first Tóstal (which gave leadership and direction), to the increasing numbers of professional and well-educated people, the initiatives of many individuals (both clerical and lay), the financial support of large organisations and the new abundance of motor cars. (7)

Morash makes the point that when ffrench-Salkeld sought to establish a national amateur theatre festival, he "quickly found that he was pushing at an open door" (*A History* 210). This is true in the way that Morash suggests, which is to say that the organisers of regional theatre festivals were keen to further expand the scope of the amateur theatre movement. However, it is also true in the sense that amateur theatre societies had been modelling on a community level what the An Tóstal and Festival of Britain campaigns aimed to achieve on a national level: the monetization of culture as part of a voluntary drive to improve communites and to attract outside visitors, or 'investors'. By looking beyond their immediate surroundings, those members of amateur theatre societies and organisers of drama festivals exemplified the kind of outward-looking, materialistic drive that lies at the heart of capitalist society.

A Movement for the People?

Although writers such as Morash, Wills and Fennell emphasised the influence of the middle class on the amateur theatre movement, it should be noted that other commentators, in particular those with some involvement in amateur theatre, have lauded it for what they see as an absence of any class bias. In the same profile of Bundoran in which Farrell praises the middle-class community leaders responsible for the drama festival, he criticises the indifference of members of the "educated classes". As a counterpoint to their apathy, he describes "that lovable and fruitful devotion which shines in so many of the tradesmen, lorry-

drivers, clerks, [and] shop-assistants who are the backbone of many dramatic societies…" ("A Donegal Festival" 527). A later account in the *Irish Times* in 1963 profiles an amateur drama society in Athboy, Co. Meath. The director of the group, a local schoolteacher, surmises that amateur theatre is popular for the precise reason that it "keeps class distinctions away" (Foy 6). Furthermore, when asked whether in their opinion amateur theatre is perceived as an upper or middle-class pursuit, several of the people interviewed for this study were keen to stress that it was not. Of the ten interviewees who chose to address the question, six were firm in their conviction that amateur theatre was free of any class distinctions. Patricia King, actor and director with Tuam Theatre Guild, stated that "you didn't have to have any qualification" to join the group, but just had to "want to do it, be friendly, and enthusiastic" (O'Gorman and King). Chairperson of the ADCI, John Travers, asserted that part of the success of amateur drama was that it was not a "class-based thing" and that it was "for the people" (O'Gorman and Travers). Carmel McCafferty, a founding member of the '71 Players, claimed that no class distinctions applied to the group and that "everyone was welcome" to join (O'Gorman and McCafferty). However, the members whose professions she recalled – a "tax man", teachers, business owners, secretaries, and nuns – were almost all members of the middle class (O'Gorman and McCafferty). In support of McCafferty's assertion, fellow founding member of the '71 Players Tom Doherty recalled that its members were drawn from a spectrum of occupations that ranged "from labourers to doctors" (O'Gorman and Doherty). Another interviewee whose experience of amateur theatre was free of any encounter with class bias was Killian McGuinness, who suggested that class was not a barrier to participation in amateur theatre in Carrigallen. According to McGuinness, "there is barely a person in Carrigallen who at some point in their lives were not involved in the theatre group … [and] being involved in theatre in Carrigallen is as natural as being involved in the G.A.A. in other parishes" (O'Gorman and McGuinness). Finally, William Burns – former chairperson of the Larne Drama Festival and a director with Larne Drama Circle – observed that amateur theatre was inclusive of people, from "…a wide range of social and economic backgrounds…" as well as those with "…a whole range of abilities" including acting, directing, set construction, stage lighting, and house or company management (O'Gorman and Burns). In contrast, the four other interviewees who addressed the issue of class noted that, at the very least, some people held a perception of amateur theatre as being a middle-class pursuit. Retired politician and Athlone-based cultural commentator Mary O'Rourke expressed the opinion that for the most part "the working class didn't go to the drama" (O'Gorman and O'Rourke) in Athlone in the 1950s and 1960s and, similarly, Pauline

Ross – a founding member of both the '71 Players and the Playhouse Theatre in Derry – recalled that amateur theatre audiences in Derry in the 1970s were predominantly composed of "the more professional class" (O'Gorman and Ross). Ross asserted that this was one of her motivations for establishing the Playhouse in 1992: "…I wanted to democratise the arts because unless your parents were working, was one thing: unless they had an awareness of how important culture and the arts are in a child or teenager's life growing up…it's seen as being on the periphery of their lives, all their lives…" (O'Gorman and Ross). In a similar manner to Ross, director of the Derry Drama Festival Marie Dunne acknowledged that amateur theatre was "probably perceived as a middle-class thing", but she asserted that it was a goal of the Derry Drama Festival to combat that perception through the release of free tickets to community groups, low-cost tickets, and special offers (O'Gorman and Dunne). Finally, Chairperson of the Western Drama Festival Brendan McGowan recalled that he had perceived amateur drama to be an upper-class pursuit until he got involved in the movement on a national level. It was then that he came to the conclusion that it "straddles all classes and creeds" and that "people from all professions and none [are] involved at all levels" (O'Gorman and McGowan).

Evidently, two opposing perceptions of the amateur theatre movement persist in Ireland, with some people viewing it primarily as a vehicle for the middle class, and others seeing it as being exceptionally inclusive: not only of a range of social classes but, as William Burns points out, of a variety of ages and abilities. Perhaps the closest example of an objective engagement with this issue is the *Public and the Arts* survey carried out by the Arts Council of Ireland in 1994. The survey grouped individual artforms/art products into three broad categories: "those associated with the 'high' arts, for example, plays; popular culture entertainment, for example, film; and traditional culture, for example, country and western music" (Clancy et al. xi). The survey revealed that occupational class was one of four key factors – along with education, age, and region – which were consistently found to have an independent influence on the dispositions that different sections of the population had towards engagement with each of the three categories of arts products (Clancy et al. xi).[10] It

[10] The Public and the Arts Survey follows the occupational class schema outlined by the Joint National Readership Survey (JNRS) http://www.millwardbrown.com/subsites/ireland/solutions/jnrs. The JNRS divides occupational classes into grades ranging from A to E as follows: A: upper middle class, B: middle class, C1 lower middle class, C2: skilled working class, D: working class, E: non-working. Grades A and B correspond to the Professional and Managerial Class in Breen and Whelan's schema; grade C1 corresponds to the Intermediate Class, and grades C2, D, and E correspond to the Working Class.

stated that, regardless of the kind of artform, "occupational class categories which consistently emerge as having relatively low involvement are those which belong to either the skilled working class or to the semi-skilled/unskilled working class" (Clancy et al. xi). The survey also noted that "for all dimensions associated with the 'high' arts [such as theatre], the higher the level of education the more likely is involvement" (Clancy et al. xi). Furthermore, it stated that of the four key factors influencing participation cited above, "class, age and gender" had the strongest independent association with participation in *amateur* artistic activities, and that "those who are middle-class, who are better educated, who are younger and are women" were the dominant cohort involved in those pursuits (Clancy et al. xii). David Grant's survey of community theatre in Northern Ireland, *Playing the Wild Card* (1993), was published a year prior to the Arts Council's *Public and the Arts Survey*, and it suggested that a similar correlation between social class and participation in amateur theatre persisted in Northern Ireland. Grant noted that amateur drama was "immensely strong" in Northern Ireland, and that "the middle-class dominance" of the pursuit was often pointed to as a factor which limited the spread of community theatre (12). The Arts Council of Ireland published a follow-up survey, also titled *The Public and the Arts*, twelve years later in 2006. In spite of the economic boom that Ireland had experienced in the intervening years, the 2006 report found that: "Whether expressed in terms of income (e.g. Figure 5.3), educational attainment (e.g. Table 5.7), or occupational class (e.g. Table 6.4), access to and engagement with the arts, and with certain art forms and practices especially, continue to be determined in large measure by social circumstance" (Drury 112). Unlike its predecessor, the 2006 survey did not include data on participation in amateur cultural pursuits. However, it stated that ninety-three percent of middle class respondents to the survey had attended at least one arts event in the previous year, compared with eighty-four percent of skilled working class respondents, seventy-one percent of semi-skilled or unskilled working class people, and eighty-three percent of farmers (which covers a range of income levels) (Drury 68). Furthermore, it revealed that forty-one percent of middle class respondents had attended a play, compared with 23 percent of the skilled working class, nineteen-percent of the semi-skilled/unskilled working class, and twenty-nine percent of farmers (Drury 69). The survey concluded that "…the arts, as practiced in Ireland, are often a mark of social exclusiveness rather than an instrument of social inclusion" (Drury 112). A year previously, the Arts Council of Northern Ireland (ACNI) had published a report titled *Research into the Actual Barriers to Publicly Funded Arts in Northern Ireland* (2005). While seventy-three percent of those interviewed for the survey had attended an arts event in the preceding twelve months,

just twenty-two percent had attended a play or drama (5). Furthermore, in a parallel of the *Public and the Arts* survey carried out in the south, those with lower educational attainment and those with lower incomes were identified as being less likely to attend the arts (7). Between fifty and sixty percent of the respondents who had attended a play or drama in the preceding twelve months had a tertiary education level (18).

Evidently, there is a disparity between, on the one hand, a perception of amateur theatre in Ireland as being inclusive of all occupational classes and, on the other, the participation and attendance rates revealed by the reports cited above. There are a number of explanations which might account for this. Firstly, the experience of those who believe that amateur theatre is not a predominantly middle-class pursuit might be limited to examples that are an exception to the general trend. Second, the various comments on the inclusivity of amateur theatre quoted above are taken from a broad timeframe that ranges from Michael Farrell's observations about amateur theatre in the 1940s to the twenty-first century. It is possible, although somewhat implausible, that amateur theatre was only dominated by the middle class from around the time of the first *Public and the Arts* survey in 1994. Thirdly, as shown above, from the 1960s onward the middle class grew in both size and scope in Ireland, north and south. It is possible that those involved in amateur theatre who judged it to be socially inclusive did so based on the broad range of incomes and occupations of their mostly middle class colleagues. For those observers, the contrast between the respective material wealth of participants on the upper and lower ends of the scale of middle class occupations might have suggested inclusivity, while obscuring the absence of members of the working class. In any case, what the *Public and the Arts* surveys suggest is that, by 1994 at least, amateur theatre was a predominantly middle class pursuit. Even if that was not always the case, and that in previous decades amateur theatre was a more inclusive activity, it is clear that an important feature of the evolution of the amateur theatre movement in the twentieth century was the growing influence of the middle class, both in the amateur theatre movement and in Irish society. If the material, organisational and cultural utility of the amateur theatre movement was easily recognised by the organisers of An Tóstal and the Festival of Britain events in Northern Ireland, then the impactful potential of amateur theatre must also have been readily apparent to a burgeoning cohort of middle-class community leaders that was striving to assert its hegemony in the cultural and political spheres.

- Section Two –

Multiple layers of Performance

At their core, the An Tóstal and Festival of Britain campaigns involved the presentation and monetization of a curated image of their respective nations as part of state-wide projects of improvement. Seemingly aware of this, in his opening speech for the first All-Ireland in 1953, the Bishop of Elphin Rev Dr Hanly stressed the importance of projecting an appropriate image of Ireland to the outside world. He declared that: "We are now inviting foreigners … to become acquainted with a people that have a tradition for religion, culture, learning, and last but not least, workmanship and efficiency, and not as some would have us – a people over-given to pleasure, and I might say, dissolute living" ("Bishop Opens Athlone Drama Festival"). A feature of Hanly's speech that arises in much of the commentary on amateur theatre of this period is that it subscribes to a view that theatre incorporates multiple layers of performance: there is the on-stage performance of a particular play and the variety of meanings that emerge from that, but there is also the broader 'performance' of the act of making theatre and the particular image or identity that this process forges for the performer. Clearly, for Hanly it was important that the on-stage work of amateur theatre societies should consolidate a tradition of Irish theatre and that, furthermore, the manner in which that work was carried out off-stage should contribute to an impression of Irish people as efficient and workmanlike. Hanly saw the All-Ireland as an opportunity to present a singular and stable image of Ireland that was founded upon traditional plays and, by extension, traditional values. That opportunity was seized by amateur theatre societies at the All-Ireland in the years which followed: seventy-percent of the 282 plays performed in the first decade of the festival were by Irish playwrights. It is unlikely, however, that Hanly could have anticipated the extent to which many in the amateur theatre movement would depart from tradition in pursuit of a newly emergent and more modern set of values and ideals. Avant-garde plays by foreign playwrights – although still in the minority at the end of two decades of the festival – came to wield a significant impact that both reflected and contributed to the significant societal changes that took place over the same period.

Tradition and Innovation

Some indication of how seriously the selection of plays was taken by societies in the amateur theatre movement could be seen in the way that it was formalised in the marking system at drama festivals. At the first All-Ireland, adjudicators could award competing groups a total of one hundred points: thirty-five for 'Acting' and 'Production' respectively, twenty for 'Presentation and Staging', and ten for 'Choice of Play' ("City and County Successes"). Groups could gain points for choosing a play that was, firstly, of an appropriate artistic standard and, secondly, within the capacity of the group to correctly interpret and perform. Clearly, this category of assessment relied heavily upon subjective interpretation on the part of the adjudicator: firstly, of the relative artistic merits of the play being performed and, secondly, of the interpretive powers of the group performing it. Much of the written commentary on the All-Ireland in its first two decades was concerned with the subject of play choice and, in the first decade of the festival in particular, that commentary can be divided into two schools of thought. In an ideological mirroring of the contrasting inward and outward-looking perspectives that were at the heart of approaches to the economy, on one side of this debate in the amateur theatre movement there were those who believed that plays should be chosen on the basis of their faithfulness to the tradition of Irish drama fostered by the Abbey Theatre. In contrast, there were those who viewed theatre as an opportunity to depart from that tradition in a spirit of experimentation and innovation.

A strain of traditionalism had been present in the amateur theatre movement prior to the establishment of the All-Ireland. It is evident in Farrell's series for the *Bell*, for example, that for the author the purpose of amateur theatre was not merely to bolster civic pride and material wealth (as we saw in the case of Bundoran); it was also to educate and improve those who participated in and viewed it. With that in mind, Farrell rejected what he saw as frivolous genres such as melodrama and farce, and instead favoured more serious works of dramatic realism and naturalism. He thus subscribed to what Thomas Postlewait has identified (and critiqued) as a 'familiar binarism' in twentieth-century theatre practice and scholarship: "On the twentieth-century side of the great divide we find complex and ambitious drama, dedicated artists, and challenging plays about the human condition. On the nineteenth-century side we have derivative entertainment, theatrical artisans, and the constraining values of popular taste" ("From Melodrama to Realism" 42). In Ireland, the

work of the Abbey is conventionally placed on the twentieth-century side of the binarism outlined by Postlewait. As Stephen Watt argues, from the Abbey's genesis as the Irish Literary Theatre in 1897, melodrama "was the despised 'other' that new Irish drama must both supplant and transcend" (13). Surveying regional amateur theatre (north and south) in the 1940s, Farrell lamented the enduring popularity of melodrama and farce, while at the same time lauding the Abbey for forging a modern and serious-minded tradition of Irish drama. He wrote that, "Had there been no Abbey, no Yeats, no Moore, and so on, there would have been no Irish repertoire to set a standard for the country, and any elevation of taste would have followed, at five or six removes, such improvement as has occurred in Great Britain…" ("The Country Theatre" 390). A noteworthy feature of Farrell's perspective is the looming presence of Britain. While purporting to focus inward on the cultivation of a native tradition, Farrell's stance was in many ways set in opposition to the influence of the neighbouring country, and in this way, it mirrored the protectionist economic policies adopted by the government at that time. When the All-Ireland was established in the following decade, Farrell's 'protectionist' perspective on the repertoire still endured. Perhaps its most prominent proponent was Gabriel Fallon, who was a member of the board of directors of the Abbey Theatre from 1959 to 1974; a regular adjudicator at amateur drama festivals; and an honorary patron of the ADCI from 1958 to 1963. Like Farrell, Fallon saw amateur theatre as existing "not for entertainment only but for the enriching and deepening of personal and community life" and he similarly believed that this enrichening project should be based on what he termed a "native dramaturgy" (Fallon 7). Writing on the subject of play choice, Fallon stated that:

> …until Lady Gregory and William Butler Yeats put their hands to a work which ultimately led to the foundation of the Abbey Theatre, Ireland had no theatrical tradition of its own. From the work of that theatre, our native dramaturgy has sprung, and it is on this dramaturgy that the widespread amateur movement which exists in Ireland to-day finds its base. (Fallon 4)

The influence of traditionalists like Farrell and Fallon could be seen in the plays performed in the first decade of the All-Ireland: the festival programmes show that 198, or seventy percent, of the 282 plays performed at the festival were by Irish playwrights.[11] Clearly, Farrell and

[11] The festival programmes from 1953 to 1963 were accessed in the Brendan O'Brien papers.

Fallorn believed that amateur theatre had an important role to play in shaping a modern Irish society. However, they both expressed reservations about the influence of British drama, which suggests that while it was important to them that amateur societies should work towards a progressive and modern future, it was equally important that they should remain true to an indigenous past. For Farrell and his successors, the repertoire of the Abbey provided a way of fulfilling both requirements. The archetypal Abbey play pitched itself in direct opposition to the derivative nineteenth-century drama described by Postlewait, while at the same time contributing to a native repertoire. Thus, for traditionalists like Fallon, Abbey plays enabled amateur societies to work towards a more sophisticated and modern future for Ireland while preserving an essential identity that was rooted in the past. Newspaper reports detailing the comments of adjudicators at Ulster Drama Festivals show that many of them adopted a traditionalist stance on the subject of play choice. In his final adjudicatory comments at the first Ulster Drama Festival, Hugh Hunt (former director at the Abbey and artistic director of the Old Vic in London) noted that five of the six works presented at the festival had been West End successes. He expressed a desire that "this lack of balance will be rectified and that some of these companies will give a lead at future festivals by presenting Irish plays and particularly Northern Irish plays" ("Drama festival prize goes to Enniskillen"). The Northern Irish plays that Hunt referenced were those produced by the Ulster Literary Theatre (ULT) (1904-1934) and the Group Theatre (1940-1960): both of which worked towards the production of plays that related more directly to a discrete northern culture and way of life. In the years following that first festival, adjudicators at the Ulster Drama Festival echoed the sentiments expressed by Hunt. While adjudicating at the festival in 1961, for example, Tyrone Guthrie was complimentary of the overall standard of the productions, but reflected that it was "…a pity that there is no Irish play" ("Play that pays").

In contrast to the traditionalists in the amateur theatre movement, there were those in favour of bolder innovation and experimentation on the part of drama societies. Those innovators shared the broadly modernist outlook of the traditionalists but believed that it should be manifested in a manner which built upon, or even departed, from the base provided by the Abbey, the ULT, and the Group Theatre. In the same way that the traditionalist perspective predated the establishment of the All-Ireland and Ulster Drama festivals, calls for an expansion in the outlook of theatre practitioners in Ireland had been articulated for some time. Leading that call in previous years was Lennox Robinson who, like Fallon, had been a

central figure at the Abbey Theatre but in the latter part of his life had taken a keen interest in the development of amateur theatre. Robinson adjudicated at amateur theatre festivals across the island of Ireland on many occasions, and he was nominated as the first honorary patron of the ADCI: a position that he held until his death in 1958. In 1919, Robinson founded the Dublin Drama League with W.B. Yeats and, according to Morash, "it became a sort of phantom image of what the Abbey might have been – a democratically run, flexible organisation presenting the best of European modernist theatre to a select audience" (*A History* 180). Over the course of nine years, the League used the Abbey stage on quieter Sunday and Monday evenings to present sixty-six plays from fifteen countries (*A History* 180). In his autobiography *Curtain Up!*, Robinson transcribed an extract from a public discussion that he had with Yeats on whether to "broaden the Abbey's repertory" (*A History* 118). The curiously Socratic tone of the dialogue suggests that the discussion was less a debate between the two men than a platform with which they could pre-emptively respond to those who would object to the national theatre presenting foreign plays. It afforded Robinson the opportunity to deliver strident passages on the rejuvenating potential of plays of an appropriate standard and form from other countries:

> Here in Ireland we are isolated, cut off from the thought of the world – except the English world, and from England we get little, in drama, except fourth-rate. I ask you, for the young writer's sake, to open the door and let us out of our prison. Seeing a foreign play will not divorce our minds from Ireland; seeing a Russian play will not lead us to lay the scene of our next play in Moscow instead of in Cork, but being brought into touch with other minds who have different values for life suddenly we shall discover the rich material that lies to our hand here in Ireland. (Robinson *Curtain Up* 120)

Robinson was in regular contact with director of the All-Ireland Brendan O'Brien throughout the 1950s, which suggests that he took his role as Patron of the ADCI seriously. Given the views that Robinson had expressed in relation to the Dublin Drama League, it is likely that he held a similar perspective on the potential for foreign plays to free amateur drama societies and their audiences from the "prison" of strict nativism. Another prominent proponent of this stance was the *Irish Times* critic Kane Archer who, after attending the first All-Ireland offered the following on the contribution that amateur theatre could make to Irish theatre:

> There can be no question as to the importance of this festival. … This is not a game, but as genuine a manifestation of the creative spirit as can be found anywhere in the theatre. … Here, then, is the life-blood of the theatre from which may spring, in the course of time, new inspiration, perhaps a new direction in Irish drama, comparable to the early work of the Abbey and the Gate. ("Amateur Drama Festival has a Big Future" 4)

For Archer, the once iconoclastic repertoire of the Abbey was in urgent need of rejuvenation. Writing on the eve of the All-Ireland in the following year, he proposed that what stood in the way of that project being realised was a "… curious narrowness of outlook on the part of today's dramatists and producers", and he argued that "they have retired within the walls of a little insularity that shuts them off from the wider currents of European or of world literature" ("Amateur Drama: What it May" 6). A number of weeks later, in a summary of the festival Archer highlighted an example of that insularity in the tendency among amateur groups to focus on the work of "late Abbey dramatists" such as T.C. Murray, Walter Macken, and George Shiels at the expense of "the great or significant drama, past or present, from outside Ireland" ("The Athlone Drama Festival" 6). He concluded that "the severance of the Irish theatre from outside influences … is bound in the end to be disastrous and to result in stagnation" (6).

Archer's call for an international repertoire of plays was echoed by other critics and by adjudicators in the years that followed, and gradually those calls were heeded. The overall number of plays by foreign playwrights rose from thirty percent in the first decade of the All-Ireland to thirty-eight percent in the second. Of more significance, however, was the increase in European and American plays – which tended to be more experimental and innovative – from thirteen percent to twenty-six percent in the same period.[12] In an interview for the *Irish Times* in 1962, Brendan O'Brien identified the impact of the 1956 production of Henri Ghéon's *Christmas in the Marketplace* as a turning point for the festival in the way that it was "…a breakaway from the tendency to concentrate on the short list of native playwrights selected in previous years and led to a widening in the choice of plays presented" ("Brendan O' Brien" 10). Ghéon's play garnered attention for being the first work at the All-Ireland

[12] Figures taken from the plays listed in annual festival programmes that form part of the Brendan O'Brien papers.

wherein the actors purposely broke the fourth wall to address the audience directly. Incidentally, in that same year the government of the Republic took steps away from economic protectionism with the use of industrial grants to attract foreign investment, and with the implementation of an export-tax relief scheme (Bradley 111). The following year at the All-Ireland saw performances of Anton Chekhov's *The Proposal* (1889) and Diego Fabbri's *Jesus on Trial* (1955); in 1959 Chekhov's *The Bear* (1888) was performed, and 1960 saw performances of Giovacchino Forzano's *To Live in Peace* (1952), Ghéon's *The Devil's Bridge* (1959), Moliere's *School for Wives* (1951), and Augustus Goetz's *The Heiress* (1947). Plays such as those were just as identifiable for being innovative and experimental as for being authored by foreign playwrights, and their increasing prevalence at the festival spoke to the steady permeation of a modernising spirit through the amateur theatre movement. The plays performed at the Ulster Drama Festival over the same period suggested that groups competing at the festival adopted a more protectionist stance. The percentage of plays by Irish playwrights performed at the festival increased from twenty-seven percent in the first decade to thirty-seven in the second. Furthermore, the percentage of plays by an author from Northern Ireland rose from five percent to fourteen percent, while the percentage of European and American plays fell from thirty seven to thirty percent. This is not to suggest that the Ulster Drama Festival was devoid of experimentation. In 1959, Belfast Drama Circle performed Howard Richardson's *Dark of the Moon*; 1961 saw the production of Sartre's *The Flies* by Queen's University Dramsoc; Coleraine Drama Club performed Peter Ustinov's *Love of Four Colonels* in 1964, and Friedrich Dürrenmatt's *The Physicists* in 1965, while in the same year The Guinness Players from Dublin produced Emmanuel Robles's *Montserrat*. The years from 1966 to the end of the second decade of the festival saw productions of Bernard Kops's *Dream of Peter Mann*, Federico García Lorca's *The House of Bernarda Alba*, and Max Frisch's *Andorra*.

The Outward-looking Imperative

By the end of the second decade of the All-Ireland and Ulster festivals, foreign, avant-garde plays were still in the minority, but their increased presence was the focus of much debate in the amateur theatre movement. At the heart of that debate was the idea that the plays performed by amateur drama societies projected an image of both the societies themselves and the amateur movement as a whole. As we have seen, traditionalists and innovators held different views on the extent to which amateur societies should deviate from the canon of

Irish plays. Interestingly, those opposing views mirrored the dilemma facing those in power, north and south, who wished to project stable images of economically viable states. The problem facing the government of the Republic in the 1950s, however, was that those efforts were repeatedly foundered by an ailing economy. That period witnessed one of the worst bouts of emigration in the history of the nation: between 1951 and 1961, over four hundred thousand people emigrated – nearly a sixth of the total population of the Republic (Delaney 81). What distinguished that bout of emigration from previous ones was that it was not motivated by economic factors alone. In 1954, the specially established Commission on Emigration and Other Population Problems issued a report which stated that a key influencing factor for rural dwellers in the decision to emigrate was "the attraction of urban life" ("Commission on Emigration" 136). The report listed motives which included: "…a natural desire for adventure or change, an eagerness to travel, to see the world … to secure financial independence by having pocket money … to obtain freedom from parental control … and to be free to choose one's own way of life" (138). A worrying feature of the report from the point of view of those in government was that it suggested that mass emigration was as much a consequence of ideological factors as it was of economic ones. Those leaving sought freedom: from financial pressure, from patriarchal control and, most importantly, from restraints upon the kind of lives that they wished to lead. Thus, the future viability of the state would depend upon its ability to respond to a modernising drive for increased personal freedom: in material terms through the range of products and services available to people, and in ideological terms in the range of possible approaches to life. Accordingly, and as Pilkington notes, after the economic reforms of the 1950s:

> …there was now a much greater emphasis on personal pleasure and on individual consumption as the basis for political agency …[and] the legitimacy of the state tended to be viewed increasingly in terms of its responsiveness to the requirements of the individual rather than as a reflection of any dominant philosophy or ideological position. (*Theatre and the State* 159)

Pilkington points out that the influence of this newly augmented strain of individualism was reflected in the changing repertoire of plays at the national theatre, to the extent that: "… the plays performed there tend[ed] to reflect a widening gulf between traditional nationalist views associated with the foundation of the state and a contemporary world for whom such views are no longer relevant" (*Theatre and the State* 159). The steady influx of experimental

foreign plays at the All-Ireland evidenced a similar development taking place in the amateur theatre movement although, crucially, in a way that prefigured rather than followed the economic policies of the late 1950s. The production of those plays was an opening out on the part of amateur societies: both materially in so far as the plays were products from a wider, international market and ideologically in terms of the alternative ways of thinking, living, and being that they presented. Thus, in the 1950s those innovative amateur societies played an important role in preparing the ideological ground for the sweeping modernization that would follow in the following decade.

- Section Three –

Material Restrictions

One of the points that this chapter seeks to establish is that amateur societies were presented with two possible responses to the economic and social effects of modernisation. By adhering to the canon of Irish writing, they could hold fast to identities founded upon nation or statehood. Conversely, by producing innovative foreign plays they could depart from established conventions and explore alternative ways of defining themselves. For most drama groups, it was not a straightforward case of choosing one mode of response over the other. Like any other material product, access to playscripts was restricted by those who had control over the means of production and distribution. Writing in 1945, Farrell noted with "regret and surprise" that : "the Abbey has refused to give the valiant and lonely Birr Theatre permission to do the box-office success *The Rugged Path* which has already filled the Abbey Theatre for nine or ten weeks" ("Plays for the Country Theatre" 64). If it could be difficult to secure access to plays that were written and produced in Ireland, then it is likely that it was even more difficult to obtain work by foreign authors. Amateur theatre societies relied upon the university student drama societies to source and import foreign, experimental work. The university drama groups competed in their own annual Irish Universities Festival – the first of which was held in 1948 – but they also participated in regional drama festivals on the amateur circuit, and Queen's University Belfast became the first university group to appear at the All-Ireland in 1960.

University drama societies were a conduit for contemporary international work and many of them took pride in showcasing experimental plays. In his opening address for the

Universities Drama Festival in 1963, the academic and playwright Dr Roger McHugh claimed that "what little hope" there was for progress and development in Irish theatre lay in "the amateurs, the little theatres and in the Universities [sic]" (Jay 7). Reporting on the festival for the *Irish Times*, John Jay wrote that a recurring theme in the lectures and performances that were presented as part of the festival was the sense of duty that university groups felt to present plays which were "beyond the reach of our un-subsidised professional companies, or outside the inclinations of our one subsidised company [the Abbey]" (Jay 7). It is worth noting that the audience for the festival was not restricted to groups of students and their friends and families. In his review of the Universities Festival in 1965, Alec Reid expressed surprise at its appeal to the wider public, in particular given the ostensibly unpopular, esoteric work being staged:

> …nearly 3,000 people paid to see the six productions at the Olympia, and the tiny theatre at Trinity was filled often to over-flowing, for the afternoon performances. Yet the programme, containing works by Pirandello, Camus, Beckett, Synge, Jean Paul Sartre, and William Shakespeare could hardly be described as popular. (10)

If access to foreign plays was largely limited to university drama societies, then it follows that it was also limited to those who could afford to attend university. In *Privileged Lives* (2010), Tony Farmar points out that, up until the later decades of the 1970s, political leaders in the Republic would present Irish society as being free of stratification on the basis of class, in particular as a counterpoint to Britain. According to Farmar, access to education was a reliable indicator of social class and a clear rebuttal to the claims of those politicians was the level of participation in post-primary education in the 1930s: "At the time there were half a million pupils in primary schools and fewer than 30,000 in recognised secondary schools … [and] the small number of secondary pupils were certainly not chosen on merit" (135). By 1951, the situation had improved but not greatly. Only 50,179 students attended secondary school (An Roinn Oireachtas 93): a very small number when compared with the 476,051 pupils enrolled in free to access primary education in the same year (An Roinn Oireachtas 74). Access to post-secondary education was even more restricted: between 1940 and 1954 only 14 percent of the population obtained a third-level qualification (Whelan and Hannan 293). The introduction of free secondary education in 1967 was a widely welcomed reform, although it did little to alter the social stratification of access to university education. As

Breen and Whelan noted in 1996 about the links between class origins and educational attainment:

> There is a continuing strong link between class origins and educational attainment … Among men there has been some change [since the 1950s], but this has been modest, nor can it necessarily be counted as a weakening of influence of class origins. Rather we see a shift in the pattern of relative advantage in third-level attainment away from the lower non-manual and skilled manual classes towards the propertied classes. (126)

For some, amateur theatre provided an education that would otherwise have been unavailable. For example, actor and director with Tuam Theatre Guild Patricia King recalled in a personal interview that:

> It was a great part of our lives, the amateur drama: I don't know what we would be like without it. And, we used to look on it as the university education that we never got. We were at that time when you couldn't go to university unless you had lots of money … Every play opened you up to something new, especially Jean Anouilh, Ionesco, those plays. (O'Gorman and King)

King noted the unique qualities of foreign, avant-garde plays and their ability to open people up to new discoveries and insights. Participation in amateur theatre granted King and others tangential access to the qualities of those plays, but the agency to lead innovation was largely restricted to a privileged cohort (such as the director of Tuam Theatre Guild, Rev P.V. O'Brien) that had obtained a third-level education. With the freedom to choose between traditional and innovative approaches to play choice, that élite cohort had the agency to choose the precise kind of identities that they wished to project for both their drama groups and themselves.

Performing Status

The material strictures underlying the circulation of foreign plays in the amateur theatre movement provide some insight into the factors which contributed to the material and ideological hegemony of the middle class in Irish society. Foreign, experimental plays were assigned a high value based, firstly, upon their novelty as new 'products' in the Irish market

of plays and, secondly, upon their status as conduits of innovative and modern perspectives. Their value was heightened in turn, not only by their lack of widespread availability but, by their purported inaccessibility on an intellectual level. Commenting on the increased presence of such plays at the All-Ireland on her report on the festival for the *Irish Times* in 1961, Aileen Coughlan wrote that: "There is one thing we of the audience are most grateful for – the chance we get to see plays that no commercial theatre could afford to stage. Ibsen may have bored us a little, Sartre puzzled us, Strindberg shocked us, but we now know what they are like; and we have the nice smug feeling of knowledgeable people" ("Excitement of New Plays" 7). Like Patricia King, Coughlan expressed appreciation for the exposure that amateur theatre provided to the esoteric work of European avant-garde playwrights. However, her report depicts an audience that is, in various ways, at a remove from that work: according to Coughlan, members of the audience were bored, shocked, puzzled, and left with a *feeling* of being knowledgeable as opposed to truly understanding what that they had seen. Similarly, former and politician and cultural commentator Mary O'Rourke recalled that at the All-Ireland over the years "…they [experimental plays] were received well, people got [*mimics affected tone*] 'Oh, we're going to have Ibsen tonight!' You know, they liked to pretend that they were in on that wavelength" (O'Gorman and O'Rourke).[13] Both Coughlan and O'Rourke held "knowledgeable people" to be an élite group composed of those with the intellect to gain a true understanding of the plays. As we have seen, however, perhaps those people and drama groups with the requisite knowledge were simply those with the material resources to access it. In any case, what the comments of Coughlan and O'Rourke show is that a person's possession of knowledge had a performative aspect, whereby their response to a play was indicative of their level of understanding. Crucially, that performance had a bearing on the perception, not only of what that person knew – of whether they were in on a certain 'wavelength' in O'Rourke's words – but of who they were: of whether they were members of the élite or not. Furthermore, we can assume that as is the case with any performance, a range of factors would be considered in assessments of the success of such performative displays: from physical appearance, to dress, manner, and style of delivery. This has important implications for the reception and assessment of performances by amateur drama societies. Performances of plays were performances of status. The assessment of such

[13] Mary O'Rourke served as Deputy Leader of Fianna Fáil from 1994 to 2002, Minister for Public Enterprise from 1997 to 2002, Minister for Health and Children from 1991 to 1992, and Minister for Education from 1987 to 1991.

performances would depend a broad range of factor, including where the group was from, what they looked like, and how they sounded. Thus, amateur drama societies hailing from socioeconomically deprived areas faced a considerable challenge in performing their knowledge of foreign, experimental plays that were primarily the preserve of the social élite.

Tuam Theatre Guild had to produce particularly convincing performances of foreign, experimental plays in the 1950s and 1960s. Tuam is a small town in Co. Galway that is best known in theatre circles as the birthplace of the playwright Tom Murphy. As so vividly portrayed in Murphy's work, the town is in a historically deprived region that was among the worst affected by unemployment and emigration in the 1950s.[14] Under the direction of Rev O' Brien in the latter years of that decade, the Theatre Guild became, in Morash's words, "one of the most adventurous amateur companies in the country" ("Murphy, History and Society" 28). Not only was it adventurous, it was successful: as well as multiple regional festival successes it twice won the Three-Act Open section of the All-Ireland, first with N. Richard Nash's *The Rainmaker* (1954) in 1963 and again two years later with Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* (1953) (O'Brien 116). Hailing from one of the most economically deprived regions of Ireland and, as we have seen from King's comments, with a majority of its members without third-level education, the Theatre Guild nevertheless produced highly successful productions of plays that were conventionally the preserve of a middle class élite. Perhaps the group achieved this under the direction of the minority of its members who were university educated and thus aware of conventions of conventions of performance that were likely to be favoured by festival adjudicators. Alternatively, perhaps it produced ground-breaking performance of the plays that broke from standard institutionalised readings. More important than the intricacies of the performances themselves was the fact that that they were accepted as valid interpretations by adjudicators, critics, and audiences. In other words, the performances of status enacted by Tuam Theatre Guild – a group whose identity was rooted in an economically marginalised and deprived region – was validated in a way that affirmed its membership of the 'knowledgeable' élite. This had important implications for Irish society as whole. At a time when the middle class was expanding and asserting its cultural hegemony, groups like Tuam Theatre Guild demonstrated the extent to which identity and

[14] An example of such a play by Murphy is *On the Outside* (1959), which he submitted to the All-Ireland new play writing competition at the All-Ireland in 1959, winning the fifteen-guinea prize (Morash, *A History* 213). Murphy won the prize again in the following year with *The Iron Men*. The adjudicator Godfrey Quigley passed the script to Joan Littlewood who staged it at the Theatre Royal in London as *A Whistle in the Dark* (1961) (Morash, *A History* 213). Both plays portray the stark effects of social deprivation in the west of Ireland.

status could be performed and, perhaps, transformed – both on and off the stage. In spite of the success of Tuam and others however, attempts at transformation were not always accepted without resistance.

The Festival Play

The idea, foregrounded by groups like Tuam Theatre Guild, that status could in some way be performed had potentially powerful ramifications. For that reason, the influx of foreign, experimental plays into the amateur theatre movement was the focus of debate, much of it centred on the idea of the 'festival play'. The term 'festival play' was used, often pejoratively, to describe a play that was chosen by a group with the sole intention of winning at drama festivals. Although it was accepted that drama festivals were competitive, for some in the amateur theatre movement festival plays were symptomatic of a level of competitiveness that ran contrary to a spirit of amateur endeavour. Any play that was seen to be of a type favoured by festival adjudicators could be termed a festival play, and plays from the Irish canon that had garnered success at festivals were sometimes described in this way. However, in the mid-to-late 1950s the term was increasingly associated with foreign, experimental plays as they began to make an impact at drama festivals. Festival plays were almost exclusively serious-minded, esoteric works that explored issues of grave concern to society. According to some reports, by the late 1960s, the practice of choosing festival plays was having a detrimental effect on the audience experience at the All-Ireland. As Coughlan wrote of the 1968 festival:

> Looking back at the All-Ireland, one must admit that while it was splendidly adventurous, it was a trifle gloomy. Amateur drama has spread its wings and the shadow fell a bit heavily on the audience. They are bored with 'different' plays. They agree it is a good thing to experiment, will accept and enjoy one or two such plays in the festival, but do not want to have to puzzle their brains about what's going on night after night. ("A Backward Look at the All-Ireland" 10)

Seven years after expressing gratitude towards groups that granted the opportunity to see work that "no commercial theatre could afford to stage" ("Excitement of New Plays" 7), Coughlan expressed an understandable desire to see a more balanced repertoire at the All-Ireland. Ideally, a festival programme would include a diverse selection of serious-minded,

esoteric plays alongside work with a broader appeal. If the sole aim of groups was to be successful, however, then the most logical choice of play was the type of work that was perceived to have the best chance of winning. Hence, the range of types of plays at the highest levels of competition in the amateur theatre movement narrowed as a growing number of competitors calibrated their output for success.

A noteworthy feature of the debate around play choice was the moralistic tone that permeated it from the outset. In one of the earliest responses to the rise of the festival play (a year after the 1956 turning point identified by O'Brien), an article by a 'Special Correspondent' in the *Irish Times* declared that:

> Before the era of festivals, dramatic societies all over the country chose and performed a play to please their home audience and, even more important [sic], to suit their cast. … And they did have a good time. They romped through it all without a thought as to whether it was a good Festival Play [sic] or not, or of how it would look to the stern professional eye of the adjudicator ("The Athlone Drama Festival" 8)

The article frames the festival play as an affront to a spirit of amateurism characterised by a commitment to fun or 'play' as opposed to the serious business of competing, and by a faithfulness to 'place' manifested in remaining true to the abilities of cast members and the tastes of home audiences. The question of the imminent decline of a spirit of amateurism in the amateur theatre movement was raised again in 1963 when Gabriel Fallon resigned from his position as Patron of the ADCI. Fallon penned a letter of resignation in which he cited a number of points of concern, one of which was that:

> For sometime [sic] past I have been rather perturbed by the tendency things have been taking in the amateur drama field. Much of the old spirit is gone; the simple idea of helping people to be makers of their own entertainment has to a great extent become secondary to cut-throat competition, audience-capturing gimmicks and the desire to win at all costs. (qtd. in Smith 106)

Almost a decade after Fallon's resignation, in 1972, J.P. Burke launched a further attack on single-minded competitiveness following the success of the Strand Players, Dublin at the All-Ireland with Peter Weiss's *Marat/Sade* (1964). This time, however, Burke characterised

competitiveness as the mark of a morally questionable professionalism. Burke objected to what he saw as the "dreadful mockery of humanity" (6) presented in *Marat/Sade*, and what really shocked him was the lack of protest from the audience (6). For Burke, the apparent indifference towards what he perceived as the immorality of the play was evidence of wholesale capitulation to a morally-bereft professionalism: "The trouble is that it is much easier to get to Athlone with the modern immorality plays, and … there is much more professionalism in the amateur theatre when the hunt is on for the All-Ireland nominations" (6). A unifying feature of the critiques launched by Fallon and Burke is that they both present professionalism as a counterpoint to a spirit or quality that they believe to have been lost to amateur theatre – whether that was a sense of play, a sense of place, or a sense of what constituted appropriate content. Furthermore, each of the critiques are united by a moralistic tone: quite overtly in the case of Burke, but in a more subtle way in Fallon's, which suggests that professionalism entails a compromise of an essential or 'true' identity. A practice which appeared to support those critiques was one whereby amateur drama societies would produce two plays in the same season: a popular work for their home communities and a more highbrow piece for festival competition. As King recalled in relation to Tuam Theatre Guild:

> We always did a pot-boiler in the early Autumn, and that would be some high comedy. We'd get English farce; we used to find great drama there, slapstick comedy. It was good for getting in actors, also for getting a good audience; if you just advertised as 'comedy' everyone would come, and you'd make money that you'd then spend on the festival play. (O'Gorman and King "Personal Interview")

The Bart Players, founded in 1953 in Belfast and one of the most respected amateur drama groups in Northern Ireland, adopted a similar strategy to the Theatre Guild. Director Ken Powles recalled that the Bart Players production of *The Playboy of the Western World* in 1964 placed second at the Churches Drama Festival, but received a mixed response from their home audience. According to Powles, "We discovered after … that a proportion of the audience who went to see it, went full of excited anticipation hoping to see thrilling conflictions between Cowboys and Indians" (Powles SW-0010). For Powles, this was symptomatic of a modern malaise, whereby "classic literature and the poetic qualities of the Anglo-Irish theatre are not sufficient ingredients in themselves to provide entertainment for modern theatre audiences" (Powles SW-0001 22). This led to a change in approach on the part of the Bart Players, and thereafter, it adopted the Tuam Theatre Guild strategy of

producing two plays per year: a light entertainment piece, usually a comedy, that would ensure a box office return, and a more serious-minded, esoteric work for festival competition. Thus, both Tuam Theatre Guild and the Bart Players cultivated a professionalism that could either be praised or critiqued according to the perspective of the observer. From a strictly material perspective, it made sense to seek the maximum return on box office receipts by staging popular plays. However, those who believed that amateur practice should reflect authentic, place-bound values and identities, would argue that the professionalism displayed by Tuam and the Bart Players reflected a modern and 'professional' duplicitousness.

Amateurism and Professionalism in Society

The idea that amateurism was an expression of a true or essential identity bears striking similarities to the dichotomy between amateurism and professionalism presented by Bliss Perry and outlined in the introductory chapter. For Perry, that dichotomy was central to the question of how American society should negotiate the myriad changes attendant to the modern era. Perry acknowledged that "the national tasks of the future should have the sobriety, the firmness, [and] the steady effectiveness which we associate with the professional," while at the same time asserting that: "To counteract all such provinciality and selfishness, such loss of love of honor in the love of gain, one may rightly plead for some breath of the spirit of the amateur…" (29). For Perry, the exemplary modern individual was the person 'who loves': the *amator* who "works for the sheer love of working," and plays "for the sake of the game, and not for his share of the gate money," while at the same time retaining the more productive qualities of the professional (29). In the introduction, it is argued that the criteria for identifying such an individual – like much of the criteria by which amateur societies were judged – was almost entirely subjective. Thus, although perhaps not intended as such, Perry's idea of the *amator* was a way in which members of the upper classes could ringfence positions of power, and it is likely that, in a modern era when capitalism led to more opportunities for social advancement, this was one of the reasons why the figure of the *amator* might have appealed to Perry and to fellow members of the upper classes. It is noteworthy that, at a time in Ireland of unprecedented economic growth, not only did the amateur theatre movement begin to flourish but there was a concurrent sharpening of focus from within the movement on what constituted the 'true' qualities or spirit of amateurism. In the same way that Perry asserted that this matter was of major concern to the future of American society, for those concerned with what they saw as the

decline of the amateur spirit in the amateur theatre movement, the matter was presented as one of grave moral importance.

If, in Perry's analysis, there is more than a hint of anxiety on behalf of his social class, then perhaps those critiquing the decline of amateurism in the context of a rapidly modernising Ireland were exorcising feelings of anxiety at the rate and nature of the societal changes that they were witnessing. In Ireland in the middle decades of the twentieth century, performances of status were not confined to the amateur theatre movement, nor were subjective assessments of the validity of those performances on the part of those in relative positions of power. By turning briefly to an example of how those performances of status were enacted and received in Irish society, we can arrive at a better understanding of the resistance to innovation and experimentation that arose in some quarters of the amateur theatre movement. In *No-one Shouted Stop* (1968), the *Irish Times* journalist John Healy provides a vivid account of the economic decline of his home town of Charlestown in Co. Mayo in the late 1940s and 1950s. The book is famed for its portrayal of the devastating effects of emigration on a once thriving rural community and its title is still a clarion call for those advocating for economic investment in rural Ireland. In one memorable passage, Healy describes a 'performance' enacted by young migrant workers returning home from England for Christmas: "They came in new suits and flashy ties, spiv-knotted and the jackets wide-boy padded, in the shoulders, in the fashion of the London spiv. The hair was styled and slicked. They looked what they were: crude caricatures of the worst spiv element in Britain. Only their accents and their honest Irish face [sic] had not changed (19).[15] Healy was a member of the regional middle class that were at the forefront of the growth of amateur theatre, and his critical assessment of the migrants' attempts to flaunt their newfound wealth offers us some insight into the debate surrounding amateurism and professionalism in the amateur theatre movement. The first wave of emigrants that left Charlestown for England in response to the wartime demand for labour in the 1940s was composed primarily of the sons and daughters of poor farmers from the hinterland surrounding Charlestown. When those emigrants began to send money home, the local ruling class of town-based business owners, teachers, and managers suddenly had less spending power than the previously marginalised and less well-off farmers. In Healy's words it "created a new social order"; one that Healy, as

[15] According to the OED 'Spiv' is a colloquial term for someone who is engaged in "petty blackmarket dealings," and who is "frequently characterised by flashy dress" ("spiv,n.")

a member of that supplanted class of local dignitaries, was highly critical of. A noteworthy feature of Healy's critique of the migrants is that, in a manner akin to the critiques of festival plays, it is couched in moralistic terms wherein the 'truth' of the migrants' identities is obscured by an ostentatious display of materialism. In this way, Healy mirrors the claims of the Catholic Church and state leaders at the time who warned that emigration posed a threat to the morality of young Irish Catholics. In 1951, the Taoiseach Eamonn De Valera claimed – in spite of overwhelming evidence to the contrary from an economic standpoint – that "the saddest part of all this [emigration] is that work is available at home, and in conditions infinitely better from the point of view of health and morals" (qtd. in Delaney 84). Later in his account, Healy expands his moralistic judgement of the migrants into a scathing critique of Irish society as a whole. In a chapter titled 'Heroes', he presents a counterpoint to the migrants in the form of Mickey Walsh: a fellow native of Charlestown and three-time All-Ireland medallist in handball. Healy describes Walsh as the town's "last hero" and introduces him in the following passage:

> Go up to the [handball] alley. Walk past the white-washed political slogans of thirty years and up the sandy path to the crumbling gallery, now grass grown. Look in over the enclosing backwall and you will see a stout blocky man of 44. The red hair, what is left of it, it [sic] matted in sweat and sweat comes through his singlet. He is alone, tossing a ball to himself, running back to pick it with a left hand, running inside the short line to finish it with a right-handed butt. He retrieves the ball and tosses again and goes on running and picking, delighting when a ball hops wrong and he must take an extra effort to pick it because he had not anticipated it. (29)

The evocative description of a lone Walsh calls to mind Lionel Trilling's analysis of the protagonist of William Wordsworth's "Michael" in *Sincerity and Authenticity* (1971). For Trilling, the eponymous Michael is an embodiment of authenticity: having lost his son Luke to "the dissolute city" (Wordsworth 446), Michael resolves to continue working on the sheepfold that he had begun building with his son. His grief is so profound, however, that "many a day he thither went,/ And never lifted up a single stone" (Wordsworth 467-468). Trilling argues that Michael and his grief are one, that "there is no within and without" (93) in his being and that, therefore, his grief even surpasses what me might term 'sincere':

> We may not, then, speak of sincerity. But our sense of Michael's being, of – so to speak – his being-in-grief, comes to us as a surprise, as if it were exceptional in its actuality, and valuable. And we are impelled to use some word which denotes the nature of this being and which accounts for the high value we put upon it. The word we employ for this purpose is 'authenticity'. (93)

What Trilling shows is that it is not merely Michael's grief that is exceptional, it is his absolute "being-in-grief": a state of completeness that forecloses any possibility of artifice. We could define Michael's repeated returns to the sheepfold as a type of performance but, as Trilling suggests, "it would be a kind of indecency, to raise the question of the sincerity of this grief" (93). In other words, such is the authenticity of his grief that it is out of the question to consider that it might be expressed with an audience in mind, or for anything other than 'being-in-itself'. Healy encourages us to observe Mickey Walsh in private rather than, for example, in the throes of competition. His solitary absorption in the task shows us that, for Walsh, handball is not merely a means of accruing glory, but an unstudied expression of his being. It seems that for Healy that purity of expression stood in direct opposition to the kind of artifice that he associated with the social and cultural effects of modernization in Ireland. In some of the most polemical lines of the book, Healy sarcastically rails against an urban society that no longer values heroes like Walsh:

> …when you live in the insulated and insulating cocktail circuit in Dublin who the hell wants to hear about some creep in Charlestown who won a medal for something or other thirty years ago? … We're sophisticated now. … In an age when television, for instance, sledge-hammers its cultural values home one is supposed to obey the smart-set cocktailed rules of double-talk and double-think, to talk with a left-handed tongue, and wrap an honest protest in the unctuous language of a doubtful compliment. Yes – and be thankful when the reply is a lecture from the current economic archangel of the Establishment [sic]. (35)

In the same way that in Wordsworth's poem the authenticity of Michael acted as a counterpoint to the 'dissolute city', Healy's Ireland was characterised by a dichotomy between insincere urbanites and authentic heroes like Mickey Walsh: between a materialistic modernity and a more authentic, pre-modern way of being.

What defines Healy's portrayal of Walsh is its stability and fixity in what he otherwise depicts as a distinctly unstable modern milieu. The previous social hierarchy in Charlestown and, more broadly, in Ireland has been subverted, and the new rules of interaction are characterised by 'double-think'. In the imaginative walk to view Walsh at the handball alley that Healy describes, we are encouraged to note the faded political slogans of thirty years previously in a way that suggests the immutability of Walsh's image through the passage of time. Not only is the image of Walsh fixed in time, it is stable in its authenticity in a way that is explicitly and immediately contrasted with the fluid and duplicitous 'double-talk' of metropolitan elites. An important point to note is Healy's positioning of himself in relation to Walsh and the Dublin-based urbanites. While the solidity of Walsh's image provides Healy with a firm marker of authenticity and identity in a volatile social hierarchy, it also fixes Walsh in place in a way that contrasts sharply with the mobility and agency of Healy. Healy is free to traverse metropolitan and rural circles while in Healy's construct Walsh is confined to Charlestown and the ball alley: just as in Wordsworth's poem Michael is consigned to the sheepfold. Should Walsh, acting as a person as opposed to a paragon, decide to pursue a new life in the city then – as we have seen in the case of the returning migrants – for Healy this would precipitate a crude corruption of the 'truth' that Walsh embodies. Healy castigates the cocktail circuit of Dublin elites, but it is nevertheless a circuit that he can access and choose to reject, and it appears that he is as familiar with the language and customs of that circuit as he is with those of his hometown. In other words, in an increasingly unstable social hierarchy wherein people were moving up and down the social ladder, across and between countries, and in and out of new cultural groups and formations, Healy used Walsh as a fixed marker of an essential identity: one that he was free to depart from and return to as he explored new and emerging ways of being modern and Irish. Perhaps the clearest way of understanding the agency that Healy fostered and utilised is to think about it in terms of mobility. By first establishing polarised markers of pre-modern (Walsh) and modern (the urbanites) identities, Healy was able to move between those identities, draw from both, and form a composite image of himself that advanced a renewed claim for social status in a changing society. Thus, Healy might be described as a consummate 'actor' in the context of a modernizing Ireland: one who could draw upon both traditional and modern modes of being according to the requirements of the role that he wished to play.

Amateurism and Professionalism in Theatre

Through Healy's account, we can see how the middle class established its hegemony in Irish society via means that extended beyond the material. The returning migrants, armed with sufficient wealth to propel themselves up the social ladder, were considered by Healy to be lacking in the essential, chivalric qualities of Perry's *amator*. Conversely, Mickey Walsh – in many ways the embodiment of that ideal – was devoid of the artifice required to negotiate the metropolitan cocktail circuit. Operating somewhere between those polarities was Healy, who situated himself as the ideal type described by Perry: the *amator* sufficiently endowed with the "firmness" and "steady effectiveness" of professionalism (Perry 29). In short, the key qualities in Healy's account – which enabled various performative responses to societal change – were 'amateurism' and 'professionalism'. There is evidence of elites in the amateur theatre movement employing those qualities in a similar manner to Healy. For example, we will recall that Lennox Robinson was a vocal advocate for the expansion of the amateur repertoire to include foreign, experimental plays. However, in his essay for *Curtain Call*, Robinson made it clear who he believed should lead that expansion. He identified what he saw as two archetypal groups in the amateur theatre movement – the rural group and the city one – and his advice to both was to push beyond the limits of their capabilities, albeit in markedly different ways. He advised rural groups to:

> Put on that murder-thriller which was the success of London's West End a couple of years ago, or that very English side-splitting farce. Some play, be it farce or tragedy or thriller which will take them utterly outside themselves and will make them show whether they are really *actors* or are just merely men and women who are excellent in imitating the Mickey Donovans and the Eileen Murphys which they are meeting every day of their lives [emphasis in original]. ("What Play Shall We Do Next?" 8)

Not only did Robinson recommend that they should attempt a farce or thriller – dramatic forms that were on the nineteenth-century side of Postlewait's binary – but he suggested that those plays should be English: a curious piece of advice considering his earlier statement that England was a source of "fourth-rate" drama (*Curtain Up* 120). In contrast, Robinson's advice to urban groups was as follows:

> And the city groups – because they have better facilities for reading plays than have the country groups – should not look so often to the fashionable plays of London of the season-before-last. It is to these groups we should look for performances of the modern Continental [sic] plays and the plays of the U.S.A., and for the revivals of the great classical plays of the Latin countries and Scandinavia and Russia. ("What Play Shall We Do Next" 9)

Evidently, for Robinson there was not only a hierarchy of plays, but a hierarchy of players: the West End plays "from a couple of years ago" that rural groups should attempt were the same London plays of the "season-before-last" which city groups should avoid. In contrast, the plays recommended to city groups were either the epitome of the twentieth-century side of Postlewait's binary or, in the case of the 'great classical plays', those which transcended that binary altogether. Robinson justifies this hierarchy on the basis of the "better facilities for reading" available to city groups, which might include universities, libraries, bookshops, or professional theatre companies. In any case, it affirmed the class-based stratification underlying play choice in the amateur theatre movement by suggesting that drama societies with the most material resources were those best equipped to innovate. Robinson's reference to the superior "facilities" of urban groups gives the impression that the primary problem facing their rural counterparts was a lack of material resources. However, the typical modernist festival play was not one which required elaborate sets, props, or costumes. For Robinson, it was intellectual rather than material resources that separated rural and urban groups, as seen in his challenge to rural groups to show whether their members were actors or were merely playing versions of themselves on stage. In Robinson's analysis, it was the ability of the urban group member to purposefully and convincingly depart from a true or essential identity – in other words, it was their 'professionalism' – that distinguished them from the member of the rural group. Thus, in the same way that an ability to move freely between identities was an enabling characteristic for Healy in Irish society, so too was it a valued quality for the societies that comprised the amateur theatre movement.

While it appears that Robinson consigned rural groups to a subordinate role within the amateur theatre movement, that was not necessarily the case. The plays that he recommended to rural groups suggest that he did not rate their abilities very highly, but his exhortation that they should reach "outside themselves" spoke to a belief that they could nevertheless improve. An alternative approach to such groups was to laud the authenticity of their

performances in a way that, while appearing to be complimentary, was ultimately limiting. Writing in *Curtain Call*, for example, Ria Mooney listed the following as the key factors in successful productions by rural amateur societies:

> I have seen amateur groups in country halls in productions that were infinitely more enjoyable than professional productions of the same play, because of several factors: suitability of play to casting material available, size of hall, type-casting, enthusiasm giving vitality to the performance, sincerity making up to a large extent for absence of technique, and perhaps more than anything else the mood of the audience. (43)

In the same publication, Mícheál Ó hAodha described the characteristics of the most memorable amateur productions that he had seen:

> In all these productions one found that intuitive sense of acting which is the very life blood of our theatre and which usually reveals itself, most fully, in plays which are within the immediate experience of the players. Amateur companies can bring to such plays an authenticity in characterisation and in dialect, and an inner conviction which one should not expect from a professional repertory company which has to tackle pays [sic] which are poles apart in time, in place and in style. (47)

For Mooney and Ó hAodha, the amateur productions that they admired were successful because they remained within the restricted orbit of the actors' lives. In an echo of the terminology defined by Trilling, they describe successful amateur performers that they have seen as 'sincere' and 'authentic' but, in a similar manner to Healy's framing of Mickey Walsh, they at the same time render those performers immobile through their praise. Not only are the amateurs limited in terms of the imaginative, thematic, and technical scope of their ambitions, but in Mooney's account they are also confined to performance spaces of an appropriate scale, and to audiences sympathetic to their aims. In contrast, professionals like Ó hAodha and Mooney had the technique and, presumably, the 'facilities for reading', to perform plays or 'identities', that were poles apart in time and space. Complimentary as they were to amateur groups, the prerequisites that Ó hAodha and Mooney listed for their success were also the boundaries within which those groups were confined. In a similar manner to Mickey Walsh and to Wordsworth's Michael, those groups were considered to be authentic for as long as they remained within specific boundaries, whether they were spatial – as in the

sheepfold, the ball alley or the local hall – or ideological: as in the plays that they attempted to perform. Thus, there is a parallel between the agency of the theatre professional like Mooney and Ó hAodha, and the exemplary modern citizen like Healy in that both were judged to have the requisite knowledge, craft, and material resources to adopt the full range of roles available to the modern actor in theatre and in society.

- Conclusion -

In her introduction to *Twentieth-Century British Theatre*, Cochrane raises the question of "What happens to the historical record if the experience of the greater majority of the theatre-making population is examined, rather than the minority experience memorialised through the dominant historical discourse?" (1). When applied to the subject of amateur theatre in Ireland, this ostensibly simple question has significant implications. It draws attention to the fact that if we adopt a view of theatre practice as a whole in Ireland, the vast majority of that singular whole in the twentieth century has the work of amateurs. Amateur theatre has been practised by the greater majority of the theatre-making population; experienced by the greater majority of the theatre-*going* population; and it has spread to the furthest reaches of the nation as opposed to the urban centres where professional theatre is conventionally found. Furthermore, it brings an awareness that the majority of the historiographical literature on theatre in Ireland – concentrating as it does on professional groups and individuals – has been dedicated to a highly influential but nevertheless small portion of theatre practice.

Theatre became an integral part of life in communities in every part of Ireland in the middle decades of the twentieth century, and it was a medium with which those communities both created and responded to societal change. In places like Bundoran, making theatre was just one facet of a broader drive towards the improvement of communities: more than simply a diversion from daily life, it formed part of the fabric of a more modern, urban lifestyle. A burgeoning regional middle class captured and recreated the prestige of metropolitan theatre occasions in their home communities – on a micro level through individual performances and on a significantly larger scale through drama festivals. Those at the forefront of the amateur theatre movement demonstrated a locally-oriented pride and will to improve their communities, while at the same time looking beyond the boundaries of their localities and the kind of lives lived therein. If making and attending theatre reflected a particular way of living, then the plays produced by theatre societies modelled new ways of being and

perceiving the world. Experimental works by European and American authors offered fresh perspectives on the human condition but, more pertinently for the purposes of this chapter, they could have a transformative effect on the status of the groups and individuals who performed and viewed them – provided, that is, that the performances were deemed to be successful. In the amateur theatre movement, foreign, experimental plays were markers and conduits of an emerging modern, individualistic and materialistic ideology that was fomented by the middle class. At a time of increased economic opportunity and class mobility, those plays were part of a wider spectrum of ways in which people could initiate a break from inherited values. Access to those plays, however, was restricted in ways which point towards the hierarchy and imbalances of power underlying innovation and opportunity, in both theatre and society. As we have seen, access to foreign, experimental plays was at first restricted almost exclusively to those with the material resources to attend university, to travel, or to access theatres and bookshops in metropolitan centres. Those restrictions were a means by which the élite in the amateur theatre movement consolidated their leadership role. However, in the same way that economic, material, and infrastructural developments led to changes in the structures and shape of Irish society, so too did they enable the dissemination of those works. The island-wide network of drama festivals that grew steadily across the early to middle decades of the twentieth-century brought those plays to audiences that might not otherwise have seen them, and to drama groups that might not otherwise have performed them. A bravura performance of a foreign, experimental play had the potential to transform the status of a group that was lacking in resources and, if deemed to be successful, the performing group would be lauded for its professionalism – a quality that was exclusive to those leading change and innovation in Irish theatre and society. Conversely, a lack of sufficient mastery of the institutionalised procedures and responses of the professional were the hallmarks of the amateur. Thus, in certain ways the task of distinguishing between more amateur and professional productions was relatively straightforward and objective.
However, this chapter uncovers a more subjective layer of assessment, encapsulated in the parallel concepts of amateurism and professionalism. The individualistic and competitive qualities of professionalism could be present in either amateur or professional groups, and could be viewed in a positive or negative light according to the subjective perspective of the onlooker. When viewed positively, professionalism was a mark of expertise and achievement, but when viewed in a negative light it was indicative of a decline in values arising from the process of modernization. In a similar manner, amateurism had both positive and negative applications. Groups were seen to embody a spirit of amateurism when they

adhered closely to traditional values and to an essentialised identity. Those groups were condemned to the benighted role of custodians of tradition; lauded for preserving an idealised Ireland of the past but lacking in the agency to shape the Ireland of the present and future. Clearly, the concern with authenticity that underpinned those concepts was closely tied to the increased ephemerality of identity attendant to the cultural effects of modernisation. Inevitably, that level of concern would change and evolve alongside the material changes attendant to the modernising process. This chapter began with a materialist analysis of the economic conditions in Ireland, north and south, which gave rise to the festivilization of amateur theatre. In spite of the separate set of economic circumstances pertaining to the Republic and to Northern Ireland, the process of festivilization led to the consolidation of a movement that was united by a materialistic and modernising ideology, thus transcending the political partitioning of the island with its reach. While it was important to people that they could identify themselves as members of a particular state or nation, it was of far greater significance to their lives that they could be modern, in so far as they would have access to the products, opportunities, and the lifestyle that this entailed.

Chapter Two

Protective Acts: St. Patrick's Dramatic Society, Newtownards.

- Introduction -

In the Theatre and Performing Arts Archive of the Linen Hall Library in Belfast there is a typed forty-eight page manuscript titled *An Ill Spent Life?* Its author, Mr. McGuigan (he never provides his forename), begins the text by addressing its rather unusual title:

> ...what I refer to, is my life-long love of amateur drama, which has been my predominant passion for the past fifty years or so. It all started when I was barely able to walk, and came about through my father's involvement with the Saint Patrick's Amateur Dramatic Society, which he joined around 1906. At least that's when he made his first appearance in the Dion Boucicault [sic] play "The Shaughraun", in which he played "Conn" ... I had the honour of playing the same part in 1956, to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Saint Patrick's Company, but more about that later. (McGuigan 1)

As McGuigan's introduction suggests, what follows is an insider account of the history of St. Patrick's Dramatic Society in Newtownards: a small town in County Down approximately twenty kilometres east of Belfast. It begins by briefly outlining the plays that St. Patrick's would stage when McGuigan's father was a member in the early 1900s, before describing in greater detail the group's activities from the 1930s to the late 1950s when McGuigan himself was actively involved. Much of the narrative focuses on the efforts of McGuigan and others to revive the society after it lapsed into inactivity during the Second World War. That process of revival began in 1942 with a rather haphazard variety show fundraiser, before progressing over several years to the production of contemporary works of comedy and realism, and it culminated in the aforementioned fiftieth-anniversary production of *The Shaughraun*. McGuigan's manuscript bears the hallmarks of the kind of source that Claire Cochrane cautions historians of amateur theatre against in a 2001 article for *Theatre Research International*:

> Library and archival searches yield chronicles of individual enterprises, especially large building-based groups, who engage an historian with intimate knowledge –

> perhaps a founder member from within the company. ... However, while the circumstances which led to the formation of a group can be instructive, the history becomes, effectively, a family memoir listing personalities and performances which have little interest beyond the domestic and the purely local. ("The Pervasiveness" 236)

Although unequivocally domestic and almost entirely local in its scope, it is precisely those characteristics which make McGuigan's personal history of St. Patrick's useful for the purposes of this chapter. The previous chapter adopted a primarily macro level view of the evolution of amateur theatre in Ireland in the middle decades of the twentieth century. That overview is supplemented with references to Tuam Theatre Guild and the Bart Players: groups whose activities and exploits were recorded in festival programmes, newspaper reviews, and articles. In addition to those successful, festival-going groups however, there was a significantly larger cohort of amateur theatre societies whose activities were rarely acknowledged or noted outside of their home communities. Aside from a brief foray into festival competition, St. Patrick's performed almost exclusively to a home audience and thus, as is the case with majority of amateur drama groups of that period, there are few written records of its activities. An assumption made about such groups is that they were less sophisticated and less developed versions of the more prominent, festival-oriented drama societies and that, in the absence of objective feedback from outsiders, those locally-oriented groups were free to indulge in some of the worst excesses of amateur theatre. For many, they were characterised by a lack of attention to accepted standards of production and performance. Journalist and author Padraic O'Farrell, for example, concluded an essay for *Theatre Ireland* magazine in 1982 with the lines "Another terrible beauty born. Another amateur drama group formed" (23). Admittedly, in many cases the assumptions of O'Farrell and others were well founded, and many amateur drama societies rejected or were simply oblivious to the fundamental conventions of the dramatic forms that they attempted. The preponderance of such groups helps to explain why, in general, amateur theatre has been marginalised histories of Irish theatre. As Cochrane writes:

> Throughout the twentieth century advanced capitalism brought with it a rapidly escalating emphasis on professionalism both in the economic sense and in the sense of enhancement of specialist skills. ... 'Professional' now carries with it connotations of ultra-competence. The amateur is non- professional and by implication incompetent.

> ... Faced with a kind of ersatz theatre which has little concern for 'real' theatre, the professional historian exercises her aesthetic judgement and turns away. ("The Pervasiveness" 234)

With Cochrane's observation in mind, this chapter advocates for a critical return to amateur theatre and for an examination of non-festivalgoing amateur drama societies: a substratum of an already marginalised cultural activity. In amateur theatre circles in Ireland, very little serious attention has been paid to the countless groups whose impact and fame has been limited to the confines of their immediate communities. Many of those groups were committed to high standards of production, but this chapter is just as concerned with cases where they were not: where performances failed to adhere to widely held expectations as to what constitutes a 'good' production. The analysis which follows is guided by the idea that dropped lines of dialogue, ramshackle sets, error-prone actors and various other calamities can be seen in some cases as symptomatic, not of an absence of accepted standards and conventions, but of attention to an alternative set of priorities. In short, it argues that performances by amateur societies such as St. Patrick's could prioritise the local community in ways that demonstrated the potential for resistance to the overbearing cultural influence of a homogenising, middle-class, and metropolitan-centred culture. With a focus on practices of production and performance, this chapter draws on Baz Kershaw's detailed analysis of conventions of production and performance in *The Politics of Performance* (1994). In a precursor to that analysis, and in a continuation of the materialist approach undertaken in the previous chapter, this chapter begins by examining the material conditions that underpinned the decisions that the members of St. Patrick's took in relation to the productions that they mounted. Chapter one established that amateur drama groups formed particular identities through the plays that they chose to perform, and this chapter affirms the extent to which those identities and choices were limited by material conditions. A key question that is addressed in this chapter is how regional groups might operate within those limits: how, in other words, might they claim a degree of agency in the context of a society that relegated them to the passive role of consumers (as opposed to producers) of culture. Over the course of McGuigan's account, the degree of agency that the members of St. Patrick's claim is relatively small. If the group never quite reaches a revolutionary pitch, it nevertheless shows, unintentionally at times, the path of resistance to cultural homogenization, thus producing what Owen Kelly (1994) terms 'protective acts' (51): that is, acts or actions whose function is to preserve the core components of community.

In contrast to the overarching perspective offered in the previous chapter, this chapter focuses exclusively on St. Patrick's as a case study. This more focused approach allows a detailed analysis of the dynamics underpinning some of the broader changes outlined in chapter one. For example, the St. Patrick's repertoire transformed from one based primarily on nineteenth-century melodramas and variety shows to works of twentieth-century realism. While some of the events described in the course of the chapter are unique to the context of St. Patrick's and Newtownards, the analysis presented herein foregrounds the relevance of this case study to broader developments in the amateur theatre movement. A strong justification for the choice of St. Patrick's as the focus of this chapter is that, as alluded to above, accounts of the locally-oriented activities of drama groups from this period are rare, and rarer still are accounts as detailed and candid as McGuigan's. It has been necessary at certain points in this chapter to step briefly outside of the timeframe established in chapter one: the variety shows analysed in section one, for example, were produced in the 1940s. This deviation is necessary in order to inform both the analysis of the production of *The Shaughraun* which is a primary focal point of the chapter, and the evolution in the amateur repertoire outlined in the previous chapter. While this deviation represents a significant portion of this chapter, it is relatively brief in the overall context of the dissertation and, therefore, does not warrant an adjustment of the overall timeframe of the study.

The first part of this chapter focuses on the revival of St. Patrick's led by McGuigan and fellow group members following a lapse in activity during the Second World War. It outlines the evolution of the output of the drama society over the course of that revival, from a popular performance tradition based primarily on variety and melodrama, to a modernist repertoire drawn from the work of the Abbey and Group Theatres. While this transition was part of a progressive process of modernisation that connected the community to contemporary cultural developments, it was also conducive to a bourgeoise ideology of conformity. The second part of the chapter addresses the question of what might have been lost to groups like St. Patrick's through their pursuit of festival-oriented standards and conventions. It advances the idea that the touring company tradition incorporated conventions of performance and spectatorship that were improvisatory, unpredictable, and, most importantly, were tailored specifically to a local audience. Those conventions demonstrated the potential for locally-oriented groups to enact performances that were tailored to the discrete values and experiences of their communities. That potential was of particular

importance in cases such as the St. Patrick's production of *The Shaughraun*, where the fabric of the community faced an imminent threat.

The Touring Company Tradition.

The evolution of the St. Patrick's repertoire following the revival of the group in the early 1940s – from popular melodrama and variety to modernist realism and naturalism – mirrors the broader evolution of amateur theatre in Ireland across the early decades of the twentieth century. Melodramas such as Dion Boucicault's *The Shaughraun* were a staple of St. Patrick's from its formation in 1906. McGuigan writes that "I couldn't say what the first play I saw was, but as well as *The Shaughraun*, other popular plays in those days were *The Colleen Bawn*, *Arrah na Pogue*, *Kathleen Mavourneen* and sometimes an out and out comedy such as *The Auction in Killybuck*"(2)[16]. The popularity of melodrama with regional groups such as St. Patrick's can be traced to the influence of travelling theatre companies, which toured widely around Ireland from the 1700s to the early twentieth century. Helen Burke writes that "such itinerant groups began crisscrossing the country in the early eighteenth century so that, by the end of the century, there was scarcely a town of any size in Ireland that was not provided with theatrical entertainment of this kind, at least for some period during the year" (120). In an illuminating chapter on regional touring or 'fit-up' companies in *Louis D'Alton and the Abbey Theatre,* Ciara O'Farrell shows that their popularity endured: by her estimation at least 250 toured the country in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. According to O'Farrell, a typical touring company show would include variety and drama, with some companies specialising in either one or the other (63). Where drama was included in the night's entertainment, O'Farrell writes that "the main play was nearly always based upon the fundamental elements of melodrama and farce" (65)[17]. Performances that included

[16] *The Shaughraun*, *The Colleen Bawn*, and *Arrah-na-Pogue* were all written by Boucicault. *Kathleen Mavourneen* is as a song composed by Frederick Couch, and silent films produced in 1906, 1911, 1913, and 1919 bore the same name. I can find no evidence of a play script with that title so it is possible that the production that McGuigan refers to is an adaptation of one or more of the silent films. *The Auction in Killybuck* is a comedy by Louis Joseph Walsh, a republican activist born in Maghera, Co. Derry in 1880.

[17] A notable exception to this trend was Anew McMaster's Intimate Shakespearean Company. McMaster's company staged classical works in regional Irish towns and villages until 1959, just three years before McMaster's death. McMaster became a household name in regional Ireland, and some of the major figures of twentieth-century Irish and British theatre began their careers by touring with him, including Micheál MacLiammóir, Christopher Fitz-Simon, Barry Cassin, and Harold Pinter. For more see *Mac* (1968), Pinter's memoir of five seasons touring with McMaster's company as a young actor, and *A Life Remembered* (2019): a memoir of McMaster written by his daughter Mary-Rose.

both variety and drama could run for two or three hours: conventionally, an opening chorus would precede a series of variety acts (singing, reciting, poetry, dancing etc) which would then be followed by a brief interval and the commencement of the drama (O'Farrell 63). McGuigan's description of a typical night of performance by St. Patrick's in the early years of the drama group from the 1900s onwards speaks to the direct influence of the fit-ups:

> The members of Saint Patrick's Dramatic Society were very musical, and would often set the scene for a play by singing "The Meeting of the Waters", or "Oft in the Stilly Night" on stage before the curtain opened. Then at the end they would again gather on stage for a few more songs, and at times some of the female members would give a display of Irish dancing. As well as that, there would often be an orchestra out front, to supply selections before curtain-up, and during the intervals. (2)[18]

In addition to the preference that St. Patrick's showed for the melodramatic fare favoured by the touring companies, it mirrored the variety and eclecticism of a typical fit-up performance. As outlined in chapter one, it was precisely that tradition of melodrama and variety that reformers such as Michael Farrell wished to eradicate. Farrell, Fallon and others advocated stridently for the abandonment of melodrama and variety in favour of more serious-minded and didactic works of realism. As O'Farrell writes, "In the nineteenth century, melodrama was by far the most popular mainstream dramatic form, but by the twentieth century its decline was evident, firstly in the city theatres and some time later in provincial ones" (65). In spite of the efforts of modernist reformers, however, "fit-up companies in both England and Ireland, toured the countryside playing melodrama right into the 1960s, catering for provincial audiences who enjoyed this genre long after its more sophisticated city audiences had moved on" (O'Farrell 65). Accordingly, when McGuigan and others strove to revive St. Patrick's in 1942 they were either oblivious or indifferent to the wave of reform that was sweeping across the amateur theatre movement. Their plan was to relaunch the drama group with a performance of "the same type of Irish play which had been popular for so long" (McGuigan 7), and McGuigan's personal preference was for "'Eily O' Connor', or 'The Lily Of Killarney'… which was a sort of simplified version of

[18] "The Meeting of the Waters" and "Oft in the Stilly Night" are both examples of Thomas Moore's *Irish Melodies*: a multi-volume collection of parlour songs that were popular in both Ireland and England in the nineteenth century. P.J. Matthews writes about hidden layers of political subversion in the melodies in his submission to the University College Dublin 'Scholarcast' series ("Doing Something Irish").

'The Colleen Bawn'" (7). Thus, St. Patrick's appeared set to join the cohort of recalcitrant regional amateur theatre societies that Farrell railed against in the *Bell*. Ultimately, however, St. Patrick's followed a different direction, and for its relaunch it staged *The New Gossoon* (1930) by George Shiels. In spite of being the kind of play that critics such as Kane Archer would later disparage as formally and thematically conservative, *The New Gossoon* was nevertheless a break from the variety and melodrama that was central to the performance history of St. Patrick's. The factors which contributed to that change in direction, outlined below, can add to our understanding of how an essentially middle-class and metropolitan preference for realism and naturalism was disseminated so effectively through the amateur theatre movement.

An Evolving Repertoire

In the opening lines of the first of Michael Farrell's series of articles for the *Bell,* he sets the tone in forthright terms for what would become a running theme in relation to the subject of play choice:

> Enthusiasts frequently wonder why the drama does not flourish in the countryside. They say: 'The Abbey Theatre has been working for many years now. It is true that we do see the country theatre producing *The New Gossoon*, and *Professor Tim* [both by George Shiels]. But we also still see it doing *Peg o' My Heart* [by J. Hartley Manners]. How is it that the country theatre should not do, in addition to these excellent comedies, something better? How comes it that the country theatre, anywhere, can at this date even dream of doing *Peg o' My Heart?* The question is not sensible unless it is rhetorical – because nobody knows the answer. ("The Country Theatre", Oct 1940 79)

For Farrell, the popularity of the drawing room comedy *Peg o' My Heart* was symptomatic of a widespread preference for popular and English entertainment over work of higher artistic merit and of Irish provenance. In Farrell's analysis, the explanation for this trend was 'rhetorical', but perhaps he might have devoted more attention to the question. Yes, those works had broader appeal, and might well have provided evidence of the overbearing influence of English culture in Ireland. However, there were underlying explanations that Farrell might have overlooked in his haste to discard the touring company tradition. We have

already seen through the example of St. Patrick's that melodrama was the dramatic form that people were most familiar with and, presumably therefore, were most skilled in when it came to the prospect of performing plays. O'Farrell informs us that Irish provincial audience members were accustomed to the melodramatic style of acting, and that at one time they might even have considered more naturalistic methods to be evidence of 'bad' acting:

> Thus, when Grattan Dawson acted in *Othello* on a tour with Cooke's company, it took the theatre reviewer of the *Mullingar Guardian* to point out that "we could not offer a better critique upon his style of acting than that supplied us by a gentleman who saw him play *Othello* here: 'He is too natural, too real and seems to *be* the character he represents.'" [emphasis in original] (67)

The review quoted above is from 1851, and O'Farrell acknowledges that "by the 1940s in provincial England (and probably a decade later in rural Ireland), audiences were more familiar with the realist revolution in theatre…" (68). Nevertheless, it foregrounds the different set of skills and horizons of expectation that were attendant upon realism on the one hand, and melodrama on the other, and that were deeply embedded in regional Ireland in relation to the latter. Thus, it wasn't necessarily the case, as Farrell implied, that regional amateur actors and audiences lacked the ability to perform or appreciate works of realism; it might simply have been the case that they were in possession of a quite different set of tools for making and viewing theatre. Those tools – both physical and intellectual – had been honed for decades prior to the arrival of twentieth-century realism and naturalism: country halls had been renovated, stages constructed, instruments purchased, sets built, scripts procured, and costumes sewn. Some of those resources were quite readily adaptable to the production of realistic or naturalistic works, but others were less so. This presented a particular challenge to amateur drama groups that – like the newly reformed St. Patrick's in 1942 – were severely lacking in funds. While the intention of McGuigan and his fellow group members was to stage the kind of melodrama that had been popular with audiences "for so long", the reason for his preference for *The Lily of Killarney* as opposed to an alternative melodrama was simply that "a copy [of the play] was available…" (7). In an echo of the influence of the touring companies, the group produced a series of variety shows to raise funds for the proposed production of *The Lily of Killarney*. Interestingly – and, perhaps in a manner that provides insight into McGuigan's thoughts about the status of variety relative to 'straight' drama – in his account he is careful to frame the variety show fundraisers

as more informal precursors to the official reestablishment of St. Patrick's as a drama group. A one-act play, *Dutch Justice*, was chosen for the drama portion of the first of the variety concerts, once more on the basis of the availability of the script. Without funds, McGuigan and his fellow cast members had to resort to improvisatory methods to acquire set-building materials for the play. They found "a large roll of roofing felt in the belfry of the hall" along with "a few lengths of six inches by one inch flooring" (6), and with those materials constructed a makeshift set. The group was fearful of irreparably altering the materials that they had found in case "questions would be asked" (7), and so the set pieces had to be held in place for the duration of the show by members of the crew.

Operating on an extremely low budget is not an uncommon challenge for a burgeoning drama group, but of greater significance than the lack of funds available to St. Patrick's was the related lack of agency that the group had in the community. An early example of this can be seen in McGuigan's description of the events which led to the initial demise of the group. The society had lapsed somewhat following the outbreak of the Second World War after several prominent members enlisted. The damage that this did to St. Patrick's was compounded when the custodians of the parish hall deconstructed the stage that it used for performances. As McGuigan explains:

> Dancing was having a boom time … so the powers that be decided, without I'm sure any consultation as is usual, to knock down the stage and so create another few feet of dancing space. Those who were taking the stage apart had had little connection with the society, and so had little or no qualms about tackling the job, but to me as a sixteen year old it was very sad to watch the destruction of something which had taken almost forty years to put together. The drop scenes were pulled down and dumped, or even stuffed into holes in the outside walls, to stop draughts, so the desecration was complete. (4)

At sixteen years of age, McGuigan might not have been privy to the decision to deconstruct the stage. Nevertheless, writing his account decades later he still draws attention to a lack of consideration and consultation on the part of those in power in the community. A repeat of this incident would occur a few years later following the production of *The New Gossoon* that marked the revival of St. Patrick's. Having dutifully donated the profits from a successful run to "parish funds", the members of the drama group discovered that the parish priest had given

permission, again without consultation, for their lovingly constructed set to be dismantled and taken by a neighbouring drama society (9).

The effects of the drama society's lack of agency extended to the work that it produced. When McGuigan and his colleagues sought to revive St. Patrick's, they secured the use of the parish hall for the variety shows, thus falling under the watchful eye of the parish priest, Rev. McCann, who held the power to veto the plays that were performed there. Following an intervention by McCann just a day prior to the opening of the first variety show, McGuigan and his fellow group members had to resort to extraordinary measures to ensure that it would go ahead. As McGuigan recalls:

> … we also thought that the one act comedy was cut and dried, with a copy of "Dutch Justice" which we had. Little did we know! … This comedy had been presented on numerous occasions in the past, especially by the boy scouts, and no one had quibbled before, so it was a real shock when Father McCann put a ban on it, after seeing a dress rehearsal. His objection was that a breach of promise case came up, and that divorce was mentioned. This was Saturday and the show was scheduled for Sunday night, so we got another one called "Blundering Barney", and three of us, John Halton, David Mulvenna, and myself, took our copy to the Lead Mines, where we learned it, well most of it, on Sunday afternoon, and put it on stage that night. (6)

Based on McGuigan's reference to the Boy Scout productions of *Dutch Justice,* it seems that he viewed McCann's decision as arbitrary and unjust. Rather than issue a protest, however, he and his colleagues improvised in a way that recalled the touring company performance tradition. O'Farrell points out that better known plays were scripted and learned by fit-up actors, but it was known, and largely accepted, that touring companies would "resort to improvisation if rehearsal time was against the clock" (64). The efforts of McGuigan and his colleagues were awarded and *Blundering Barney* was a success. They subsequently staged several equally popular shows that demonstrated an eclectic range of influences and styles of performance – all anchored by the variety show format:

> Heartened by the success of this venture, we staged a few more similar type shows, with usually a scene from the play "Knocknagow", a few short sketches based on ones we had seen performed in various professional theatres, and the tried and true

> songs of Stephen Foster, for which we used a black make-up composed of burnt cork mixed with olive oil.[19] (7)

Bolstered by those further successes, the group decided to produce a full-length play to officially mark the re-emergence of St. Patrick's as a drama society. Perhaps with a view to avoiding a repeat of the *Dutch Justice* incident, the group members approached McCann's replacement with a proposal to stage a melodrama:

> So we approached Fr. John Murphy who was Parish Priest [sic] at that time, and told him of our aim. I'll always remember that when he asked what play we intended to do, and I replied "The Lily of Killarney", thinking that was a more colourful title than "Eily O'Connor," he said, "But that's an opera". So I was shot down, not for the first time and certainly not for the last. However to his credit a short time later, he came to us with a copy of "The New Gossoon" by George Shiels, and so we were on our way. (7)

Once more, the members of St. Patrick's encountered disapproval of their choice of play by the "powers that be", but this time on the basis of quite different criteria than before. Whereas McCann's objection to *Dutch Justice* was based on its content, in the case of *The Lily of Killarney* Murphy was more concerned with its form. Whether the play is, in fact, a melodrama or an opera is less important than the fact that for Murphy its form was a cause for concern. By assigning Shiels's *The New Gossoon* – a comic staple of the Abbey Theatre – to the group instead, Murphy was acting in the mode of the traditionalists in the amateur movement described in chapters one and two.

While certainly not a serious-minded drama, for St. Patrick's *The New Gossoon* was nevertheless a significant step away from the more locally-oriented tradition of melodrama and variety that had been introduced to regional Ireland by the touring companies. That step brought St. Patrick's in line with more recent developments in theatre, and enabled it to quite literally step outside of its immediate environs via an invitation to compete at the annual Group Theatre Festival in Belfast in 1945 (9). The festival was adjudicated by Lennox

[19] Stephen Collins Foster (1826-1864) was an American songwriter known primarily for his parlour and minstrel music.

Robinson who, according to McGuigan, "wasn't too hard" on St. Patrick's in his feedback, and who placed the group fourth overall. McGuigan writes that Robinson "praised us for our choice of play … and he said that we had made an honest attempt" (11). Later that year, Murphy was replaced as parish priest by Rev. John McCarroll and this led to what McGuigan describes as "perhaps the most exciting and fruitful of my entire years in amateur drama" (13). McCarroll continued Murphy's practice of providing contemporary play scripts and, in a manner that impressed greatly upon McGuigan, he procured a "typewritten copy" of Joseph Tomelty's *Right Again Barnum* (1943) just weeks after a "record run" of the play had finished at the Group Theatre (13). A more significant contribution on McCarroll's part, however, was the active role that he played in promoting and encouraging the drama group's activities in the community. According to McGuigan, "this was perhaps the brightest period for drama in all my experience, with packed halls the norm" (13). Reflecting on the group's popularity at that time, he suggested that "when you have a priest at the helm, support for your efforts seems to come from a much wider circle, and with much less coaxing on the society's part" (14). Before McCarroll too was transferred from the parish, he secured a copy of George Shiels's *Borderwine* (1946) for St. Patrick's. In the years that followed, the group continued on the trajectory that Murphy and McCarroll had set it upon, with a series of plays that had first been produced (often quite recently) by the Group or Abbey theatre companies. Between 1946 and 1955 it produced Walter Macken's *Mungo's Mansion* (1946), MJJ MacKeown's *The Real McCoy* (1928) and *Still Running* (1931), Lynn Doyle's *Love and Land* (1913), and Louis D'Alton's *They Got What They Wanted* (1947). Interestingly, in a manner that foreshadowed Lennox Robinson's advice (referenced in chapter one) that rural groups should experiment with a West End success or an English farce ("What Play Shall We Do Next?" 8), on occasion St. Patrick's produced English or American comedies and thrillers. It staged *Troubled Bachelors* by AJ Stanley in 1945; Arnold Ridley's *The Ghost Train* (1923) and *Peg O' My Heart* in 1954; and Mary Hayley Bell's *Duet for Two Hands* (1947) and, Ridley's *Easy Money* (1948) in 1955. An exception to the trend of producing twentieth-century works of realism, comedy, and thrillers arose in 1956, when the society returned to the touring company tradition with an anniversary production of *The Shaughraun.*

A Form of Control.

The evolution of St. Patrick's from the revival of the group in 1942 to the anniversary production of *The Shaughraun* in 1955 affirms some of the core points presented in the

previous chapter. Firstly, it provides further evidence of the significance of play choice for amateur societies and their communities. As the censorship imposed on *Dutch Justice* and *The Lilly of Killarney* shows, for local decision makers – in this case, the parish priests – the appropriateness of a play was not merely a question of content; it was also a question of form. Chapters one and two show that the push for realism led by Farrell and others in Ireland was part of a broader, international trend in theatre in the twentieth century. Broadly speaking, at the turn of the century realism and naturalism were advanced by an educated and privileged cohort of western society as civilising counterpoints to melodrama and other popular forms. Murphy and McCarroll advanced that cause in Newtownards, presumably with a view to improving the community, but while also aligning themselves ideologically with an international bourgeoise. It is important to note that the pre-existing popularity of melodrama and variety in regional towns and villages had developed from a similar process of interaction between local communities and the outside world. The companies that toured Ireland from the 1700s and that introduced those forms to the regions were, as Helen Burke astutely observes, sites of negotiation between an English, metropolitan tradition of performance and a "no less vital but subordinate native Irish performance tradition" (120). For Burke, "the fractured, bicultural productions that came out of this contact zone are better read as evidence of an emergent Irish modernism rather than an emergent Irish nationalism" (120). The relocation of the emergence of modernism suggested by Burke – from the late nineteenth to the early eighteenth centuries – enables a reassessment of the rise of realism and naturalism in the amateur theatre movement in Ireland in the twentieth century. It suggests that those forms – as disseminated via the repertoires of the Abbey and Group theatres – were not new but, rather, 're'-newed ways for amateur groups to negotiate with the changes attendant to modernity. Popular, accessible, and light-hearted though they often were, melodrama and variety had enabled communities to negotiate an Irish modernism prior to the comparatively belated arrival of realism and naturalism. Two questions that then arise from this consideration are as follows: what distinguished the particular kind of Irish modernism that realism constructed from what had preceded it, and why was that particular form so appealing to the contemporary elite? A way of concisely addressing the vast implications of these questions is to consider the way that it relates specifically to the context of St. Patrick's and Newtownards. Pilkington points out that one of the core aims of the Irish Literary Theatre was to create an audience of spectators that "would behave not like a crowd but like individual citizens – maturely suspending their personal circumstances and vested interests within the context of an over-arching national ideal" (17). Pilkington also observes that the

Irish theatre initiative of the late 1890s coincided "with widespread attempts in England and in Ireland to curb the extent to which theatre was perceived as a site for unruly social behaviour" (18). The work of the Abbey and Group theatres was part of a nation-building and citizen-forming project that had consolidated the hegemonic status of elites like Murphy and McCarroll in society. In contrast to the potential for unruliness and unpredictability attached to more popular forms such as melodrama, the modernist plays produced by those theatres demanded a compliant and attentive mode of spectatorship that worked towards universality. In the same way that the thematic focus of those plays was on the universality of the human condition, their production and performance demanded a standardized approach which offered a universal audience experience. Though not lacking in insight and entertainment, such universality foregoes the possibility of accounting for the discrete experiences of individual communities and for the different rates and ways in which those communities have adapted to broader social, political, and cultural changes. That potential was present in the more adaptable form of variety, and it could be seen in the performance occasions mounted by St. Patrick's – even as the group was in the process of adapting to a more modernist repertoire.

A Variety of Conventions.

It is worth noting again that McGuigan draws a distinction between the fundraising variety concerts and the production that would officially signal the revival of St. Patrick's. Evidently, for him and his fellow group members, variety was not an appropriate form for a legitimate drama group and, accordingly, he outlines contrasting preparations, approaches and audience expectations for the variety shows and the 'straight' drama productions. The group's plan was that the first variety show would feature "a one-act comedy, a few lightning sketches, and some singing items" (McGuigan 6). For the musical portion of the event, McGuigan drew a cast of performers from his friends and relatives, and he surmised confidently that "it presented little difficulty as we were always singing" (6). Meanwhile, he viewed the planned performance of *Dutch Justice* as similarly "cut and dried" (6). The relaxed approach evident in the preparations extended to the role of the audience: rather than charge a set admission fee, the group "passed around a cap" at the end of the event, and the forty pounds that was collected was a measure of its success (7). In contrast, for the first official production by the revived St. Patrick's society – which, owing to the intervention of Murphy, turned out to be *The New Gossoon* – the audience was charged an admission fee prior to entry. In contrast to

the blasé attitude towards the prospect of performing *Dutch Justice*, McGuigan determined that *Knocknagow* would be "too difficult to stage in its entirety", and the group opted instead for what McGuigan judged to be the easier option of *The Lily of Killarney* (7). The fact that McGuigan sought Murphy's approval to stage *The Lily of Killarney* prior to going into production was a further measure of the more stringent overall approach that the group adopted. The two types of event outlined by McGuigan were executed according to a contrasting set of what Kershaw refers to as "rhetorical conventions" (26). Building on the definition outlined by Elizabeth Burns in *Theatricality* (1972), Kershaw writes that rhetorical conventions[20]:

> … produce the signals that enable us to classify different shows as belonging to the same genre or form, and to distinguish between different genres and forms. Clearly, too, rhetorical conventions are not confined solely to the performed show itself. They also structure the gathering and dispersal phases of performance, though there they tend to contribute less to the construction of genre or form, and more to the particular type of spectator/audience role that the event requires. (26)

The practice of requesting a voluntary fee at the end of the variety performances demanded little from audience members in terms of prior commitment of money or time. It was thus a clever sales technique in the way that it accounted for doubts about the quality of the shows. However, it also held subtle implications for the respective roles of the audience members and the performers. Firstly, it positioned each audience of a given performance as the foremost arbiter of quality and value: whether a performance was a success or not depended solely upon the reaction of a particular audience on a particular night. This encouraged the drama group to tailor its performances directly to a local and immediate audience. In contrast, the payment method for 'straight' drama productions such as *The New Gossoon* indicated a different set of relations between audience and performers. By paying an admission fee prior to entry, audience members were investing their money in the expectation of a certain degree

[20] Burns writes that: "Between actors and spectators there is an implicit agreement that the actors will be allowed to conjure up a fictitious world, that their actions and words will be meaningful and affective (not instrumental and effective) within arbitrarily defined bounds of place, time, situation and character. This agreement underwrites the devices of exposition that enable the audience to understand the play. These conventions of which the dramatist takes account in writing the play, the producer in directing it and the actors in performing it can be described as *rhetorical*." [italics in original] (31)

of quality and value. With this method of payment, the audience loses a certain degree of agency. Some reassurance is provided, however, in the form of a tacit agreement that the drama group will adhere to established standards and conventions of dramatic performance; in other words, that it will be professional in its approach. McGuigan and his fellow performers signalled their intention to adhere to those conventions by placing the straight drama productions under the banner of St. Patrick's Dramatic Society. The plays that the group chose to perform were a further signal of the type of experience that the audience should expect. For plays like *The New Gossoon*, the appropriate conventions of performance were established by the professional, metropolitan theatre companies that first produced them. Those conventions not only dictated the form of performance that the audience could expect to see, but the role that it was expected to adhere to. While, as suggested above, that role demanded a high level of compliance and attentiveness, it also granted a metropolitan cache that made it appealing.

By adhering to the conventions of metropolitan theatre companies, St. Patrick's offered the public in Newtownards a taste of the experience of attending a metropolitan theatre house. If this brought a sample of a more modern and sophisticated lifestyle to Newtownards, then it did so at the expense of a performance that catered more directly to the local and discrete experience of life in the community. Arguably, the standardization of the audience experience that the conventions of professional theatre companies aspired towards were a reflection of the better standard of living that modernization promised. That promise is underpinned by a materialistic logic which suggests that anything that is not standardized is below standard. From a professional, metropolitan perspective, the St. Patrick's variety shows could be seen as simply having low, or even no, standards of preparation and performance. However, they had the potential to connect with their audiences in unique, discrete, and transient ways. For example, as referenced above, the members of St. Patrick's had to resort to improvisatory measures to construct a set for *Blundering Barney,* and the flats that they used for the set were held in place by the cast and crew. This led, somewhat inevitably, to problems on the night of the performance:

> One of our sketches was going so well that one of our scenery propper uppers, either started to applaud, or blow his nose or something like that, but anyhow those of us who were on stage, suddenly found those very heavy flats falling towards us. Needless to say we hopped smartly out of the way, including one of our cast who was

> supposed to have gout, and was sitting with his heavily bandaged foot propped up on a chair. (7)

Unplanned calamities such as this run contrary to professional standards of production and they signal a breakdown in the tacit agreement that the drama group will successfully execute a pre-planned performance. In the context of the variety show, however, this unexpected occurrence was welcomed rather than rejected by the audience. This was in large part due to a piece of improvisation by one of the actors:

> The flats crashed down on the platform raising clouds of dust in the process, but the situation was saved by David Mulvenna who was noted for his ready wit, and who quipped when the dust cleared, "That's these pre-fabs, you can't trust them". The same member also raised gales of laughter when in the same sketch in the part of that gout sufferer I just mentioned, he was wearing a bald wig which looked really authentic, and he was supposed to say "Keep my hair on, why my head is as bald as a billiard ball". But noticing his father, who was also very short of hair, in the front row, he changed the script by saying, "Keep my hair on, why my head is as bald as Barney Mulvenna's". (7)

Mulvenna's improvisation succeeded because it resonated directly with audience members in a way that affirmed their membership of the local community. The actor referenced 'pre-fabs' – the prefabricated aluminium houses that were introduced in Britain in response to the reduction in material resources that resulted from the Second World War – and a member of the local community who happened to be his father. Through those references, he employed what Burns terms 'authenticating conventions', which:

> … prevail for the interaction of the actors as characters in the play. They 'model' social conventions in use at a specific time and in a specific place or milieu. … These conventions suggest a total and external code of values and norms of conduct from which the speech and action of the play are drawn. Their function is, therefore, to *authenticate* the play. [italics in original] (32)

In *The Politics of Performance* Kershaw profiles four community-based theatre groups and practitioners, one from each decade ranging from the 1960s to the 1990s. According to

Kershaw, the authenticating conventions that those groups employed were "always drawn, in one way or another, from the community which was their context", and "almost always dealt with hidden or obscure histories, relationships, issues and problems which were important to the culture from which they were drawn" (246). For Kershaw, the most crucial function of this material was the way that it:

> …enabled the companies to introduce oppositional ideologies into the discourse of performance, for the material, having been suppressed by the dominant socio-political order (and by the community as part of that order), was implicitly critical of that order. As we have seen, by skilful use of these signs the companies also could introduce more explicitly subversive ideological perspectives to the community, as part of an agitation for change. (246)

Kershaw's focus is on the radical and socially-conscious community theatre that arose as part of the international counter-culture movements of the 1960s, hence the emphasis that he places on the potential for authenticating conventions to challenge the dominant socio-political order. The members of St. Patrick's were not explicitly concerned with introducing subversive ideological perspectives to the community. On the contrary, the repeated capitulation of the group to the interventions of successive parish priests could be viewed as evidence of an unwillingness to challenge the at times repressive social hierarchy that was in place at that time. Nevertheless, the authenticating conventions employed in the variety show had the effect of, in Kershaw's words, "celebrating their source by raising its public importance through performance" (246).

The prioritisation of the local community that was central to the conventions of the variety shows situated them as opportunities for members of regional communities to become producers as opposed to imitators of culture. In this way, they were examples of ways in which community-oriented, local performances could resist or subvert the homogenizing influence of a metropolitan-centred process of cultural modernization. That potential may not have been fully realised or even recognised by the members of St. Patrick's. However, the variety shows provided a kind of audience experience that was valued by some in the amateur theatre movement. In a preview of the 1959 All-Ireland, for example, Aileen Coughlan described an encounter that she had with an older man on the street. He wanted to know, "if this festival was going to be any good?":

> I said it ought to be the best yet, and was he going to be there? No, he said, and then went on to tell me why. … There was nothing at all thought of the finicky character who merely repeated the author's words and hadn't one of his own to add. And, if the villain was a little unsure of his legs as well as his lines, so much the better – there was always the hope he'd trip over something and fall flat on his face, which, I understand, was the making of any performance. We were all a lot of nambie-pambies these days, and if he wanted that sort of thing he'd go to the pictures and get it poured over him. Unless I could promise him a tumble or two, he said, he'd stay at home; and, since it must be many a long day since anyone fell flat on his amateur face, I left him to his memories of what he called "real amateur acting" ("Curtain Up!" 8)

Coughlan's intention with this anecdote was to highlight the increased professionalism at amateur festivals that had resulted from a steady improvement in standards. However, it also draws attention to the increased standardization that was attendant to a more professional approach. The improvement of standards was a primary concern for commentators, adjudicators, and practitioners, in particular after the establishment of the All-Ireland when those standards could be centrally judged and disseminated. In the same way that competing at festivals exposed groups to a wider repertoire of plays, it introduced them to different methodologies and conventions, most of which were established by theatre professionals. Thus, for Coughlan the process of standardization was a necessary precursor to a wider process of professionalization of the amateur theatre movement. For the man in Coughlan's story however, the epitome of professionalization in modern culture was film: a medium that guaranteed a standardized experience that was free from unplanned errors. The price of that standardization was a product that demanded a passive audience and that held as much appeal to a global perspective as it did to a local one. Thus, both the best and worst characteristic of standardization was that it guaranteed a particular experience for the audience member. If audience members were reassured about the quality of a production, then the price of that reassurance was passive acceptance of performances that would only ever present a generalised and global experience of life.

Protective Acts.

Based on the analysis outlined in chapter one, it appears that the evolution of the St. Patrick's repertoire was echoed on a much broader scale throughout the amateur theatre movement. That process of change was both empowering and limiting for drama groups and their communities. The performance of modernist plays – whether works of realism or more avant-garde material – enabled amateur drama groups to experiment with new and modern identities in ways that empowered audience members to do the same. The authenticating conventions of those works spoke to universal values centred around individual freedoms and identity. At the same time, their rhetorical conventions enabled communities to capture a modicum of a metropolitan lifestyle, if only in many cases for a single night. In response to the influence of prominent reformers such as Farrell, primarily middle-class elites advanced the cause of a bourgeois and metropolitan form in their communities. If, based on McGuigan's account, that process appeared somewhat coercive in Newtownards then it should be noted that the members of St. Patrick's were willing subjects. McGuigan provides no evidence of any resistance on the part of the group to the changes to the repertoire imposed by the parish priests. On the contrary, he describes his pleasure at how well received the group's new direction was and his delight at the new opportunities (such as participation at drama festivals) that it led to. The society discarded a vibrant, accessible and participatory performance tradition, but they also gained access to some of the great works of Irish and international theatre. Furthermore, as the evidenced in the previous chapter, the aspirational and materialistic drive that fuelled the broader processes of modernisation in Ireland led to ancillary improvements to the infrastructure and amenities of communities: streets were tidied, flowers planted, clubs and festivals founded, and theatres were built by local volunteers that were eager to augment the lifestyle that was available to them. That being noted, the loss of variety and melodrama entailed the loss of the kind of potential that was evident in the *Blundering Barney* performance: that is, the potential to connect with, foreground, and celebrate community life on a local level. While in the case of *Blundering Barney* that potential was realised as light-hearted relief and entertainment, its true importance would become clearer in cases where the elision of a local perspective posed a threat to the community. An example of such a case was the St. Patrick's production of *The Shaughraun* in 1956, which marked the fiftieth anniversary of the drama society.

The Shaughraun is a skilled rendering of some of the most effective tropes of Boucicault's melodramas: letters, lovers and cliff-hangers abound as the eponymous stage Irishman Conn 'The Shaughraun' helps his friends to escape the clutches of the evil villain Kinchela. St. Patrick's staged the play to mark the anniversary of the society while also acknowledging the tradition of variety and melodrama in the community. As McGuigan states, "we thought we had to do something special, and what could be more special than staging the first ever play to be staged by the St. Patrick's Amateur Dramatic Society…" (21). As seemed to be the case with many of the productions described by McGuigan, the production process was beset by problems such as scheduling clashes, difficulties with seating and ticketing, and even a snow storm on opening night. In addition to those setbacks, McGuigan discovered that: "A few of our misfortunes but not all, were explained when we learned that some people had been worried that the play could be deemed to be insensitive politically, being set during the Fenian uprising of the middle 1800s" (23). The Fenian Brotherhood had ceased operations by the end of the nineteenth century, but the term Fenian was still used in Northern Ireland, often in a derogatory manner, to refer to Republicans. Thus, it is somewhat understandable that a reference to the Fenians might raise questions in the wider community in Newtownards, a predominantly Protestant town. Arguably, however, *The Shaughraun* is as much a vehicle for the conventions of melodrama that it is for an overt political agenda.[21] In *The Melodramatic Imagination* (1995) Peter Brooks argues that at the core of stage melodrama there is "an intense emotional and ethical drama based on the manichaestic struggle of good and evil … Their conflict suggests the need to recognise and confront evil, to combat and expel it, to purge the social order" (12). In *The Shaughraun,* good and evil are elemental forces that manifest themselves primarily through individuals rather than through particular nations or nationalities. The oppressiveness of the English army campaign against the Fenians is balanced through the presentation of the inherently good English soldier Captain Molineaux, while the heroics of Conn are counterbalanced by the villainy of his fellow Irishman Kinchella. In this and other ways, the play deftly works towards a neutrality and universality that aided its unprecedented popularity when it premiered in New York in 1874.[22]

[21] In *Theatre and Globalization* (2009), Lonergan argues that "Boucicault's Irish work is typically received as reflexive rather universal. … It is therefore not the case that Boucicault's plays have one 'correct' meaning that might alienate any potential audience, but that they invite many interpretations, none of which may necessarily be privileged" (94).

[22] In *Dion Boucicault: Irish identity on stage* (2012) Deirdre McFeely writes that following its premiere in Wallack's theatre on 14 November *The Shaughraun* became "the longest-running show at Wallack's that

In spite of the careful avoidance of an overt political stance in the script of *The Shaughraun*, a consideration of what Kershaw terms its "contextuality of performance" in Newtownards points towards the potential that the play had to arouse discontent in the community. According to Kershaw, this is "the propensity of performance to achieve different meanings/readings according to the context in which it occurs" (33). As Kershaw himself acknowledges, the idea that performances have different meanings in different contexts is hardly new, but it is nevertheless crucial to an understanding of the unique occasions that arise from performances in individual communities, particularly in response to the authenticating conventions of a piece. Boucicault's plays had a performance history that was unique to the region and that might have affected their reception in Newtownards. The international popularity of Irish political melodramas such as *The Shaughraun* in the mid-to-late nineteenth century corresponded with a resurgence of nationalist feeling in Northern Ireland in that period and, as Mark Phelan points out, in Belfast the performance of Irish political melodramas gained notoriety through what were known as 'Irish Nights'. The rhetorical conventions that developed during Irish Nights included protests, interventions and even physical confrontations between rival Protestant and Catholic factions situated in the audience ("Modernity, Geography and Historiography" 143). Phelan quotes the Ulster actor Whitford Kane, who in his memoirs recalled his performance in *The Shaughraun* at an Irish Night in the 1890s:

> The play was generally turned into a battle between the religious factions. Naturally, it was a nervous play for the actors … the gallery policeman would conveniently turn his back and see nothing if an odd rivet should find its way there. Cracking the skull of a fellow citizen during a performance of *The Shaughraun* was hardly a misdemeanour. (Phelan 143)

The Irish Nights remind us of the unique contextuality of performance in Northern Ireland, both before and after partition. The nights had ceased to exist by 1956, but Farrell's report on theatre in Ulster for *The Bell* suggests that certain plays could still act as indicators of cultural identity within communities in Northern Ireland. According to Farrell, almost any town of

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decade: the 118 evening performances and twenty-five matinées grossed just under a quarter of a million dollars, and receipts for the Thanksgiving Day matinée at $2,250 were the highest ever recorded in New York for a single performance" (77).

any size would have at least two amateur dramatic societies, one Protestant and the other Catholic. Farrell observed that those groups drew from different repertoires: "In general, the Catholic Society will do the less important Abbey plays, also farces, 'Irish' farces if possible, if not, just farces. …The Protestant Society will do mostly West-End plays, never an 'Irish' play…" ("Drama in Ulster Now" 87). Farrell paints a picture of communities firmly divided along religious, social, and cultural lines. His analysis also suggests that in Northern Ireland there was a further aspect to the process of identity formation that – as explored in the preceding chapter – centred around the plays that amateur groups chose to perform. In the context of what was evidently a contested social milieu, and in a predominantly Protestant town, St. Patrick's was presented with the possibility that its production of *The Shaughraun*, though not intended as such, could be interpreted by unionist members of the community as a contentious assertion of a nationalist outlook. In response, McGuigan and his fellow group members "went through the script from cover to cover, and altered every line, which we felt might cause offence" (23).

The St. Patrick's response to the rumours of discontent in the community ran counter to a central convention of modern theatre practice: that is, to remain strictly faithful to the play script. Seemingly aware of this, McGuigan expressed misgivings about editing *The Shaughraun* that arose even decades after the production. After attending a performance of the play by Bangor Drama Club in the 1980s, he ruefully reflected that, in contrast to the St. Patrick's production the group had staged an unedited version of the play (23). As outlined above, the members of St. Patrick's took the business of producing plays in the society's name seriously and, evidently, McGuigan did not approach the task of editing *The Shaughraun* lightly. Why, then, did he and his fellow members undermine their newly established commitment to globally accepted conventions of theatre? Put another way, why were they so wilfully amateur in their approach? An explanation can be found through a closer examination of the unique set of rhetorical conventions pertaining to the anniversary production. In the summer prior to the planned run of the play at Christmas, the members of St. Patrick's renovated the local hall with the help of volunteers, some of whom were not even members of the drama society but who wished to help nonetheless. A range of improvements were made, including the installation of lighting and window boxes, painting, and the construction of new toilet facilities and a set for the play (21). Those developments assigned a unique role to many of the audience members. In contrast to a more conventional role as passive consumers, a greater portion of the audience than usual had played an active

role in the production of the play. Thus, the performance of *The Shaughraun* was not only a commemoration the community's past, it was a celebration of a unified present. An important feature of that unity was that it was not restricted to the Catholic members of the community. In a striking passage, McGuigan recalls how he acquired scaffolding for the renovations to the hall:

> I remember Billy Auld and myself going to the Orange Demonstration field, which as far as I remember was off the Movilla Road, on the morning of the 12th of July, and asking Gus Edgar who was a local building contractor, and also a leading Orangeman, for the loan of tubular scaffolding, to enable us to reach the very high walls and ceiling. He readily agreed, and so we were on our way[23]. (21)

Based on Farrell's account of the cultural dynamics of drama societies in Northern Ireland, and considering the contentiousness of events such as Irish Nights, it is surprising that a local 'leading Orangeman' would contribute to the production of an 'Irish' play. What is equally surprising is that this act of cooperation occurred on 12 July: the date when Orangemen traditionally mark the anniversary of the Battle of the Boyne (1690) and sectarian tensions in Northern Ireland are at their highest. In other words, this act of cooperation presents a counterpoint to broader accounts of Northern Ireland, such as Farrell's, that depict it as a society mired in internecine conflict.

The production of *The Shaughraun* adhered to a set of rhetorical conventions that prioritised local consensus and unity over globally accepted conventions of theatre. This left the group open to accusations of bad practice, both as theatre makers and as Catholics in Northern Irish society: not only did it desecrate the play text but it capitulated to local political pressure. From the founding of the Northern Ireland state in 1922, successive Unionist government administrations had imposed an oppressive and discriminatory regiome. An example of that oppression in the cultural realm was the insistence on the part of the Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts (CEMA) – established in 1943 – that the British national anthem should be played at all theatrical performances and other events

[23] The Loyal Orange Institution, or Orange Order, is a Protestant fraternity order based primarily in Northern Ireland. The order's name comes from Protestant King William of Orange who defeated Catholic King James at the Battle of the Boyne in July 1960. The order holds seventeen or eighteen principal parades in Northern Ireland on an annual basis on 12 July.

that it sponsored, with the exception of art exhibitions. For (predominantly Catholic) nationalists in Northern Ireland, this policy was, as Pilkington succinctly puts it, "a potent symbol of alienation" (*Theatre and the State* 171). Arguably, by responding immediately to the slightest suggestion that *The Shaughraun* might cause offence to unionists in Newtownards, the members of St. Patrick's – a Catholic drama society – reinforced their subaltern role in the community. Notwithstanding the validity of that critique, the St. Patrick's production of *The Shaughraun* can be better understood as what Owen Kelly terms, in *Community, Art and the State* (1984) a 'protective act'. According to Kelly:

> The self-directed and internally controlled activities of living communities can take two forms: the *protective* and the *expansive*. Protective acts will aim to protect, nourish and maintain those minimum social meanings and resources without which community would be impossible. Protective action, therefore, covers many of the areas in which community arts and community work take place: the maintenance of reasonable living conditions, the satisfactory provision of entitlements and services, and the establishment and maintenance of basic communal facilities. (51)

The production of *The Shaughraun* corresponded to Kelly's definition of protective action in a number of ways. Firstly, it brought members of the community together to share a common experience. Secondly, it acted as a focal point for the renovation of a communal facility: the local hall. Thirdly, it prioritised the unity of the local community in a way that ran counter to the conventions of both theatre and society. Whether the action of editing the text was one of reconciliation or capitulation, it produced a bespoke production that was tailored to what the members of St.Patrick's judged to be the specifically local requirements of the situation.

A problem with protective acts is that they can be used to establish or enforce consensus in a way that doesn't allow space for dissenting voices, innovation, or potentially contentious but progressive ideas. This is particularly concerning in cases where a minority of members of a community is being repressed. Enabling and encouraging positive change is the task of expansive acts which, according to Kelly:

> …move beyond the determinist fallacy of seeing people *solely* as the products of a given, and pre-existing culture, and take into account their role as co-authors of that culture. People are constrained within limitations, but they are capable of changing

> and expanding those limitations; of pushing against them and making them move. (51)

An expansive action on the part of St. Patrick's might have explored why the members of the society responded so readily to mere rumours of unionist discontent, or it might also have interrogated the subaltern role of the members of the drama group: not only as Catholics in Northern Ireland, but as marginalised members of the community of Catholics in Newtownards. The aim of an expansive act of this kind would be to ultimately, in Kelly's words, change "the specific constraints under which they live" (51). Clearly, protective acts such as the production of *The Shaughraun* were conservative in their aims and could quite easily be critiqued as a symptom of a lack of agency or resources. In spite of those limitations, however, their importance to societies like St. Patrick's becomes clear if we consider the broader changes that were taking place in Irish theatre and society. The flourishing of regional festivals and the establishment of the All-Ireland enabled the consolidation of a repertoire and set of conventions that was shaped by adjudicators and commentators such as Ria Mooney, Mícheál Ó hAodha, Michael Farrell and Aileen Coughlan. Drama groups competing at festivals were expected to adhere to those conventions in order to achieve success, and they adapted their repertoires and methodologies accordingly. From the point of view of influential figures such as Gabriel Fallon and Lennox Robinson, that process of adaptation was necessary in order to, as they saw it, 'improve' the overall standard of amateur theatre. A troubling feature of that process, however, was the extent to which it encouraged an island-wide homogenisation and standardisation of plays and performances. Perhaps it was that homogenising process that the man in conversation with Aileen Coughlan was implicitly critiquing in his desire for a missed line or a fall on stage. Although protective acts like *The Shaughraun* foreclosed opportunities for communities like Newtownards to interrogate their internal social meanings, they nevertheless demonstrated a capacity to resist the homogenous cultural forms and conventions that proliferated as the twentieth century progressed.

- Conclusion -

Through an analysis of St. Patrick's Dramatic Society, this chapter has explored the potential for locally-oriented drama societies to enact performances that resisted the hegemonic spread of a centrally-led, metropolitan culture. Such acts of resistance are, as a consequence of their

orientation towards the local, difficult to trace in written records. Drama groups that largely remained within the surrounds of their localities are rarely referred to in publications and, in cases where they are, they are often lampooned as anachronistic adherents to poor standards and outmoded approaches to performance. Their prioritisation of local values and preference for outdated forms is seen, not as a result of conscious decision making, but as a wilful or ignorant denial of progress. For example, in a fictional account of a meeting of members of a regional amateur drama society written by O'Farrell and referenced in the introduction to this chapter, the local acts as a force that undermines authority and logic with comic results.[24] In the account, an amateur historian suggests that the drama society should perform a play about a local historical figure, Peadar Nall. His proposal is rejected, however, when a member of the committee reveals the 'local' knowledge that "her grandfather told her he slept with a widow-woman from Nenagh. (Peadar, not the granddaddy)" (23). The historian's idea is rejected because in a local context the institutional authority of the historical record falls subject to the iconoclastic power of local knowledge. Similarly, a "local man of letters" at the meeting "was agreed with in everything he declared – until he accused Mary Reilly of reading her script from the skillet during a performance of 'Sive' a decade ago" (23). Once more, the authority of an institution – in this case education as embodied in the man of letters – falls subject to the imperative to uphold the reputation of a member of the community. The article is intended as a piece of light-hearted fun, but it nevertheless reveals the peripheral status of regional communities in Irish society and, in parallel fashion, the amateur in Irish theatre. This is, perhaps, most apparent in the passage where the society chooses a play to perform:

> The choice of play brought the most lively discussion of the evening. No mention of *Oedipus Rex*, *Miss Julie* or *The Caretaker*. 'That wouldn't go' was the gut reaction to proposals for any work unheard of by the most vociferous. (i.e. anything other than plays by O'Casey, Keane or Logan. Logan was the local fellow who 'wrote powerful stuff altogether'). Someone said 'The audience gets the theatre it deserves.' That sounded well. And a Logan play was decided upon. One about manufacturing and selling poteen to raise funds for a set of jersies [sic] for the local camogie team. (23)

[24] An earlier example of a parody of Irish amateur theatre societies is an essay by Emily Hughes that appears in the December 1939 edition of *The Irish Monthly*. Like O'Farrell, Hughes outlines an account of a fictional amateur drama group ("Amateur Drama").

The influence of melodrama has been identified in the work of O'Casey and Keane, and the implication here is that those authors are appealing to a group of amateurs that does not have an appreciation for more complex forms.[25] Furthermore, the subject matter of the play by the local author is used to foreground the triviality of local issues and concerns. In short, the article suggests that when measured against the work of professionals, the output of amateurs lacks authority. This is a viewpoint that even some amateurs in Irish theatre might be willing to accept. However, a concerning aspect to the article is the suggestion that the desires, priorities, and lives of the small town 'locals' are somehow of less consequence than those of their metropolitan counterparts. It is that suggestion that foregrounds the importance of performative acts of resistance on a local level. St. Patrick's mounted occasions with conventions that resonated directly with members of the community. If not quite conscious acts of cultural resistance or revolt, those performances were purposefully local 'protective acts' that prioritised the values and tastes of the community. They were also, intentionally or otherwise, definitively amateur in the way that they disregarded standardised conventions of theatre. For adjudicators and writers like O'Farrell, an absence of conformity to professional conventions on the part of amateur societies constituted a failure. What this chapter suggests, however, is that by refusing or even failing to conform to widely accepted conventions and standards, groups like St. Patrick's mounted amateur occasions that could instead be seen as acts of resistance. Chapter one shows that a standardisation of the repertoire and of conventions occurred at amateur drama festivals alongside the modernisation and increased urbanisation of Irish society in the 1950s and 1960s.[26] In an amateur theatre movement and a society where the authority to set standards was increasingly centralised, it was important to perform the possibility of resisting those standards and of affirming the agency of individual communities. If that potential was of some importance in the context of a rapidly modernizing society wherein traditional values and networks were changing, then as we have seen through the analysis of the St.Patrick's production of *The Shaughraun* out, it was of considerably greater importance in cases where a more imminent threat to the community was present. The following chapter continues the focus on such cases following chapter, with

[25] James Moran's *The Theatre of Sean O'Casey* (2013) has sections dedicated to the respective influences of the Music Hall and Dion Boucicault on the playwright's work. Moran argues that while O'Casey later distanced himself from Boucicault as a source of inspiration, "in reality the Dublin dramas are suffused with admiration for the earlier playwright" (52).

[26] In *Ireland: A Social and Cultural History* (2004) Terence Brown points out that the overall population of Dublin rose from 472,935 in 1936 to 595,288 in 1961.

a similarly detailed account and analysis of a single case study, the '71 Players: an amateur drama society founded at one of the most intense periods of the Northern Ireland Troubles in Derry. If St. Patrick's in Newtownards grants insight into the role of protective acts during times of potential threat to a community, then the example of the '71 Players adds to our understanding of that role at a time when a threat was clearly present, thus augmenting our knowledge of the contribution made by amateur drama societies on a community level.

Chapter Three

Local Insiders:
The ’71 Players, Derry.

- Introduction -

The series of civil rights marches that took place in Derry in late 1968 and early 1969 are widely accepted as the starting point of the Northern Ireland Troubles. Those marches pressed for an end to gerrymandering, a fair allocation of housing and local government jobs for Catholics, and ‘one man, one vote’ in local elections. Following the partition of Ireland in 1921, the Unionist government of Northern Ireland abolished proportional representation, resulting in a Unionist-controlled corporation in the predominantly Catholic city of Derry. As the proportion of Catholics in the city increased in the decades following partition, the ward boundaries were redrawn a number of times in order to retain Unionist control of the corporation (Ó Dochartaigh xii). Only ratepayers could vote in local elections which meant that, for example, one-third of those of voting age in the Catholic Bogside area in 1964 did not have a vote (Ó Dochartaigh xii). In an analysis of Catholic grievances in Northern Ireland in the 1960s and 1970s, Denis O’Hearn concludes that there was “overwhelming evidence from the 1971 census that discrimination in employment was the normal state of affairs during the period under review” (O’Hearn 442). O’ Hearn outlines a number of statistics to support his claim, one of which is that in 1968 only thirty percent of Derry’s administrative, clerical and technical employees were Catholics. Thus, the marches were a response to decades of institutionalised discrimination on the part of successive Unionist administrations. What began as a civil rights campaign, however, rapidly descended into a war that affected every aspect of the lives of people in Northern Ireland. Theatre was no exception in this regard, and this chapter focuses on an amateur theatre society, the ’71 Players, founded in Derry in the midst of the conflict in 1971.

It might appear at first glance that a society such as the ’71 Players, which emerged in the context of a war, would represent an exception to the conventions of a typical drama society. However, the extraordinary social circumstances from which the group emerged heightened the need for functions that have been identified in the previous chapter as being

central to the role played by amateur drama societies in communities. The Troubles brought international attention to Derry and Northern Ireland, and with that attention came various attempts to analyse and problematise what was taking place there. Those hypotheses, formulated from a global vantage point, often contradicted the perspectives and experiences of people on a local level. In a continuation of the theoretical approach followed in previous chapters, this chapter frames the ’71 Players as a point of negotiation between global and local cultural influences. Although the group emerged in some of the most violent years of the Troubles, the ’71 Players was similar to the amateur drama societies profiled in previous chapters in so far as it was subject to the material and social effects of modernization. Among those effects was a heightened awareness of an idealised, middle-class and metropolitan lifestyle. Participation in the ’71 Players – whether as a member or spectator – formed part of an aspirational drive on the part of the community towards that lifestyle: a drive that was all the more vital in light of the material, social, and cultural deprivation resulting from the Troubles. Thus, like Tuam Theatre Guild and the Bart Players, the ’71 Players enabled performances of modernity and prosperity – even if those performances most often reflected the aspirations of the community rather than the reality. In an echo of St. Patrick’s Dramatic Society in Newtownards, those performances took the form of what Kelly terms “protective acts”, the primary goal of which were to consolidate rather than question the established conventions of the community, and of society in general. The protective acts performed by the ’71 Players were characteristic of the amateur theatre movement as a whole and, with that in mind, this chapter questions the role of the movement in galvanising hierarchical and potentially repressive societal structures, particularly at a time when society was failing in many ways in Northern Ireland. This chapter suggests that although expansive acts which challenge commonly held and destructive assumptions might be seen as the ideal function of artistic practice, we should not overlook the equally valid contribution of protective action. To do so would be to discount the vulnerabilities, desires, and aspirations that constitute life for a significant portion of the public. This chapter shows that even within the formally and ideologically conservative scope of protective acts, there is the capacity to resist global cultural influences in a manner that prioritises the local, lived experiences of people at a grassroots level.

In a continuation of the materialist theoretical approach taken in previous chapters, this chapter proceeds on the basis that economic interests are central to a consideration of the function and role of amateur drama societies and, more broadly, of the amateur theatre

movement. The hypothesis is that we can gain a better understanding of the role of amateur theatre in communities if we focus on the opportunities for material gain that it presented. Those opportunities did not necessarily lead to material rewards, but instead constituted opportunities to ‘perform’ a metropolitan lifestyle, even, or especially, in the absence of the products and services that comprised it. The core/periphery framework utilised by Cochrane is pertinent to this analysis. The ’71 Players was twice-marginalised owing to, firstly, the economically and politically peripheral status of Derry as a city and, secondly, the peripherality of amateur practice in relation to professional theatre. A key feature of the group’s role in the community was the way in which it presented opportunities to address that marginalisation in ways that avoided a loss of the discrete characteristics that distinguished the local community from the outside world. Like the preceding chapter on St. Patrick’s, a methodological focus is placed on a single amateur society which serves as an informative example of, firstly, the role of amateur societies on a local level in communities and, secondly, the broader role of the amateur theatre movement in Irish life. Building upon the analysis outlined in chapter one, this chapter uses the plays performed by the ’71 Players as markers of the identity that it intended to project. The methodological focus on a single drama society enables a more detailed consideration of the plays in performance. In addition to the performance conventions adhered to by the group, the conventions of audience behaviour and response prove to be important indicators of the role played by the amateur theatre event or occasion in the community.

This chapter beings by establishing the social context in which the ’71 Players was founded, in the process comparing outside and inside perspectives on the Troubles in Derry. It then considers the ways in which the ’71 Players negotiated the tensions arising from those perspectives. It then presents a critical assessment of the role played by amateur theatre societies such as the ’71 Players in their communities. It questions whether the formally and ideologically conservative ideals and practices of those societies were a justifiable consequence of the pursuit of material aspirations or whether, alternatively, they were evidence of a missed opportunity to interrogate repressive and hierarchical societal structures. The chapter closes by analysing the parallel decline of the ’71 Players and the establishment of Field Day Theatre Company in Derry in 1980. It suggests that the rise of regional professional theatre companies such as Field Day, widely heralded as a new era in Irish theatre, cannot be fully understood without a consideration of the role of the amateur theatre movement. Furthermore, it argues that an analysis of those regional professional companies

should lead to a reassessment of the contribution of amateur theatre societies such as the ’71 Players to Irish theatre.

Global Perspectives.

A striking feature of the civil rights marches in Derry, and of the Troubles as a whole, was the amount of attention that they garnered in international news media. From the occasion of the first major demonstration in Derry in 1968, televised footage of the marches and the violence which followed reached the United States, Europe, and even countries as far away as New Zealand, Thailand, and Zambia (Ó Dochartaigh 48). Cillian McGrattan argues that, for international viewers, footage of protestors being violently repressed by state forces was reminiscent of civil rights movements in the United States and other countries:

> This US model provided Northern Irish activists with inspiration and methods, but it also offered the British and Irish media a convenient and readily comprehensible narrative for explaining what was going on in Northern Ireland. In 1968 and 1969, television images of state forces attacking unarmed demonstrators in the North echoed previous reports from Paris, Prague and Selma, Alabama and resonated with political elites in Westminster and the general public across the British Isles. (5)

What McGrattan’s analysis suggests is that an international audience viewed the events surrounding the marches through a lens coloured by a selection of protests and campaigns from other countries. As McGrattan points out, civil rights movements in other countries presented a readymade narrative with which to explain what was occurring in Northern Ireland. From a theatre perspective – and without intending to minimise the real harm and loss of life that resulted from the Troubles – the framing and interpretation of the conflict in that way was akin to the relationship between performer(s) and audiences, wherein the spectator attempts to interpret what they are witnessing with reference to particular expectations and conventions of performance. As discussed in the previous chapter, theatrical conventions dictate the role of the audience member as well as the actions of the performers, and some international observers interpreted their role as an active one. Bishop Edward Daly wrote in his autobiography that Derry was the “place to be” in the summer of 1971 for “a large number of students from continental Europe [who] came to Derry seeking excitement” (174). He recalled being reprimanded by a visiting German student while trying to quell an

outbreak of violent protest: the student claimed that he, unlike Daly, “knew the people of the Bogside” (174). Perhaps the student, fuelled by revolutionary fervour, was critiquing Daly’s status as an authority figure, or perhaps he believed that violence was a necessary means of advancing the cause of civil rights and therefore viewed Daly’s peacekeeping efforts with disdain. Either way, it seems that the visitor was of the opinion that his interpretation of the ‘conventions’ of the conflict in Derry held at least as much authority as Daly’s, in spite of the fact that the latter was a resident of the city whose vocation demanded regular and close engagement with the community. Such outside interventions in the Troubles in Derry would continue throughout the conflict, perhaps most famously in the case of Bill Clinton’s visit to the city in the wake of a ceasefire in 1995. Clinton’s address to the people of Derry was typical of the international response identified by McGrattan in the way that it offered a reading of the Troubles informed by conflicts in other countries:

> Over the last three years since I have had the privilege to be the President of the United States I have had occasion to meet with Nationalists and to meet with Unionists, and to listen to their sides of the story. I have come to the conclusion that here, as in so many other places in the world – from the Middle East to Bosnia – the divisions that are most important here are not the divisions between opposing views or opposing interests. Those divisions can be reconciled. The deep divisions, the most important ones, are those between the peacemakers and the enemies of peace. (Clinton)

International interest in the conflict in Derry and Northern Ireland continued in the fields of conflict studies and mediation following the Good Friday (or Belfast) Agreement in 1998. McGrattan writes that an entire “peace process industry” formed around academics, political commentators, ex-politicians, community leaders, and ex-paramilitaries who were called upon to share the lessons that they had learned with places around the globe embroiled in similar conflicts. According to McGrattan, the international marketability of the Troubles in conflict studies depended heavily upon a specific characterisation of it as an atavistic and inevitable war between rival ethnic communities.[27] While readily assimilable, that characterisation elided more nuanced and locally specific analyses. Clinton concluded his speech by urging the people of Derry “to believe that the future can be better than the past;

[27] See McGrattan chapter 1 for a comprehensive outline of this body of literature.

[and] to work together”. This might have been a meaningful maxim for the Troubles as a whole, but it was somewhat obsolete when applied to the specific field of the arts in Derry, where examples from the recent past of co-mingling and cooperation between Catholics and Protestants were readily available. The intention here is not to characterise the interpretations of the Troubles held by Clinton, or even the German student, as misguided. Rather, it is to foreground the contrasting interpretations of the Troubles that could arise from inside and outside perspectives on the conflict. The actions of key figures and institutions throughout the Troubles were informed by an awareness and consideration of how local events would be received globally. This applied to political and paramilitary ‘actors’ in the same way that it had applied to drama groups for decades prior to the Troubles: each act or action was part of a process of identity formation and had the potential to be read in a number of different ways, depending upon the perspective of the spectator or audience. Thus, the identities which emerged at that time, of both groups and individuals operating in a broad range of fields, depended upon a tenuous negotiation between global and local influences. In this way the Troubles instigated heightened form of the kind of negotiation that took place in communities as a consequence of the processes of modernization.

Local Experience.

The first of the protest marches to be held in Derry in 1968 took place on 5 October and was organised by the Derry Housing Action Committee (DHAC) with the support of the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association (NICRA). The Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) blocked and baton-charged the march and the resulting violence was broadcasted around the world. It is important to note that this event – which had far-reaching consequences – was planned with the specifically local issue of housing in mind. Even in the aftermath of the 5 October march the campaign run by the Derry Citizens Action Committee (DCAC) remained, as Ó Dochartaigh writes:

> …not so much a purely political one, led by political activists, as a civic one, run in large part by prominent local business people and professionals. It was dedicated to the local and the civic: to Derry. … The DCAC, although founded after a NICRA-sponsored march, was far more the child of the 1965 university campaign and years of housing activism in Derry than a ‘civil rights’ organisation. (20)

The university campaign of 1965 presents a counterpoint to claims that Catholics and Protestants in Derry were locked in an internecine struggle. A suspicion in the city that the Belfast-based Unionist government was favouring development in the east of the state appeared to be confirmed in 1964 by the government’s decision to locate a new university campus in the predominantly Protestant town of Coleraine instead of in Derry as had been expected. The prospect of a university being sited in Derry had been welcomed as a much-needed boost for the city after a series of economic setbacks such as the closures of the Royal Navy Air Station and the Londonderry-Portadown railway line. When the Lockwood report outlining the decision to site the university in Coleraine was leaked in late 1964, it sparked a public outcry in Derry that transcended religious and political allegiances (Draper 47). An interdenominational and inter-party University for Derry Committee was formed in early 1965, and its first meeting in the Guildhall on 8 February was attended by over 1,500 people “of every political shade, all religious creeds and every facet of educational, professional, business and trade union life in the city” (Richtarik 16). Ultimately, the government did not waver in its decision and the wave of unity that had swept through Derry during the university campaign receded. Nevertheless, the campaign demonstrated that, far from being interminably divided, Catholics and Protestants in the city could prioritise local interests over political and cultural rivalries on a state level: particularly, it seems, if those interests were of a material nature.

The co-mingling and cooperation evident in the university campaign was also in evidence in theatre in Derry and, like the university campaign, it was rooted in material interests. In *From Farquhar to Field Day* (2012), Nuala McAllister Hart writes about the Guild Theatre: an amateur-run performance space that emerged as part of an upsurge in amateur theatre activity in the years following the Second World War (McAllister Hart 175). While music in Derry at that time was still divided along religious lines, the Guild was a shared space in which Catholic and Protestant amateur theatre societies swapped equipment, props, and stage personnel. The cooperation that was shown in the 1940s with the Guild Theatre was continued in the 1960s through an informal, non-denominational group of campaigners (including the playwright Brian Friel) who advocated for a purpose-built theatre venue in the city. They complained that, “little had been done by the City Fathers [sic] to improve the facilities [of the Guildhall]” and argued that a properly appointed venue was essential if they were to have “some chance of giving the public the shows which they would

like to see” (McAllister Hart 191).[28] An example of the kind of shows referred to by the campaigners had appeared in Derry during a visit by Dublin’s Gate Theatre to the city in 1945. The company – led by Micheál Mac Liammóir and Hilton Edwards – staged *Othello*, Mac Liam Moir’s *Where Stars Walk* and the Brother Quintero’s play *A Hundred Years Old* to a rapturous response (McAllister Hart 173). A local reviewer compared what he had seen to the amateur productions that were a staple of theatre in Derry, and wrote that an insight had been granted into “…the secret of the superiority of the professionals” (McAllister Hart 173). The visit drew large audiences and was judged to be a measure of the demand for professional theatre in Derry. However, a discouraging note was struck by the members of the visiting company, who considered that the Guildhall “did not lend itself, to put it mildly, to the presentation of any worthwhile stage production” (McAllister Hart 173). Thus, a number of points became clear to the Derry public from the Gate’s visit: firstly, that a better standard of theatre was available; secondly, that a better standard of venue was available; and thirdly, that both of those things were available in Dublin but not in Derry. Furthermore, what Dublin had in theatre, Belfast had in music: in May 1947 an editorial in the traditionally Unionist *Sentinel* newspaper compared ‘what Belfast gets’ with ‘what Derry gets’, and drew attention to what was widely perceived in the city as neglect on the part of the Northern Ireland Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts (CEMA) in the provision of musical events in the city (McAllister Hart 181).

The comparisons drawn between Derry and other metropolitan centres revealed the motivations underlying the campaigns for a purpose-built theatre and a university. Both had the potential to bring immediate material benefits to residents of the city, and both would bring the lifestyle of those residents – whether Catholic or Protestant – closer to that of people in metropolitan cities like Dublin and Belfast. Thus, it is clear that Catholics and Protestants could and did unite in the pursuit of material goals. If that suggests superficiality on the part of either cohort, then it should be noted that campaigns such as those for the university and the theatre were not just a matter of materialism; they were a matter of pride. This was evident in the Sunday night concerts which became a focal point of entertainment and nightlife in Derry in the early 1960s. When Daly was first appointed as a curate in the

[28] The Guildhall is a neogothic building constructed in 1890 and situated in Derry city centre. In the 1970s, the Guildhall was the seat of the Londonderry Corporation and was thus viewed by the Catholic population as the institutional centre of discrimination. In the absence of a venue of a suitable size in the city, the Guildhall also hosted performances by visiting professional drama groups.

city in 1962 he was given charge of St. Columb’s Hall: a cavernous venue in the city centre. In order to address the challenge of maintaining the upkeep of the hall, Daly adopted a twin strategy: a series of Sunday-night concerts, and Bingo. The Sunday-night concerts were extremely popular (as was the Bingo), primarily due to Daly’s uncanny ability to book some of the best known music artists in show business at the time. A popular television show in the early 1960s was *Sunday Night at London Palladium*, and Daly often managed to book performers who had appeared on the show for the following Sunday in Derry. The concerts featured performances by artists such as Roy Orbison, Jim Reeves, The Seekers, Val Doonican, and the Clancy Brothers. The presence of such celebrities in Derry was a boon for the community because it placed the city within the nexus of contemporary entertainment. This was important at a time when it was being pushed further towards the economic and political periphery of Ireland, north and south. The Sunday-night concerts situated Derry, albeit temporarily, as the “place to be” for young people: not in the embattled manner later suggested by the German student in the midst of a protest, but in a way that positioned it as a centre of popular culture and entertainment.

A Monumental Mentality.

A purpose-built theatre had the potential to become a source of pride in a way that was similar to the Sunday-night concerts. For those campaigning for its construction, the building would not only regenerate the surrounding area, it would also have a positive effect on the status of Derry as a city. Marvin Carlson has written about the evolving “architectural semiotics” of theatre buildings from ancient Greece to the present. According to Carlson, the first theatres built in Paris and London in the early Renaissance period were erected in precarious and ambiguous locations in a way that reflected the social ambiguity and marginality of theatre itself (16). However, in the late Renaissance, European rulers became aware of the signifying potential of the theatre as a cultural monument, and theatre buildings and opera houses became prominent, grandiloquent symbols of their royal patrons (20). Today, theatres and arts centres (their more modern incarnation), are a highly visible symbol of “the dedication to the arts now expected of a world city”, and a means for modern urban planners to regenerate the areas around which they are built (29). The disparity between what Derry had and what other metropolitan centres had in the realm of arts and entertainment in the 1940s continued into the 1960s, in spite of the mitigating efforts of local amateurs. McAllister Hart writes that:

> By the later 1960s, Derry had an established calendar of musical entertainments. … But these were mainly local events, staged by city people. In the absence of arts leadership from the city fathers [sic], Derry people had to construct their own cultural life. …it was drama and music teachers who started and led amateur activity … It was their teaching, enthusiasm and passion for music and drama which kept Derry culturally alive during the depressed 1960s. (191)

The efforts of the amateurs described by McAllister Hart were a response to the marginalisation of Derry. Evidently, something of the cultural capital of theatre and music could be constructed, symbolically at least, in the absence of capital investment and monuments made of bricks and mortar. However, with the onset of violence on the streets of Derry in the late 1960s and early 1970s, those symbolic structures were subject to the same devastation that was increasingly visible on the streets of the city.

The civic issues and concerns that had united Derry as a community for the university campaign were subsumed by broader social and political issues during the Troubles, and this could be seen from the outset of the conflict. For example, when the DCAC announced a sit-down protest in response to the actions of the RUC at the 5 October March, it lost the support of Campbell Austin: a liberal who had broken with the Unionist party in Derry over the university campaign. As Ó Dochartaigh points out, Austin’s exit foregrounded the limits of liberal Protestant support for the civil rights campaign: “Once the campaign began to directly confront the state, it would find it hard to retain the support of the substantial number of liberal-minded Protestants in the city, whose liberalism stopped at measures which directly challenged the state, as controversial public protest did” (21). Presumably, those Protestants were further alienated by the military campaign launched by the Irish Republican Army (IRA), in much the same way that a significant portion of moderate Catholics and Nationalists were. In the past, communities of interest composed of both Catholics and Protestants had formed around the arts but opportunities to create those communities were reduced significantly following the outbreak of violence. In a personal interview, Daly cited the resulting lack of opportunity for socialising as a central motivation for establishing a choir and a theatre society:

> Then the Troubles started in ‘68/’69 and gradually people withdrew to their homes. … I got the idea by going around houses; the Bogside was the district that I worked in … and a lot of women in the area in particular mentioned to me that their social life had ended. The cinemas had largely closed down and all the social outlets they had – dancing, dance halls and so forth – a lot of them had closed and people generally weren’t willing to open places where people would assemble with the possibility of a bomb going off, or a bomb scare which would panic people. So, all that social life stopped. (O’Gorman and Daly)

In order to address the lack of opportunities for socialising, Daly placed an advertisement for a meeting in St.Columb’s on 21 September 1970 with the aim of establishing a choir and a drama group. Having expected a turnout of twenty to thirty, he was surprised when approximately 120 men and women appeared on the night in question (O’Gorman and Daly). At that meeting, the nucleus of the ’71 Players was formed and a number of months later it produced its first play: Lennox Robinson’s *Drama at Inish*. There was little prospect of civic or state funding being made available for a purpose-built theatre in the city but a mini monument to that ideal materialised in the form of the Little Theatre at St. Columb’s: a minor hall attached to the larger venue that was repurposed as a 100-seater auditorium. From the outset, Daly was keen to stress that membership of the ’71 Players and the use of the Little Theatre were open to all. In an article in the *Irish Times* in 1971 he stated that, “the theatre belongs to anyone of any religion or none, in Derry, who is interested in amateur dramatics” (McCafferty “Talent”). In spite of Daly’s assertion, it appears that the ’71 Players and other drama groups tended to be composed primarily of either Catholics or Protestants. In a personal interview Carmel McCafferty, a founding member of the ’71 Players, recalled joking playfully with Gordon Fulton – a Protestant actor and member of the Theatre Club who joined the group – that it had not taken him long to “come to our side” (O’Gorman and McCafferty). McCafferty’s anecdote suggested that people of any religion were, as Daly had promised, welcomed by the ’71 Players but that the nucleus of the membership was predominantly Catholic. That being noted, the predominantly Protestant groups the Theatre Club and the City of Derry Drama Club (CDDC) – accepted Daly’s offer of the use of the Little Theatre. A feature of the Little Theatre that aided Daly’s call for inclusivity was the £4 per night rental fee: a paltry sum when compared to the £40 required to rent the town hall (McCafferty “Talent”). A further decisive factor was the cultural form that the groups were engaged in. As the campaign for a purpose-built theatre had shown, theatre had proven to be

a catalyst for the formation of multidenominational communities of interest in the past. It was not merely drama itself which provided a platform for collaboration but the specific form of drama in question. According to McAllister Hart, the CDDC focused primarily on experimental, “modern” plays (181), the Theatre Club staged an eclectic range of works ranging “from Muriel Spark to Ugo Betti” (193) and the ’71 Players concentrated at first on plays by Irish authors such as Brian Friel and Hugh Leonard, but later expanded its repertoire to include “other twentieth-century playwrights, such as Arthur Miller and J.B. Priestley” (193). In short, the groups using the Little Theatre focused primarily on works of twentieth-century realism that (as discussed in the previous chapter) demanded an audience role oriented towards conformity and consensus. Thus, it encouraged a suspension of rivalries for the duration of a night’s entertainment, and the resulting consensus was built upon a shared belief in what those nights of theatre signified: a collective performance of at least a sample of a modern, metropolitan lifestyle.

The idea that theatre formed part of a way of living in the world as much as it presented a way of seeing the world came to the fore in the reception in the local press of the newly renovated Little Theatre at St. Columb’s. In an effort to augment what Carlson terms the ‘monumental’ function of the venue, local press reports placed an emphasis on how advanced the newly installed technical equipment was in comparison to what was available in venues in other places:

> It will be available to any company wishing to use it and it boasts the most modern theatrical equipment and facilities that can be found anywhere. It seats 102 people in comfortable modern seating and Strand Electric, the world’s leading theatrical equipment manufacturers, have been responsible for all the equipment installed in it. … The lighting equipment has the potential to solve practically any lighting problem that can confront a producer. (“Derry’s New Little Theatre Opens on Monday” 7)

The article strongly emphasised that the Little Theatre had equipment and facilities that could match any venue in the world, and that as a consequence the people of Derry would now have access to a suitably “modern” theatregoing experience. Not only would theatregoers be seated in comfort, but plays with technical requirements that were previously out of reach for local producers would be available to Derry audiences. The focus on the audience experience continued in the local press following the opening of the Little Theatre. An article written

under the pseudonym ‘Melculum Audum’ in the *Derry Journal* in December 1971 lauded the strength of theatre in Derry at a time when, in the author’s estimation, it was in decline in other parts of Ireland (“Derry’s Little Theatre” 8). Audum proclaimed that Derry was “on the verge of a real repertory theatre”, and that “nothing should be allowed to stand in its way” (8). An idea of what constituted a “real repertory theatre” emerges in the article from the elements that the writer identifies as standing in its way:

> The Theatre Club’s two programmes were a delight to handle and to read. Their front of house arrangements were fair to middling. The ushers and usherettes are an important part of the evening and they need to be drilled. … F.O.H. [Front-of-house] lights need supervision and control and noise in the corridor can be a serious distraction. We need a foyer, or room, or space for the intervals for smoking, and drinking, and talking, and stretching. There must be a rigid “No Smoking” rule inside the theatre. (“Derry’s Little Theatre” 8)

Evidently, a ‘real’ repertory theatre was defined as much by the experience that it offered its audience in the foyer and the auditorium as by the work that was produced on stage. As noted in the previous chapter, Baz Kershaw writes that rhetorical conventions contribute “to the particular type of spectator/audience role that the event requires” (26). Underlying Audum’s demands for a more rigorous approach to the front-of-house procedures was a desire to adopt a role as an audience member that responded to those procedures. That role would involve a number of performative elements: listening quietly and attentively, reading the programme, following the efficiently delivered directions of the ushers, and discussing what had been presented on stage. In other words, for Audum a ‘real’ repertory theatre enabled the audience member as well as the actor on stage to perform the role of an attentive and productive member of the audience: characteristics that might also be used to describe the professional in a variety of contexts. That role was defined by adherence to standards and procedures that stood in direct contrast to the lack of regulation and control associated with amateurism.

Expansive Acts.

Audum’s call for the signals and conventions of a more professional theatre occasion can be understood in the context of a wider effort in Derry to ensure that the people of the community attained a lifestyle that was closer to that of residents of metropolitan cities like

Dublin, Belfast, and London. If a well-equipped theatre space of an appropriate size could not be built in Derry, then some approximation of a metropolitan lifestyle could be actualised in the Little Theatre at St. Columb’s: not only through the facilities of the venue but through the conventions followed by the drama groups that performed there. Accordingly, the 71’ Players established itself as an amateur society committed to the kind of professional conventions and standards propagated through amateur drama festivals. This was evident from the first drama festival that the group entered in Ballyshannon, where May Friel collected an award for Best Actress and Peter McGirr was named as one of the three best actors at the festival (“Derry 71 Players’ Success” 1). It garnered numerous accolades at festivals in the years that followed, and in 1976 won a nomination for the All-Ireland Amateur Drama Festival with a production of Friel’s *Freedom of the City* (Smith, *Festival Glory* 50). The ambition of the group was also evident in the repertoire of plays that it performed, which was composed of the kind of modernist works favoured by festival adjudicators and audiences. Of the thirty-two plays staged by the ’71 Players between 1971 and 1984, twenty-three were by Irish playwrights, four were by British authors, four were European and one was American.[29] The Irish plays were predominantly works of realism by well-known authors such as Lennox Robinson, Louis D’Alton, Joseph Tomelty, John B. Keane, Tom Murphy, and Brian Friel. The plays performed by the group were modernist, but not particularly experimental. As McCafferty recalled, the Theatre Club, “put on very high-falutin’ plays” and nicknamed the ’71 Players the “Irish kitchen comedy” (O’Gorman and McCafferty). Thus, the ’71 Players was aspirational in its commitment to professional standards, but conventional in its overall approach and selection of plays, particularly when compared to more experimental groups such as Tuam Theatre Guild. A notable feature of the ’71 Players repertoire, however, was that it produced ‘Troubles’ plays at a time when the kind of events that those plays portrayed were taking place on the streets of Derry.

The '71 Players produced several Troubles plays which, in addition to *The Freedom of the City*, included Stewart Love’s *Me Oul’ Segocia* in 1982, Sam Thompson’s *Over the Bridge* in 1979, and John Boyd’s *The Flats* in 1973. The latter was the first amateur

[29] Daly sent me a list that he had compiled of productions by the ’71 Players in the years that the group was active, from 1971 to 1984. He himself acknowledged that it was compiled from memory some years after the group ceased to operate and that, therefore, it might not be complete. I cross-checked the list by checking references to the ’71 Players in the *Derry Journal*, although coverage of theatre in the paper was often interrupted or overshadowed by events resulting from the Troubles. The resulting list of thirty-two productions might not be comprehensive but it nevertheless provides a useful sample from which a sense of the group’s output can be gained.

production of *The Flats,* which had premiered at the Lyric Theatre in Belfast in 1971. The play is set in Belfast in 1969 and tells the story of the Donnellans: a Catholic, working-class family who live in the predominantly Catholic block of apartments referenced in the title. The flats are under attack on a nightly basis by a mob of loyalists, and the British Army are called in to protect the residents. Much of the action centres around whether the Donnellan family will trust the protection offered by the British forces or choose instead to engage in armed defence of its home. At the climax of the play, Monica Moore – a Protestant neighbour of the Donnellans – is accidentally killed while venturing out to seek help for her sick mother, thus foregrounding the human cost of armed conflict. The ’71 Players production of the play was reported as being the group’s most successful to date (“The Flats Opens”), and both McCafferty and Pauline Ross singled it out as being particularly memorable:

> McCafferty: It was because of the time that it was done in.
> Ross: It was one of the first Troubles plays. I mean, he put British soldiers on the stage.
> McCafferty: Yep, and sandbag pillar posts. He actually made the sandbag posts, what do you call them, pill boxes? Right, he made those and the soldiers went in behind them.[30] (O’Gorman and McCafferty)

The impact that the mere presence of soldiers, pill boxes and sand bags could have on the audience in Derry at that time suggests the potential for expansive action held by Troubles plays such as *The Flats*. As outlined in the previous chapter, Kelly defines expansive acts as those which challenge the fallacy of seeing people solely as the products of a pre-existing culture and push against social limitations (51). For Kershaw, those limitations are imposed on marginalised communities by what he terms the “status-quo”: that is, the collective force of the mutually reinforcing ideologies of “the dominant class of society” (19). In his analysis, the effectiveness or “efficacy” of community theatre performances can be measured according to the extent to which the status-quo is meaningfully challenged (19). Kershaw the Protestant community in Kilbroney, Northern Ireland as a hypothetical example of how such a challenge might be issued. For that community the “fresh-coloured Ulster flag” is one of a number of symbols that “signify the beliefs and behaviour which structure the community

[30] McCafferty arrived to be interviewed at the end of the Ross interview and so there was a brief overlap between the two. The conversation quoted can be found in the transcripts of the McCafferty interview, which is included in the appendix.

(including the rules for separation from the Kilbroney Catholic working class)” (32). Kershaw envisages a performance that might use the Ulster flag and associated symbols to engage in a transaction with the community’s ideologies in the hope of influencing its patterns of behaviour. In order for the performance to be efficacious, he suggests that the Ulster flag might be damaged somehow, but not destroyed:

> …in order to achieve inescapable significance for the audience, the closer the flag gets to being destroyed – the more fundamentally the community ideology is challenged – the greater the likelihood that the performance will become efficacious within the networks of the community. In other words, the ideological transaction of performance must deal with the fundamental constitution of the audience’s community identity in order to approach efficacy. (33)

The ’71 Players production of *The Flats* included potent iconography of the Troubles that had the potential to challenge some of the central assumptions and beliefs that the community held in relation to the conflict. Ultimately, however, that potential was not realised. *The Flats* follows a pattern common to Troubles plays of the time, whereby the death of a character in the climactic scene serves to highlight the futility of violence between Catholics and Protestants.[31] While the human cost of the conflict is confronted, the root causes are tacitly avoided. In *Theatre and the State in Twentieth-Century Ireland,* Pilkington critiques the strategy of narrative avoidance that was common to Troubles plays. He points to the depiction of the unruly Protestant mob in *The Flats* as an example of how sectarianism was presented more as an aberration than a pervasive feature of ordinary life in Northern Ireland. This was in spite of the reality of the institutionalised anti-Catholic discrimination that was prevalent in the state at that time. Pilkington argues that, in their attempt to transcend sectarianism, Troubles plays like *The Flats* unintentionally demonstrated the recalcitrance of the divisions in the North and affirmed an apathy towards positive action: “As well as absolving the theatre spectator of all political responsibility, this portrayal of the conflict in terms of an irresolvable social pathology tends to foreclose the possibility of its political resolution” (209). In *Making Theatre in Northern Ireland*, Tom Maguire points out that expansive acts “tend to be regarded as the proper role for the arts as political interventions”

[31] Along with *The Flats,* Gerard McLarnon’s *The Bonefire* (1958) and Sam Thompson’s *Over the Bridge* (1960) are two of the most prominent examples.

(134). If we consider that, at that time in Northern Ireland in particular, intervention on a political and social level was desperately needed then we might justifiably question the purpose of Troubles plays such as *The Flats*, which at best provided audiences in Derry with a fleeting acknowledgement of the dire social situation that they were living through, and at worst signalled a tacit acceptance of the ideologies underlying the conflict.

Strategies of Avoidance.

Strategies of avoidance were not restricted to the work that amateur societies produced on stage, but extended to the organisational functioning of the movement in Northern Ireland. As John Travers – a member of Ballyshannon Drama Society and President of the Amateur Drama Council of Ireland – noted in a personal interview:

> The festivals in the west like Derry, Carrickmore, Newtownstewart, Strabane and Enniskillen would tend to be from more Nationalist areas. They’re very careful … when you’d meet people you talk about neutral subjects like the rugby or the weather, but you’d avoid talking about the [GAA] football match – Fermanagh and Donegal – until you found out who you were talking to. And, in the drama people had a way of being able to work together and avoid any confrontational areas … (O’Gorman and Travers)

The kind of tactful diplomacy described by Travers enabled the amateur drama movement to operate throughout the Troubles without any overt instances of sectarianism. An exception to that trend occurred in 1997 in Larne when loyalist posters appeared in the town warning a visiting drama group from Dunloy not to appear at the drama festival that was due to take place there. According to the *Irish Times,* the threat was “linked to the continuing dispute over the refusal of Dunloy residents to allow Orangemen to parade in their town” (9). In a personal correspondence, William Burns – chairperson of the Larne festival at that time – reflected on the collective sense of shock felt by the festival committee and emphasised how unprecedented it was in the context of the amateur theatre movement as a whole:

> We were horrified about this – especially since amateur theatre had been one of the very few areas where no trouble of any sort had been experienced before. It is true that a number of border festivals closed down for a few years at the height of the

> Troubles, but this was a case of difficulties, and indeed danger, to companies travelling long distances and especially at night through Armagh and Tyrone in particular. (Burns “Programmes”)

Burns’s account speaks to the rarity of overt incidents of sectarianism in the context of amateur theatre, but it also inadvertently provides some insight as to why that was the case. Elsewhere, he recalls that “Larne Festival was saved the unenviable task of having to take the decision as to whether or not the play should appear, as the company immediately agreed that they would withdraw” (Burns “Programmes”). The Dunloy response was to withdraw from the festival rather than face the prospect of any further trouble. If the group had not taken that decision, however, it might still have been prevented from appearing by the Larne festival committee. Thus, we can see how a festival committee might move to anticipate and avoid sectarian tensions, even in less prominent cases than the incident in Larne. As Travers observes:

> That’s an interesting element; that the festivals could pick plays that weren’t divisive; that’s one way that it [sectarianism] was managed. … a lot of the drama audiences will accept plays that are outside their comfort zone, which everybody has to do, but you still have to suit the play to your audience and sometimes you’ll say ‘we’re not taking that play… because it might be a play that might be offensive to our audience’… it comes down to bums on seats is money. (O’Gorman and Travers)

While it was rare, as Burns notes, to see overt cases of sectarianism in the amateur theatre movement, it is likely that this was because those involved at an organisational level were adept at anticipating and avoiding them. While such strategies might have created some much-needed distance from the conflict for both performers and audiences, arguably they also precluded a meaningful engagement with the causes and consequences of the war.

According to the Northern Irish novelist Ronan Bennett, avoidance was a central characteristic of the broader middle-class response to the Troubles, which was defined by a “culture of aloofness, of ‘being above it all’, of distance from the two sets of proletarian tribes fighting out their bloody atavistic war” (Bennett 46). Writing for the *Guardian* in 1994, Bennett claimed that:

> The North’s well-to-do have managed to come through the conflict unscathed: they live in pleasant residential suburbs that see no rioting; they are not arrested or raided; they suffer few casualties. Low house prices and rates mean they enjoy relatively large disposable incomes; it is said the proportion of BMW and Mercedes owners is higher in the North than anywhere else in Britain or Ireland. The neutral middle class can afford to be aloof (46).

It would be a mistake to characterise the avoidance evident in both the running and repertoire of the amateur theatre movement as solely a symptom of cosseted aloofness. Undoubtedly, there were many people involved in amateur theatre at that time who were grievously affected by the Troubles. Daly pointed out that: “…people had sons killed, uncles locked up, fathers locked up in prison, husbands locked up” (O’Gorman and Daly). Furthermore, he made the point that “… people who are living under injustice are not going for their evening out to hear about more injustice … And, anyhow, they know far more about it than anyone in theatre; they are living the story” (O’Gorman and Daly). Daly’s account suggests that the kind of direct engagement called for by expansive acts might simply have been too emotive for some audience members. As Maguire points out, “the capacity of the community to engage with … expansive acts may well be circumscribed by the specific conditions with which it is faced at any given point in time” (135). Nevertheless, expansive acts were possible in the context of communities that were severely affected by the Troubles, as Maguire shows using the example of Derry Frontline Culture and Education.[32] In Maguire’s analysis, with *Inside Out* in 1988 Derry Frontline issued a challenge to “the operation of patriarchy, inculcated by the church and lived out in social structures and personal relationships” (135). He is careful to note, however, that a crucial factor in the success of *Inside Out* was the state of development of the community at the time of the production:

> Cultural interventions were already a feature of community life by the time of *Inside Out*: by the Bogside Sculptors group, for example, and by a range of interventions by members of Frontline. The group had already been provided with a model in

[32] See Pilkington “Resistance to Liberation with Derry Frontline Culture and Education” (1994). Founded in 1988 and led by Dan Baron Cohen, Derry Frontline was a community arts group that operated primarily within the nationalist, inner-city communities of Derry’s Creggan and Bogside areas until 1994. As outlined by Pilkington, the group was involved “in various cultural activities including the production of two theatre pieces: *Inside Out* (1988) – a drama/sculpture collaboration which links the issues of abortion and armed resistance – and *Time Will Tell* (1989), a play which explores issues of Ulster loyalism, gay identity, and domestic violence.

> Manchester Frontline’s initial visit and its members were also involved in a range of other highly politicised community networks. Thus, the performers are allowed a license to take a critical stance as members of the community. (135)

If the ’71 Players did not engage in expansive acts, it might have been the case that the community was not ready to receive such work, and that at that time it was enough for the group to engage instead in protective action. However, we should also consider the possibility that such acts of protection were symptomatic of the distancing practices that Bennett identified as being central to middle class culture in Northern Ireland. If we believe that to be the case, then perhaps we do not have to diagnose such distancing as being a product of aloofness. In Bennett’s critique of middle-class culture, he inadvertently outlines key facets of its appeal: the prospect, not only of emerging from the Troubles unscathed, but of doing so with a house, a large disposable income, and a luxury car. If such materialistic goals were not the basis for ‘good’ culture, they were nevertheless central to the capitalist promise of the ‘good life’. If we identify that promise as a central driving force behind the amateur theatre movement, then we begin to see strategies of avoidance not merely – as Bennet suggests – as a means of creating distance from the conflict, but as a method of engaging with it. This can be seen in Travers’s suggestion that festival committees might reject contentious work on the basis that “bums on seats is money” (O’Gorman and Travers). Any accusations of censorship, or of sectarianism, on the part of committees could be responded to with reference to the widely accepted and ostensibly objective logic of capitalism. In this way the tribal energies of the conflict can be subsumed under the apolitical and unifying logic of consumer choice. Thus, avoidance becomes a necessary diversion on the collective journey towards modernisation and the promise of an improvement in living standards and lifestyle.

The amateur theatre movement provided a framework for people in communities to work together to improve the intellectual and, perhaps more pertinently, the material quality of their lives. To simply dismiss the material side of that goal as superficial or lacking in artistic integrity would be to ignore the deep allure of the capitalist dream: the promise that Derry could have what Dublin, Belfast, London or New York had. Nevertheless, the extent to which materialism can function as a unifying ideology in society is questionable: not least because of the social inequality that it precipitates. Derry Frontline addressed this point directly in the *Threshold Project*, which was initiated in 1990 and included a full-length

naturalistic play; the development of a People’s Banner; sculptures, mural art, music workshops, and political and cultural education programs. The play centres on the actions of the protagonist Marie after she is raped on the streets of her community. Marie engages in a hunger strike (or, ‘freedom strike’ as it is termed in the play) as “…a protest against what she sees as the refusal by her community to acknowledge the parallels between its silencing of the issues of rape and abortion and the violence and censorship of the state” (Baron Cohen and Pilkington 18). Marie’s protest coincides with the return home from America of her uncle, Sam. A successful businessman, Sam stridently advocates for the utility of economic development (through international inward investment) as a means of transcending the conflict. At a pivotal point of the play, however, a young Catholic boy is found badly beaten in the toilets of a new shopping centre: his cries for help drowned by the din of consumers. In a manner that coincides with Bennett’s critique of the middle-class response to the Troubles, the play suggests that a capitalist credo based on consumerism and materialism is merely a superficial panacea for the socioeconomic inequality underlying the conflict. As McDonnell writes in relation to Marie’s assessment of her uncle’s ideology:

> She [Marie] sees his dream of economic regeneration as yet another front in the war, and the myth of economic renewal a means to deny ‘the slaughter that’s meant to stay out of sight’. Later the priest will agree with her, telling a television chat show host: ‘Do you know what inward investment really is? Mass rape. The calculated rape of a whole people.’ (137)

McDonnell astutely points out that, in spite of the forceful manner in which it condemned economic development as a legitimate means of community regeneration, Derry Frontline still chose to take part in the IMPACT 92 Festival: the cultural wing of Derry’s inward investment economic programme (137). This is not suggest that the group was somehow hypocritical in its actions, but rather to draw attention to the kind of dilemma that inevitably arises when rhetoric meets reality. The case for abstaining from the festival on the grounds of its capitalist aims was counterbalanced, as McDonnell notes, by the prospect of reaching other constituencies and a related desire to avoid becoming ghettoised (137). Thus, engagement with the world outside of the community required at least some concession to what Kershaw terms the status-quo. The amateur theatre movement enabled community-based groups to engage with the outside world in a similar manner. From the perspective of those involved in Derry Frontline, that engagement might have appeared hopelessly beholden

to a capitalist and materialistic ideology: here was a movement that rewarded conformity at all levels, from the performance conventions reinforced at festivals to the learned responses of audience members. When viewed from the perspective of community groups such as Derry Frontline, the prospect of amateur theatre societies producing expansive acts and becoming, in Kelly’s words, “co-authors of [their] culture” (134) appears particularly bleak. However, as the protective actions taken by St. Patrick’s Society for its production of *The Shaughraun* showed in the previous chapter, amateur theatre societies nevertheless had the capacity to resist global cultural pressures in favour of local priorities. By focusing on that capacity for resistance, amateur theatre societies such as the ’71 Players can be viewed in a more positive light. If their contribution was conservative in so far as they advocated for changes to societal structures, they nevertheless enabled communities to produce more than merely superficial replications of the experience of attending metropolitan theatre houses. The locally-oriented performances that they could produce were of particular value in the context of the Troubles in Derry, when a variety of descriptions and definitions of the city and its residents were formulated from outside of the community. An example of such a response was the ’71 Players production of Frank Carney’s *The Righteous are Bold*, which the group staged in 1972.

The Righteous are Bold.

Frank Carney’s *The Righteous are Bold* was one of the most commercially successful Abbey plays of the late 1940s and 1950s. In 1946, the year that it premiered, it ran for a total of 96 performances, and it was produced on ten further occasions by the Abbey in the decade that followed. The play is set in a rural cottage on the side of Croagh Patrick in Co. Mayo. It tells the story of a young woman, Nora, who returns from a period working in England with a mysterious illness. At first, Nora’s parents Michael and Mary suspect that she might be pregnant. However, as the action progresses it transpires that she has been possessed by an evil spirit, and that only the intervention of the local priest Fr O’Malley can save her. The climactic passage of the play depicts Fr O’Malley dying heroically on stage having successfully performed an exorcism on Nora. When it was first performed in 1946, *The Righteous are Bold* staged a set of anxieties that surrounded the unprecedented rate of female emigration from the Republic following the Second World War: the government was concerned with the way that it undermined the viability of the nascent state; the Catholic Church feared the consequences of young Catholic women being exposed to a more secular

and cosmopolitan society; and in the domestic sphere the family members of those who emigrated had to cope with the absence of loved ones. The appeal of the play to audiences in the 1970s is less clear, however, not least because of an undercurrent of misogyny that pervades it. For example, one of the early signs that Nora is possessed is her expression of an individualism that betrays the patriarchal mores of her society and her religion:

> Nora: I’ve discovered that I have a mind of my own. I’ve learned to think for myself. I never believe anything now unless my reason tells me it’s true. What use is our reason otherwise? Patrick there agrees with everything I say. Don’t you, Patrick?
>
> Patrick: This is no place for that kind of talk. (28)

That “talk” is ultimately silenced via the exorcism of the demon and Nora returns, presumably, to a previous state of not thinking for herself or using her reason. The ’71 Players’ success with the play at the Ballyshannon festival suggests the those anachronistic aspects of the play did not hinder its reception. Perhaps the theme of exorcism was sufficiently compelling to subsume the play’s ideology, and the furore surrounding the release of William Friedkin’s *The Exorcist* in 1973 would certainly support such an analysis.[33] Nevertheless, *The Righteous are Bold* was an ideologically, formally, and thematically conservative choice of play for the group. For a drama society with aspirations to compete at drama festivals it was safe but uninspiring: while it had been ubiquitous on the amateur circuit since its premiere in the 1940s, by the 1970s its popularity was in decline. Furthermore, in a community that aspired towards modernisation its portrayal of women was at the very least outdated, if not offensive. Thus, the group’s decision to stage *The Righteous are Bold* is somewhat curious, but through a closer consideration of the events surrounding its production we can arrive at a better understanding of the significance at the particular time in which it was produced.

The Righteous are Bold was first performed by the ’71 Players in February 1972, but the decision to stage the play had been taken in late 1971. The casting call for the production was released in November (“71 Players to stage” 3), during a fortnight in which two Derry

[33] *The Exorcist* was the focus of debate around the question of censorship in a number of countries. In an interview with Friedkin for the *Independent* newspaper Pat Stacey points out that the film was released in a cut version in Ireland in 1974. The uncut version of the film was not screened in the country until 1998 (Stacey).

women from nationalist areas were tarred, feathered, and tied to lampposts by a group of vigilantes. The women had boyfriends who were British soldiers, and they were accused of passing on information that led to the imprisonment of nationalist internees (“Priest condemns” 5). While the *Guardian* reported that members of the IRA were involved in the second tarring incident (Brown 6), after the event it was alleged that the attacks were not sanctioned by the paramilitary group, and that the mob of attackers was composed primarily of local women (McCafferty “We’re All Terrorists Now” 6). The tarring was carried out at a time when relations between the British Army and residents of the Bogside were deteriorating rapidly. Less than two weeks prior to the first attack, Kathleen Thompson – an active nationalist and mother of five children – was shot dead by the British army in the back yard of her house. A rumour circulated in the nationalist community that when Thompson was shot, a British soldier was heard on the radio saying, “I hope she’s dead” (McCafferty “We’re All Terrorists Now” 6). A feature of the escalating conflict that was particularly unacceptable for residents of Catholic areas was that when the British army first arrived in 1969 they had been hailed as protectors from police brutality. The civil rights movement, fuelled by local concerns, had instigated an international response and the British army were a facet of that response. Thus, for a short time the people in those communities looked to the outside world with a degree of hope and positivity. Those hopes were steadily eroded, however, by army checkpoints, house raids, a policy of internment without trial, and civilian deaths. Meanwhile, the international perspective on the Nationalist cause veered towards apathy and condemnation in response to the guerrilla campaign waged by the IRA. A feature of the tarring that was particularly damaging to the impression of the Catholic community formed from outside Derry was that the attacks were not carried out by paramilitaries, but by local civilians. Press reports that included photographs of the second victim attracted national and international coverage in newspapers such as the *Irish Times* (McCafferty “We’re All Terrorists Now” 6), the *Guardian* (Brown 6), and the *New York Times* (Weinraub 1). With an awareness, perhaps, of the negative impression that those images would project, Daly penned a letter to the *Derry Journal* in which he stridently condemned the attacks. The letter stressed that, “Derry people, Bogside people are basically decent, upright, kind and fair-minded people … they seek equal rights for all” (“Priest condemns” 5). A similar awareness fuelled comments that appeared in Nell McCafferty’s report on the attacks in the *Irish Times*. They were made by a man who had witnessed the second tarring and who presented a view of the incident that contrasted with Daly’s:

> Have you any idea what we’ve gone through, you who make moral judgements from the comfort of Dublin and London? …The world outside asks for normal standards. What human being could live through death, destruction, fire, day in, day out and remain normal? Who’s normal? Girls who comfort soldiers, or girls whose fathers and brothers have been taken away by soldiers? What does normal mean? (McCafferty “We’re All Terrorists Now” 6)

In a manner that echoed the anxieties surrounding female emigration in the 1940s, the complexities of the debate around the presence of the British army in Derry were transferred to a focus on the bodies of young women. With both issues – the mass emigration of young women and the tarring and feathering – there was a broader, ‘societal’ view of the issues, and a concurrent and contrasting local perspective. The bystander interviewed by McCafferty made the point that from the metropolitan vantage points of London and Dublin the tarring and feathering was morally reprehensible, but that the experience of living in Derry cast the event in a different light. This is not to suggest that all residents of Derry shared the man’s perspective, but rather to point towards a dichotomy between a local, interior experience of the Troubles, and a contrasting exterior perception.

The interior/exterior opposition traced by the bystander presents resonates with the spatial dynamic that Morash and Richards identify as being central to much of the plays produced by the Abbey in the twentieth century, including *The Righteous are Bold*. They argue that the ubiquity and familiarity of rural domestic settings in the Abbey repertoire allows us to look at it as a theatre of place rather than space (35). Within that theatre of place they identify a paradox: “The places it creates are knowable, and hence can be aligned with communal and familial values; at the same time, the very thing that makes them knowable, its relatively unchanging nature, is that which makes it potentially a trap” (43). Morash and Richards explain how that trap operates with reference to the distinction that Anne Ubersfeld’s draws between interior and exterior spaces, whereby the underlying threat of the domestic interior space resides in the stifling restrictions that it imposes. They use the example of W.B. Yeats and Lady Augusta Gregory’s *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, where The Poor Old Woman enters the mimetic place of the domestic cottage and its surroundings from an offstage space that is conceptual. Both the objects that inhabit the stage and the members of the family unit that inhabit the cottage are firmly fixed in place. In contrast, The Poor Old Woman inhabits space, and any attempts to attach her to a fixed place or point in time are

thwarted. Morash and Richards argue that “From the security and stability of place we are aware of the openness, freedom and threat of space…” (44). They view Michael’s decision to leave with The Poor Old Woman in the final moments of the play as a choice of both freedom and death. However, in contrast to conventional readings of the play which view Michael’s likely death as serving the cause of Irish political freedom, they define it as an escape from the strictures of a comforting but restrictive sense of place: while the offstage may be a space of death, it is also one of transformation (46). When applied to *The Righteous are Bold,* this spatial reading situates the play as a response of sorts to *Cathleen ni Houlihan* wherein Nora, in the role of Michael, returns from the exterior space of freedom and death to the interior sanctuary of a fixed and knowable place.

In a similar manner to Nora and Michael, the ’71 Players and their audience retreated from the outside world – literally a space of death at times – to an interior place with stable boundaries. When asked whether the 71’ Players engaged with the contemporary political situation in its work, Daly responded that:

> I don’t go into these things of Catholics, Protestants, Republicans because, you are a drama group, period, end of story. … The work we did and the company we had, politics was left outside the door, because there was enough conflict going on without adding to it. We were there at a troubled time to give people some escape, and some enjoyment, and some social outlet; that was our purpose, and whilst at the same time producing reasonably good quality work. (O’Gorman and Daly)

Ross’s description of rehearsals would suggest that, in spite of Daly’s assertion to the contrary, the issues raised by the Troubles were not entirely excluded from the performance space. If those issues did gain entry, however, it appears that they were transcended: “It was always, the winter nights, and there was great camaraderie, tremendous camaraderie, and obviously the Troubles got discussed, but then you got into the play and you were in another world, you know, another character” (O’Gorman and Ross). The accounts of both Daly and Ross speak to the ways in which participation in the ‘71 Players enabled the creation of an interior space within the community; a somewhat permeable exclusion zone for outside issues. Furthermore, that sense of interiority extended to the audience members. The rhetorical conventions expected of festival-oriented groups such as the ’71 Players demanded an audience role centred on attentiveness and decorum – precisely the type of role described

by Audum in his article on the Little Theatre. However, McCafferty’s account of performing in a production of *Sive* provides evidence of the kind of disruptive, participatory behaviours that could erupt in the Little Theatre:

> *Sive* was another great Keane play and you know in *Sive* where Mena bakes a scone? Well, I’m not the most domesticated person and my mother was in the audience. So, I was mixing the stuff in the bowl and you know, I was mixing it away and put it on the griddle and pushed it in and of course whoever was backstage took off the piece of dough and put on a real one and then in the play I was taking it out and my mother says, “She never baked that scone!” At the top of her voice! “Carmel never baked that scone!” (O’Gorman and McCafferty)

McCafferty, the members of the audience, and perhaps even McCafferty’s mother were aware that this interruption was not conventional audience behaviour for the type of performance that was being enacted. The incident does not necessarily point towards a lack of awareness of the accepted conventions of audience response, but rather towards a reinterpretation of those conventions. That reinterpretation stemmed from the close ties that audience members in the Little Theatre typically had with any given production. Some, like McCafferty’s mother, had relatives, or close friends and neighbours on stage; others had donated funds; some designed posters or costumes, while other people made sandwiches and collected tickets at the door. Pauline Ross recalled that, in many cases, audience members donated pieces of furniture and props, and it is likely that the presence of belongings on set instigated a unique response on the part of donors (O’Gorman and Ross). In their essay “Materialities of Amateur Theatre” Cara Gray and Sarah Penny argue that the “material things” in the amateur theatre productions that they analysed “evoke personal memories of places and people” for the members of the societies (104). For Gray and Penny, “the stories that emerge from the tangible materiality of things” contribute to a sense of belonging and become testament to “practical and voluntary processes outside the time of the theatrical event … [that] sustain the production of amateur theatre and the endurance of companies over time” (104).

When McCafferty plucked the scone from the fire it triggered a response on the part of her mother whereby the parallel histories of Mena and McCafferty collided. That McCafferty’s mother gave voice to the collision spoke to the participatory ethos that

permeated the community in which the 71’ Players was situated. McCafferty recalled that many of the audience members had an in-depth knowledge of the plays that the group performed: “… they loved the plays and they *read* the plays. … You would have had your J.B. Keane fans and they would know every line, nearly, of every play, if you missed one” (McCafferty “Personal Interview”). Furthermore, the audience played an active role in deciding upon the repertoire and providing feedback for the group. Although Audum lamented the lack of a place for the audience to congregate at the Little Theatre, after performances by the ’71 Players audience members were invited backstage. As McCafferty asserted:

> You have to say to your audience when you’re bowing, “Come on down to the back and meet us.” … everybody got their tea out of great big kettles. Everybody was sitting in chairs and chat, chat, chat … and somebody would say, “C’mere, great play coming up. Helen: perfect for the part, perfect.” “What’s that play?” …“Right, give us a bit of paper, somebody.” They’d write down the name of the play and the author, “…and who did you say would be good in that part? Right, I’ll try Helen out for that.” And, that was how you got your part: the audience picked you. (O’Gorman and McCafferty)

Daly and Doherty both recalled that, ultimately, play choice was largely dependent on producers and was subject to the approval of a board of directors. Nevertheless, McCafferty’s account provides evidence of the active role that the audience played in the wider production process and, at times, in the performance itself. Thus, the intervention of McCafferty’s mother was a break from convention that was unacceptable in any other context than the one described by Daly and Ross: where a collective sense of interiority enabled a suspension of conventional rules of behaviour. If the local performance context called for an alternative set of rules of behaviour then it also enabled alternative readings of the work presented on stage. The issues that Nora embodied in *The Righteous are Bold* – emigration in Ireland in the 1940s or fraternisation with soldiers in Derry in the 1970s – were complex, nuanced, changeable and, perhaps, irresolvable in the outside world: in the outside world the young women who were tarred and feathered were either victims or perpetrators, depending on the perspective of the onlooker. Similarly, the soldiers could alternatively be framed as saviours, invaders, boyfriends, husbands, or sons. In contrast, within the interior place of the theatre those debates were streamlined and simplified into a straightforward conflict between good

and evil that would, inevitably, be resolved before the end of the play. The comfort and reassurance of that interior resolution in the face of exterior uncertainty was, arguably, more important than any particular political or social stance that Nora might have symbolised. Regardless of whether audience members sided with one side or another in the debates that took place outside of the theatre, the *Righteous are Bold* offered the tantalising prospect of a clear resolution to a straightforward dilemma. Thus, a formally and ideologically conservative play produced in the service of an overarching, materialistic and capitalist ideology had the potential to offer the community resolution. Furthermore, in performance it enabled a community to speak to itself by pushing the boundaries of centrally-derived, metropolitan and bourgeois conventions of performance and audience response. If that process of pushing never reached the level of an expansive act, it nevertheless provided a measure of protection and consolidation to a community that was critically in need of it.

- Conclusion –

Eddie Kerr’s *Beaten Docket*, staged in 1984, is the last play listed in the chronology of ’71 Players productions compiled by Daly. The Theatre Club, Derry Players, and CDDC all continued to stage plays throughout the 1980s, but amateur theatre in Derry entered into a gradual decline which continued into the new millennium. No local groups participated in the Derry Amateur Drama Festival in 2016 or 2017 (in spite of various initiatives on the part of the organising committee), and the festival did not proceed in 2018. Tom Doherty suggests that, nowadays, people who would previously have gravitated towards amateur groups such as the ’71 Players are instead drawn to semi-professional companies such as the Derry Playhouse (O’Gorman and Doherty “Personal Interview Two”). It could be said that this is a trend that Doherty helped to start: in the mid 1980s he formed Them’Uns: a semi-professional company that drew many of its members from the ’71 Players or from other amateur drama groups from around the city. A more prominent and in all likelihood more significant contributor to the changing landscape of theatre in the city was the arrival of Field Day Theatre Company. The group’s premiere production of Friel’s *Translations* in the Guildhall in 1980 is widely considered to be among the most significant landmarks in the history of Irish theatre. *Translations* is set in the fictional townland of Baile Beag/Ballybeg in 1833, at a time when the first Royal Ordnance Survey was being conducted. The play situates the Ordnance Survey – which, among other tasks, translated Gaelic place names in Ireland into English – as a pivotal point of origin of the conflict in Northern Ireland. Following a

rehearsal period and premiere in Derry, *Translations* toured to thirteen venues in the north and south of Ireland. Many of those venues were in smaller towns that were not conventional stops for professional theatre companies. In reviews of *Translations*, critics were keen to emphasise the broader significance of the play and the production. The director and reviewer Michael Sheridan described it as a “watershed in Irish theatre” (Sheridan “Friel play a watershed” 3), and after viewing it in London Irving Wardle wrote that it was a “national classic” (Wardle 11). A factor that contributed to the sense of import surrounding *Translations* was the occasion of its premiere in Derry. Much was made of the symbolism of a play dealing with the loss of the Irish language under British rule being staged in the Guildhall. Furthermore, a great deal of anticipation surrounded the fact that Friel, by then an established and highly regarded playwright, had decided to premiere a new play of his in Derry rather than in Dublin, or in New York where his previous play *Faith Healer* had opened. In *A History of Irish Theatre*, Morash writes that on the occasion of the *Translations* premiere, Derry became “the cultural centre of Ireland for the night” (238). A similar sentiment was expressed by *Irish Times* reviewer David Nowlan as he noted the presence of the Unionist mayor of Derry, Marlene Jefferson, several members of the city council, and various other British and Irish luminaries at the event:

> Cyril Cusack was there from Dublin, Julie Covington from London, Thomas Kilroy from Galway and more from places further east and south. …The writers were there in legion. Beside Kilroy was Tom Murphy. Along the line were Seamus Heaney and Michael Longley. Jim Sheridan was there and Joe Dowling and Sean McCarthy from the Abbey, and that dark cloud that must linger forever over such a glowing light - the critics - had arrived from London and from Dublin to assess the work. (“Electric Love Affair” 8).

With the premiere of a play by an internationally recognised playwright, the presence of famous writers, actors, politicians, and celebrities and, crucially, extensive coverage by national and international newspapers, Derry people did not have to question, as they did after the visit of the Gate Theatre in 1947, whether their city had what Belfast or Dublin had. Pauline Ross recalled the effect that the birth of Field Day had on the amateur theatre community in Derry:

> … for the people involved in the amateur theatre movement it was wonderful ... to watch great works of art, great works of literature with superb actors, directors, lighting designers, set designers; it brought that to us, because none of us could have ever went to London, you know, to see that type of theatre ... (Ross “Personal Interview”)

Ross highlights what was a commonly held perception: that “great works of art” were exclusively available in metropolitan centres such as London, and that artists and audiences necessarily gravitated towards those centres. A key part of the significance of *Translations* for residents of Derry and Northern Ireland was it counteracted that gravitational pull. An important distinction between Field Day and the ’71 Players was that, owing in large part to the status of Friel and Rea, Field Day had the capacity to actualise what for amateur societies in Derry had been a perpetual aspiration: whereas amateur groups aspired to recreate the occasions of the metropolitan centre, Field Day relocated that centre to Derry. Attended by key figures from both sides of the political divide in Northern Ireland as well as a host of dignitaries and celebrities, *Translations* rearranged the co-ordinates of theatre in Britain and Ireland so that Derry became, albeit temporarily, a centre of theatre akin to Dublin or London.

Field Day drew the metropolitan centre to itself, but this was not simply a case of a drama company in an economically marginalised city producing a convincing simulacrum of Belfast, Dublin, or London. Rather, Field Day’s unique impact was predicated upon an ability to counterbalance the wide-ranging star appeal of the company with a locally-oriented insider status. In the weeks preceding the premiere of *Translations*, Field Day established a physical presence in Derry by rehearsing there, and a swathe of articles in local and national newspapers helped to forge a connection between the company and the community. In the *Irish Press*, Noel McCartney provided a detailed list of links between the cast and crew and the city: they ranged from Friel’s status as a former pupil of St. Columb’s school, to the somewhat more tenuous connection that stage and costume designer Consolata Boyle had through her Derry-born father (McCartney 5). Another article in the *Derry Journal* titled “Derry Women in Translations” profiled female members of the cast with connections to the city and, at the invitation of Derry City Council, the company agreed to visit local schools to talk about the production (McCartney 5). Friel was careful to mention that the presence of members of the cast and crew with connections to Derry and the North was the result of a

deliberate policy on the part of the company (McCartney 5). Several days before the premiere, the director Art O’Briain felt confident enough to state that “…we feel that we have become part of the community around us” (Sheridan “Translated logic” 9). It is likely that the connection that the local connection that Field Day forged had an effect on the play’s reception both in and outside Northern Ireland. Marilynn Richtarik surveyed the local press reaction in the smaller towns that Field Day toured to with *Translations* and concluded that any potential that the play had to arouse sectarian tension was subverted by a feeling of pride in the international renown of a ‘home-grown’ production (51). Richtarik writes that support for the production was a way of affirming that “…‘the black North’ could, after all, produce something to excite admiration rather than disgust or pity” (54). Thus, in general, for people in Northern Ireland the sense of pride deriving from the success of *Translations* subsumed the political and cultural issues that might have arisen from its content. It should be noted that a robust intellectual debate did develop around the subject of the verisimilitude of the events portrayed in the play, but that debate had little discernible effect on the response at a grassroots level.[34] The insider status that Field Day cultivated in Derry also had an influence on critics from outside Northern Ireland. Take, for example, the opening paragraph of Stephen Dixon’s report on the Derry performance of *Translations* for the *Guardian*:

> Derry in the drifting, drenching September mist. Green-uniformed RUC men cluster in doorways. From time to time an Army Land Rover squelches past, with the inevitable man riding machinegun in the rear. The outside of Derry Guildhall, where Brian Friel is adding the final polish at rehearsals of his new play, *Translations*, is forbidding: a high wire fence all around and a gauntlet to run of locked gates and security men. (Dixon 11)

Dixon’s filmic prose signals the appeal – heightened by inaccessibility and an imminent sense of danger – that Derry and Northern Ireland held for outsiders. The impression given by the article is that the intrepid, metropolitan journalist could only access the truth proffered by the periphery by negotiating a gauntlet of armoured vehicles and locked gates. The reward for facing those challenges was an authentic, local insight into a conflict that resonated

[34] Writers such as Edna Longley [“Poetry and Politics in Northern Ireland”, 1985], Sean Connolly [“Dreaming History: Brian Friel’s *Translations*”, 1985], and Bruce Kirkland [*Literature and Culture in Northern Ireland since 1985*, 1996] claimed, with some justification, that *Translations* endorsed rather than questioned traditional nationalist conceptions of Irish history, in particular a depiction of pre-colonial Ireland as a Gaelic-speaking utopia.

globally. In a similar but more direct manner than Dixon, Sheridan framed the location of the premiere in terms of the authenticity that it granted to the occasion as a whole:

> Broadway, London and Dublin have all provided platforms for the plays of Brian Friel and the metropolitan impersonality of those theatrical capitals has sometimes cast a cold eye on the expression of the Northern writer. The openings have of course been marked by a sense of occasion. But have lacked a community spirit. Derry has changed that characteristic. (Sheridan “Translated logic” 9)

Field Day, or Friel at least, seems to have been aware of the allure of the periphery in the metropolitan mindset: an allure based the promise of insights that were not available in urban centres of society. Friel’s stated ambition in 1970 was “to write a play that would capture the peculiar spiritual, and indeed material, flux that this country is in at the moment” (qtd. in Richtarik 78). He believed that this would have to be done, “at a local, parochial level”, but expressed the hope that it would “have meaning for other people in other countries” (qtd. in Richtarik 78). Following the premiere of *Translations,* he reiterated that idea in more forthright terms, stating that: “We are talking to ourselves as we must and if we are overheard in America, or England, so much the better” (Friel *Brian Friel: Essays* 85). Thus, Friel suggested that the answers to the problems of a world increasingly oriented around metropolitan centres of economic and political power did not necessarily reside in those centres. While purporting to turn away from America and England in order to hold a ‘private’ conversation on the periphery, the latter statement noted the overarching presence of those powers, almost daring them to eavesdrop in the process. Thus, it encapsulated the conscious positioning of Field Day between the centre and the periphery. With *Translations*, the company produced a professional occasion that rivalled and even surpassed most marquee premieres in metropolitan centres for the exposure and coverage that it attracted, thus actualising what amateur groups like the ’71 Players could only dream of achieving. At the same time, however, a key part of the appeal of that occasion was the extent to which it promised to provide insight – into the troubles engulfing Northern Ireland at that time, but also into the broader set of troubles attendant to modern metropolitan life.

It cannot be definitively stated that the establishment of Field Day Theatre Company led to the decline of amateur theatre societies such as the ’71 Players in Derry, but it is clear how such a conclusion might be reached. Field Day offered the realisation of material goals

that amateur theatre societies could merely aspire towards: with the premiere of *Translations,* and with subsequent opening nights in the years which followed, Derry became the ‘place to be’, and its residents no longer had to look wistfully towards Belfast or Dublin, in the cultural realm at least. More than a mere visit by a professional company such as the Gate, those premieres were marquee occasions whereby Derry announced its status as a centre of cultural production: this was culture produced by the Derry people, for the Derry people and – in a spirit of capitalism – ideally, for everyone else too. This might lead us to view Field Day as the logical culmination of years of campaigning in Derry for a theatre company akin to those in operation in metropolitan centres, and to conclude that, firstly, professionalism is the logical conclusion of amateur theatre practice and, secondly, that professional companies will supplant amateurs in regional locations such as Derry once there are sufficient resources in place. While there is some merit to this argument, it is vital to note that Field Day was quite different to the professional metropolitan companies that had visited Derry in the past. Granted, the company exemplified a professionalism characterised by strict adherence to accepted standards of production and performance; by astute marketing and promotion and by thorough preparation and careful execution. However, it also fostered an identity that was informed by a spirit of amateurism: one that was founded primarily upon a connection to community and place. This is noteworthy because it was precisely those characteristics which had been used in the past to distinguish the more ‘amateur’ societies in the amateur theatre movement from their more ‘professional’ counterparts such as Tuam Theatre Guild. As outlined in chapter one, place-derived identities were used as markers of amateurism or professionalism: too close an association with a particular place and identity – in particular one derived from a peripheral locale – was seen as precluding the universality and objectivity that were essential to professionalism. Secure in its ability to move freely between metropolitan centres, Field Day was nevertheless keen to establish an identity that was firmly attached to Derry and Northern Ireland. This was, in part, a means of addressing the sociocultural issues arising from the Troubles but – as suggested by the growth of regional professional theatre companies in Ireland in this period – it also signalled a change in how the qualities of amateurism and professionalism were viewed in society. Previously, the spirit of amateurism emerged behind closed doors in the interior spaces of communities: in ad-libbed lines, local references, falling sets and audience interventions. That spirit would be corralled and controlled in other contexts: muted appropriately in accordance with the standardized conventions of festival competition or professional production. What the conditions surrounding the emergence of Field Day suggests, however, is that a spirit of amateurism

added rather than detracted from the appeal of the company. It appears that while audiences appreciated a high level of professionalism, they at the same time desired something that resided outside of standard practices and procedures. Like the reviewer Audum in Derry, theatregoers could adopt a professional, metropolitan perspective in their assessment and expectations of conventions and standards of production and performance. However, it appears that they also desired to descend from that vantage point, and to look to the interior spaces of the periphery for a connection that ran counter to the standardised experiences of modern life.

Chapter Four

The Art of the Amateur:
The Listowel Players and John B. Keane's *Sive*

- Introduction -

Thus far, this dissertation has argued that the amateur theatre movement was driven by a modern, materialistic and essentially middle-class ideology that was founded upon a desire to fulfil the material aspirations of communities. Furthermore, it has shown that the productions and performances of amateur theatre societies in communities around Ireland were as much a process of identity formation – for both participants and audiences – as they were a means of attaining material gain. The ideal subject position or identity was that of the metropolitan actor: the person attuned to the latest conventions of either the stage (in the world of theatre) or of modern life (in the 'real' world), who was thus situated to benefit most from the changes attendant to modernization. To be 'modern' necessitated conformity to the conventions of centrally-directed, metropolitan modes of performance, both on and off the stage. Thus, more traditional, localised, and 'amateur' ways of being in the world or were pushed aside in the pursuit of standards of professionalism. The result in the context of amateur theatre was a formally and ideologically conservative movement that lacked the capacity, or the inclination, to issue a challenge to the social and political status quo. The aim of amateur societies – in particular those that wished to succeed at drama festivals – was to be as professional as possible by conforming to pre-determined conventions of preparation and execution. The performances and events which resulted were acts of replication that had the capacity to improve and protect the material and ideological resources available to communities. Where they lacked, however, was the degree to which they enabled people to innovate and to interrogate the potentially oppressive structures of society. While this presents a bleak picture of the contribution made by the amateur theatre movement to Irish society, this chapter casts it in a more positive light. Through a focus on the famed production of John B. Keane's *Sive* by the Listowel Players in 1959, it shows that amateur theatre could be a source of innovation: not in the manner for which the play is often

celebrated, but for the way in which it drew on and combined the discrete dramatic traditions of an amateur periphery and a professional core of theatre and culture in Ireland.

Most discussions of the artistic, as opposed to the social, contribution of amateur theatre to Irish culture have retrospectively celebrated practitioners that would later become renowned professionals. Robert Hogan and Richard Burnham's *The Art of the Amateur* (1984), for example, makes some fleeting references to amateur societies such as the Leeside Players in Cork and the Catholic Rosario Players in Belfast, but the bulk of the material is dedicated to the activities of the Abbey Theatre, which for a brief time in its formative years employed amateur actors before establishing itself as a professional company. Given the time period under consideration in the text, 1916-1920, perhaps the authors were indirectly referencing revolutionaries like James Connolly and Patrick Pearse, who not only penned amateur works for the Irish stage but also aspired to the role of amateur statesmen in a nascent state. Hogan and Burnham's framing of amateur theatre resonates with a widely accepted view of it as an embryonic stage in the development of a more advanced professional practice.[35] When to articulate the contribution that amateur theatre has made to Irish culture, many people in the amateur movement will name successful professionals who began their careers as amateurs, from Tom Murphy in the 1950s to Liam Neeson in the 1980s.[36] Thus, we might assume that the 'art' of the amateur referred to by Hogan and Burnham is, in actuality, the art of progressing from amateur to professional status. Along with Murphy and Neeson, John B. Keane is one of the more prominent examples of a practitioner that fits within that framing of amateur and professional practice. The widely publicised story about Keane's emergence to fame is that, having been rejected by the Abbey with *Sive* in 1959, the young playwright gave the script to an amateur theatre group in his native town of Listowel in County Kerry. The unprecedented furore that grew around the play and its subsequent success on the competitive amateur festival circuit propelled Keane onward to a career as a professional playwright. A problem with that story is that it casts the amateur theatre movement as an antechamber in which Keane languished before being

[35] A 1985 article in the *Irish Times* noted that "the amateur movement has been described as an unfunded academy for the professional stage" ("Amateur Drama: From Big House" 10).

[36] In an article for the *Ballymena Guardian* previewing the twenty-sixth Ulster Drama Festival the Chairperson of the AUDF John Knipe made a case for the contribution made by the festival by referring to Neeson and other celebrities who had participated in amateur theatre: "Five years ago, for example, a gangling youth appeared on our festival stage … His name? Liam Neeson, now one of the rising stars of the Irish professional theatre. There have been many such first appearances of players who graduated to international stardom…" ("Do not support the Ulster Drama Festival!" 3)

invited to his rightful place among the ranks of the professionals. It fails to acknowledge the discrete traditions of amateur and professional theatre in Ireland: traditions that evolved at different points in time, and in response to different influences and priorities. Furthermore, it obscures the unique contribution made by *Sive* as a work of art: one which, this chapter argues, can only be fully understood through a consideration of the regional amateur context in which it was first performed. Through a closer consideration of the separate influences exerted by the discrete traditions of amateur and professional theatre, we can gain a better understanding of the unique blend of conventions that is evident in *Sive*. While Keane intended *Sive* to be produced by the Abbey, arguably it is not, strictly, an Abbey play. Rather, as this chapter shows, it is a hybridised blend of melodrama, folk customs and realism that owes its form to a regional tradition of performance as much as it does to the overarching influence of the Abbey Theatre. The performance of *Sive* in a regional amateur context precipitated occasions wherein audiences responded directly to the overt, melodramatic and folk conventions in the play. Conversely, when the play transferred to a metropolitan milieu, those conventions were either used as evidence of the play's failings, or ignored completely by critics. While Keane's transition to the professional ranks might be viewed as an advance for the playwright in so far as it fulfilled his personal ambitions, the alternative narrative of Keane's emergence presented here shows that it might also be seen as a loss for Irish theatre in terms of the stylistic changes that it instigated in his later work. This retelling of the story of Keane and *Sive* shows that the play should no longer be viewed as the embryonic outpouring of a nascent professional, but as a superlative example of what we might term the art of the amateur.

In a continuation of the theoretical approach adopted in the previous two chapters, this chapter focuses on the significance of the performance occasion or event as opposed to the themes, ideas, and performance conventions of the play under consideration. It combines an analysis of the critical and audience response to the Listowel Group's production of *Sive* with a formalist close reading of the play's conventions in order to advocate for a reassessment of the unique contribution that it has made to Irish theatre. In a reversal of the linear temporal trajectory of the previous chapters, this chapter goes back in time to 1959. The necessity for a non-linear structure will become clear at the conclusion of this chapter, where it is argued that the innovative, hybrid potential evident in *Sive* was manifested more clearly in the regional professional companies which arose in the 1980s than it had been within the amateur theatre movement in the preceding decades. While in the years following

the emergence of *Sive* the amateur theatre movement as a whole was formally and ideologically conservative, Keane's play evidenced a latent potential for innovation that re-emerged decades later with the ideological return to the periphery that was evident in Irish society in the flowering of regional professional groups led by Druid Theatre Company.

A rapid ascent.

Following a premiere run of three nights in its home town in February 1959, the Listowel Group won first prize with *Sive* at both the Clare and Limerick drama festivals in March, in the process securing a nomination for the amateur All-Ireland Drama Festival in Athlone. It placed second at the North Cork Drama Festival and first at the Kerry Drama Festival before advancing to the All-Ireland in late April and winning the award for best play. The Listowel Group's All-Ireland success was burnished by an unprecedented invitation from the Abbey to present *Sive* in its temporary home in the Queen's theatre at the end of May. Thus, in the space of three months and via a circuitous route, Keane had risen from obscurity to secure his ambition of having his work performed on the Abbey stage. This brief chronological account of the Listowel Group's success with *Sive* provides a sense of the very short period in which Keane became a household name in Ireland. However, it does little to capture the fervour that grew around the play as the Listowel Group progressed from regional amateur festivals to the Abbey stage. The *Kerryman* quoted Mícheál Ó hAodha, the adjudicator of the Clare Drama Festival, as saying that the play, "hit the audience with the force of a mills bomb" ("'Sive' was big hit in Scarriff" 17): the festival received coverage in the national press, with the *Irish Independent* labelling it a "triumph" for the Listowel Group, and printing Ó hAodha's comment that *Sive* was, "the best contribution to the amateur movement since M.J. Molloy's *The Paddy Pedlar*" ("Listowel Triumph" 8). The *Limerick Leader* reported that "hundreds" of playgoers who had failed to gain admission were turned away from the Playhouse in Limerick for the Listowel Group's second appearance at a regional festival ("Hundreds turned away"). The article described "regrettable" scenes of "pushing and general chaos" outside the theatre and, according to Gus Smith and Denis Hickey's biography of Keane, the Gardaí were called to prevent the disturbance from escalating into a riot (55). A number of weeks later, at the North Cork Drama Festival, the *Kerryman* reported that, "over two hundred people … had to be refused admission despite the fact that the Festival Committee had announced by notices in the papers that the theatre was booked-out [sic] for *Sive*" ("High Praise for Listowel Author"). The sense of momentum that had built up throughout the

Listowel Group's tour through the regional festival circuit culminated in the presentation of *Sive* at the All-Ireland, which the *Irish Independent* described as "the most exciting night of theatre in the history of the All-Ireland Amateur Drama Festival in Athlone" ("Listowel Group Acclaimed").

Underlying and perhaps further augmenting the popularity of *Sive* was the sense of controversy that surrounded the play, the first hint of which could be detected in comments made by H.L. Morrow as part of his adjudication at the Limerick Drama Festival. According to Smith and Hickey, having paid tribute to the producer and the cast, Morrow remarked: "I do not salute the management of the Abbey who, I am told, had the stupidity and impertinence to reject the manuscript of this play without a word of explanation or apology. I despair!" (56). In a curious twist of fate, one of the members of the Abbey management that had rejected *Sive*, Tomás Mac Anna, adjudicated the North Cork Drama Festival: the only festival at which the Listowel Group did not win the premier award. Although he placed it behind Tuam Theatre Guild's production of Robert Ardrey's *Thunder Rock*, MacAnna's adjudication of *Sive* was positive overall. For example, he described Keane as being, "on the edge of something that was new and very exciting in the theatre" ("High Praise for Listowel Author" 5). Nevertheless, Keane took exception to what Mac Anna had to say about the Abbey's rejection of *Sive*, in particular the adjudicator's assertion that: "I read this play in the Abbey … and I was one who said that I did not like it all that much. The point was that when I read it, it was not this version. It was an earlier version and since that time the re-written version has come our way … Mr. Keane has re-written it in the way we suggested" ("High Praise for Listowel Author" 5). A week later, the *Kerryman* reported that Keane had asked Mac Anna to withdraw the remarks that he made at the festival. He claimed that *Sive* had been returned to him with "no comment whatsoever", and that Mac Anna "should have had the humility to confess to a deceived public that the Abbey had not given any consideration to the play at all" ("Sive will be staged").

The conflict with Mac Anna forged an enduring perception of Keane as a playwright who was marginalised by the Abbey and metropolitan critics, in spite of his widespread popularity with the Irish public. A common line of thinking on Keane's career follows Anthony Roche's contention that, prior to the 1980s when the Abbey produced *The Field* (1980), *Sive* (1985), and *Big Maggie* (1988), the playwright was one of a number of "theatrical outsiders" who had been "unjustifiably excluded" from the national theatre (29).

Keane's exclusion has been attributed to a bias against his regional background and to his association with amateur theatre. In a 1987 article for the *Irish Press* titled "J.B. is in from the cold", for example, Aodhán Madden reflected on the snobbery that had been exhibited towards Keane's work in the years prior to the Abbey productions in the 1980s:

> For over twenty years, Keane wasn't taken seriously by the Dublin Arts Politburo. … If we came from backwoods, we wanted to forget it pronto. Our self-delusion could better be served by intimations of Syngian romanticism or the mean city angst of Beckett. … Above all, Keane was popular – beloved of the Amateur Drama movement. How could he be taken seriously if his plays touched a common nerve and he wrote in a language that wasn't as obtuse as an arty farty's navel? (17)

In a more measured echo of Madden's article in the *Oxford Handbook of Modern Irish Theatre* (2016), Lisa Coen surmised that "it was the popularity of Keane's work in amateur drama productions that maintained his career, but arguably this popularity undermined his reputation with the national theatre" (316). Thus, a widely accepted narrative about John B. Keane is that, with the Abbey productions in the 1980s, the writer was elevated to his rightful place among the ranks of respected professional playwrights. The Abbey productions instigated a reassessment, not only of Keane's status but of the status and merits of his work. The result was a wave of revisionism, whereby critics and commentators hastened to unearth previously unacknowledged evidence of the playwright's professionalism. Writing in the *Irish Times* about the 1985 revival of *Sive,* for example, David Nowlan wrote that "Ben Barnes's new production of the play … gives cause for those of us 'sophisticates' who sneered somewhat in the Fifties to think again. Now the play seems much better, and much more seriously intentioned, than it did then" ("Sive at the Abbey" 10). A consequence of that revisionism was that the more popular conventions of Keane's plays – strongly associated as they were with regional amateur theatre – were ignored or brushed aside. The overall impression given from reports like Nowlan's was that Keane had been a serious professional artist all along, and that only now was this being realised. The problem with that perspective was that, yes, Keane was a serious professional artist but he was also a serious amateur in so far as his work was informed by a regional amateur tradition of performance. As referenced above, Mac Anna proclaimed that Keane was "on the edge of something new and very exciting" with *Sive* ("High Praise for Listowel Author" 5). Evidently, the play was not a conventional debut by an aspiring professional, but something that was quite different. In

order to understand the nature of that difference, it is essential to consider the unique blend of traditions from which *Sive* emerged, as well as the unique context in which it was first performed.

A hybridised theatre experience.

When the curtains opened on *Sive* in 1959, audiences could have been forgiven for assuming that it would not offer anything new or exciting. The poorly furnished cottage kitchen on stage matched the ubiquitous setting for much of the Abbey's plays in the middle part of the twentieth century. Furthermore, with its presentation of a family home as a metonymic representation of the nation, it was very much in the mould of popular, naturalistic Abbey plays such as *The Righteous Are Bold* (discussed in the previous chapter) or Walter Macken's *Home is the Hero* (1952). As the action progressed, however, regional audiences steeped in a tradition of melodrama would have recognised a familiar pattern to the unfolding events which deviated significantly from the tenets of naturalism. In *The Melodramatic Imagination* (1976), Peter Brooks outlines the structure of what he terms 'classical' melodrama: "… the play typically opens with a presentation of virtue and innocence, or perhaps more accurately, virtue *as* innocence … And there swiftly supervenes a threat to virtue, a situation – and most often a person – to cast its very survival into question, obscure its identity, and elicit the process of its fight for recognition" (29). In the opening scene of *Sive,* the audience is presented with the eponymous heroine: a character whose indelible and uncomplicated virtue corresponds to the type of broad characterisation that we would associate with melodrama. In keeping with the structure outlined by Brooks, a threat to that virtue soon arrives in the form of the local matchmaker, Thomasheen Sean Rua. Thomasheen proposes marriage to Sive on behalf of Sean Dota, a fittingly repulsive character whose considerable wealth is matched only by his age. The Faustian pact proposed by Thomasheen not only threatens Sive, but also poses a threat to the virtue of her guardians Mike and Mena for whom it offers a rare chance to escape the stranglehold of poverty. Brooks points out that the success of the villain in melodrama "depends largely on the errors of perception and judgement committed by those who should rightfully be the protectors of virtue, especially the older generation of uncles, guardians, and sovereigns" (33). Accordingly, Mike and Mena succumb to temptation, and their niece Sive must rely on a group of individuals that correspond to the conventional allies of the melodramatic heroine: "a handmaiden, a fiancé, a faithful (often comic) peasant, or very often … a child" (Brooks 33). Liam Scuab proposes marriage to Sive; her grandmother

fulfils the role of handmaiden; and a pair of travelling tinkers adopt the role of faithful and musical peasants. In true melodramatic form, Sive's escape hinges on the safe delivery of a letter, and much of the dramatic tension of the final act is based on that letter's proximity to enemies of the heroine. Ultimately, and somewhat unexpectedly, the letter is intercepted by Thomasheen and burned before the audience's eyes. Another unexpected turn is encountered at the play's climax, which denies its audience the happy conclusion so common to melodrama. As Brooks points out, in melodrama there was usually "a reforming of the old society of innocence, which … [had] now driven out the threat to its existence and reaffirmed its values" (32). In *Sive*, the heroine's innocence is saved but at the cost of her life, and it is not quite clear whether her death symbolises the preservation or the destruction of the community's values in the face of an oncoming, materialistic modernity. The resolution of the play is more in line with the conventions of tragedy or realism, and it is likely that this added to the play's impact on audiences. The appearance of Liam Scuab with Sive's drowned body at the close of the play would have shocked audience members who were keenly anticipating the happy ending promised by the preceding melodramatic conventions.

The blending of realism and melodrama evident in *Sive* is not uncommon: Thomas Postlewait observes that "Melodrama may be defined as a theatrical form of polarized excesses, articulating and resolving primary conflicts, but this does not mean that its relation to realism is equally polarized. Most of the time we can find melodramatic elements in realistic drama and realistic elements in melodramatic plays" (55). There is evidence to suggest that regional audiences of the Listowel Group's production of *Sive* had an acute awareness and appreciation of its melodramatic conventions. For example, the tinkers introduce music into the play which, as the 'melo' (derived from 'melody') in the term suggests, was a key part of the multifaceted entertainment that classical melodrama offered its audiences. Smith and Hickey describe audiences being "hypnotised" by the tinkers in Listowel (18), and the "electric" atmosphere instigated by their arrival on stage at the Clare Drama Festival (55). Similarly, a review of the performance in Limerick cited the "entry of the tinker men" as one of the "great moments" of the play ("Hundreds Turned Away" 1). The appreciation that regional audiences had for the melodramatic conventions of the play extended beyond the 'hypnotism' described by Smith and Hickey into more overt displays of emotion. Brendan Carroll, the director of the Listowel production, recalled people "weeping" in the audience at the opening night of the play (Smith and Hickey 19). Similarly, Smith and Hickey report that during the performance of the play at the Kerry Drama Festival, "people

laughed in the wrong places", while others "applauded during tense moments, as though unable to control their emotions" (59). To the chagrin of many within the amateur theatre movement, the normally decorous reception afforded to adjudicators was repeatedly ruptured at the regional festivals at which the Listowel Group competed. H.L. Morrow, the adjudicator at the Limerick festival, could hardly be heard "amid the euphoria in the auditorium" (Smith and Hickey 57), and there was heckling during Jim Fitzgerald's adjudicatory speech at the Kerry Drama Festival (Smith and Hickey 59). Although expressed in support of the Listowel Group, those overt demonstrations were not always welcomed by the cast. Nora Relihan, who played Mena, recalled that the opening night performance at the Queen's theatre had almost been overwhelmed by the audience reaction: "Many people applauded in the wrong places, others went wild over the tinkers. They weren't a help at all. And I think I gave a poor performance that night" (Smith and Hickey 69). With people weeping, laughing, and applauding in the 'wrong places' it would appear that *Sive* not only presented a blend of melodramatic and realistic conventions on stage, but also incited an audience role that broke with the decorous conventions associated with serious works of drama.

Critics of the laughing, stamping audience members that attended *Sive* were quick to attribute their behaviour to a lack of understanding of what constituted proper conduct in the auditorium. However, those demonstrative displays had antecedents that extended deep into the roots of regional, amateur theatre. As referenced in chapter one, the first experience of theatre for many people in regional towns and villages in Ireland was provided by strolling players, or 'fit-up' companies. There is evidence to suggest that a key part of the appeal of the melodramatic and comedic performances that the fit-up companies specialised in was the way that the emotion on stage spilled out into the audience. Beginning with examples from the eighteenth century, Ciara O'Farrell shows that "disruption of fit-up performances through over-zealous audiences was still prominent in provincial Ireland right up to the 1950s" (54). O'Farrell presents examples of audience members fainting, crying, jumping, and even in some cases mounting the stage to join the action (55-56). In O'Farrell's analysis, those audience members "were totally unexposed to drama, except for these rare fit-up visits, and thus were more likely to take what they saw at face value" (57). It is possible, however, that there was a performative element to those outbursts that made them a precursor to the later appearance of those audience members on stage as part of amateur societies. Furthermore, the responses outlined by O'Farrell correspond to Brook's eloquent description of the emotive response that melodrama elicits:

> The familial structure that melodrama (like Greek tragedy) so often exploits contributes to the experience of excruciation: the most basic loyalties and relationships become a source of torture. Like the characters, the audience experiences basic emotions in their primal, integral, unrepressed condition. From their full acting out, the "cure" can be affected. Virtue can finally break through its helplessness, find its name, liberate itself from primal horror, fulfil its desires. We awake from the nightmare. (35)

Melodrama presented an opportunity to engage in a cathartic outburst of emotion in a way that was socially acceptable. If we consider Brooks's contention that the dramatic action of melodrama is primarily driven by a "manichaeistic struggle" between good and evil (12), then it is plausible that in the small, regional communities described by O'Farrell it was beneficial, and even enjoyable, to perform your allegiance to the side of virtue while under the watchful eyes of your neighbours.

The melodramatic conventions of *Sive* can be traced to the influence of the fit-up companies and the melodrama that they introduced to regional Ireland in the nineteenth century. There are, however, elements of the play that gesture towards a deeper tradition of regional performance. At the opening night of *Sive* in Listowel, Keane had initially been worried about the reception of the play, but the entry of the tinkers marked a turning point in the audience response which, as outlined above, threatened to subvert the conventional role expected of an audience for a realistic drama:

> At the distant sound of the bodhrán some members of the audience cheered, and there were more cheers for the arrival of Pats Bocock and his son Carthalawn. Keane grew more optimistic. The bodhrán is a popular musical instrument in North Kerry for long synonymous with the Wren Boys, and the familiar sound made the audience sit up. There was even a danger that their over-reaction might upset the cast. (Smith and Hickey 17)

The 'Wren' is a folk custom practiced in Kerry and other parts of rural Ireland. Although there are variations in specific practices, the basic premise of the Wren was that a group of 'Wren Boys', from four to twenty in number, would go from house to house on the morning

of 26 December, singing popular ballads or songs, or in earlier times dancing. They would be given refreshment or monetary reward for their efforts, and that this would bring luck to the household (Gailey 83). In the past, an actual wren was caught and displayed by the band of performers, but in most cases this element of the ritual ceased as the entertainment element took precedent. Proceeds from the performance were divided amongst the performers, or else they pooled the money to pay for a dance or party for the community. Gailey presents a surviving example of a Wren's rhyme from west Ulster which evidences the influence of the tradition on the characterization of the tinkers in *Sive*: "And if your treat be of the best/ I hope in Heaven your soul will rest;/And if your treat be of the small,/It won't agree with the boys at all (75). The rhyme bears a striking stylistic resemblance to the songs of Pats Bocock and Carthalawn in *Sive*. Prior to their entry, and in a manner that foregrounds the ritualistic aspects of their performance, the stage directions indicate that: "Nanna rises to her feet, as is the custom when travelling minstrels enter a house" (Keane 21). The stage directions inform the reader that the "first song must be in praise of the man of the house, who is generally absent at work in the fields" (Keane 21). Accordingly, Carthalawn sings the following: "Oh! Mike Glavin, you're the man;/ You was always in the van;/ With a dacent house to old man and gorsoon;/ May white snuff be at your wake,/ Bakers bread and curran-y cake,/ And plinty on your table, late and soon." (Keane 21). Gailey points out that in recent times the focus of the Wren has been primarily on merry-making and fun, but that in the past its potential to bring luck to the community was taken seriously (83). It is in the context of the original function of the Wren that we can better understand the audience response to the tinkers in Listowel. When Thomasheen Sean Rua refuses to gift money to the tinkers, he is warned by Nanna that "There is no luck in refusing a man of the road!" (22), and in the lines which follow Carthalawn issues the following curses Thomasheen with the following: "May the snails devour his corpse,/And the rain do harm worse;/ May the devil sweep the hairy creature soon;/ He's as greedy as a sow;/ And the crow behind the plough;/ That black man from the mountain, Seaneen Rua!" (Keane 22). Kevin Donovan, who played the part of Mike Glavin, recalled of the opening night in Listowel that: "I could feel the reaction. I could sense it coming up from the audience. I knew the others in the cast felt it too, and that we had won them over. The tinkers' curse had made the audience cringe with terror" (qtd. in Smith and Hickey 19). One of the central points of tension in *Sive* is the clash between traditional, communal values and an encroaching individualistic and materialistic modernism. Pats Bocock and Carthalawn, heralds of a by-gone era, inform Mena that they have "the caravan beyant in the steamrolled road" (Keane 22) and Mena in turn urges Sive to picture herself

sitting in a "motor-car" alongside her aged suitor, "giving an odd look out of the window at the poor oinsheacs in their donkey-and-cars and their dirty oul' shawls…" (Keane 27). When the play was first produced in the 1950s, the modernization of Ireland was slowly underway, and steamrolled roads and motor-cars gradually spread to rural communities such as the one portrayed in *Sive*. Nevertheless, the reaction of the Listowel audience would suggest that certain folk customs and superstitions retained a residual power. Gailey posits that customs such as the Wren may have had pre-Christian antecedents (7), and so the tinkers embodied performance practices that had deep roots in the community. As referenced in chapter two, Helen Burke has argues that the influx of touring companies to regional Ireland in the seventeenth century led to "fractured, bicultural productions" whereby the metropolitan dramatic tradition of those companies met with a "no less vital but subordinate native Irish performance tradition" (120). *Sive* represented a continuation of that fractured process of negotiation whereby pre-Christian rural folk practices met with a modern, regional tradition of melodrama, and a more contemporary metropolitan mode of dramatic realism.

The Listowel Group's tour of *Sive* on the regional festival circuit precipitated occasions that were – to reference Mac Anna's adjudicatory comments – 'exciting' and innovative, but not quite 'new'. On the contrary, audiences responded accordingly to conventions that had a lineage that significantly predated the relatively recent arrival of dramatic realism and its attendant codes of conduct. That being noted, the type of raucous reaction that *Sive* elicited was becoming increasingly rare at amateur festivals by 1959. As outlined in chapter one, the exponential growth of the number of amateur groups in Ireland in the early part of the twentieth century contributed significantly to the demise of the fit-up companies. A concurrent development was that amateur groups competing at festivals discarded a predominantly melodramatic repertoire in favour of festival plays. Writing in the *Irish Times* in anticipation of what would be the seventh All-Ireland festival in 1959, Aileen Coughlan lamented the growing ubiquity of the festival play and she urged amateur societies to risk "the cold blast of criticism" from adjudicators and audiences rather than continue to be "comfortably smothered" ("Curtain Up!" 8). Coughlan welcomed *Sive* on the basis that it was a new play, but it is unlikely that she could have anticipated the type of innovation that it represented. Its naturalistic theme and setting gestured toward the established conventions of the festival play and the attendant code of behaviour that those conventions demanded. However, the play's melodramatic conventions triggered unexpected ruptures that violated that code. Those ruptures pointed towards the potential for a hybridised theatre experience:

an event that combined the participatory, popular appeal of the melodrama with the social engagement and character development of realism or naturalism. They also suggested that performances of *Sive* on the amateur festival circuit in 1959 were hybrid occasions. Imbricated as they were in a rich regional and local performance tradition, the melodramatic conventions of *Sive* functioned as rhetorical conventions that encouraged a raucous response on the part of audiences; one which would normally be discouraged at drama festivals. In the context of a movement whose members increasingly adhered to a centrally-imposed repertoire and a set of conventions, *Sive* incorporated the conventions of a less influential periphery. Combined in the context of the amateur festival circuit the realistic, tragic, and melodramatic conventions of *Sive* at once suggested a serious-minded and 'professional' occasion appropriate to the reception of a festival play, and an 'amateur' occasion that was more audience-centred and anarchic.

The (lost) art of the amateur.

The fulfilment of the hybrid potential of *Sive* in the professional sphere would depend on a positive response to the play's melodramatic conventions on the part of metropolitan critics. However, where those conventions were identified in reviews they were often used as evidence of the play's failings. For example, when the Listowel Group performed *Sive* at the Queen's Theatre, the *Irish Times* reviewer claimed that the play presented "melodramatic situations that would have been credible on the stage … in 1909, but stick slightly in the craw fifty years later ("Listowel Players Present 'Sive'"). Similarly, a review in the *Irish Press* claimed that *Sive* was the type of play that "tends to undo much of the good work of the past decade in Irish playwriting in banishing the stage Irishman into well-merited oblivion"("Sive gets a warm welcome"). This pattern was not necessarily restricted to the Listowel Group's production of *Sive* in 1959. Scathing reviews in the *Times* of London ("Rural Irish Melodrama") and in the *Guardian* (Fay 7) of a professional production in Hammersmith the following year both cited melodrama in their analyses of weaknesses in the play. As a result, perhaps, of the metropolitan critical response to *Sive*, there was a discernible change in Keane's work in the interim period between his emergence with the play and what we might term his redemption at the Abbey in the 1980s. The seeds of that change can be found in Keane's collaboration with the director Barry Cassin for *The Highest House on the Mountain* in 1961. *The Highest House* appeared in the Gas Company Theatre and became the longest running play at the 1960 Dublin Theatre Festival. In many ways, Cassin and Keane were an

unlikely pairing. Keane was famed as a popular playwright, while in 1951 Cassin had founded the 37 Theatre Club: a basement theatre committed to producing avant-garde plays. Prior to the start of rehearsals, Cassin spent weeks editing the manuscript of *The Highest House* (Smith and Hickey 90) and, at the request of the director, Keane made further revisions once rehearsals began (Smith and Hickey 91). In his introduction to the published text of the play, Cassin questioned whether the production of *Sive* by amateurs had been truly beneficial for Keane's craft as a writer. He suggested that "even an effective writer like Keane needs direction that amateurs are unlikely to provide", and commended the playwright for having "the good sense and humility to realise that by observing the work of professionals he could improve his own" (Keane, *The Highest House 1*). It would appear that through the process of producing *The Highest House,* Cassin made Keane aware of the fissures between the art of the amateur and the quite different craft of the professional. The result was a play that Seamus Kelly in the *Irish Times* described as Keane's "best play yet" (6). Kelly surmised, "where *Sive* and *Sharon's Grave* were merely repetitive and melodramatic, this latest work undoubtedly is a piece of contemporary theatre" (6).

Keane resumed his collaboration with Cassin for both *The Field* (1965) and *Big Maggie* (1969): two of his most critically acclaimed plays. Both plays are similar to *Sive* in the way that they explore the effects of modernization on the values and codes of rural communities. However, they are much closer to conventional works of dramatic realism in their characterisation. The nuanced portrayal of the Bull McCabe in *The Field*, for example, contrasts with that of Mena in *Sive* who, in spite of the sympathy we might hold for her, is ultimately a conduit for the melodramatic battle between good and evil at the heart of the action. In a reflection of the blend of melodramatic and realistic conventions in *Sive*, there is at least some indication that Mena has an inner subjectivity that makes her more than just a conduit for evil. In act one, for example, Thomasheen delivers a cutting monologue that evidences the cruel manner in which poverty has shaped her life: "Did you ever hear the word of love on his lips? Ah, you did not, girl! … He would sooner to stick his snout in a plate of mate [meat] and cabbage or to rub the back of a fattening pig than whisper a bit of his fondness for you" (37). Although such moments provide a stark insight into Mena's personal plight, the action of the play is nevertheless driven by a broader conflict between a traditional, communal way of life and the onrushing force of a voracious and self-serving modernity. When director Ben Barnes chose to revive Keane's work for the Abbey Theatre in the 1980s, the first play that he chose to produce was *The Field.* Following the success of that

production and the resulting elevation of Keane's status as a writer, a process of critical revision of his work took place, and this was perhaps most evident in the 1985 production of *Sive*. The critical commentary surrounding that production recontextualised the play for a contemporary metropolitan audience. In an interview with Anthony Roche in *Theatre Ireland* magazine titled "Respectability at Last!", Barnes identified what he saw as the play's central question, which was "…the way in which dire economic necessity precludes personal necessity – in this case in the area of human relationships (Roche 30). In keeping with the conventions of naturalism, Barnes placed an emphasis on how *Sive* relates to the individual as opposed to the broader theme of good versus evil raised by the melodramatic conventions of the play. Roche himself observed that Barnes's emphasis on the personal motivations of Mena was central to the "reevaluation" of the play that the director had instigated. Thus, using the platform provided by *Theatre Ireland* magazine, the critic and director clearly articulated the terms by which the play should be reevaluated in 1985. Nowlan responded accordingly in the *Irish Times* with an article noting how much more "seriously intentioned" *Sive* now seemed ("Sive at the Abbey" 10). Similarly, in the *Sunday Independent,* Gus Smith made the point that it would be easy to "dismiss" the play as melodrama, but that the manner in which it highlighted changes to Irish society made it an important piece ("Brilliant Cast in 'Sive'").

The Highest House on the Mountain was a more pivotal point in Keane's career than has previously been acknowledged. It seems that with Cassin, Keane had a director and a collaborator who was adept at parsing the naturalistic elements of *Sive* into separate, highly successful works. That being noted, the popular, melodramatic side of Keane's writing was by no means abandoned. In the same month that *The Field* opened in the Olympia theatre in 1965, Keane's first musical, *The Roses of Tralee,* premiered in the Cork Opera House. By his own admission, Keane had written the musical "as a kind of light relief" after what he described as the "heavy demands" of writing *The Field* (Smith and Hickey 147). We might view the almost concurrent showings of *The Roses of Tralee* and *The Field* as a separation of what was once a unified approach in Keane's writing. With that in mind, we could trace an imaginative line between Dublin and Cork in 1965 – between the bitter naturalism of *The Field* and the light-hearted musicality of *The Roses* – and find a meeting point in Athlone in 1959, in the hybridity of *Sive* and the unique kind of occasion that its performance precipitated. We might also view that imaginative meeting point in Athlone as an end point of sorts for amateur theatre in Ireland. The potential for a hybridized form that came to the

fore through *Sive*'s performance on the regional amateur circuit did not materialize in future plays. If anything, *Sive* represented the last vestiges of the presence of melodrama at amateur drama festivals. Aileen Coughlan penned a retrospective article for the programme of the twenty-first All-Ireland in 1973. In her analysis, one of the most notable changes that had occurred in two decades of the festival was evident in the audience: "From being an independent creature capable of snarling its disapproval or yawning its boredom in your face, it has become a gentle gathering of individuals, appreciative and appreciated" ("From the Inside" 47). It would appear that the efforts of reformers advocating for the dissolution of melodrama at festivals had been successful, and that the hybrid occasions precipitated by *Sive* in 1959 were a final flurry of noise before festival audiences fell in silent thrall to dramatic realism. Coughlan welcomes this development overall, but not without a hint of regret: "This, when one remembers the old flaming cigarette lighters, the seat-banging, the rustling sweet-papers, is a change very much for the better; yet there are times when, perversely, one would welcome the sound of the old snarl" ("From the Inside" 47). In the same way that Keane's success as a professional was predicated on a separation of the hybridity evident in *Sive* into its constituent elements, amateur theatre festivals had disavowed the deep tradition of melodrama from which they had emerged and instead become smoke-free, silent occasions more suited to the realistic, metropolitan style of drama that they hosted.

- Conclusion -

Sive is often celebrated as the greatest success story of the amateur theatre movement in Ireland: the play that propelled a regional amateur playwright into the ranks of the professionals. In this way it reaffirms the purportedly meritocratic promise that underpins both the idea of professionalism and the ideology of capitalism. Central to that promise is a belief that anyone with the requisite skill, ingenuity, and work ethic can rise to the top of their field. More than that, it implies that because it can be done, everyone therefore *should* aspire to do it: whether through the accumulation of wealth in the context of a capitalist society, or through the development of a more advanced skillset in the context of artistic practice. In spatial terms, the destination of those ambitions is the metropolitan centre, where wealth and expertise are most heavily concentrated. A major problem with that hierarchical perspective on society and the arts, however, is that the criteria for assessing professionalism is not always as objective or transparent as it purports to be. This is not to suggest that professional standards of preparation and execution are unnecessary, but rather to question the rigid

parameters that they impose. *Sive* displayed conventions that were used as evidence of the professionalism of its author but as this chapter has shown, an equally important aspect of the play was the extent to which it was amateur: that is, the extent to which it drew upon a rich regional and amateur performance tradition. It is unlikely that the unprecedented furore that developed around *Sive* as it progressed from regional festivals to the All-Ireland could have been generated by a play that merely copied the Abbey formula for realism or naturalism. The conventions of those forms are clearly present in the play, but it was the unique occasions that performances of *Sive* precipitated that contributed significantly to its impact. The participatory, emotive, and anarchic audience role at those performances brought them closer to the locally-oriented occasions produced by groups like St. Patrick's Dramatic Society than to conventional drama festival occasions, the aim of which was to replicate the atmosphere in professional theatre houses. What the success of *Sive* suggested was that in spite of the ostensible progress made in the amateur theatre movement via the dissemination of professional conventions, there was still a keen demand for what we might term an 'amateur' occasion. Furthermore, in a society that increasingly focused on the metropolitan city as a focal point of social, economic, and cultural power, *Sive* suggested that regional Ireland could be a source of innovation in Irish theatre. In Keane's biography there is a revealing passage in which the playwright reflects on *Sive* and its legacy:

> I will admit, of course, to *Sive*'s crudities and clumsiness. It is raw, gawky, and gangling. I think, to be fair to it, it must be called amateur and forgiven because it is amateur. It is beyond question a child of the [amateur] drama movement, the first child of the movement. The remainder of the children will benefit from the mistakes, and I have no doubt that many great plays will spring in time from the movement. (Smith and Hickey 100)

No playwright has subsequently emerged from the amateur theatre movement in as prominent a fashion as Keane did, but that might be attributed to the greater variety of routes to professional status that are now available. Keane imagined that the influence of *Sive* would become evident in the plays written and performed by amateurs in the years which followed. No other playwright, however, combined regional and metropolitan influences in the manner that Keane did. Perhaps the most noteworthy aspect of the potential evident in *Sive* was the hybrid occasions that emerged from performances of the play on the amateur festival circuit. As Coughlan's retrospective article showed, the unpredictable and participatory atmosphere

that formed during those performances was reminiscent of time before the festivilization of the amateur theatre movement had fully taken hold. That being noted, we know from the example provided by the ’71 Players that this kind of atmosphere could form during local performances, even in the case of a drama society that adhered strictly to professional conventions of preparation and practice. Furthermore, we know that those locally-oriented events – whether intentionally or otherwise – played an important role in consolidating the communities in which amateur theatre societies such as the ’71 Players were based.

Although it appeared that in Ireland in the twentieth century all cultural and political roads led increasingly to metropolitan centres, evidently there was a counterpull towards the periphery. That ideological shift was instigated, not only by the promise of pre or anti-modern insights as outlined in the previous chapter in relation to Field Day but, as the Listowel production of *Sive* demonstrated, for unique experiences that ran counter to standardized and professional theatre occasions. It is likely that this move away from the centre contributed significantly to a wave of regional professional theatre companies that emerged in locations across Ireland from the 1970s onwards. In what Morash refers to as “a seismic shift that would utterly transform the geography of Irish theatre” (*A History* 253), professional theatre companies were formed in Waterford (Red Kettle), Cork (Meridian and Graffiti), Limerick (Island), Clonmel (Gallowglass), Ennis (Theatre Omnibus) and, perhaps most famously, in Derry with Field Day and in Galway with the foundation of Druid Theatre Company in 1973. Writing in the *Irish Times* to mark the twenty-first anniversary of the establishment of Druid, Fintan O’Toole described the emergence of the company as “a great moment in Irish theatre” (“Twenty-one years” 10). Writing in the *Irish Independent* fifteen years later, Ed Power proclaimed that Druid was “Ireland’s most prestigious theatre company” (Power 4), and five years after that in 2016 Michael Billington described it as “one of the world’s great acting ensembles” (“Galway festival 2016”). While evidently a paragon of professionalism in Irish theatre, a less explored aspect of Druid is the extent to which it crafted a dual identity founded upon a voracious professional drive and ambition on the one hand, and a contrasting spirit of amateurism on the other. That dual identity or hybridity is perhaps most evident in what the company termed ‘Unusual Rural Tours’ (URTs). In an address to regional venue managers in 1995, Druid’s artistic director Garry Hynes explained the origins of the URTs:

> We had a nagging feeling that there was another audience out there that we weren't quite reaching. What about the towns and townlands like those some of us had been born and reared in – places like Ballaghadereen, Ballybofey and Boyle? With financial help from the Arts Council the first Unusual Rural Tour or URT was planned. This phrase, coined by one of our actors to distinguish touring other than touring to the dedicated arts centres and theatres, was the proud and affectionate name for what was to become a central part of Druid's artistic and strategic policy. From now on Druid would tour every year. Every tour would include a practical mix of week to half week residencies in the main centres of population and one and two night stands in smaller venues from Ballybofey to Skibbereen, from Callan to Clifden. Most importantly the touring productions would be the productions as seen in Galway not small scale, cut down versions of them. (*Touring Ireland* DA/NUIG T2:1064)

Hynes was careful to frame the tours in terms of the service that they provided to rural Ireland by bringing professional productions directly from urban centres to rural communities in an unedited form. What would emerge subsequently over the course of several URTs was the service that the tours provided to Druid by augmenting the company's image as authentic representatives of rural Ireland. Druid's first URT was a tour of M.J. Molloy's *The Wood of the Whispering* (1953) in September 1983, which the company brought to Lisdoonvarna (Mon 12), Inis Oírr (Wed 14), Inis Meáin (Fri 16), Ros a Mhíl (Sat 17), Clifden (Sun 18), Westport (Mon 19), Molloy's hometown of Milltown (Tue 20), Ballyshannon (Thu 22), and Ballybofey (Sat 24) before proceeding to the Dublin Theatre Festival (Wed 28). Newspaper reports on the *Wood of the Whispering* tour, and on subsequent URTs, emphasised the boon that Druid's presence provided for the residents of those smaller towns and villages. Writing in the *Sunday Tribune,* Kevin Dawson described the hall in Lisdoonvarna "fill with the kind of people Druid had gone on the road to find: the provincial villagers who miss out on even the occasional city tours, and to whom Irish theatre has – since the days of Anew McMaster and the fit-up companies – been one big rarely-opened book" (Dawson DA/NUIG T2:426). Druid brought the prestige of an award-winning professional theatre company to regional towns and villages like Lisdoonvarna but, as the previous chapters have shown, invariably the people there were familiar with the "book" of Irish theatre that Dawson referred to, not least the work of M.J. Molloy which was widely popular with regional amateur theatre societies. In an editorial for the *Tuam Herald,* Jarlath Burke pointed out that "several of the Milltown author's plays became almost a standard with amateur groups, in much the same way as T.C.

Murray and George Shiels were the staples of an earlier age…" (Burke DA/NUIG T2:425). Like John B. Keane, prior to the 1980s Molloy had fallen out of favour with the Abbey. As Hynes wrote in an obituary for the playwright in 1994:

> His successes with the Abbey Theatre in the forties and early fifties were followed by a long silence (not that Michael ever stopped writing, but increasingly his plays were not produced) and there is no doubt he sometimes felt forgotten and ignored. He attributed this – legitimately to some extent, I thought – to the increasing urbanisation of Irish theatre, the Abbey in particular, and never ceased to argue his case in long and passionate letters to successive Artistic Directors of that theatre, myself included.[37] (Hynes, "A Writer of Richness" 10)

Druid's arrival in Dublin to stage *The Wood of the Whispering* at the Dublin Theatre Festival was preceded by articles such as Dawson's outlining in detail the company's visits to the kind of rural communities that it was to portray on stage, including the community in which Molloy grew up in. If, as argued above, metropolitan audience members craved a return to the periphery, then Druid offered them the opportunity to do so by bringing the periphery to them. This was reflected in the critical response to the production, wherein it was framed as an act of retrieval of Molloy's work – presumably, from the regional amateur darkness in which it had been mired. Charles Hunter wrote that Hynes's, "alchemical skills have been seen in many number of productions, but perhaps her retrieval of M.J. Molloy's *The Wood of the Whispering* from a dusty shelf was the most spectacular. An apparently hokey play about the middle of nowhere was shown to take the problems of emigration and the West of Ireland head on" (Hunter, "Garry Hynes" 9). O'Toole arrived at a similar conclusion in the *Sunday Tribune*. In a veiled reference to the association between the playwright and the amateur theatre movement, O'Toole wrote that "it is hard to imagine a playwright more susceptible to bad productions than M.J. Molloy. Approached naturalistically, his language, like Synge's is open to easy parody … while the action of the plays - particularly this one - runs dangerously close to melodrama" ("The Heart of the Vision" DA/NUIG T2:425). In O'Toole's analysis, Druid avoided the melodramatic pitfalls that were inherent in the script by combining Beckettian techniques with clowning. Thus, in a manner that foreshadowed the revisionism

[37] From 1991 to 1994 Hynes was the Artistic Director of the Abbey Theatre.

applied to Keane's work, O'Toole justified the return to the periphery that *The Wood of the Whispering* enabled using terms and conventions that were more acceptable to a metropolitan audience. Both the 1985 production of *Sive* and the 1983 production of *The Wood of the Whispering* that preceded it were indicative of a broader resistance in society to the processes of urbanisation and modernisation. This was an ideological turn away from metropolitan centres and towards the "middle of nowhere" that *The Wood of the Whispering* is both from and about. Perhaps in Ireland that turn was an inevitable response to the outward looking modernisation that had gathered pace from the late 1950s onward. While the myriad changes of the preceding decades had led to considerable material gain for a significant proportion of the population, they had also contributed to a sense of detachment from previously secure identities that were anchored upon a firm sense of community and place. It thus followed that people would look away from the centres of those processes and towards the alternatives presented by the periphery. This explains the renewed focus on John B. Keane and on M.J. Molloy and on the rural characters beset by modern forces that populate their plays. It also helps to explain the apparent desire on the part of audiences to experience, not the calculated precision of the professional production but, the sense of belonging of the amateur occasion. Finally, it adds to our understanding of the appeal held by regional companies like Druid and Field Day as conduits of an authentic and place-bound authenticity.

Conclusion

Amateur theatre today.

The amateur theatre movement continues to thrive in Ireland in the twenty-first century, if not quite at the level of popularity that brought almost 5,000 people to the Ballymoney Drama Festival in 1948 (Blair 7), or that contributed to an All-Ireland Festival of three weeks duration, with a total of fifty-six competing groups in 1961 ("Heavy Booking for Festival"). As evidenced by newspaper articles which appear on an intermittent basis during the annual drama festival season in Ireland, amateur theatre is acknowledged as an ever-present feature of community life, in particular in regional areas where the majority of amateur theatre societies are based. A 2016 article by Keith Duggan in the *Irish Times* pointed out that three-act festivals had been held that year in thirty-seven towns and villages around Ireland (Duggan), and the following year an article covering the All-Ireland on the Raidió Teilifís Éireann (RTE) website estimated that regional drama festivals had attracted audiences "in excess of 60,000" ("4 Reasons"). An article by Tanya Sweeney in the *Irish Independent* put that figure closer to "around 300,000" (Sweeney). The typical format for such articles is to note the popularity and resilience of amateur theatre in Ireland before offering some observations about the role that it plays in communities. That role is usually defined as being primarily a social one, with amateur theatre providing a voluntary national infrastructure for socialisation and personal development. As a widely popular cultural pursuit, amateur theatre has undoubtedly contributed a great deal to Irish society in that regard, but this does little to capture the full extent of the role that it has played in Irish life or, furthermore, the contribution that it has made to the evolution of Irish theatre. A central aim of this thesis has been to add to our understanding of the role and contribution of amateur theatre in both of those contexts. In pursuit of that aim, it has provided a more detailed account of the efflorescence of amateur theatre that occurred in Ireland in the middle decades of the twentieth-century. It has presented an analysis of the mutually-defining qualities of amateurism and professionalism and shown them to be a central component of how amateur and professional performance are received by the public. Furthermore, it has argued that amateur theatre was a means through which communities across Ireland initiated, and in many cases resisted, the effects of a period of significant modernization and social change. This conclusionary chapter will revisit the primary points that the dissertation has made in

support of the dual aim of adding to our understanding of the contribution of the amateur theatre movement to Irish theatre and society. In the process, it will refer briefly to how amateur theatre is perceived in Ireland today, and will conclude by suggesting areas of further research arising from this study.

A social pursuit.

An enduring perception of amateur theatre in Ireland has been the idea that it is primarily a social pursuit, and that its primary contribution to Irish society has been the development of skills and confidence in individuals, and the provision of a platform for socialising and entertainment for communities. As Michael Farrell rather condescendingly observed of a drama festival held in Sligo in 1942:

> One can imagine what a boon this week of competition and possible triumph must be to those scattered towns of the West [sic] where nothing ever seems to break the monotone of repose except the shunting of some empty cattle-wagons within sight of a creamery's blank wall …To the young man who lives in, perhaps, unresponsive surroundings and thinks that he possesses a talent, Sligo [Drama Festival] offers a convenient tuning-fork and, possibly a transformer-station. (89)

The view of amateur theatre expressed by Farrell in the 1940s is echoed in contemporary assessments of the role of amateur theatre in communities. A member of an amateur society interviewed by Sinead Ryan for a 2014 article in the *Irish Independent* pointed out that amateur theatre grants people an opportunity to "meet people with similar interests" (Ryan); a 2017 article for *TheJournal.ie* noted that amateur drama groups "…provide a social outlet and foster talent across various age groups" ("Amateur Dramatics: Singing"), and an amateur theatre-maker interviewed by Tanya Sweeney for the *Irish Independent* in 2019 observed that: "As hobbies go, it offers plenty: a sense of community, a tool for building confidence, as well as a creative outlet" (Sweeney). Amateur theatre has made a major contribution to community life in Ireland and aided in the personal development of countless individuals. There is a danger, however, that when it is described as primarily a social or creative 'outlet', that this situates it 'outside' of the more central concerns of life and society. This is not to exaggerate the gravity and import of what for many is an enjoyable pastime, but rather to suggest that amateur theatre has fulfilled a more central role in Irish society than that of a

mere diversion from quotidian concerns. Compounding the tendency to sequester amateur theatre in the social sphere is the manner in which it is often measured against professional practice. The introductory chapter of this thesis shows that amateur theatre most often appears in the existing literature on Irish theatre in the form of fleeting references to the formative years of professionals. In those accounts, there is a tendency to characterise the amateur years of would-be professionals as a less advanced, chrysalid stage of development. For some observers, the amateur theatre movement has been successful only in so far as it has acted as a platform for prominent figures such as Keane, Tom Murphy, and Liam Neeson. The RTÉ article cited above, for example, lists the following as one of the "4 reasons the RTÉ All Ireland Drama Festival matters":

> Apart from feeding an appetite to attend the professional theatre, the festival has provided a stepping stone for many drama enthusiasts to enter the professional theatre as playwrights, performers and stage practitioners. Writers such as John B Keane, Seamus O'Rourke and Deirdre Kinahan have seen the amateur drama festival movement as the most accessible forum through which to present their work…" ("4 Reasons").

The terminology that the RTÉ article uses is revealing in that, in a similar manner to the framing of amateur theatre as an "outlet" in the articles cited above, it suggests that Keane, O'Rourke, and Kinahan were merely "enthusiasts" before they progressed to professional status. Sweeney's article similarly cites the "…many cases … [when] professional actors found their feet in amateur groups. David Rawle, star of Moone Boy, came from the [sic] Leitrim's Corn Mill Theatre Group, while Bronagh Gallagher cut her teeth in the Oakgrove Theatre Company" (Sweeney). A problem that arises from viewing amateur theatre in this way is that it elides the unique contribution that it has made in and of itself as a discrete form of theatre practice. By uncovering previously unexplored aspects of that contribution, this dissertation has shown that amateur theatre in Ireland is not, as is commonly assumed, a minor branch of a central trunk of professional practice, but a separate form of theatre with unique characteristics and conventions. That is not to deny the myriad points of overlap and intersection between the amateur and professional spheres, but rather to argue that amateur theatre should be taken seriously in its own right.

A discrete form of practice.

If amateur theatre is viewed as a separate and discrete form of cultural practice, then the particular role that it has played in Irish society becomes clearer. Amateur theatre in Ireland can be described as an outlet, but not in a manner which suggests that it takes us away from the business of theatre or of life. It does, in some ways, reside on the periphery of theatre and society but, as has emerged over the course of the four chapters of this study, that peripherality has often been an asset in terms of what the amateur theatre movement has offered communities around Ireland. The introductory chapter cites Brown's assertion that, in the period after the Second World War, amateur theatre was the only point of contact that many people in rural areas had with artistic activity of any kind (224). Similarly, Garry Hynes recalled the important role that the amateur theatre movement played in exposing her parents to theatre and culture (Hynes, "Garry Hynes" 195), and Tomás MacAnna made the point that "amateurs kept theatre alive when there was nothing else" (287). It is worth noting that this is still cited as a central function of the amateur theatre movement today. In Duggan's article for the *Irish Times,* Maura Clancy from Corofin Dramatic Society, Co. Clare observed that amateur theatre:

> …brings the most fantastic works into rural Ireland. … It exposes people to new ideas. People who live in Dublin have the Gaiety or the Abbey: they are exposed to fantastic art and writing. For instance, I am stuck here in Corofin on a week night: How do I get to see Peter Nichols's fantastic work? Unless I travel to Dublin or London to see the shows? (Duggan)

In the same article, John Travers noted how well-received Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* had been on the festival circuit a number of years previously. As he observed, "This was a play that featured sexual themes and nudity in front of a relatively senior and, I suppose, traditional audience. But there was no walking out in protest or what have you" (Duggan). Like Clancy, Travers cited the pivotal role that the amateur theatre movement had played in connecting regional Ireland to metropolitan culture. He eloquently concluded that "…the staging of these plays is very much a window into the world" (Duggan). The peripherality of amateur theatre is heightened for people who, like Clancy and Travers, live outside of metropolitan centres. Even in the case of metropolitan amateur theatre societies, however, the peripheral status of amateur practice relative to professional theatre situates it as an activity

that resides outside of the centre or 'source' of the dominant culture. As Clancy's comments suggest, it is easier now than ever to go directly to that source by attending a performance in Dublin, Belfast, or London. An important part of what amateur societies offer, however, is the transportation of cultural artefacts from the centre to the periphery, thus relocating them and initiating a dialogue with the dominant culture that, crucially, takes place outside of the centre. Plays such as *Angels in America* provide amateur societies and their communities with a "window into the world", but it is a window that is angled according to the unique perspectives of amateur societies and their communities.

The observations of Clancy and Travers might grant the impression that amateur theatre acts as a contingency for those who do cannot access professional productions. That is true to an extent: even the most committed fan of amateur theatre would not deny that the theatre world is primarily oriented around the premieres, products, and events of the professional sphere. That being noted, to couch amateur productions as mere imitations of those of professionals is to preclude a comprehensive understanding of what amateur theatre can achieve. Duggan makes the point that, "When civic theatres such as the Hawkswell in Sligo and the Glór [in Ennis] opened, there was a vague assumption that the need for amateur festivals would dissolve" (Duggan). Evidently, some people assumed that the provision of purpose-built arts venues would lead to the formation of a professional touring circuit that would usurp the position of the amateur theatre movement in regional Ireland. What they failed to grasp, however, was that the impact of amateur theatre is not merely dependent on the plays being performed, but is also drawn from the people performing. The introduction to this dissertation cites Mick Waddell's testament to the transformative potential of theatre, and the pursuit of that potential has been central to the appeal of amateur theatre as a form. It grants participants and audiences an opportunity to inhabit alternative roles and identities. Furthermore, a point that has arisen in the course of this dissertation is that it has the capacity to transform the status of drama societies and their communities. Thus, in the middle decades of the twentieth century in particular, it acted as both a mirror and testing ground for the changing identities of communities in Ireland.

Transformation

This study has shown that the plays that amateur societies chose to perform were seen to have a transformative effect on both audiences and practitioners. Following the

exhortations of reformers such as Michael Farrell, Gabriel Fallon, and Lennox Robinson in the middle decades of the twentieth century, sweeping changes were instituted to the repertoires of festival-going amateur theatre societies. Groups such as St. Patrick's Dramatic Society discarded the melodrama and variety introduced by the fit-up companies in favour of works of twentieth-century realism and naturalism: in particular, plays first produced by the Abbey, the ULT, and the Group Theatre. What drove that wave of reform was a belief in the transformative effect that theatre could have on the populace. For Fallon and his fellow reformers, theatre was as much a tool for "the enriching and deepening of personal and community life" as it was a source of entertainment (Fallon 7). They believed that the performance of the right kind of theatre in communities would lead to the cultivation of a more modern, cultured, and sophisticated populace. The exponential modernization of the nation, north and south, heralded an economic and ideological 'opening out', whereby people were being presented with ways of being 'modern' that departed from traditional modes of being. Furthermore, with the expansion of the middle class in both the Republic and Northern Ireland in subsequent decades, the processes of identity formation that had taken place on amateur stages in regional communities were mirrored in society as an increasing number of people made use of a wider range of opportunities for social advancement. In a period where people and ideas were increasing in flux, efforts were made to re-establish fixed markers of truth and identity. In the amateur theatre movement, those efforts centred on a heightened concern with the plays that groups chose to perform, and particular attention was paid to the rise of 'festival plays' that, according to some observers, were chosen with the sole purpose of success in competition.

A central goal for all groups competing at drama festivals, and for amateur societies in general, was to be more 'professional', in so far as that meant the pursuit of the highest possible standards of preparation and performance. As outlined in chapter one, however, 'professionalism' was identified by some as symptomatic of an individualistic, voracious, and immoral competitiveness. For those critics, the kind of 'professionalism' evident in the selection of festival plays ran contrary to a spirit of amateurism that was supposed to distinguish amateur theatre from professional practice. The defining features of that spirit were its commitment to pre-modern communal values and its faithfulness to a place-bound identity. Writing at the dawn of the twentieth century, Bliss Perry defined the characteristics of professionalism and amateurism using qualities that encapsulated the contrasting values associated with tradition and modernity. For Perry, the exemplary modern subject should

embody both the single-minded, individualistic focus of the professional and the inherent, communally oriented values of the archetypal amateur. As outlined in the introduction, there is more than a hint that Perry was exorcising his anxieties about the precarity of the class structure. This would help to explain the argument that he advances for a reliance on inherent and, ultimately, subjective qualities when assessing a person's capabilities. Considering the timing and subtext of Perry's analysis, it is noteworthy that questions of identity and authenticity were central to the debate that arose in the amateur theatre movement at a time of significant economic and social change. The critiques levelled at professionalism and the related demands for adherence to an ethos of amateurism were, ostensibly, calls for a 'return' to more nurturing and communal values. Given their reliance on subjective assessments of factors such as the motivations and 'true' identities of drama societies, those calls could just as readily be interpreted as attempts to impose regulation and control. To attempt to succeed as a drama group was to attempt an act of transformation: not only of actors into characters, but of a drama society into successful theatre-makers. A measure of the success of that transformation was how 'professional' a drama group was deemed to be. Evidently, however, in addition to objectively measurable components such as lines of dialogue or the verisimilitude of a set, an assessment of the success of that transformation depended upon more subjective factors such as the degree to which a group had remained 'true' to authentic values or an inherent identity. Thus, although amateur theatre granted the potential for transformation, that potential was regulated and controlled by critics, adjudicators, festival administrators, and audiences. While the amateur theatre movement provided a platform and testing ground for the kind of transformations there were taking place in society, it also replicated the societal structures that regulated that transformative power.

Duggan's article for the *Irish Times* informs us that today, "across Ireland", amateur theatre groups "aspire to professional standards" (Duggan). The amateur theatre makers that he interviewed were eager to stress that they were "conscious [that] the audience is paying" and therefore believed that, "there is an obligation to reach a certain standard" (Duggan). The "certain standard" that those amateurs aspired towards was established by professional theatre companies. Reflecting on that point, however, Duggan conceded that: "They are not full-time actors, directors or sound engineers. The endeavour is based on people stepping out of themselves; it is a leap of faith for the audience to believe the local postman or publican or chef can metamorphose, and for said postman to then convincingly do so in front of their eyes" (Duggan). The drama group members believed that a professional standard of

production would be key to the success of their transformation. Such was the immutability of the identities of local people such as the postman and publican for Duggan, however, that a transformation would require a more subjective and even spiritual "act of faith". In a manner that recalls the analyses of both Bliss and Stebbins, Duggan refers to a spirit or feeling when trying to capture the essence of amateur practice. The fixity of the identities of the amateurs that Duggan identifies is limiting for the purposes of performance or transformation. Nevertheless, it is also central to the appeal of the amateurs for the metropolitan critic. In a manner reminiscent of the assessment of amateur theatre offered by Ria Mooney and Michael Ó hAodha in chapter one, the place-bound fixity of the amateurs provided authentic markers of a fixed identity in a modern milieu where identity is otherwise transient and precarious. If the amateurs interviewed by Duggan delivered a bravura performance, they would most likely be congratulated on their professionalism: a common refrain among audiences of amateur theatre is, "that was just as good as any professional production!" As evident in the critiques of the festival plays outlined in chapter one, however, that professionalism might, in another context, be used as evidence of a departure from a 'true' identity or 'spirit'.

It might appear that the place-bound fixity of amateurism can be a limiting quality, but this dissertation has shown that it has been a source of innovation for both amateur and professional theatre makers. Chapter four calls for a reassessment of John B. Keane's *Sive* which takes into account both the regional tradition of performance that informed the play, and the unique occasions that arose from its performance on the amateur circuit. It suggests that while Keane intended *Sive* to be an Abbey play, and while the critical revisionism applied to it in the 1980s affirmed that intention, a full appreciation of its contribution to Irish theatre can only be gained through a consideration of the hybridised blend of traditions, conventions, and qualities that it encapsulates. The first two of those components can be analysed in a relatively straightforward manner by identifying the conventions of melodrama, folk, and realism that are evident in the play. The 'qualities' that *Sive* combines, however, are those of the participatory, anarchic, and locally-oriented, 'amateur' occasion on one hand and the attentive and decorous 'professional' event on the other. That is not to suggest that audience participation and anarchy are the sole preserve of amateurs, but rather to situate *Sive* at a meeting point between two discrete performance traditions. Following the festivilization of amateur theatre in Ireland in the early 1950s, the movement grew into an effective tool for the dissemination of the dramatic forms and attendant codes of conduct of a metropolitan elite. For regional amateur theatre societies, the adoption of those forms was part of an

aspirational drive to improve the quality of life in their communities: an effort which, as seen in the example of the Bundoran Drama Festival in chapter one, often incorporated a broader range of infrastructural and social improvements to communities. While beneficial for the most part, the wholesale adoption of those forms threatened to subsume the perspectives and experiences of individual communities. As chapters two and three show, drama societies such as St. Patrick's and the '71 Players demonstrated a capacity to resist that influence, albeit in the conservative and sometimes restrictive form of acts of protection. Furthermore, the analysis of the Listowel production of *Sive* presented in chapter four shows that amateurs could engage in a negotiation with the dominant, metropolitan culture in a way that produced work that moved beyond protective acts of resistance and towards more expansive forms of innovation.

Eager, perhaps, to succeed at festivals by mirroring the conventions of professional theatre, in the years following the success of *Sive* few societies at the highest level in amateur theatre were willing to adopt a more locally-oriented focus or to take a chance on an untested play in the way that the Listowel Group had with *Sive*. Thus, it could be argued that the innovative, hybrid potential that was evident in *Sive* was not fully exploited in the amateur movement. It did manifest itself, however, in the emergence of regional professional theatre companies in Ireland in the 1970s and 1980s. Led by Druid Theatre Company in the early 1970s, regional professional theatre blossomed in Ireland in an echo of the way that amateur theatre had over thirty years previously. In the opening decade of the twentieth century, the standard-bearer of Irish theatre was the Abbey Theatre, but by the century's end regional companies such as Druid and Field Day were at the vanguard of innovation and development. As outlined in chapters three and four, the periphery was seen as a source of insights that provided an alternative to conventional, metropolitan approaches to life. The modernisation of Ireland in the middle decades of the twentieth century had encouraged regional amateur societies to look towards metropolitan centres for inspiration, but the decentralization of Irish theatre in the 1970s and 1980s suggests that there was a counterpull towards the periphery as a source of authenticity. Michael Sheridan captured the essence of that renewed appreciation for the regional in the *Irish Press* in 1980, almost a year after the opening of the Druid theatre on Chapel Lane. Surveying the venue, he listed a set of problems ranging from the very basic dressing room area to an "almost impossible to obliterate warehouse atmosphere" ("Druid Lives up to the omens" DA/NUIG T2:402). Nevertheless, he concluded that: "Here there is no feeling of poverty. There is a richness which is absent from the big metropolitan houses

and that richness is built into the sacrificial effort" ("Druid lives up to the omens" DA/NUIG T2:402). Sheridan was not arguing in favour of Druid's value in comparison to metropolitan theatres, he was arguing for its value in contrast to them. For Sheridan, Druid was a suitable foil for the theatrical institutions of metropolitan centres because of the "sacrificial effort" of its members: a form of endeavour that, in the spirit of amateurism, was driven by more than pecuniary concerns. Thus, like Field Day, Druid presented metropolitan critics with an entry point to a more authentic periphery that was at a remove from centres of theatre and of society. That peripheral positioning was both geographical, given Druid's location in the West of Ireland, and ideological considering the amateur devotion that distinguished the company from its fellow professionals. In a similar manner to the hybridised blend of traditions evident in *Sive*, the success of Druid depended on a carefully balanced duality of identity. On the one hand, the company maintained a locally oriented 'insider' status on the geographical and ideological periphery of Ireland, while on the other hand it demonstrated the professional nous to transport those insights to the centre.

The intention of the preceding analysis is not to suggest that regional professional companies such as Druid represent a more advanced stage in the development of amateur theatre societies. As outlined above, there are a number of ways in which the respective contributions of amateur and professional groups can be distinguished from one another. Furthermore, the amateur theatre movement was not lacking in creativity or invention. As MacAnna pointed out in relation to the festivals that he had adjudicated over the course of several decades, amateur productions of plays that he was familiar with often presented him with insights that he had not previously considered. In contrast to the example provided by *Sive,* however, that particular kind of creativity was based primarily on the interpretation as opposed to the production of culture. The amateur theatre movement reflected and replicated the cultural, social, and political structures and cultural artefacts of the dominant culture without, for the most part, seeking to challenge them. There are examples of community-based amateur groups, such as The People's Theatre and Derry Frontline Theatre and Education, which have sought to engage in revolutionary and expansive action through their work. However, as outlined in chapter three, those groups are almost exclusively located in urban, disadvantaged areas. Given the expansive potential that those community drama groups have explored and developed, and considering on the other hand the extensive reach of the amateur theatre movement, a possible future area of research might involve an exploration of ways of combining the respective strengths of those different forms of amateur

practice. As Grant points out in *Playing the Wild Card*, in spite of the "middle-class dominance of amateur drama" and in spite also of its competitive framework – which runs contrary to the ethos of community drama – "there is no reason amateur drama cannot also be community drama" (12).

A further topic of interest that did not fall within the remit of this study is the central role that women played in the amateur theatre movement. This is of particular relevance in the context of a society that was strikingly patriarchal for much of the twentieth century. Patricia King recalled being required by law to leave her job in the civil service:

> Once you got married you lost your job. It was very frustrating; I think I'm still cross about it and it's over fifty years ago now. I loved it: loved that independence you mentioned, and I always felt on top of the job and good humoured about it, and that I was making good progress, and I often thought…how far can I go in this?[38]
> (O'Gorman and King)

Amateur theatre provided an outlet and, literally in the case of actors, a platform for women to assert a presence in their communities outside of the family home. That being said, it seems that the agency afforded to women in amateur theatre was predicated upon the status that they held within their respective communities. In an interview for *Theatre Ireland* in 1992, Mealda Doherty provided a fascinating account of her experiences as a young actor with a regional touring company from 1939 until 1946 when she "escaped to marriage" (92). Doherty details the numerous occasions when she was subjected to sexual harassment and assault by male audience members (90), and her experiences suggest that there was a sharp contrast in attitudes towards women performing in professional and amateur contexts.

A further subject of potential interest raised by this dissertation is the role that the Catholic clergy played in the development of amateur theatre. Amateur societies often performed in their local parish hall and, as demonstrated in the example of St. Patrick's in chapter two, the plays that they performed were subject to the approval of the parish priest. The clergy are sometimes portrayed in accounts of twentieth-century Ireland as an oppressive

[38] A 'marriage bar' that prevented women from working in the Civil Service after they were married was introduced in Ireland in 1933 and remained in place until 1973. According to an *Irish Times* article by Pamela Duncan, the bar also extended to many private companies. ("Women at Work")

force, and in some respects the example of St. Patrick's attests to that portrayal. Through his role in the cancellation of the Dublin Theatre Festival in 1958, Archbishop John McQuaid provides what is perhaps the paradigmatic example of such repression.[39] There are also, however, numerous prominent examples of the positive contribution made by the clergy to amateur theatre. Bishop Edward Daly in Derry is one such example, and Rev. P.V. O'Brien of Tuam Theatre Guild is another. Fr. O'Brien instigated Tuam Theatre Guild's exploration of avant-garde plays, and King recalled that "There were priests who would find fault with some of the plays that we did, you know, that they were supposed to be avant-garde; European and American drama more than Irish drama. But, with P.V. [O'Brien] it was the drama and the play…" (O'Gorman and King)

It is my intention that this dissertation will act as an entry point into what remains a vastly unexplored and rich field of study. Furthermore, I believe that it presents an interesting point of comparison for researchers of amateur theatre and performance practices in other countries. As referenced in the introduction, the various analyses by Claire Cochrane of amateur theatre in Britain raise interesting parallels with the account of amateur theatre in Ireland provided in this study, as do analyses from further afield such as Brian DeMare's article on Rural Amateur Drama Troupe's in China (2012), and Susan Costanzo's account of amateur theatres in the Russian Republic (2008). In their introduction to the special issue of *Contemporary Theatre Review* titled *The Ecologies of Amateur Theatre* (2018), Holdsworth et al. state that:

> Looking across the varied histories of amateur theatre in different nation states, three lineages of amateur theatre-making, among many, emerge. One perspective traces amateur theatre as a place for avant-garde innovation and politically resistant forms, while quite another identifies amateur theatre groups as a conservative cultural force, aesthetically and politically conventional, centred on questions of cultivation or education. A third story of amateur participation marks the amateur as preserver of traditional or endangered cultural forms. (6)

[39] For a comprehensive account and an analysis of the cancellation of the 1958 Dublin Theatre Festival see Pilkington's *Theatre and the State in Twentieth-Century Ireland* (154).

This study can contribute to an understanding of each of the lineages outlined by Holdsworth et al. in their succinct overview of amateur theatre practice. As the preceding chapters have shown, amateur theatre in Ireland from 1952 to 1980 was a cultural practice that was centred on the cultivation of the people, and that made a valuable contribution to the preservation of a repertoire of plays that might otherwise have fallen into obscurity. Amateur theatre provided people in communities around Ireland with an insight into the wider world, and a platform upon which to redefine and transform themselves. Finally, at a time of significant societal and cultural change, it reflected the energies and pressures underlying and restricting the transformation of Irish society as a whole.

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Appendix

Research Interviews

Interview title: Personal Interview with Bishop Edward Daly.
Interviewer: Finian O'Gorman
Date: 22 February 2016
Method: Telephone

Finian O' Gorman: You were talking about Tomás MacAnna and his influence in your area?

Edward Daly: He was a customs officer there, he encouraged people in that area to do, not just amateur drama but also, amateur drama to a very good standard and he became a big artistic director in the Abbey Theatre. He was a very senior producer and director there [and] subsequently one of the leading theatrical directors and producers. [unclear] I think when you see drama well done it gives you an appetite for it and a love for it and an attraction to it that is a life-lasting thing. I have always felt that if you do things as well as possible – it wasn't enough just to get people to learn lines and go off on stage and chatter words. It had to be acted, properly acted and as far as possible well directed. That was the kind of standard I was after, and when I became a priest then after college and school, I developed some [unclear]. It was a rural parish in County Tyrone, in quite a deprived area: I involved myself in musicals, in pantos and concerts and they were very good. Most of the people involved in that had never been involved in theatre before, and we managed to have moderate success in festivals and so forth, and then I was moved there after five years – I was moved to Derry.

And in Castlederg or in Derry, even when you were younger was there an association between theatre and a certain socio-economic background?

Not really, I think maybe I grew up [when the belief was common?], it wasn't long after the partition of Ireland. I lived in the area was 95% Catholic and nationalist, but not republican, there was no militant nationalism at that time, at least that I was aware of or exposed to and they … it wasn't something that entered in my reckoning as a youngster. My father had been involved in the War of Independence, but he never mentioned it. I didn't know about it until shortly before he died, and I was 22 or 23 at that stage.

And you describe in *Mister, are you a priest?* your motivation for setting up the '71 Players as providing a social outlet…

Well, that was part of it. That was part of it (providing a social outlet) ...when I came to Derry in the beginning, in 1962 there was a large theatre in the city centre, it's still there, which was St.Columb's Hall. It was built as an assembly hall, lecture hall, in the 1880s or thereabouts, and it was a fine, there was a very fine auditorium in it: a large 1,000 seater auditorium. It had been used as a cinema for years, and at that time television was just coming in and cinema was gradually being taken over by the large cinema chains, and smaller cinemas were getting releases

possibly a year after Dublin had them or some of the big cinemas had them. So, gradually people got out of the habit of going to the cinema and the cinema closed down. And, after it was closed down I was asked if I'd go over – I'd been involved in Castlederg as I'd mentioned to you. I didn't do any plays at that stage. I invited the Abbey to come and they came a couple of times: they performed Brian Friel's first play *The Enemy Within,* they came with *Juno and the Paycock* and with something else. I wasn't involved [unclear].

Then the Troubles started in 68'/69' and gradually people withdrew to their homes. They were afraid of going out, afraid of letting children out. It was a very dangerous time and very challenging time for people with young families and so forth. I got the idea by going around houses; the Bogside was the district that I worked in, it was an area that was very caught within the conflict… and a lot of women in the area in particular, mentioned to me that their social life had ended; the cinemas had largely closed down and all the kind of social outlets they had; dancing, dance halls and so forth, a lot of them had closed and people generally weren't willing to open places where people would assemble with the possibility of a bomb going off, or a bomb scare which would panic people. So, all that social life stopped. So, I put an ad in the local newspaper, the *Derry Journal* suggesting, and just thought that [unclear] that anyone who was interested in being involved in musical or dramatic productions, if they would come to a meeting in St. Columb's on a certain evening I thought I would get 20/30 people coming along. There was 120 people that came to the meeting, men and women. We set up a women's choir and a dramatic society and, that's where the '71 Players had its beginnings. And, a choir was formed called the Colmcille's Ladies' Choir, it's still going all these years later and they've been …they've sung in the White House, they've sung in the Vatican, they've sung in Albert Hall, sung in Boston Concert Hall, all over the world, and not just themselves, their daughters, some of the original members' grandchildren are now involved in the choir, so it's been very much at the centre of cultural life in Derry for all those years, since 1971, or 70 when the meeting took place.

Were people worried at the time about gathering, even in terms of drama or music or that?

Yes, it's like the first day of snow, when snow comes no one wants to leave the house, but after a few days you think, "we need to get out of the house…we need some social contact," and that's what happened; people starting making friends and picking up life again and social life and making contact with people making friends. There's few better ways of doing that than being involved in choir, drama soc or something of that nature.

What made theatre different as a social outlet?

It's one that all kinds of people can participate. Some people are gifted in acting skill, some people love theatre, other people love stage management, other people are good at backstage work: costuming, makeup there's a whole skillset there. Everyone who comes can be fit in some way, and feel part of what's going on. As well as that, it's highly enjoyable; the plays put on were very successful, and drew large audiences. I developed a part of St Columb's Hall as a theatre for around 120 people; it was very intimate, it was ideal for the type of work we were doing and it worked very successfully.

How did you go about choosing plays?

We read a lot of plays, first of all. There was a couple of people who came to that meeting who had some previous experience with other companies that had ceased to exist at that time; producers, actors, stage designers, people like that. They formed the core. We read a lot of plays and we decided the first play was *The Far Off Hills* which was a lovely quiet, gentle typical Lennox Robinson quiet comedy. And, Derry being a place where people like singing [unclear], did you get that note about the plays and authors? The second play we did was *God's Gentry*: it was a combination of song and acting by Donogh McDonagh. It's all but disappeared now; you don't hear much of it. [unclear] we all enjoyed that very much. We did, largely, plays by Northern playwrights, Irish playwrights: we did Tom Murphy – he's from Tuam I think originally – and then Frank Kearney from Mayo. Then we did a play, John Boyd's *The Flats*, which ventured a little bit into the conflict at the time. It was based on the [unclear] flats in Belfast and it was, kind of, an observation of what was going on at the time without taking any kind of critical stance on it: just playing up the tense relationship between the British Army and the local people living in the area. It was a very nice piece of writing; John Boyd worked with the BBC in Belfast. I don't think he wrote many plays but this was quite a good piece of writing. He was a keen observer of what was happening around him. And then we've a whole eclectic mix of plays: we did a lot of Brian Friel. I worked in RTÉ at one stage; I was there at the time [unclear] and so I came back from that I wasn't actively involved so much in the plays – the Players themselves – after I stepped down in mid 73'. But, I produced a couple of plays after I became Bishop.

Was the audience predominantly Catholic for the Players?

[Unclear] People liked plays I didn't care tuppence whether they were Catholic, Protestant, Atheist or Hindus: it didn't matter. Actually, there *were* some Hindu people there. I remember some Indian people came to them regularly.

What I am trying to form a picture of is did the audience and the group identify as Catholic or Protestant or 'Derry'? Or, what was the identity there? The self-identity?

I don't go into these things of Catholics, Protestants, Republicans because you are a drama group: period, end of story, I couldn't care tuppence where drama is concerned, or theatre is concerned. I know that there was at least two Protestant people in the choir, the ladies' choir: at least two, there possibly were more. But, nobody was ever asked. Everybody, I hope, was made to feel comfortable. The work we did and the company we had – politics and religion and that sort of thing was left outside the door, because there was enough conflict going on without adding to it. We were there at a troubled time to give people some escape, and some enjoyment, and some social outlet; that was our purpose, and whilst at the same time producing reasonably good quality work.

It's quite interesting for me, looking from the outside in…

People in the South have a very skewed idea; they confuse what goes on in Belfast with what goes on in the rest of the North. Derry is different in many ways: it's a smaller place and, people know everybody else. Once there is a sense of division in a place … it's not that difficult outside

of politics; coming up to an election yes, it gets a wee bit heated, in the marching season it does, but for the rest of the year people get on with life.

Even something like theatre, I guess, I associate theatre historically … it's an artform that's indelibly linked with politics, so it's hard to imagine that public performances like that wouldn't be politicised when you have … the other renowned public performances are the marches, or political speeches

Well, is Liam Neeson a political figure?

No, but he did play Michael Collins, without making light of it…

Well, other people have played Al Capone and they are not gangsters. You have to look at these things in a dispassionate manner. Life would be terribly miserable if you were going around saying "I wonder what religion that guy is; I wonder where he comes from, what he does?" I couldn't give a damn. I was interested in people who were interested in theatre, period, and that's all anybody should be interested in. We weren't making political points, we were trying to address a social need more than anything else and provide some enjoyment and social interaction for people who were deprived of it, whose lives were deprived of normal life at a very difficult time; that's what we were about. And certainly we didn't want to take on … we did a few plays about the [unclear] the plot I think at one stage, and Brian Friel's plays aren't political for example, although Brian is a quintessential Derry man.

With Field Day and *Translations* some commentators have said that…

Translations is about ordnance survey work in the middle of the nineteenth century translating the local Irish names into English, and, look; it's events of 150 years ago or whatever, and, I wouldn't like to think … it's a magnificent piece of writing, a magnificent play and Stephen Rea was involved in it; I don't know what religion Stephen is but I'm quite sure he isn't a Catholic and, what difference does that make? I went to the opening night of all their productions, and I was at the opening night of *Translations*. Liam Neeson was involved in that, actually, and Stephen Rea, Seamus Heaney, Brian Friel, Séamus Keane; the audience was eclectic, absolutely.

The '71 Players competed at the All-Ireland and performed at festivals in the South; do you think there was a perception as a Northern group … did audiences have certain expectations?

Absolutely, yes to that, they saw as exotic creatures from some foreign place, you know? It was as if ISIS had landed today as it were. There's so many people in the South have a warped ideas of the North and most of them have never been here, you know? I have first cousins living in Galway – my brother lived there, he's dead now I used to go there frequently. They lived in the North originally, in Fermanagh but I found people in the South, generally speaking, sometimes had very strange ideas about the North. But, the North is perfectly normal.

Perhaps now, arguably, but in the 70's it was certainly…

In the seventies it was a place of war, but what do you do during war? Do you sit and wring your hands and say, "this is terrible, what's happening outside the door"? Life has to go on; somebody has to grab the nettle and give people some kind of outlet, some kind of hope that life isn't always like this behind barricades; soldiers on the streets and checkpoints and so forth.

It's more of a testament to theatre at the time…

Yes, I'm not one of those who say that theatre and culture is everything, but it is important part of society: part of life that is important, and you have to lift people among themselves from where they are when you see good theatre, good film. I don't know if you saw *War and Peace* on the BBC? It's quite a difference piece of work; they've compacted it into six episodes. Again, it was a struggle to live life in a very difficult situation and, it wasn't just theatre that was going on. I was involved in the inner city trust at the time which was involving young people and people who had been released from prison in rebuilding the city, which was lying in a heap of rubble. We had to evacuate the theatre on several occasions because of bomb scares. Nothing, thank God, went off right beside us but quite near, you know – we had windows broken from blast damage and so forth, here and there but we went on regardless.

What I am hearing is that the performances of the '71 Players didn't have a political agenda. That must have been a conscious decision on your part?

Certainly not by those of us involved. Look, if you want to engage in theatre, in theatrical activity, it's like engaging in hospital activity: you don't ask a patient before an operation, "are you a Catholic or a Protestant?" You know? It's nonsense; or, "are you Green or are you Orange," or whatever. You see a patient in front of you; I spent most of the last twenty years as a Hospice chaplain, people were dying, people of all faiths in that situation. I mean, who gives a hoot? I don't worry about whether a play is nationalist or republican; whether it's Thomas [unclear] or some of the other English playwrights… [unclear] or whatever. I mean, the Gate produces a lot of plays by English playwrights. Some of them do Shakespeare's and people like that.

[unclear] I don't see…Brian Friel was a very close friend of mine; I knew his father and mother, and his wife. I knew Seamus Heaney: Seamus and Brian went to same school as I did, and it's a very skewed view of the situation here. The worst is Irish America; they have the weirdest views about Ireland; that it's all donkeys and carts still … singing ballads you know? I'm quite sure, I don't know anything about Syria, but I'm sure there's people in Syria still trying to hang on as best they can to some threads of normal life. And, every conflict situation has got to have somebody to do that. I grew up during World War II, when everything was rations and we had a very lively [unclear]. There were big numbers of American servicemen and English based in the area training for D-Day and so forth, but people got on with their lives. Children were brought up and educated and provided for, and whatever. You get one go at life and you use it or you don't use it.

In terms of the group itself, the professional influences: would you look towards Belfast, or Dublin, or England?

The professional theatre in Belfast was fairly quiet during the conflict. The Lyric theatre has reopened doing very good work. It's got a new building, it's lovely. During the time I was involved with the '71 Players there was the Group theatre based in the Ulster Hall: a small theatre in the Ulster hall. They did a lot of rather broad comedy – not necessarily of the highest artistic nature. I'm not saying the '71 Players were, but they were fairly good amateurs; they did reasonably well at festivals and things like that. There's no comparison between professional actors and amateurs; they are a different kind of individual, no matter how good they are. Liam Neeson bumped into us at festivals: he was involved in the Slemish Players, Ballymena, which most people would think is a very 'Orange' town. But, Slemish Players were a very mixed group; Liam Neeson certainly wasn't with the IRA or the UVF, you know?

In terms of the venue, St. Columb's Hall, that was the home of the '71 Players: I'm just wondering what kind of space, what place did that space have in the community?

Well, it was one of the biggest cinemas in the city, from 1923 to 1962. [unclear] opened the cinema at half one/two. And played until the last in the evening time about ten or eleven o'clock. People came all over the city to visit it. There would have been some people in the unionist community who thought it was a catholic church hall and so forth, because the people who built it were Catholic people in the 1880s, at the end of the nineteenth century. But, it doesn't: I did pantomimes and shows in it and had all sorts of dodgy individuals at it; Roy Orbison, Jim Reeves and all sorts of other people – the Bay City Rollers, God forgive me. But, if something is of good quality then everybody comes. It was in a neutral area wasn't in an area that was attended by green or orange: it was bang in the city centre which I think added to its attraction.

Were there any differences you notice between the '71 Players performing in St. Columb's Hall and performing in other venues?

Well, they were always much more nervous playing at home than they were away because there was neighbours and families and all the rest of it at times when they were playing at home. We did about four or five productions a year. We had quite a big membership at its height. It was more like a repertory company than the ordinary amateur drama company. We went to festivals really to get assessment from professional adjudicators as to how we could improve ourselves; how we could improve the standards of our work. As I said, I had to leave the '71 Players in 1973 for a while and then I was there for a wee while in 74' and 75' but after that hadn't time because of my other work. They carried on themselves and did very good work. As the Troubles came to an end, some of them became professionals, they joined professional theatre companies. One of them works a lot in commercials. Others just had other commitments – family commitments and so forth – and they couldn't give the time to it. Cinemas started opening again, and normal society took over. That began in Derry again in the middle of the 80s. So, there were plenty of other things to interest people other than that. That was one of the only things people had at that time.

Later on, when Field Day came along with Translations, one of things that people say about Field Day, and even about Druid in Galway, was that both companies brought theatre to areas that hadn't seen it before. What they ignore is…

They brought professional theatre. There is a difference. Professional theatre is a totally different animal.

These commentators give that impression that there was no theatre there.

I'd like to differ. There wasn't something of the standard of Field Day [unclear] people like that: Stephen Rea, Liam Neeson and all the others. We were simply local people from the local areas who were interested in theatre and were doing it for a love of theatre. Professional theatre [unclear] are people who are professional and [unclear], and they have standards far above amateur theatre. Even the best amateur theatre is not as good as — you might get the odd exception every now and again but it's not as good as professional productions. We tried to rehearse two or three nights a week. Professionals are doing it all day, every day, six days a week.

Arguably, the '71 Players prepared the ground for Field Day?

I'd like to think that they may have done. I just don't know how much Field Day … how it happened, or what it did. The quality of some of the work that they did was superb, I don't know about [unclear].

We can argue about whether *Translations* was a political play or not… Field Day didn't shy away from political issues, in contrast to the amateur movement..

Were there not enough people involved in those issues?

Do you think that that [there was enough people involved in those issues] is the attitude that people had?

Well, people had sons killed, uncles locked up, fathers locked up in prison, husbands locked up. They didn't go for their evening out to somebody who is talking about locking people up, or talking about the injustice that happened. People who are living under injustice are not going for their evening out to hear about more injustice, you know? And, anyhow, they know far more about it than anyone in theatre; they are living the story. And, anybody in theatre who comes along and says "I'm going to talk to you about this and I'm going to explain this to you," is being very presumptuous, to put it mildly, when people are living that experience every day of their lives. I mean, I witnessed one, two, three people being shot dead. I was present on Bloody Sunday when 13 people were shot dead: 29 people shot. I gave the last rights to, I'm sure, twenty people on the streets in those years, including British soldiers, including RUC, including IRA volunteers. I didn't want to go for my relaxation to somebody talking about shooting people and injustice this and that. That's something that's another part of life; you see it every blooming day. It's okay, maybe, going to Galway talking about it, but you don't go to Derry talking about it to people.

So maybe theatre didn't have a mechanism at the time…

It didn't have the mechanism to do that sort of work amongst people who weren't making it every day of the week. I think that Field Day in Galway is quite a different situation than Field Day in Derry. That's my view anyway. I wouldn't bother my head going to see something in the theatre when I can see it on the streets outside. *Freedom of the City* is about Bloody Sunday, but it's a very cleverly couched — as Friel is a genius at doing — take on things, you know?

Did you happen to see the *Theatre of Witness* project?

Yes, I know some of the people involved in that. Actually, I was just speaking to Pauline Ross who is the director of that, about two hours ago when I was coming from my medical appointment. She does tremendous work for theatre here in Derry. She was in the '71 Players. That is the people who were through the situation. They are not really acting: the people who lived that in their lives. I know a woman whose husband was tied into a van, driven into a checkpoint and then the van exploded under him killing himself and five soldiers. And she's one of the women involved in it, and she doesn't have to act; she is bearing witness to what she went through, and that's quite a different thing to somebody who was … normally you see them in plays, on television, in sit-coms or whatever. This person is not a person who is an actor: she is a person who is re-enacting a horrendous experience in her own life, and a horrendous injustice that was done to her; that's what that is. And, I think it's quite a different thing. As well as that, I think, it's a twenty years distance from when it happened. We were doing things in the midst of mayhem going around us; it's quite a different thing.

The *Theatre of Witness has raised quite a lot of debate; some people are quite opposed to it…*

Some people are quite opposed to talking about these things at all, and, I say that there is a place for doing that, and there is a time for doing that, and, during the five years after Bloody Sunday when we were at the height of our [unclear] was not really the place or the time for it, you know?

In writing about the '71 Players, is there anything that you feel I should pay particular attention to?

I think that one of things I always remember is being in Athlone for the Listowel Players' performance of *Sive*. It's one of the memories that I always have of theatre. How, just, magical and wonderful it was. It was a commentary on Irish society at that time, as much of Keane's work was. I would see it more as social comment than political comment. I think that social comment is often confused with political comment. I think that theatre is a wonderful way of expressing different things and different ideas; it gives voice to a lot of issues and I think that it's right that that should be. But, I'm speaking from a very narrow perspective when I talk about theatre and the 71' Players; the 71' Players has to be taken aside from theatre. The 71' Players was a reaction to the situation we found ourselves in, where people who had a love for theatre, and had a real panging – for social activity and social contact, in the midst of all the mayhem they were going through – to engage in something that we all enjoyed and got great satisfaction from. And, at the same time gave great pleasure and relief to audiences that came in very large numbers to the performances and productions. Theatre, generally, is quite a different thing; we had theatre in the midst of; in the very midst of conflict – actual bombs going off during productions, not very far away. That happened quite often.

We found men on the streets: at an army checkpoint, a man at the bottom of the street about 100 metres from where the theatre was located. That was the situation that we lived in, and we worked in. So, it wasn't a normal situation at all, and it shouldn't be taken as an example of the amateur drama movement from 1955 to the present, I think that it wasn't … it wasn't typical; it was atypical you know? But, I enjoyed it, and I'm delighted that we did what we did and I think if you ask anybody who was involved at that time, they enjoyed it too; it was, a wee chink of light at a very dark time and I think finding chinks of light in the midst of darkness is a good occupation.

I do feel quite strongly, and there's a great doctoral thesis there you know, about the misperception of people in the South of people in the North. I really … I remember once I was invited to speak in Ballinasloe and I talked about being scared in O'Connell street at night coming back from the theatre, but when bombs were going off in Derry I was never scared and there was a spate of letters written about it in the papers. They took great exception to it – but that was a time when Dublin and O'Connell street was in the junkie age. Dublin has its own problems at the moment. When guns come out it's a different ball game. It's the most frightening thing in the world having guns going on around you and not knowing who they are aimed at: it could be at yourself or at somebody else. There's a lot of rationalization done subsequent to things but the reality of the situation is that all you are trying to think of is getting cover somewhere, that's it you know?

[END OF INTERVIEW]

Interview title: Personal Interview with Tom Doherty One
Interviewer: Finian O'Gorman
Date: 25 February 2016
Method: Telephone

Finian O'Gorman: How did you first become interested in theatre, or what was your first experience of theatre?

Tom Doherty: Would you believe my first experience of theatre was in St Columb's Hall in Derry. It was a production of *Juno and the Paycock* by the Abbey. It was historical because O'Casey had banned his plays from being done in the Abbey and Fr Daly (who subsequently became Bishop Daly) was involved with St. Columb's Hall at that time. He wrote to O'Casey and got permission to do it. The Abbey did it and brought it to St. Columb's Hall in Derry. An extra in that show was Tomás MacAnna. I was captivated by theatre. It was the first time I'd gone and seen live theatre.

How was theatre perceived in Derry at the time? Was it something that everyone was into at the time?

Theatre was very much a novelty in Derry at the time. There had been a very strong amateur tradition in Derry at the time but it was very much a generational thing, and when the generation of people who were active got too old, or whatever, it died. During the Troubles, funnily enough, amateur drama in Derry got a huge revival and there were two prestigious companies in the town who were in fierce competition with each other. In St. Columb's Hall, which is a large hall, there was a little theatre which had seating for 103. That was sort of the mainstay for amateur drama in the town.

The two groups, were they the '71 Players and the Theatre Club?

The '71 Players and The Theatre Club.

As you got older then, were you involved in both clubs?

Oh no, I was strictly in the '71 Players. And then I subsequently went on and formed a semi-professional group called 'Themuns': Themuns' is a Derry expression for saying "those people". Yeah, like "yousuns". "See what themuns' are doing?"

Was the '71 Players your local group? Is that why you joined them?

The '71 Players was my local group. What happened was Fr. Daly (who subsequently became Bishop Daly) launched a recruiting campaign for artistic things and the Colmcille Ladies Choir and the '71 Players were formed as a result of that. They started the recruitment in 70' but they actually did their first performance in 71' so they were called the '71 Players.

I remember reading a description of the '71 Players and it said that their repertoire was Irish, English and European work. So, what kind of plays were usually produced by the '71 Players?

It was heavily Irish, some English and a few European. Irish plays they did were *The Freedom of the City*, *Over the Bridge*, a couple of Lennox Robinson plays. The *Country Boy* by John Murphy, a couple of English plays. They did *Blythe Spirit*. I'm trying to think now off the top of my head what was done. *Abigail's Party* was another English one that was done. John B Keane's were being done: *Big Maggie*, *The Year of the Hiker*, *Many Young Men of Twenty*.

What was the process in choosing plays, was it the director said, "this is what we are doing"?

Oh, aye, the director had the choice of play and what usually happened was two plays were being done in tandem which were staged in mid-November. Then casting was being done before Christmas for two plays to go on in time for the festival season. So, they would have gone on in late February. The '71 Players would have done on the festival circuit. They would have always gone to Carrickmore, Ballyshannon and Moneyglass. And occasionally we would have had two plays out in the circuit.

So was the main motivation to produce plays that you thought would do well on the festival circuit?

We didn't tend to pick what would be known as 'festival plays'. We didn't tend to do that. Well, it was the director who picked the play. I suppose to a greater extend it was a match between the available players and identifying a script from that and, of course, in the company there were a couple of stars and plays were built around them at times.

And what kind of plays did your audience like to see?

We did an audience survey once and it was very much Irish plays and, really, Irish comedies. That was what emerged from it. As I said, we did that survey and some people mentioned individual plays they would like to see. George Shiels came up as people requested it. We didn't do a lot of George Shiels, but when it came up in the survey we did a few George Shiels plays after that.

And of course, the age old cliché is that comedies don't do well on festivals?

That's correct yes; that's it, yes.

So did that present a problem for you then?

Aye, but I meant really we went to festivals for the experience rather than pot-hunting.

On the festival circuit, was the goal the Ulster Finals or the All-Ireland Finals or were they looked upon as equal?

Well, really, Carrickmore, Ballyshannon only nominated [unclear]. So there were years we got into both. There were some years we only got into one.

And did it matter in terms of how you looked at the finals? Did one or the other mean more? Did they seem like a bigger competition?

Athlone was much the bigger competition. I mean, the Ulster Finals were prestigious at a time when they were held in the Opera House in Belfast. But then, during the Troubles, the Opera House closed and it went to Ballymena Town Hall, which wasn't a very good venue. And, then it went to small venues in Belfast and it lost a lot of the prestige because of that.

That kind of came from the venue then?

Absolutely, and then in recent years it was in Armagh in the Marketplace Theatre there and was very poorly advertised. I mean, I remember going to see plays – not being involved, but going to see a play… plays that I had adjudicated – and there might have been ten in the audience.

Do you think that the Ulster Finals because, it's a smaller festival that it needed that prestige from the venue. I'm thinking of the Dean Crowe Theatre. It's a nice theatre now but certainly over the years, it's not the nicest venue you could go to…

No it wasn't. I mean, going to the Dean Crowe for the first time was a huge disappointment from lots of points of view. The catering used to be in the hall and they had salads made up from the night before. There used to be potatoes and beetroot beside them and the beetroot always seeped into the potatoes and we called the potatoes Athlone pinks!

So, maybe there was some kind of tactics going on? They were trying to poison you!?

I mean, Athlone has improved beyond recognition, and particularly since RTE sponsorship began.

Yeah, and certainly the exposure as well is hugely improved.

Aye.

I'm just wondering then, when you were travelling to Athlone then, did you feel you were categorised as a northern group? What was the perception of the Northern groups?

Well, we were seen as a northern group, particularly when we did northern plays like *The Freedom of the City* but, I never felt there was any barrier or anything, you know? One of the first festivals we went to was Claremorris and we were seen as a great novelty in Claremorris: a northern group coming. And, I remember we travelled up and stayed overnight the night before. And, funny enough (I can't remember the name of the play but it was Garry Hynes who directed it)), it was something to do with Vikings who came up through the auditorium with actors carrying boats. Tom [unclear] was adjudicating. Everywhere we went – that day before, in the

shops and all – we got "you are welcome to Claremorris!". It was obvious from the accents who we were, you know?

The audiences or other groups didn't have any preconceptions, I mean, they were just welcoming overall then?

Oh, they were. No, there was no preconceptions [unclear].

In terms of the '71 Players, they performed in the St Columb's Hall. Did you notice – and I guess this is a general question because I am interested in the effect the location has on a group, the location where they perform – [but] did you notice the difference in the group's performance or perception between when they performed in their own venue or when they performed in other locations?

No, I didn't notice any significant difference. I know in St Columb's Hall, it was a little theatre but that [unclear]. The only perceptible difference was Ballyshannon. It was the Abbey theatre in Ballyshannon and the theatre at that time was a cinema. It has since been developed, but at that time it was a cinema. The stage had no depth to it because it essentially was a cinema. It had a flat floor and then a raked piece behind that with cinema seats and they [unclear] some of the cinema seats. And, in my experience, it was the greatest venue to play a comedy. I remember we did *Da* in it and *Da* has a line a young fella went to confession. A[unclear] says, "I met a girl from Cork". "Yerra," says the priest, "you're a dead man walking!" When that line was delivered, there was a laugh that started at the front and went to the back and reverberated up and down the theatre about three times.

So there is no problem with the acoustics anyway, it sounds like?

Oh, absolutely not no. Beautiful acoustics because it was designed as a cinema but it was difficult to get a set on stage.

Right, so there was logistical things there … I'm just wondering if theatre in the north was particularly associated with a certain socio-economic class or was it people from all different walks of life?

Well, theatre in Belfast was very much associated with the churches because there was a Churches Drama League in Belfast and players like Bart players were sent from St. Bartholomew's and most of the Belfast players originated in church groups. So, it was a safe social outlet for churchgoers. It meant as well that they had to be careful of their choice of play and anything that could spark up bad language or [unclear] so there was that constraint. And against that, the other thing about the festivals in the north: if you got a festival in Belfast or a festival like Larne or Bangor, which would clearly be from a Protestant ethos, you would be at home in your bed at eleven o clock. Once the play finished, that was it. But, if you had a festival which came from a Catholic background, like Carrickmore or City of Derry or Moneyglass, you would have drink and carousing afterwards. So, there was that very strong difference in those two.

That's interesting because I would have maybe naively thought that if there was any Catholic influence, that it would just be conservative. That's interesting.

There wouldn't have been a Catholic church involvement. There might have been people who had a Catholic identity but the church wasn't involved in the way that it was churches-led in Belfast.

Oh right, I see.

One exception to that, funny enough, would be Portadown. Portadown would have a reputation as a sectarian sort of place, but Portadown would not have been in the same sort of mould as the other Protestant festivals. It would be more open. They had a bar afterwards and there was a club and it was convivial. Whereas a place like Ballymoney festival – I actually remember afterwards there would be a cup of tea. And whether this is [unclear] or not I don't know, [unclear] sandwiches. Sandwiches with slices or orange on them. And then that would've been goodnight then after that.

Right, God that's interesting. During the height of the Troubles it [amateur theatre] was free from any sectarian issues and – I mean, I hate to always bring everything back to the Troubles when it comes to the North – but, it is kind of hard for me to understand from the outside looking in how that was possible?

I mean, I can remember going out propping – getting props for a play in Derry and dodging gunfire. Do you know, I mean, that's absolute fact. So while the Troubles were at their height, the plays still went on. St. Columb's hall was in Derry: on the other side of the street there was a hotel called the Melville Hotel. And, the Melville Hotel was bombed and burned down. While the smouldering ruins were one side of the street, there was a play going on on the other side of the street. When we did a play, we always did teas and pastries and all afterwards. The firemen who were after having [unclear] the fire were still around. They were brought in and had tea and pastries. So, you had that [unclear] of things and people still came out.

Woah so, I mean, was it a case that the drama was there in real life in terms of, you know, drama that confronted conflict and that theatre was an escape?

Any play that confronted the conflict or dealt with the conflict attracted an audience. John Boyd's *The Flats* was done and got audiences because of that: because it was contemporary and it was topical. But there wasn't a lot of contemporary writing coming out. The plays [unclear] was another one which attracted huge audiences. There was one sectarian incident and it concerns Larne Festival. I cannot remember the detail now of it but it was to do with a play having to be withdrawn because of public opposition in Larne. That's the only sort of sectarian incident that I remember in the Troubles.

I guess those incidences were reduced as well by the fact that Festival Committees could choose to reject the play?

Yes, that's right, and steer clear of anything.

The other element to it as well is … so I'm looking at theatre in the North. There are a few case studies there. There is Belfast; there is Derry; and then, in between, there is the rural scene. So, the rural scene in the South is so strong. It almost *is* the amateur movement in the South. I am just wondering what is the story there with the North? Is it similar?

The rural scene in the North would not have been as strong as the rural scene in the South. Carrickmore Festival attempted to develop the rural scene. They had a travelling festival. With a travelling festival the adjudicator travelled around venues and saw plays such as [unclear] which was subsequently called [unclear]. He saw them in their own venue. Because the Confined plays tended not to get as big an audience, people recognised, I suppose, that the standard might not be as high. So, they were picking and choosing in that way. But, some festivals tried to develop the rural side of it. I told you how Carrickmore did it. Moneyglass would have been a rural group and would have tried to feature rural groups. There's another festival and I am trying to remember the name of it: it's outside Newry, and it runs over a number of weeks, because they only go on at weekends. They are an exclusively rural festival.

It's interesting if we had to speculate as to why the tradition wasn't as strong in rural areas in the North. I mean, in the South you had a number of factors like the fit-up companies visited so many rural areas and that kind of sparked an interest. And the Lenten ban on dances was another huge factor that encouraged people because there was nothing else to do, you know?

That's right.

But I wonder are there any social factors or even cultural that prevented the same blossoming in rural areas in the North?

Given the religious demographic [unclear] wouldn't have been a feature in the North. There was a rural tradition of putting on shows, but the shows would have tended to have been variety shows with possibly a one-act play or an extended sketch in them. Groups tended to only play in their own area. There wasn't a tradition of travelling. So, although there was an active community, which were staging events; they were not necessarily plays.

Right, right. And then even events that happened we might not know about?

Yeah.

So there wasn't that exposure so as well?

No.

I'm just thinking back to Derry. Were groups and audience then a mix of Catholic and Protestant? Was it just something that did not come up or was it just consciously avoided as an issue?

It was something that wouldn't come up as an issue.

But, at certain points … I was reading about the Guild Theatre in the 40s, and they didn't want to apply for CEMA funding because they stipulated that you had to play the National Anthem at the time.

Oh yes, that would have been a big "no no".

Yeah, and obviously that alienated Nationalists or Catholic members from the group?

Yes

But then later, with other groups, a little after that, the City of Derry Drama Group did apply for funding and I was just wondering if that would immediately single it out as a Protestant group?

No. It's very interesting in Derry: it was deliberately called City of Derry rather than Londonderry. That's a very significant thing, because Londonderry would automatically have classified it as Protestant. City of Derry was a mixed group.

Right, most of the groups were mixed then?

[unclear] yes. Even though the '71 Players were based in St. Columb's Hall theatre, it would have been a mixed group.

That's interesting as well. Presumably, then, the audience would have been mixed as well?

Oh, aye. The audience very much was mixed.

Yeah, so I mean it begs the question of if you read about … I mean, if the first thing that comes up if you Google theatre in Derry or even theatre in the North is 'Field Day' and a lot of academics describe Field Day as bringing theatre to almost a barren wasteland that had never seen theatre before. But, arguably, the ground for Field Day was prepared by amateur groups decades before that.

Yes, it would have been. But, I mean, now with Field Day the first night of *Translations*: people were aware in the Guild Hall that night that they had attended something special. I mean, I was aware that I had seen the birth of a classic. I mean, the play was just so strong, so resonant, so vibrant and the audience didn't want to go home. It was an amazing night in the Guild Hall. I was there until five o clock in the morning! There was a reception in the Mayor's Parlour which eventually spilled out to involve everybody. People just knew there was a special historic night. But, that was never recaptured. That high they started on blighted future first nights. People went with that kind of raised expectation: *The Communication Cord* didn't spark; *Three Sisters* didn't spark. In a way, it was a monkey on their back.

What do you think made it so special? Was it the play itself or the expectations beforehand, or the cultural significance, or a combination of everything?

It was a combination of all of those. It was the excitement. Derry, in terms of professional theatre, got very little. One of the main reasons was there wasn't really a suitable venue. And subsequent to that, there was a strong lobby developed for a theatre. There was a group called the Theatre Action Group, which spent its time lobbying for theatre and when the theatre came to Derry and the Millennium Forum was built, it really existing on touring English Companies. It would have been the B Division that came to Derry because the Opera House in Belfast got the A Division.

So, yeah, I mean, I'm kind of trying to understand the significance of Field Day as opposed to the locally-produced work because, you know, as you have mentioned there was a burgeoning amateur scene and other artistic activities right through the Troubles in Derry. But there is something about the tag of professional. Was it to do with recognition or something?

It was to do with personality as much as anything else. Friel would have a huge reputation. Stephen Rea was an emerging actor of note. Ray McNally would have been of huge note because he had local connections. He was married to a Mulville woman and was known because of that. There was a combination of things.

I'm just thinking of your time adjudicating as well over the years. How would you describe the relationship between adjudicators and amateur groups from your own experience and has that changed over the years?

No, it has stayed pretty constant. In my experience, the groups who would not accept adjudication and argue with adjudicators and sometimes become quite verbally abusive and those are the poorest groups because they don't listen to the advice they get. The good groups are the ones who equally get a critical adjudication, will sit and discuss it and tease it out and whatever. That is why they are good groups.

In terms of the imagined standard that groups and adjudicators have is that a standard or is it set by good amateur groups?

It is a standard set by good amateur groups.

That's different then, you know?

A play creates its own standard. There is little difference. Good drama groups can match professionals in every way. The only thing is, professionals have a gloss on their work that amateur groups don't have. And professionals have a gloss because they play in a run. They play it night after night and it settles into a rhythm. I always think it's got a polish or a veneer because of that: a confidence, a comfortableness with what they are doing. Whereas an amateur group: I mean, the '71 Players would have done the play in the theatre and would have run for maybe ten nights with it and the play was polished and ready. But, then there might have been a gap of four

weeks before it went to a festival, and a gap of maybe 2 weeks between different festivals. It's very hard to keep a play alive after it has had a run and then a break because it is very difficult to rehearse again. Without the buzz of the audience, it's difficult to gee them up for a rehearsal.

It's like each piece has its own kind of … has its own lifespan as well?

Yes. You are trying to resurrect it once it's gone.

Yeah. How would you describe the relationship then between amateur and professional theatre in Ireland?

I think its uneasy. Although a number of notables from the professional theatre would adjudicate. I mean Colm [unclear] in his time adjudicated. Tomás MacAnna adjudicated, Joe Dowling adjudicated. There would have been a culture of closeness in that way. But in the main, the professionals see the amateurs as almost stealing their audience. An audience that would potentially have gone to professional shows would [unclear] the play performed by amateurs. It's something that has influenced things greatly in recent years. There has been [unclear] of theatres that have been built all around the country. I mean, there are few towns in Ireland now that don't have a theatre. That the programming for those would depend greatly on amateurs. There aren't enough professional touring groups to put on a programme.

So, to fill their programme they are relying on amateurs?

Yeah. And it would be amateurs and musical societies.

And Pantomimes…

Yeah, absolutely. Pantomimes are the staple thing.

Over the years, do you think there is a typical type of amateur play?

The archetypical amateur play would be a John B. Keane play. It would be unusual on the festival circuit not to see a number of John B. Keane plays. And, because of that, there almost became a template for playing the plays. I have seen productions of *Sive* at different ends of the country. But, essentially, they fitted the same template.

That's interesting. What is it about Keane do you think?

He is hugely popular with audiences. He has strong characters. Comedy. They are contemporary and dealing with contemporary issues and very available.

In terms of the performing rights?

Ah no, I don't mean in terms of the performing rights. I mean, in terms of the audience's identification with them. I mean, I would think that audiences say it is like seeing their neighbours when they are seeing a Keane play.

We are talking about rural audiences then predominantly, or regional certainly?

Yes. I'll tell you another thing that was in my head to say to you. Drama festivals work best in a relatively small town – a town like Ballyshannon – because in a relatively small town the festival makes an impact on the town. The people are aware of it. They own the festival and they are proud of it. Where in largely urban centres like Derry, for instance, it just becomes one of a number of things that are going on. There is no special place in the social calendar.

Yeah, could the same be said for amateur groups as well? I mean I know a lot of towns that would have had quite strong groups such as Sligo and Galway. They don't really have a notable group on the circuit nowadays. Is that for the same reason?

It is for the same reason, yeah.

There is just too much competition?

In a smaller community they identify with their local group.

Yeah, so a sense of place is really important?

Absolutely, yes.

I'm just wondering, over the years … I'm kind of looking for case studies and that could be a group or a play. One of my chapters is actually on the first production of *Sive*. And, I am looking at the All-Ireland in Athlone, and I am currently trying to narrow down case studies to look at; amateur theatre in the North as well. But, from your experience is there any particular incidents, festivals or productions that you think are worth a look?

The Moat Club, Naas always did and did well, interesting stuff. Consistently, there was a consistent standard. In Belfast and the North The Bart Players always produced a consistent standard in what they did.

Do you think The Bart Players are fairly representative then of amateur theatres in Belfast?

Oh, I think so. Very much so. Another group that would be very interesting to look at is the Lifford Players. The Lifford Players are drawn from Strabane but they call themselves The Lifford Players because historically they [unclear] not let them enter the Confined section of festivals. The festivals were the smaller communities in Strabane. But, they are a group with a tremendously strong tradition who won the All-Ireland several times. They were a group who certainly would be worth looking at.

Could we call The Lifford Players more of a rural group then?

They presented themselves as a rural group, but in fact drew most of their actors from Strabane. They are from Donegal to be honest. I mean, they drew actors from as far west as Donegal.

[unclear] and places like that. And Lifford had a reputation. And people wanted to join the group. Lifford, although they participated in festivals, they also performed on Sunday nights in halls around the country. They had a big following and big exposure because of that.

So, again that attachment to place is so strong, you know, especially in comparison to professional theatre.

Yeah.

Even in terms of that act of touring in the county. You know, it's different from the kind of stereotype of groups who are completely festival-driven and almost mercenary?

Yes, that's right.

It's interesting from that perspective…

Another thing that occurred to me that I think has changed over the years is it used to be with festivals outside Dublin … You would get groups from Dublin travelling out to those festivals because they didn't have an opportunity of presenting a play in Dublin. And, a number of times at festivals I met Dublin groups who at that festival were doing their first performance of the play. So, the only way they could get to stage the play was by going in the festival circuit. But that has changed in recent years because there are now plenty of venues around Dublin again to do their shows.

But, even now, I have spoken to a few people from Dublin and they have talked about things like storage and that; you know, they find it incredibly difficult.

Aye, very difficult. Yeah, everything is much more expensive.

Definitely. Any kind of property now in Dublin is crazy.

Yes.

The last thing I wanted to ask you is again in terms of case studies. Do you think that the '71 Players is an exception really, in terms of the time it was formed: the social and political situation in Derry at the time?

Oh I do: I think it is exceptional surely. Yeah. I mean, most groups have roots in the community. They can be traced back, but the '71 Players were hybrid in that way.

A hybrid?

In other words it started from scratch. It didn't follow on from previous groups or whatever.

Were there certain people involved that would have come from other groups that would have been disbanded because of the Troubles?

No, but it contained people who had been involved in drama but the groups that they were in folded essentially because of the age profile of the people that were in them.

Right, yeah. Again, that is kind of the life cycle of groups as well.

Yeah.

I've come across that a lot. Or where one key figure leaves.

Oh aye, the director is essential to an amateur group. And, the director makes all the difference to the group. And, it is due to a strong Director that can hold a group together. The most difficult thing is passing on the crown.

I would have seen that in my own home town growing up, Charlestown in Mayo.

Oh yeah, Paddy Henry.

Paddy would have left and then people like my parents stopped and then it kind of dissolved and nobody took up the mantle.

And your parents were involved, were they?

Yeah, Philip and Carol O'Gorman.

Oh, for heaven's sake, I know Philip and Carol very well.

Really?

I didn't realise that's who you were.

Yeah, yeah that's me. So that's how I became interested in the topic and when I was starting my PhD it was the topic I wanted to do based on that.

Well, no wonder you have an interest in drama with the parents you have.

Exactly. Yeah. It's hard to avoid it!

[END OF INTERVIEW]

Interview title: Personal Interview with Tom Doherty Two.
Interviewer: Finian O'Gorman
Date: 29 September 2016
Method: Telephone

Tom Doherty: How did you get on with Carmel?

Finian O'Gorman: Very well. She was a really interesting interviewee. She had plenty of stories of different productions and stuff like that.

She was a star.

So I believe, but she was quick to deny that.

She was just a natural.

She went on to do some professional work as well.

Yeah she had a one-woman show.

Yeah, so we were chatting a little bit about that as well. So, I guess what I wanted to focus on with you was just a few specific productions and try and get some details on them.

Right.

Bishop Daly sent me a list of the productions – well, as many as he could remember that The '71 Players did – and I remember that you said to me that the plays that dealt with the Troubles were particularly popular with audiences.

Yes.

And, I was looking at them and there's almost an exact three-year gap between what we might call the Troubles plays, starting with *The Flats* in 73'. Then there was *Freedom of the City* in 76' and *Over the Bridge* in 79' and then *Me Oul' Segotia* in 82'. I'm just wondering, from your experience, how was the decision made to produce what we might call Troubles plays within the group?

Well, the group didn't make the decision. It was an individual producer who decided what to perform and it was popularity, I would say, which is why those were done. *The Flats* had a good run in Belfast before it came to Derry. *Me Oul' Segotia* was done in Belfast before it came to Derry. *Over the Bridge* was a standard which had been about for years.

So, there was kind of a recognised demand from audiences that they would be aware of these plays?

Yes.

And there seems to be as well two impulses at the time in terms of what plays to produce, like for example after Bloody Sunday Fr. Daly said that they wanted to produce a play that was a comedy and that kind of provided relief from what was happening on the streets you know?

Yes.

But on the other hand, there also seems to be an impulse where people want to see what's happening on stage and want to engage with it.

Oh absolutely, yes.

I just wonder was that a kind of a thing that was discussed? Did some people prefer to just, you know, have theatre as escapism or did other people want to engage with these issues on stage?

We did an audience survey once and what emerged from that was the local audience wanted contemporary drama with a local resonance if possible.

So, I guess there was a demand there for issues that spoke to Derry people at the time?

Absolutely. They wanted to see their own social situation [unclear] on stage.

Yeah. And how did people feel about how those issues were represented? For example, a criticism that is directed towards *The Flats* and *Over the Bridge* was that they were very neutral. They followed a similar format of like, for example, boy meets girl from the other side of the tracks and then in the end we all learn to live in peace together, you know? Was there a feeling that they were too neutral or how did people feel about what they represented?

People didn't see it in that way at all, I don't think.

Yeah, so I guess, for example, with *The Flats:* did they think it was a true representation of what was happening?

Well, it was recognised as such, and in *The Flats*, although it was set in Belfast there were Derry sayings inserted into it to localise it and it was accepted as a reflection of the contemporary society. I played the soldier in *The Flats*. And, at the time that was accepted as a true reflection of what people were seeing on the streets.

Even though those plays were set in Belfast, did people in Derry still feel there were parallels there because some people have said to me, I think Fr. Daly said to me, that "you know you have to remember that Derry wasn't Belfast".

No, Derry wasn't Belfast. It was a very different situation. In Belfast the nationalist community was under threat. In Derry it never was because it was in such a majority in the City. It was never under threat.

And, as regards those plays as well, were there any feelings about touring them regionally in the North? You know, with the content?

There was no problem. *Over the Bridge* was toured. *Over the Bridge* went to festivals. It went to Newry. It went to Carrickmore. It went to Ballyshannon. It got to the Ulster Finals and the All-Ireland Finals. It did the All Ireland in Athlone. I'll come back to that in a second. And it did the Ulster Finals, which at that time were held in Ballymena townhall. It had the misfortune when it went to Athlone to have Scott Marshall, a Derry man, adjudicating. And his big comment about the play was that the accents were more of the Foyle than the Lagan. That they were Derry accents rather than Belfast accents. No other adjudicator would have picked up on that and my feeling is that he chickened out. He didn't want, as a Derry man, to give a Derry company first place. And we got second. And, at that time the winning play in Athlone did a week in the the Peacock and David Nolan, the Irish Times critic at the time, said when he saw the play that either the standard was very low this year, or the wrong play won; which is what he wrote in the *Irish Times* about it.

Yeah, that's interesting because you'd imagine as a Derry man that he'd be more sympathetic to the play I guess?

No, well he came from a different traditional in Derry.

Right, yeah, and of course I believe … didn't he direct a play and his lead actor was murdered? I think that was Scott Marshall as well was it? I can't remember.

No, I can't remember either.

But, I'm just wondering as well in terms of the way the group functioned. Like, practically, from your memory, what was the atmosphere like in rehearsals? Was it kind of business-like and serious or was it, you know, more informal?

It depended on the play and depended on the producer. A play like *Over the Bridge* would be business-like and formal. A play like *Barnham was Right*, which was a comedy, the rehearsals were like [unclear] and more full of camaraderie rather than business.

So, in a way it seems like the company had two different functions in that for some it was more of a social outlet and then for others they were more focused on making serious drama or doing well at festivals.

I would say for practically everybody it was a social outlet. The practice was that there were two plays rehearsed in tandem and rehearsals would be on the same night. And there would be a half an hour of tea break where the cast would have mixed and mingled. And then people would have

gone to the pub afterwards. So, it was socially motivated I would say rather than artistically motivated.

Did this kind of causes a lot of problems in a lot of amateur groups where some people want it to be more serious, more festival-driven?

No I wouldn't say so. It didn't cause those sort of problems in amateur groups in our group. The difficulty was when those two plays, which had been produced together, went to festival and one did better than the other. That caused some friction.

And, in comparison, you've got a great perspective in that you can compare your professional with your amateur experience as well. What were the kinds of challenges with working with the '71 Players as opposed to working in a professional environment?

With a professional environment you expected and demanded that actors got their lines off pretty quickly. In the amateur environment they could still be learning their lines on the week before the play, you know what I mean? That would be the biggest disciplinary difference.

I'm wondering as well about, so you were saying as well that play choice would be quite strongly directed by the director or producer who wanted to make the play?

Yes.

And did that kind of apply to the whole process of producing a play? Was it kind of really centred on the director as a driving force in terms of how the rehearsals went? Did the director dictate the terms in terms of atmosphere, in terms of rehearsal times, everything like that?

Well, yes and no. The director would have had the last say on those, but obviously there was a certain tradition of rehearsing on certain nights at certain times and that still followed through.

Actually, Carmel had mentioned that there was quite a democratic philosophy within the group in that everyone was given a chance to perform or to express their potential?

Yes, there would have been and everyone would have had the opportunity to direct had they wanted to.

Right, and how did that come about? Did people have to volunteer themselves or did someone say, "I think you'd be good at directing in this part"?

No, people weren't asked to direct. People volunteered to direct.

And then it went from there… And would they bring a play as well like, "look, there is this play I want to make," or would they volunteer themselves forward? Was there kind of a reading and someone said, "I wouldn't mind directing that" or did people bring plays to the table?

People brought plays. People came and proposed plays to be done.

And then would you agree as a group whether you were going to produce it or not?

No. There was a committee which would have made the decision. It wasn't put before the group. The group had an Annual General Meeting but really the Annual General Meeting was to elect officers and once the officers were elected, they dictated policy.

Were the officers usually longstanding members of the group?
Oh yes.

And, were the wider members of the group also people who performed, or was there more organisational and administrative members as well?

No, there were people who performed and there was another group who looked after the social end and that essentially meant providing tea at the interval and then there was a tradition that there was a supper provided and audience members would be invited round. So, if people had friends in the audience they would invite them round for supper. And there was a cohort of ladies who looked after that end of things.

They are always kind of the beating heart of groups you find around the country. There seems to be a similar set up in a lot of groups.

Yes.

The other thing that I'm not quite sure on is the makeup of the group. For example, Carmel told me that … I was wondering if there was a predominant socio-economic background within the group?

There wasn't. It went from labourers to doctors within the group. The whole spectrum was represented. It wasn't a middle class thing. It went broader than that.

That's quite unusual because, I guess most amateur groups are predominantly middle class.

Yes, I would say.

Or, people who are aspiring towards middle class. How do you think the '71 Players managed to be different in that way?

Well, one of the reasons for that was that there were, at that time, two very active groups in the City. One was The '71 Players and the other was the Theatre Club and the Theatre Club would have been distinctly middle class. So, the '71 Players offered an alternative to that if you like.

And when you say the Theatre Club was distinctly middle class, was that a feeling that people got from the group members or from the plays they produced or how was that communicated?

While the '71 Players would have concentrated on Irish plays in the main – they may have done European plays, *The Queen and the Rebels*, *The Fireraisers*, those type of plays. Also people would have known them by their social background and they were distinctly middle class.

Also, I wanted to ask you about within that, the roles that people adopted. So, for example in Charlestown, I remember when the group was active when I was younger – again, in terms of class if you want to call it that although in rural towns the lines are far more blurry I think than in cities. But I think, say for example, most of the directors would have been professionals or teachers or that. And then, I suppose, in a rural context you might have more working class members tended to do specific types of roles, you know, like set-building, design, lighting … things like that. Did you find that to be the case as well with the '71 Players?

No, it was more fluid than that. There were people who came to the group and said they wanted to work backstage but my experience was that somewhere they aspired to go on stage and wanted to get the feel of the thing before they put their toe in the water, essentially. So, you got people who came expressing the wish to do backstage work, but somewhere within them was the aspiration to go on the stage.

In the 70s then, you mentioned there was the Theatre Club and there was the '71 Players and there was The City of Derry Drama Group.

The City of Derry Drama Group was not active at that time.

Ah right, so they had kind of fallen by the wayside then?

They had fallen by the wayside. They revived once and did one play. There was also St. Columb's Past Pupils Union. It would have been an active group but again had become defunct.

But even if there were two or three groups at a time in the 70s, amateur theatre was really thriving at that time in Derry. And, comparatively now it's struggling. And I wonder, why do you think that is the case?

At that time, because the Troubles were on, there were very few social outlets at that time. And, the Little Theatre provided one of the few live-entertainment venues in the city at that time. Now, people have a much wider recreational choice. Also The Playhouse has opened. And the Playhouse would now in semi-professional productions use people who conventionally or traditionally have been amateurs.

And, as someone yourself who was part of that burgeoning theatre scene in the 70s, you can see now the legacy of theatre in Derry both professional and amateur. How do you feel about that legacy? How do you feel about theatre in Derry today?

Well, a number of things happened. One of them was Field Day who came in. Also, I formed a semi-professional company which did a number of plays. And, because of that the '71 Players folded. Because, when I left the '71 Players and formed my own company, obviously I took actors with me. And the '71 Players (what remained of them) were unable to elect officers at their Annual General Meeting. Nobody would stand. And, the company folded because of that.

Was there any disappointment directed towards you over that?

No. Certainly there may have been but it wasn't expressed to me.

Do you feel like that was the logical progression then for the group, you know, semi-professional?

Well, it was a logical progression in that we had developed our skills and I suppose wanted a bigger expression of those skills. And, the '71 Players operated in a little theatre which had seating for 103. When I formed Themuns', [we] performed in the Guild Hall to audiences of 500.

So, it offered better scope for those members who were willing to commit to it?

It offered better scope and a better challenge.

And in terms of the way rehearsals operated, did the group members who transferred find that transition ok or how did they deal with that?

We went from the comfort of St. Columb's Hall where The '71 Players rehearsed. We rehearsed in the theatres we were going to perform in to having to find premises to rehearse in, and we hired a hall that during the day was used as a crèche or a playgroup. We used that in the evenings to rehearse. When that became no longer available to us, we then went to Foyle College, which was closed at the time as a college, and we used rooms there which were cold and drafty and uncomfortable but people put up with it.

And in terms of the process as well of rehearsing, your approach: did that change, or did you have to make any tweaks there?

Well, it wasn't as leisurely as it was with the amateurs. There were deadlines that had to be met. When we were in the Little Theatre we could, at our leisure, choose the dates that the plays would go on. Because there were deadlines it became professionalised.

Did you find the reaction of the audiences: was it different, in that you were semi-professional? Were the expectations different from your local audience?

I don't think so because the local audience would have known us and followed us. You know we were just presenting in a different environment. But, it wasn't that we were introducing something new in terms of personnel. It wasn't that we were introducing something new in terms of types of plays or anything else. Audiences accepted it and audiences came to it.

That's interesting because I thought that they might be less forgiving, for example, if someone dropped a line or these things that do happen. I thought that they might be less forgiving if they thought, "oh, this is a semi-professional group". You know, we should expect more.

Well, I think that possibly instinctively they did but there weren't any moments where the audience didn't receive the play well.

You have talked about having to change space. In the 80s there was the Theatre Action Group in Derry and there was a huge push to get theatre spaces. Now you know you have the Playhouse and you have the Millennium Forum and you have other venues there. Do you think that now there are accessible spaces for theatre makers in Derry? Are those spaces truly accessible?

Sorry, say that again or give me what you are getting at.

Yeah, I'm getting at the different variety of the theatre spaces that you have available in Derry now. Do you think they are accessible to people?

Well, the Playhouse is accessible to people and the Millennium Forum is. There is a local playwright Brian Foster who writes broad comedy and he puts the plays on in the Millennium Forum. The Buck Players from Ballyboe put plays on in the Millennium Forum. The Millennium Forum is a commercial theatre for the [unclear].

And how about for amateur groups, do you think that there is available space there?

Well, amateur groups – I don't know any active amateur groups in the town at the moment because of, I think, the Playhouse and to some extent the Millennium Forum.

Because of them?

Because of them, aye.

And, how so?

Well, anybody with an aspiration to act would tend towards The Playhouse. And The Playhouse does in-house productions and would be a source that people who wanted to act would seek out. But, to my mind, there is no strong amateur movement in Derry as there was in the 70s. I think that's a generational thing. I think that happens; I think something becomes current for a generation. I think, inevitably, it dies out and then somebody re-discovers it and it blossoms again.

It seems quite sad, you know?

I think it's the natural rhythm of things. I think what happens is a group of people come together and do that and, if you like, they grow old together. When you get an established group they are not very good at recruiting because people don't want to take people who would take parts that they potential might get so they get very protective in that way.

It's interesting then because it seems then that groups then become a sub-group within a community as opposed to, you know, groups with their doors open to everyone after a certain amount of time.

Initially the doors would be open to everyone but then, as I say, it evolves and changes from that.

I wanted to ask you about *The Righteous are Bold.* I wonder were you involved in that production?

No, I wasn't involved in that production. *The Righteous are Bold* was Fr. Daly as he was then [unclear] and it coincided with Bloody Sunday. And, after Bloody Sunday he went to travel around America and he came back and the play had continued to rehearse while he was away. He was the director. He came back and he said the play is going. Then [unclear] Connolly – a man who was the leading actor in it – felt that the play wasn't ready to go on and so he cried off on the opening night. And Fr. Daly read in the [unclear] and Connolly then sat back and did the rest on his own.

It is an unusual play to see performed in the 70s because, even then, it was very conservative you know? It's about women emigrating in the 1950s, and the threat of emigration on women's morality.

Yes.

It seemed unusual for me to see it played in the 70s. Can you think why it was chosen?

I think because of the impact. It was Fr. Daly who chose it. Aren't there exorcism features in it?

Yeah.

I think it is because of the dramatic strength of moments that the play is chosen.

It's funny because, maybe I'm reading too much into this but, he had been at pains to stress the function of theatre as a social escape you know, for people who were involved and that was his motivation rather than anything social or political.

Absolutely, I would agree with that.

The call for that play: there was an advertisement in the *Derry Journal* in November of 72 and that's when the call went out and during that time Derry received a lot of notoriety for the women who were tarred and feathered for fraternising with British soldiers. It just seemed very interesting that the decision to make that play happens in that same month,

you know when women's bodies become the centre of a debate about wider and political issues. I was wondering if it was a coincidence if he chose that play?

No, I think you are delving into things that didn't concern people at the time.

Really?

Aye. And I think you are looking for motivations that weren't there. Things were very much done on the moment so they weren't mapped out and planned out.

So it was more of a case of this play has great punch in terms of performance and we are going to go with it?

Yes

Yeah, that makes sense too. The last thing I want to ask you about Tom is whether you encountered the group Derry Front Line, the Community Theatre group in the 80s? I wonder did you happen to see any of their work? They were based in the Bogside and they were a community theatre group.

No, I haven't seen any of their work.

Or more recently *The Theatre of Witness*?

No I haven't seen any of their work either.

I don't know if you know the format of *Theatre of Witness*?

I know the format, yes.

What are your views on that type of theatre?

I'm not particularly attracted to it.

Why is that?

Because it is overtly political and I think theatre should be much more subtle than that.

When you say subtle, can you think of another play maybe that would be a good example of that?

Off the top of my head, I can't no.

I guess what that gets back to again, the Theatre of Witness. I have heard a lot of people talking about it since it first came out and people seem to fall either 50/50 on either side of whether it's appropriate ,whether it's an appropriate mechanism for theatre, you know?

Yes

And, a lot of it focuses on the idea of theatre as entertainment where people's pain could almost be voyeuristic. There is a voyeuristic pleasure, kind of, in it.

Yes

That would be a criticism that is levelled at it. It gets back to what we see as the role of theatre within a community, you know?

Yes.

So I wonder, looking at something like Theatre of Witness, amateur theatre, semi-professional theatre in Derry you know what do you see is the role of theatre within communities?

I think the role of theatre within a community is essentially entertainment, pleasure and enjoyment and, as a subtext to that, a reflection of people's own lives and people, I think, enjoy seeing their lives dramatized.

And when you say their lives, do you mean their specific local lives or you know, an element of their experience?

No. What they are familiar with. The social life that they are familiar with: characters that they can identify with and situations that they can identify with.

I'm thinking of John B Keane, for example: his plays would be a good example.

Yeah, absolutely.

That's pretty much it Tom. The very last thing I'd like to ask you, if you were to describe your memories of the '71 Players is there any stand-out image or moment that would capture that time?

The stand-out moment with the '71 Players would have been the production of *Over the Bridge*. *Over the Bridge* was by some distance the most successful play the '71 Players had. It was the most successful in terms of audience numbers. It was the most successful in terms of awards at festivals. It was a play that required three different settings. And, I designed a set which was done as workers in the ship yard if you know what I mean? The set was changed in view of the audience and accompanied by sound effects. And, those sound effects were essentially steam, clanging and then from the change from the second act to the third act where there had been a death that clanging became the single clang of a funeral bell. In many ways that would be my memory and my highlight of the '71 Players.

Actually, Carmel mentioned that production to me and that set design as well.

Right.

Yeah, she singled that out above the others. It sounded really impressive. You hardly have any photos of that set?

I do have photographs of that set.

I'd love to see it sometime. It would be great. It sounds absolutely impressive. Well, that's everything I wanted to ask you Tom, and thanks so much for agreeing to speak to me again. You have been really generous with your time.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

Interview title: Personal Interview with Patricia King.
Interviewer: Finian O'Gorman
Date: 18 February 2015
Method: In person in Tuam, Co. Galway

Finian O'Gorman: I'm interested in how you first became interested in drama — can you remember the first production that you ever saw?

Patricia King: Well, it was before that even; I was five years old when my mother decided I was too shy and she took me to speech and drama. And, I actually remember my very first time, it's a long time ago, being interviewed by my speech and drama teacher. It was Burke's School of Elocution and Drama in Dublin, I was born in Dublin.

Was that in Ranelagh?

Yes, in Ranelagh, in Mountain View Road, and Mrs. Pence was her name; she was one of three Burke sisters and were very well known from their father, fifty years ago moving back to the nineteenth century and she took us (like I do now indeed) in her front room. So there were many interesting people there over the years, and I did all my grade examinations then, right up through, you know about them I'm sure.

No, what are they?

You can follow it as you would music, to a diploma, and you start at the lower grades. At that time, we did the Father Mathew Feis during the year – that's pretty well known – and any other Feis's that were locally done. I had a mixture of working with big groups and one-on-one classes all through my young life, but when I was twenty-one or so I worked for the ESB and I came to Tuam, came to Galway. Of course, my ambition would always have been to become an actress. I never had anything else in my head but, of course, you didn't do that in those days; you had to get a 'real job' you see? So, I did demonstrating for the ESB. It was when they were launching rural electrification.

What did a demonstrator have to do?

You had to stand up before all the people of a town or a village, couple of hundred people, and you had to bake or cook and talk about their washing machines and their mixers; everything. Big sales or exhibitions.

So, the ESB were setting up their stores nationwide as well?

That's right, yeah. That was in 1960-61. 62' then I was sent down to Galway to be a fully-fledged demonstrator. We were down there; it's down on the river now, this ESB shop, Newlands or…I can't think of the name of it. Just opposite the river from where the cathedral is now, which was being built at the time. You had your own little car which was very nice and you'd go out if some lady bought a cooker. I did East Galway and right around a big circle down

towards Portumna. The country was divided up into areas by the ESB and, anyway, if someone bought a cooker, part of the business of buying a cooker or washing machine or any other equipment, was filling out a card to say a demonstrator would call to instruct you on the use of it.

Woah, that's pretty good customer service!

Oh, it was something yeah. And, if we found an electrical fault … We did a course on electricity, very minor, but I think the men felt a bit threatened by it at that time! They used to mock us a bit; slagging us a bit: "Oh, you know all about electricity?" [laughs] Of course, we didn't really but we could spot small faults and that and we'd report those to the workshops and an engineer would come out and spend half the day with someone helping them to use their stuff, because it was all totally new.

So, there was a public safety and health element to it as well.

Yeah, we were nearly like social workers at times; you would go into people's homes, sometimes in remote areas where they wouldn't have many visitors at that time. It was a totally different world from now.

I can imagine, coming from Dublin as well. I mean, you were really thrust into rural life; into people's homes and that. I mean, was it a shock for you at the time?

It was, yes, certainly. To a farm — I had never been on a farm in my life! The conversation would be so different but I don't think; people would enjoy telling you things, you know? You'd be laughing at me now, how ignorant I was! [laughs] But, I knew about my ESB! We had to have some sort of cookery course done; I went to Cathal Brugha Street and did Institutional Management – it was sort of a parallel course with Hotel Management – and once I got that then I applied to the ESB. I had the flow of language, which was important, and they trained us again for six months and then they sent us out across the country. There were a lot of demonstrators at the time.

You must have had a relatively high degree of independence then, for a woman your age, at the time, in that era. You had your own company car, and you were travelling the country.

That's right, keeping notes, keeping records, and you had to answer for everything you did. I think we were more grown up that time, you grew up much quicker. Now, girls are looking for long training, six, seven, eight years, and then they go working experience before they'd even think of getting married or settling down, that's a different question entirely now. They used to say that the problem was they trained us so well and they gave us that independence you mention, we only ever lasted two years with them, after all the money they'd invested in us, because you couldn't hold your job then, you see, once you got married you lost your job.

It's bizarre thinking about it now.

It was very frustrating. I think I'm still cross about it now and it's over 50 years ago. Because I loved it, and loved that independence you mention and I always felt on top of the job and good

humoured about it and always making good progress. One question I thought of often was, "how far can I go in this?" There wasn't much promotion or anything because the job didn't last long, there'd be another lot coming up behind you. I suppose you can't even imagine it in existence nowadays.

It was such a short time ago as well; it's shocking. And, a lot of people aren't even aware of the marriage bar now.

I don't even mention it at all to my young students now because it seems so ridiculous to them. They just look at you and go "What?! Crazy!"

It's mad though, because I asked for a show of hands, we were looking at feminism and gender studies in a class I was teaching last year in college, and two people out of the whole class said they were feminists. I suppose the association with the word now is quite extreme, but at the same time within that short period people think that there is no more gender imbalance at all. That's another debate, but that shows you how quickly opinions can change.

I was at the first feminist meeting, with Nell and all the girls at the mansion house, myself and my sister. I was married a couple of years and I was still cross about not having a job, and she the same, so we went to that, but, we sort of joined in. I was coming back here; I was married in Tuam, I didn't think it was for me, I was having babies. It's history now, but for us that the time it was just happening … but there was a lot of anger in it too at that time. We were alright, my sister and I; we'd landed on our feet where feminism was concerned, our father was very conscious of that. He brought us up to be at one with male company, and not to take any rubbish from the men, and that we knew as much as they did about anything and more, probably. He prepared us.

And was he from Dublin?

No he was Belfast, he ran out of Belfast in 1920 or something.

My partner is from Belfast, so I have a close affinity with the city, and go up a lot.

I haven't been for a good few years, I still have a lot of relations in Belfast. Cousins and all my aunts. His sisters, all my aunts, they all died, all that side of the family, in the 1980s and 1990s. They were getting old, like we are now! The women in the North were much slower to step forward than here. We used to meet Northern drama groups, and sometimes they were amazed at us; well, very ordinary things like, always after a play you'd be in the pub for a while, it didn't mean that we were all huge drinkers but, we'd go up, the girls would go up and order our own drinks and sit down and the Northern women used to look at us like this…I think they thought we were very bold! [laughs]. I don't know if that's for publishing or not! No personal opinions. I'm sure your girlfriend doesn't like that.

No, no, she'd be surprised to hear that. So, your mother was from Dublin was she?

She was, North Circular Road.

And what were your father and your mother? What were their occupations?

Da was in the Civil Service, and my mother stayed at home, of course, mother full time, but she had been a shorthand typist working in the Civil Service when they met. 1933 they married. They had a great time, I think. I'd one older sister that died the year I was married, 1964; she died young from asthma which was a terrible killer at that time. They were heartbroken after that; it changed everything. That's one reason I never followed feminism or anything. I hadn't the heart for it for a good few years in the 60s. We were still immersed in the drama all that time.

You came here, and according to Gus Smith's book you sought out a drama group once you came to Galway. You were with the Taibhdhearc first?

That's right. I was with them first of course, Traolach Ó hAonghusa, the producer at that time. He was very nice. I went looking, asking in Galway, I didn't know how easy it would be at the time, but of course everybody knew everybody else and if you just said something, eventually the person you wanted would appear. He came up to the ESB and told me to come in. So, I did backstage work with the Taibhdhearc for a while, and then I did Mrs. Tancred in Seán O'Casey. It's one long speech in Gaeilge, which I was able to manage. I wouldn't be good at lots of conversation in Irish but I was good at Irish. I'd been to the Gaeltacht all my life, gone to the Aran Islands. I had a soft spot for Galway as well so I was delighted when I came here.

So it was there, then, that I got a lot of publicity when it was written up in the Connacht Tribune. Then, Fr O'Brien who was here at the time sent word "come on in and see us" in the theatre in Tuam. It was through the nuns: I used to call to the convent a lot here, to the Pres and the Mercy because they were all getting their electrical equipment. I used to be in kitchen talking to the nuns on the job, so they knew me and they told me to go and see PV now, and not to be holding back. I stayed over for tea one evening and went down to the Town Hall. It was Christmastime and they were practicing there. It must've been Autumn — October '62. It was a play that was popular at the time about a court case. I went in and became a prompter for a while and got to know the crowd. They were lovely and I was delighted; it was all an adventure. I lived in Galway in Knocknacarra, with another girl for one day a week. I worked here and would go to Gort and Loughrea, the bigger centres, for one day each week and do the area for all new equipment and then. I'd stay over when I was here, and go to rehearsals. He'd picked this play, *The Rainmaker;* it had a lovely part for me in it, and I knew I'd be good at it, and that was the beginning of it then. It involved the ESB, coming over here in the evenings and going back. Drove hundreds of miles!

Yeah, I heard you were commuting a lot, but by all accounts you were the missing link that theatre group needed here; they needed a strong female lead.

It just happened at the time, they'd a lovely girl, I'm sure she's still there up in Derry, Mary Fahy was her name and she played the female leads with them and she left that summer, and PV, that's Fr Brian, he had this play waiting to be done. He was waiting for a woman; he had lots of men!

A few well-placed prayers from you then?

That must have been it. I blame God for the next fifty years!

So you settled into life in Galway. What were the main differences socially between Galway and Dublin?

Ah, it was similar. I was very young, really, when I left Dublin. Social life wasn't the same then as it is now, it wasn't all going out. It was going to films, and going to dances, you know the Showbands were top of their form that time – that's what we loved – and we'd go as a group, or as pairs or whatever. I saw Dickie Rock on the telly the other night, on the Late Late. He was younger than me, but I used to think he was older than me at the time: all these great guys up on the stage. He'd be here out in O'Neill's in Glenamaddy. They'd a big dance hall there and we used to go there a lot, and up to Castlerea; we used to go to dances and films up there. We travelled a lot, and of course Galway was a hub for everything...Salthill, it's a gambling centre now isn't it? Yes, the big dance hall – all the big bands from around the country would be there. That was our social life, you know? The Royal Showband. I'd been in Waterford for three months before I came; they sent us out, to 'areas' as they called them in the ESB, that were run by more senior demonstrators, and we'd go up on the stage and do ten minutes or something and so on, and, so I'd been in Waterford when the Royal was big, Brendan Boyer. They were everyday heroes to us, just like now it would be someone from America or Australia the girls would be following...or the "groups" .. there was no such thing as a "boyband" at that time. So, that was a big part of it now, the music .. and in Dublin too...always you'd have a hobby. Well, I was in Drama through schools of drama that time, the Burkes, and that'd be your social life, a big group of teenage people.

How did drama fit into that list of options, the cinema, dances. I heard an account from JB Keane's wife that a lot of drama was done during Lent because the dance halls were closed. Was there a yearly rhythm, or was it all year round?

Well, when I started out it was all year round, but it would be four nights a week you'd be practicing rehearsing. And, then you'd be 'on call'. It was supposed to be [your] priority, and that's how we did so well I suppose. P.V. taught us all this discipline and, you know, organisation. He'd be as good as yourself with everything on paper. He'd meet us then, individually, if he wanted to say something special to us; "You'd want to improve yourself on this", or some point that you were missing in the drama. So, it was pretty intense.

It sounds like he adopted a very professional approach. Where do you think he got that from?

It was in his family. I wouldn't like to speak for him, but, I know that when he was in Maynooth, he was very involved in productions there. That was part of the priest's life: helping them towards the community, working in the community I suppose. So, he was in Maynooth with Tomas MacAnna [later corrected via email to Ray McAnally]. I remember I mentioned him. A

few names he used to. I don't like talking about other people; I might get names wrong, it was a long time ago.

His contribution was so positive by all accounts. His name comes up often in terms of driving the movement forward. There was an incident in the early 60s when Gabriel Fallon was the honorary patron of the movement, and a letter that he had said to Brendan O'Brien, the chairman of the Athlone committee: he sent this letter saying he was resigning over the amount of clerical involvement in the amateur movement. When I first read it, I thought he was complaining that priests were choosing which plays were being produced. And, then I showed it to another person and he interpreted it as that was somehow demeaning the priests' status within the community to be involved because ideally in a drama group you had to be, well, apart from the director directing things, you had to have a level of trust with each other. Was there an opinion at the time among group members on priests' involvement in the groups?

It varied I'd say according to personalities. There were priests who would find fault with some of the plays that we did, you know, that they were supposed to be avant-garde – Arthur Miller, we did a lot of at that time, sort of European and American drama more than Irish drama, which was, generally, what was produced, and you'd hear, "Oh, father so and so said this, or that." But, I mean, with PV it was the drama and the play, and you put as much truth – that was always a big word with him – "You're looking for the truth of it now, you've got to get down to and think about it", and all that. That was his great love. He was a brother of Síle O'Brien who worked in RTÉ in Dublin. She worked as one of the first announcers and commentators, very well known. They were from Cork and there was theatre in their family. He was teaching English in Jarlath's, that's how he came here. But anyone who was in his class, they're old men now, but they still remember PV's classes and he used to get them to stand up on the desk and pronounce out a Shakespearian speech, always trying to bring the feel of theatre into it, instead of just the academic looking at the words. "They were written to be acted!" He'd say. He was way before his time. Even that play we did, *The Rainmaker*, it was a story of love, kind of growing, blooming, revelation of love and romance, and we were in no way similar to twenty-two year-olds nowadays. We were quite innocent to the world. The word relationship hadn't been invented at that time. PV, he was very strong. He always defended us; we were like his little family that he looked after. He made sure that we went, you know – he was interested in us going to places dancing and whatever young people did at the time, that was part of him. He minded us, and he gave out to us, very much! [laughs] If he thought we were being a bit cracked, or wild … of course there were some in the group who would drink too much and, he'd speak to them too.

Was it a mixed age group then or was it mostly younger?

He [PV] was only in his forties at that time, and a few of the group had been friends of his at school, you know, men who had settled here. He went to the banks a lot, looking for people for parts – there was a great turnover of young women and men – yeah, we had quite a few out of the banks now, and then of course locals, you know. All the schools did 'operas' as we called them at that time, and he'd be producing in Jarlath's and he'd spot people who might be good, you know? Keep track of them and they'd stay with him. Glenamaddy and Dunmore didn't have groups. Tuam was more a centre for drama. It's awful the way Tuam doesn't really have a

theatre group any more. There's no one doing it at the moment. But, it was always like that; it would come up, loom up for a few years and then, that group of people would stop, retire from it, and someone else comes and starts.

The same thing happened in Charlestown where I'm from. Paddy Henry was a driving force there and then he moved to Galway and got involved with KATS. It would have fallen on my father to take up the mantle after he left, but with work and that. You talked about the difference between young people in their 20s then and now. Was there something in the content of the plays that were chosen? Things that were going on at the time? What influenced the decision behind the choosing of plays?

When it was father O' Brien here, he chose the plays, that was it, and he gave them out to us to read. He often got us to try and read more plays and get back to him, but, he was just the best at it, he knew the most about it, and ehm, and then when he went, he went to Claremorris then and he produced with them. Joe Dillon and myself took over production and we tried to follow, and we'd still be in contact with PV, what we were best at, the things he had done with us, that style of play. And, you see, the thing was you had to get the actors; that sort of thing took over a lot in what your choice would be. We tried to be six months or a year ahead, you know, PV used to always say "As soon as you put a play on the stage, you start thinking about the next one."

There was what was known as a competition play, a festival play … We always did a pot-boiler in the early Autumn, and that would be some high comedy. We'd get English farce; we used to find great drama there, slapstick comedy, it was good for getting in actors, also for getting a good audience. If you just advertise as 'comedy' and everyone would come, you'd make money that you'd then spend on the festival play. We'd sometimes do a Christmas play as well, do one just. It wasn't so much a pantomime as a play about Christmas. Sometimes, we'd do three plays in the year and sometimes we'd do, in the hotel, something for the summer season. But, that was never very successful really; it was coming into time when you wanted to spend a lot more on publicity: 70s, 80s, then. So, we opted out of that after a couple of years. It was very hard work to work the summer when your children were at home! [laughs]. I think, looking back at the kids, they got more out of it than it cost them. They're all in that sort of work, presentation. They knew things that lots of other kids didn't know; they knew language and words. They still, even in our conversations, we used terms and quotations that were in the plays, these kind of remarks. John B Keane: he was a great one.

I remember my grandmother telling me about that, a certain line would come into local slang, or people calling locals who acted a certain role, by their nickname in the play.

Our ancestors in the town hall were the travelling shows, you know ehm…

Anew McMaster?

Yes, and, we met him and his son and his … was it his daughter got married too and they carried it on? And, we knew of them and sort of associated ourselves with them quite a bit. They were a bit before my time – they'd stopped in the early fifties – so I was more from hearing the stories about them. I was here after 1960.

What was the opinion of the life of the travelling actor?

It was accepted as a way of life, and a way of bringing your income in. A lot of actors at that time had started with the travelling shows, you know? People who were on the Late Late Show and people like that, they'd talk about their travels. It was very much their way of life, they were proud of it. I'm always interested hearing people reminisce about it: the travelling, the landladies and the digs. A lot of the adjudicators talked about that – how rich; how much more rich Ireland was in amateur drama and theatre, and choice of play.

Why do you think that was?

I'm sure the festival had a lot to do with it, but, it was all there, all the time. The groups weren't invented for the festival. The groups were there, doing their own theatre, and then Athlone and the festival came to bring it on. I know PV always looked at the festival as your education. He'd say "listen!" You know, listen to the adjudicators and don't always be resenting them. Don't be defensive about what they say. Argue with them, and ask them "why?" if they didn't agree with your interpretation. He always encouraged them with that. A lot of groups came to see us because they were interested in founding their own groups. Places with festivals didn't necessarily have theatre groups, because the drama people were involved with putting on the festival. They didn't have time for putting on plays. We'd be saying that festivals didn't give us a right tea, they didn't look after us enough and the groups used to get annoyed about that. They wouldn't have anyone there to help you, and help with lights when you'd arrive in a strange hall, and have ladders available. You were just left to it. There was a lot of argument about that at the time, but the luxury tea served in hotels now and, showers in theatres and all that? [laughs]

I'm interested in the idea of the festival play, and even how that went down in your locality. You know, did people prefer the pot-boilers? Would they ignore the festival play?

What often happened was you'd put on the play in town for three or four nights and then you'd go to the festivals; that would be your rehearsal. Maybe twenty-five, fifty people would come to the three or four nights. [laughs] Then you went to the festival, you'd win a few awards, and then you'd come back and do the play again and the place would be full! You'd have cups [trophies] to put in the windows of the shops, you know, "…come and see our festival play, winner here there and everywhere." We used to do something like eight festivals – right through February March – but that was stopped then. You were only allowed to enter so many because the festivals would find that it was only the bigger groups, of which we were one at that time, that would bring in a crowd and a lesser known group wouldn't get many the next night. People wouldn't go every night the way they do now. People would ask us to be on; they'd want to see our play. We used to look at the play that way too – that it was only fair to people down the country that they would get a chance to see plays that were put on in Dublin; you know, that would only be seen in Dublin. So, Father O' Brien taught us that, you know, to keep in touch with what plays were written and produced at the time and we used to get magazines; he used to order for us. And, we continued all of these things when he was gone. That heap of magazines upstairs; I have to give them to the university some day. He brought a group over to London to see a production that was on at the time. I didn't go to London, but by all accounts it was fantastic going by train through

England, seeing the play and back home on the boat. People wouldn't do it now; they'd just hop over on the plane or just watch it on YouTube. We were lucky to have him and he was lucky to have us that were so involved and wanted to do it.

There's a popular perception of Drama as upper class. At the time, was it seen in the town as something that was snooty, or was it seen as something that everyone was involved in?

Yeah, I never, well people would say things like, "Oh you did so well at this or that, sher, it's easy for you, you know? As if you had something that they didn't have. I often remember that coming to me, but I never, we didn't, we were from all different sides of the world, and … it changed a lot over the years. I understand what you're saying. And now it's much more confined to a certain group of people, "Oh, they're … they're the actors". I'd often hear of, I remember my father saying one time about me, he met somebody in Galway from Tuam or something and he said, "You know my daughter?" you see, and immediately "Oh the actress one?" [laughs] He thought this was awful funny, the "actress one" because he remembered times when actresses were, the wrong side of the, the coin, at that time, but, I was never aware of that. We were excited about what we were doing, and we'd accept anyone in, at all, you didn't have to have any qualification … just to want to do it; be friendly and enthusiastic. Well, later on there were things that kind of, broke us up. The eighties, seventies, and I think we were getting tired of the whole thing. We just faded out. There were others there doing it: people who did productions for a few years, and then let it go. They wondered what we were at for so long. Forty years: we went up to the 90s and then left it at that. Jerry stayed interested. When he retired from school teaching Druid employed him a few times: a few nice things were being done in the 1990s. Then he found memorisation difficult. He's eighty-one this year now, so he did it well over seventy. A lot of our people are dead: ones I'd be talking about.

You would have met a lot of people around the country.

Yes, you'd be wondering if they're still alive!

Was there a sense at the time that you were part of a nationwide movement?

Yes there was, very much. We'd always say, in normal conversation people would mention Ballyshannon of Scarriff or Tubbercurry and we'd say "oh we used to know a lot of people down there" and they're still there, and know us in the same vague way. It was lovely going back every year to compete. People used to sometimes accuse us, of ehm, you know, if they wanted to say something nasty about you or to you it would be, "oh pot-hunters".

I've heard that term before, what was it exactly?

The pots were the cups, and that we only did drama to win, you know, to be better than somebody else: to be a champion. But, I used to say things like, "Oh, that's, that's a GAA view; playing a match is quite different to putting on a play. You hit the ball in the right direction and that's it!" That was very mean too.

A lot of language was appropriated from GAA or sport. A lot of groups refused to take part in competition, they thought it was against the ethos of drama, I'm trying to understand their perspective as well, what that could have been?

I don't know, bad experience, maybe, of adjudication. They [adjudicators] could be quite cutting at times. There were groups, one or two and, they don't like adjudication; they don't like someone from outside who hasn't 'lived' with the play coming in and telling you how to do it. But, we weren't like that; the way we looked at it was you, you used to take what you wanted out of what they'd say, and reject the rest of it. They'd often have a totally different interpretation of something than you would have. It all depended on the material you were working with, and what you could afford for a set, you couldn't always ... but others would take this very personally and have stand up rows with adjudicators and that. We had a few over the years too, but eh, it made the festivals more particular about who they'd have to adjudicate too. Sometimes there was an odd one you wouldn't want to go in front of at all because you'd feel like they knew nothing about it, so, there was criticism from that side as well!

From what I can see, it was really sought after, to get adjudicating, particularly for the All-Ireland, and it was quite well paid. They were put up in Hudson Bay, and there was a big social side to it…

That we wouldn't be a part of at all, you know, we used to say that without the groups you wouldn't have a festival, have more respect for the groups, and, give us more backing. Like with publicity, you'd need publicity because that would sell your play at home as well, and it was good for the town as well. So, you'd be sort of pleading for these things. But, the newspapers weren't interested at all then. You know, I still listen in awe to hear RTE saying "and our festival in Athlone", you know, and they have a person there for the whole week. Des Rushe used to be the man that would be there mostly, he's dead now too, but eh, he used to do it off his own bat. I don't think he even had any guarantee of getting it into the paper. I thought I'd have cuttings for you today; they weren't in the place I thought they were. I must find them now and put them somewhere safe.

At the time, there were Rural and Open sections. I'm just wondering, so, it was 'technically' done by population, was it 1500 or lower for the Rural? I'm wondering, was there an overall perception of the rural section being inferior?

Well, yes, we did have a bit of that, you'd be surprised. The winner of the Rural used to come to Athlone and we'd all be waiting to see if it's a dark horse you know? And, some of them were terrific.

So, did it just depend on resources or…

A lot of it did, yes. At the beginning that didn't really matter; we'd build our own sets, well, there'd always be carpenters, or we'd get people, builders around the town to help. If you needed a special prop, you'd be able to go to a special craftsman or tradesman and he'd do it for you, and pay for that. But, later on it became … well we always felt that we were professional in what we did. We gave it total concentration and, you know, the very best we could. And, an awful lot

of the actors at that time moved from the amateur to the professional. The line was very jagged, between the top amateurs and professionals. The professionals had a lot of respect for us too, for what we'd do, or what we'd be thinking at the time. But then that widened out, as, I think as population increased and education…you were getting people doing degrees in drama, or whatever, and Trinity was the big place then for it. Then you'd have those influences coming into the amateur movement, and more money around as well.

It was kind of a filter working both ways?

It would have been in the 1950s/60s certainly. Bill Golden, he and I won best actor and actress together in the one year, whatever year it was. Next thing he was on television, and being a professional actor after that. Nora Relihan became sort of semi-professional. She had a lot of publicity living down there, in Tralee.

She was in that production of Sadhbh, and I think she turned down a role with the Abbey because she was getting married.

That was the whole thing! What were we thinking of? Ann O' Driscoll, she's another who became professional, a professional producer.

Right, so it was seen as a viable stepping stone …

Oh it was, well, it was the only thing available to you, if you were interested in theatre, and you lived outside Dublin I suppose. The Dublin groups got big then too at one stage, and, they were on a different level altogether: different types. We used to say, "Our plays are much warmer than theirs" (laughs), because we sort of lived in each other's pockets at the time, but, I'm sure that wasn't true!

When you say a different level do you mean the set design or…

Yes, all of that, money put into it. They had access to stuff, they'd borrow costumes from the Abbey or places like that.

And, do you think that brought up the standard or was it the case that you couldn't compete in certain respects?

Well, we had more or less gone out at that time. But, they did fill up the festivals. If you thought Sundrive or one of these was coming up then there wasn't much point in going there. People used to go for "experience" they'd say, and, we felt that it knocked the fun out of a lot of it because we never got to know them very well; they would just be down and they'd book all the weekend nights too, that was another thing that used to annoy us: we'd only have weekdays left, you know, which was pretty hard.

I saw a bit of behind-the-scenes politicking over that as well. You'd have JB Keane writing to Brendan O'Brien saying "can you put Listowel's play on such-and-such a night" and he

wouldn't be involved in it but he'd hear somebody in the pub saying "wouldn't it be great if we were on the Friday night?" And MJ Molloy would have been in regular contact.

He was great too, I have a lot of letters from MJ Molloy, because we did a lot of his plays, eh, later on, when I was directing on my own. We did plays that he hadn't had produced, or that had just one go in the Abbey. We started doing, sort of, local; we had Tom Murphy of course in the middle of it. We did a great *Famine* and that, but a lot of people didn't understand the *Famine* play: foreign adjudicators, that was true there. Yeah, and, Joe Molloy was our next one, and there was a man in North County Clare, we used to do his plays, I can't remember his name; Francis something, we did his plays. And then for a few years we used to have actors from different play groups, you know, we'd look further afield. It's all changed a lot over the years. I should talk to you about PV and all those sections; soon after he left, the fire was still there.

I read a letter from MJ Molloy to Brendan O' Brien where he's complaining about being able to find an amateur to premiere his play and influx of foreign writers.

He often sat over there and told me that!

Was that a real trend that happened in the movement? Was it the people involved, [or] was there just not enough Irish plays? What happened?

We got more outside influences coming on us. We didn't know about European and American drama in the fifties and sixties, yeah, but we were doing them because of Father O' Brien. Then the trend started; I'd say we were fairly influential then, in bringing in theatre from other parts, but it was happening in Dublin. The Dublin Theatre Festival started too around that time and we were opened up. The 1960s was a great time; there were so many new things coming, I remember thinking at that time, it was just the best time to be alive like, you know, all the new stuff you'd hear on the radio. Well, the 1950s as you've heard, was pretty dark, well, that was my growing up time, yeah, and then the 60's, it was like as if a light went on in places. And, of course, I was involved in the theatre, and I was doing – I was very lucky – I was doing the two things that I wanted to do. I wanted to have a home and a family and be married and I wanted to be in theatre as well, and I wanted to have my career as well (laughs) so, it was a great time. But, I know Joe Molloy was always on about that, his type of play. But, we loved the folklore ...*Petticoat Loose*, did you ever read that one? That's one we did, we premiered that amateurly for him and, *The Runaways* was another one.

Maybe Ireland then, left folk behind?

Yes, we wanted to be all "mod", as we called it at the time. We did of course, but we loved it; we loved his stuff. It was very hard to act, very hard to learn the lines, because every sentence nearly, was a little 'aguisín', or a little Irish saying, and very little cueing. All the cueing was subtext to know where to go for the next line. I used to find that very hard. His long speeches were nice when you were there on your own.

What effect, do you think, broadly, had the amateur movement on Irish society? Or, in the likes of Tuam or Galway?

Well, certainly they were very proud of us. I never heard an insult from anyone. Well, some people would be a bit grousey and say, "We did plays for years before you came." [laughs] But, and I'm a blow-in of course, even still, I'm not a native here! But, the first time we won [the All-Ireland], they had a big reception for us, and that was when Galway was winning the football as well. Galway had three in a row in the early sixties. And, we would be considered on a level; as All-Ireland winners, it gave us great status. There was a man, O'Brien too, he had a café on Shop Street at the time, and he organised a big certificate made from the different factories that were around, and people who wanted to say something to the Theatre Guild. It was very advanced. I remember the evening itself: it was in the Imperial Hotel as it was then; there was several hundred people there, and we were presented with these certificates of appreciation. Illuminated addresses, that's what you call them. … The nuns, they did all the beautiful handwork on them. All Celtic lettering.

It sounds like there was much more of a community awareness of your achievements, than now say…

There was, yes, oh I think so. Like you were saying, the theatre people are there, the football people are there, the junior chamber somewhere else … everything is specialised nowadays. I remember having conversations about that, way back, it's all specialization now; that was a big thing. Probably as the population gets larger, you're more defensive about what you do, and sure of where you are before you saying anything.

Is there anything you would like to add?

It was a great part of our lives, the amateur drama. I don't know what we would be like without it. And, we used to look on it as the university education that we never got; you know, we were all that time when you couldn't go to university unless you had lots of money, and I did my Open University then when I was 60, a long time ago now. I did English literature with sort of a balance on Shakespeare: a big unit on Shakespeare and art. I got my first-class honours degree, but I certainly wouldn't have had that without the theatre, without the drama. And then, the teaching: I have taught children now since, I always say "since my third child was born!" [laughs] She's forty-five, I think, now! But, we had five children; we didn't have a huge load, according to nowadays maybe. But, I felt so cut off from everything outside this house, you know, and my mind I felt, was stagnating. I was trying to fit in a bit of drama, but it was too difficult really, as you know, with children. So, I decided to finish my diploma first, when she was born, so I did that when I was expecting her, I read the books on the beach. And, again through the nuns, they got me an examiner, in the London College of Speech and Theatre or something…and I got my diploma. Since I discovered then I was able to do that. I started teaching in the house here; we really live upstairs. I used to teach them up in that room, six or eight at a time, then I taught them in the Town Hall, and the Community Centre, and then I'd go out to Glenamaddy or Mountbellew to teach, and I'd like to think that some of those groups out there, because I was giving them the basics. That left with me the wish to get a proper degree – that became important. It made a big difference really to the shape of my life. Every play opened

you up to something new, especially Jean Anouilh, and the French people, Ionesco, those plays, yeah. Sorry, I interrupted you there.

Jerry was an actor in the *Rainmaker* our first play and when summer came and we weren't meeting each other he started calling up to Galway to me, and we started sort of dating, and eighteen months later we got married, you know it seemed like the thing to do. The kids now would throw their eyes up to heaven. They used to say 'it's a goulash day', and on days when we were deep in the festivals we wouldn't have times for our children, we'd make goulash, it's all made in one pot and it might be sitting out for two days, and that'd be the dinner they'd got. Asking us "what time are you leaving, when will you be back, who's minding us?"

We have the All-Irelands [trophies] there, they're not polished, they say we have more All-Ireland's than anyone and I suppose we have because there were two of us. Sometimes the children asked me what they're for and I say 'they're for acting'.

When we got them they were supposed to be worth £400 each. They're all stamped, and then the first year the European stamp came in, that was very important. I'm not sure what it was for. We've loads of them up in drawers upstairs; I don't know what to do with them. Some of those are my children's. My daughter is the world champion at kettlebells, can you believe that? She was always over-active as a child and always into training. She did karate and swimming. She thought weight lifting would suit her so she trained up. It's mostly on the east coast; I always feel that they get everything. So, she trained and went to Hamburg and competed against Russians and Americans, and she won…competition brings out the best in you in the end. You're not in it for the cups, but if you get one, brilliant.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

Interview title: Personal Interview with Carmel McCafferty.
Interviewer: Finian O'Gorman
Date: 9 September 2016
Method: In person, in the Derry Playhouse

*Note: At the start of the interview the previous interviewee, Pauline Ross, is leaving and Carmel arrives. Carmel is accompanied throughout by her daughter Muire.

Pauline Ross: Carmel, was it Bishop Daly that did *The Righteous are Bold*?

Carmel McCafferty: He was in it anyway, because Tom Connolly took sick and he had to go on and do the young curate.

Finain O'Gorman: Were you in it?

No, my husband was in it. The 71' Players was so big that you weren't in every play, but there was a play every two weeks.

Every two weeks? So how many productions?

As many as Bishop Daly could get on that Little Theatre stage.

I actually have a list that he sent me…(hands list to Carmel)

Drama at Inish was the first, I know that… [unclear]

There's the list, do any of those productions stand out for you?

Aye, *The Flats*.

Pauline: Aye, the Flats was a cracker. They did *The Flats* in the big hall Carmel, didn't they?

Aye, it was on the wee stage there: everything was tested out in the wee theatre, and he was a great man for figures in his head, and if he thought "this play's going to run", then before you were asked you were told "you're going up to the big stage next week".

Pauline: And it packed it out.

It did.

That was in the main hall of St. Columb's?

Pauline: And that was eleven hundred people.

And, why does The Flats stand out?

It was because of the time that it was done in.

Pauline: It was one of the first Troubles plays. I mean, he put British soldiers on the stage. Yep, and sandbag pillar posts. He actually made the sandbag posts, what do you call them, pill boxes? Right, he made those and the soldiers went in behind them and… And I was saying, it was the parish carpenters and all, they could have made him anything.

Anything. And it was the people who owned businesses around the town, we went round, and if you said Father Daly you were on [unclear] like, come on, but, all the businesses took out an advertisement on the back of the programmes and because we had so many plays on we filled the backs of programmes all the time. We had our usual ones, like Kevin McLaughlin's garage. We called it Kevin McLaughlin's garage but it was franchised to Volkswagen, and he was a 71' Player so we had his, and then we had Glendennings Chemist, McCourt's Butchers, Doherty's Butchers, my shop, O' Carroll's on Waterloo street. But, every shop you went to, you know, and I think the thing was about five pounds, and because it was amateur dramatics, you know, you didn't know anything about money, or the price, or, you just went in there and did your bit and came out and got your cup of tea and sandwiches that the girls who worked backstage made. And, everybody, the whole audience, if they didn't come around half of them came around, and had their tea and sandwiches. But we always said it was because of Fr Daly, you had no worry. Sure he was a saint then.

Pauline: You had no worry, didn't they give him a guard of honour at Carrickmacross after Bloody Sunday, do you remember? I'm going to leave you because this woman was the star of the '71 Players.

No, I wasn't because there was no stars. That was what was so good about it. You know, you could have been given the lead role in one play and you could have been given two lines in the next. There was no such thing as 'she was good in the last one, she'll get that'. He really went across the board and gave everybody a fair due. The other play that stands out here is *Philadelphia Here I Come*. I wasn't in it but I love the play anyway.

Pauline: I was telling him about *Autumn Fire*, when I was married to your husband and you were married to Kevin in it.

[Laughter]

I have a poster of that in the house. I liked that poster. [unclear]

Pauline: It was great. Kevin loved theatre, Carmel loved theatre and I married somebody who loved theatre. [Unintelligible] Carmel is a real '71 Player.

What was that play that you (Pauline) did the choreography for?

Pauline: Big Spender, what was that?

Big Spender, aye. ...And you made me go out in a red wet-look dress and a wig...and I can't sing!

Pauline: But boy, could she move! Remember that chair?

I couldn't sing, I don't know why! *Abigail's Party* was another brilliant one.

I've never heard of that play.

It's about a woman who throws a party and she only throws a party because she likes to get off with men, and she makes a whole hames of everything she does. But, ehm, *Over the Bridge*, I thought, was the first time I ever saw a moving set on stage. And, he moved it that it moved from inside the house, to the sounds of the shipyard and men shouting, the set changed onstage to an office in the shipyard and it was amazing.

Pauline: Is that [unclear] *Over the Bridge*?

Who built it?

The men who worked in St. Columb's Hall. Just these men who…

Pauline: The parish was a big parish but they had carpenters that they could get. But, it was a proper workshop, remember the big workshop? And they had tools, I don't know what you call them, that could cut wood. But they could have made anything out of anything. But I was saying everybody's living rooms were …

...emptied!...emptied! The time that we did ehm, a kitchen scene; a lot of them were kitchen scenes...we had opposition you know, we weren't the only drama group! We had the Theatre Club, we had St. Columb's College, we had...there was one [to Pauline], your Mammy was in one, on the Waterside.

Pauline: Was it the Fallon Players or something.

Like, there was drama groups all over the city and the '71 Players was formed so that there would be no divide in the people.

How so?

Because, we were at the height of our riots and then it was definitely Protestant and Catholic and he thought "this is not good", so he put an advertisement in the paper to say he was starting a choir and he was starting a drama group and *everybody* was welcome: you didn't even have to act or sing now, [unclear] but everybody came along and that night, I was going out with Kevin at the time and we'd finished. And I knew he'd be up at this drama group.

Pauline: I am going to leave ye. Let me know when you are done.

I will do.

[Pauline leaves]

I had never been up on the stage in my life, nor could I sing, but I knew Kevin would be there. So, I went, and my romance all started up again. I used to go with Kevin, to the rehearsals, and one night the Bishop handed me the book and said "Now you say that line there" and here was me "What!?" He said, "You say that line now" and here was me "No I couldn't…" And I suffer from dyslexia, so to hand me a book was like "Oh Jesus, how do I tell this man I can't read at my age?" But I don't know how I did it but I got through it. And then, after I'd say about twenty rehearsals, he says "Sher you might as well do the part now!". And that was my first baptism on to the stage and I was terrified, really terrified.

What was it that terrified you?

I'd never been on the stage in my life and all these people sitting there looking up at me, oh God, it was awful!

...in case you failed, was it the people watching or?

Everything! You know, there was no such thing as a dressing room, changing rooms. There was two rooms that were filthy dirty. In St. Columb's hall the stage wasn't used for years and it wasn't the nicest, cleanest looking place. And then...you were standing behind screens, you know, and I'd never changed in front of a woman before let alone a man and you're going "Jee, is that...normal!?" But you know, the whole thing, I was overwhelmed, really. And then after that it was just, whenever they put out for a play reading you just went and read and you know, you brought stuff for dressing the set and as Pauline said your house was just emptied, emptied!

And it was so much fun then, you know. Theatre was fun then because, well the Theatre Club put on very high-faluting plays, you know, and ehm, they called us the 'Irish kitchen comedy', but sure, we didn't care. We were filling the houses and they weren't so we were just "Hah!" But, money never reared its ugly head then. We didn't ask where the money went, how it was spent, who got it, you know? You got your tea and sandwiches and biscuits and the craic was great afterwards. We used to go up to – there was a pub at the bottom of the street that is called Badgers now. It was Peter Owens's pub then, and Fr Daly came and all to the pub with us, and had his wee gin and tonic. The craic was great.

The groups that were around before the 71' Players: were they, I mean, when you say that the 71' Players was open to all, were they segregated socially, or were they Catholic or Protestant groups, or were they segregated by class?

Well they all, sort of, died off. Ehm, we just got travelling theatre, ehm, the Druid's would have come and then there would have been musicals put on, and then of course Bingo, you know, and then there was the talent shows on a Sunday night, stuff like that. But, I think Fr Daly was sort of, where they make the china, Belleek, and they always had amateur theatre there and I suppose he just thought "I'm going to do it here" and started it, and it just took off. It really did, and then

as I say the Theatre Club and St. Columb's College past pupils and I think there was a group called The Red Hand, I'm nearly sure there was a group called the Red Hand, it was possibly Protestant players, I don't know. So after 1971 it did take off.

Why did that happen? You would imagine that it would be the worst time to do theatre?

Well, people were just bored and they didn't have an awful lot of entertainment. Television of course but I think; I think Derry people liked live theatre, and you know you always, Fr Daly always on opening night had a standing order for – there was a convent on the Waterside that was full of girls and he used to bring them all on the opening night, so we always had a full house on opening night [laughs]. It was a captive audience!

He was a master promoter anyway…

Awh he was brilliant, he was brilliant, and there was no set ever the same, all the sets were different. But *Over the Bridge* was totally amazing.

I was speaking to Tom Doherty and asking him what kind of plays were popular and he said that comedies were quite popular and that actually political plays like *Over the Bridge* and *The Flats* drew a big audience. Like, for example, *The Flats*: do you think that there was a sense of "Oh well, that's Belfast and it's not Derry".

No, because his poster was the flats in Derry.

Ah, right, okay and what was the reaction then to it?

Unbelievable. It had to go up to the big hall. They were queued up the street to get into it.

It's a long time since I read the play but were you worried about how people might react?

No.

I mean, from what I recall it has quite a neutral message.

It does, yes.

But if it was something more divisive would the group be less inclined to do it?

No.

I'm just wondering what was the feeling towards 'Troubles' plays…

No. It was just...we just put it on and did it. There was no politics in the theatre; you either go for it or you just say "I don't want to get in that play" but there was never any, it was "I *want* to be in that play, oh let me be in that play". You know there was one play and I can't even remember what it was now but the Bishop said "we need a singer" and I put my hands up and he said "Can

you sing Carmel?" and I says "Like a *lark*" and I haven't a note in my head! And he says "Right, you can play that" and here's me "I can't sing!" He says "But you just told me you could sing!" and I says "So I lied!" You know, it was just, it was a great atmosphere and there was … I can't remember what the play was and it's terrible that I can't remember what the play was but, we were on stage when the Melville Hotel – which was directly opposite the end of the wee theatre – was on fire, and we played on.

You just carried on?

Mmm hmm, we played on. And he never, you know, no matter what size of part you had, he never ever made you feel "That's only a wee part". He'd say, "You did that wonderfully: see the way you did that? Keep that. Do that: that's brilliant." Never made you feel any different from the so-called star. And you know the so-called star could have been on that stage in your clothes because she needed clothes to fit the part and you had them and you'd say "Ah sher, take that, there you go." And another one which was brilliant, and once again it was Tommy Doherty did the set and it was *Blythe Spirit.* [Unintelligible] Things moved, you know the lid of the gramophone came up and down and the books came off the shelves and the curtains flew open: it, the sets were amazing.

Muire: I've got the photos of them, I can send you them.

That would be great. I'd love that. It sounds like there was a great group spirit? Who was the group? Did you know them before or was it just random?

No, at the start it was random. I remember there was one wee boy, he came from Waterside and he was a Mormon. And we were all looking at him: we had never seen a Mormon. We were all looking at him like he was going to do something different and Fr Daly says "Stop staring at him!" I says "Well, I don't know he's a Mormon!" and Fr Daly says "So!?" Well, I was waiting for him to do something different, you know, [laughs] do something magic!

[laughs] You didn't ask him to do magic did you!?

No! No! But there was one time, it was funny, some of the Theatre Club started to slide over to the '71 Players because we did more plays and they wanted to be on the stage. Well, there was this great fella, Gordon Fulton you called him, and Gordon is a professional now: he's in theatre, in the cinema; he's on television.

Muire: He was in that...programme about the dentist and Jimmy Nesbit was in it. We paused it and were like "There's Gordon Fulton!"

Gordon Fulton was a Protestant, you know, and he was coming over to the 71' Players and he was coming in to a reading on this night and the Bishop says to me "Carmel … don't you say anything to him." I says "Why would I say anything to him?" He says, "Just, you know. No, you wouldn't say anything." I says [feigns sadness] "I'm so hurt!" And Gordon came in and the Bishop says "This is Gordon Fulton" and I says "Ya right Protestant bastard ye' it didn't take you long to come to our side", and Gordon just exploded laughing!

[Laughing]

Then about three years later he came in and he says "you know what I did today?" and I says "no, what did you do today?" He says, "I became a Catholic." I said, "ye fuckin' mucker, you couldn't even stay to your own side!" [laughs] and Bishop Daly is going "Give me one! Just, give me one! Leave her alone, leave her alone!" But, you know, Bloody Sunday really took it out of him, it really did. He didn't produce or direct many plays before that, but I don't think he did any at all after it. But, he would come to the odd play, and he would always have let you know, in an indirect way, that he knew that you were on stage. You know, you might have met one of his friends, you know they would have said, and it could have been weeks after the play, "Your mucker was up seeing you the other night, you know?" And, he just says to tell you he saw you.

Was there, in the group then, regardless of Catholic, Protestant, or where you were from…

Mormons?

[Laughing]

Was there a type of person that got involved? A certain type of character?

Not in the 71' Players. Well, Kevin McLaughlin was a character. He was from somewhere around by Inch or somewhere, even when he went on the play. He was my father in the [unclear]. No, there was no set person; everybody was welcome in the 71' Players, everybody.

And was it mostly, say, middle-class people or people with middle-class aspirations?

I don't think we had any class. Well, we had *class*, of course we had *class* [laughs]. But, no there wasn't. It would be silly to say: everybody... there was the tax man, he was in it, schoolteachers, there was Kevin McLaughlin who owned Kevin McLaughlin's garage, which was Volkswagen, there was Peter McGurr who was principal of a school, eh, there was people who owned their own businesses. There was just, it was just, a whole sweep of people: secretaries; we had a few nuns, you know, who worked backstage! But no, everybody was welcome, everybody, and from all...everybody was welcome. It wasn't just Derry people: we got to the stage then when we were sort of branching out and it was just great! Ehm, Limavaddy, Strabane, down around Muff, Moville, Carrandonna; they were all coming from everywhere, and *then* out of all that, you know, being in a play in Derry, they started up their own groups then. So, it was just growing, and growing, and growing…

Can you remember when that started actually? I saw, this is partly how your name came up, it was because of the festivals and the awards that you started winning. because normally in the articles in the *Derry Journal* it mentions just the group and it rarely mentions one person but your name came up consistently in it. But, you started in local festivals didn't you?

No, we never did local festivals because you weren't allowed to appear in your own city.

When I say local I mean not the All-Ireland, but you did regional festivals?

We did the All-Ireland, we did the regional aye…

Can you remember the first festivals that you did?

No.

Ballymena maybe?

Oh, no. We did do Ballymena but… Do you know, I don't know. I know that *Patsy* was a festival play. *Blythe Spirit* was a festival play.

Muire: I remember you saying that because that was where the adjudicator was horrible.

Yes, we were all on stage, you had to stand on stage and be adjudicated in front of the audience.

You stood on the stage?

You had to!

That's really weird, and where was he? On stage as well?

He sat out front and watched the whole performance, and then he came on stage and we had to line up behind him, curtains open and sit around the set and be adjudicated to. And *Blythe Spirit;* my friend Noeleen, she was one wife and I was the other, I was the ghost. And, at the adjudication, Kevin was standing: I was on one side and Noeleen was on the other and she was waxing lyrical about Noeleen and then she came to me, looked me up and down and said, "Let's face it, would you go to bed with her?" And Kevin says "Every night, I'm married to her!" And the other one we did, *Over the Bridge,* we did a big festival. Do you know, we did that many. *Lovers*, was I think, one of the big ones we did.

You went to the All-Ireland, didn't you, in Athlone?

Yes.

Do you know what play you brought?

No. I think it was *Over the Bridge.*

I think I remember seeing that in an article about that year. How was it going to Athlone?

Great. Oh, it was great, you met all the other groups. It was great!

And, how did it compare to, say, the Ulster finals?

Well, it was amazing compared to the Ulster finals! You're not allowed to enjoy yourself in Ulster!

This has come up before, I've heard this before…
We did *Lovers* in Ballymena, and when I was on, when we were on doing *Lovers*, have you seen the play?

No.

Well, the first half is just two people on the stage, right? Mag and Joe, and then second half there's four people on the stage, maybe five, the older group. The first one is 'winners' and the second one is 'losers'.

Oh yeah, is it two or three one-acts?

Yes. And when we were on stage doing *Lovers*, the winners, the two of us, Dennis McGowan and myself, the Orange band rehearsed next door, the whole play. Not just us, but when the others went on, but at least they had backing and each other on the stage. It was just Dennis and myself, and they played, and they battered those drums. And I love the Lambeg drums, it's in me; my granny was a Protestant, it's in me. But, it was hard to take. And the night of the adjudication there was a man in our group too called Paddy Rice, who was just one of those big characters that you were talking about, and they were giving the adjudication and they says "And now we come to the best actress and we have decided that, because the standard of theatre" - now, best supporting actress had been given- "because of the standard of theatre that we've had this week we've decided to withhold the best actress, but we will give her a certificate and Paddy Rice stood up and roared at him "Bastardin' Protestants give the wee girl her cup!" We all crawled out on our hands and knees, out the door. They were waiting on us outside...it just, wasn't nice. And then we went to Michael MacLíammoir adjudicated us – I'm nearly sure it was *Over the Bridge*, or one of those political plays. It was a very Protestant hall and they gave us orange powder in our sandwiches.

Orange...Were they trying to tell you something!?

Yeah they were. They were. And his adjudication was "if you ever come to the Abbey just knock on the door, I'll be waiting on you." For some of the plays it was terrible, you know, he says he gave them ten marks, ten out of ten, and it was he worked his way down and the last one was for "mercifully closing the curtains". You were really stripped when you went into those festivals, you know, the adjudications could be scathing. We always came out and the fellas in the group had their wee drink and of course Fr Daly had his wee gin and tonic and we went home very merry, although there was sober drivers allocated, we all went home singing whether we won, drew, or lost.

Muire: There was the night she tried to get Fr Daly into the bed with her and Noleen because she was reading a Stephen King book, and she was frightened.

No, Noleen read *The Exorcist!* I read the Stephen King book. I was alright because Noleen was in the room with me, but Noleen was afraid and she said you aren't even holy and if anything happens so I knocked on the door and asked the Bishop sleep in the room with us. He told us to press the dresser up against the door and he would bless us from the other side. [Laughing] He [Fr Daly] wasn't treated with any great reverence, although we did respect his collar and being a priest, but when he was on stage he was treated as one of us, you know; he cleaned and he hammered and he nailed and he went up ladders and he did his parish work as well so he was a hard goer. A lovely man too.

I was so glad to speak to him. He was really ill but he was really generous with his time. That was January, February. He was very forthright in his views and had a real passion. That's interesting what you were saying about the Ulster festivals: were they across the board like that or was there differences between them?

Across the board.

It was much more conservative…

Conservative? Come on! They were like that religion where you wear all black and your hairs tied up, what do you call them people? *Abigail's Party,* Abigail's...you know the one that Marilyn Monroe's husband wrote.

Muire: The Puritans? The Crucible: the Puritans?

[Laughing]

And some of the plays when I think back, *The Flats* for instance. I wore very short clothes in *The Flats* because that was the era it was set in. You know, and I had, there was a line about the Duke of Edinburgh and I had to say, "Never heard of him, who is he?" Well, there was a few ruffles in the audience and then they walked out.

No way.

Oh yeah. They were learning, they were getting trained out their own culture and getting brought into our culture and… [unclear]. When we did *Lovers*, and I can't remember where it was but it was on the Ulster tour, but you know the Queen was on one side and the Duke of Edinburgh was on the other on the stage, you know, big pictures. The Orange hall Larne: that's where it was because I stole a cup and saucer and I still have it, it says 'The Orange Hall Larne'.

Was that the festival in Larne?

Yes, it would have been part of the, you know the way you did a tour?

That must have been surprising, coming from Derry where theatre was apolitical for the most part?

I think we just sort of went, "oh shit!", you know? There was always that grounding in the 71' Players, you know, you knew to accept and not to step over the line and, you know, ach no; there was no politics in the 71' Players. The only politics in the 71' Players was *in* the 71' Players, you know? "My set is better than your set", or "we got this and youse didn't get that!" That sort of rivalry and politics, but that was healthy!

Yeah definitely, healthy competition. How about when you went South for festivals? Did you get a sense of that when you went South for festivals?

Oh no, no. That's what we liked. In the South it was great because you went there and you were sort of shy or a wee bit reticent, and the next thing it was, you know, "will you take a wee drink?" and it was "ah sher take a wee drink before you go on" and it was "did you get your tea?" and "there's sandwiches over there" and "do yiz need any hand putting up your set?" and no, no, it was always welcoming, always. Ballyshannon, you know, Ballyshannon was definitely out of [unclear]. Theatre now in Ballyshannon? Amazing! See then? It was awful.

…he [Fr. Daly] took us to a play one night, I'll never forget it. I can't even remember where it was like but it was like, but it was like a parish hall and it was *The Young Gossoon*, is that the name of a play *The Young Gossoon?*

Oh yeah, *The New Gossoon*.

But, they read the directions! You know, so it was "And here I am taking my tea, exit left." They read and learnt the directions and said them as part of the play! And he was sitting there beside me: "Don't you dare laugh, I'm warning you", and I says "I'm not laughing!", and he says "you're dying to, I'm watching you, don't you dare laugh!" And then at the end of the play, everybody on the stage got a clap. "And because she's going off to do nursing next week we're giving her a clap", "and because Willy put those flats up so well we're giving him a clap". And they said "we have a very important visitor here tonight and I says "You're getting a clap!"

[Laughing]

We all went everywhere to see the plays. We didn't all have cars. Kevin McLaughlin had a Mercedes so there was a fight to get into his car. I'll tell you something: Father Daly was an awful driver and nobody wanted to get into the car with him. Noleen would be in the back with the Rosary beads saying 'he's going to kill us, he's going to kill us'.

But the night we went to Carrickmore, there was a blackout. It was the time of the Ulster cuts, remember the Ulster workers strike? And the lights all went out, and there was this [unclear] all around the hall and there was "we were told there was going to be a power cut and we have a generator and it'll only take a couple of minutes". But when the lights came on again, the Bishop, every man around him had a gun. Carrickmore was in the middle of nowhere, you know, and it was *very* staunch Republican. Like that [clicks fingers] every man around him. It was *The Flats* we were doing: Joan Fallon was standing there and she was saying "Jesus, if we say a wrong line we'll be shot!" And as soon as the lights came on the men were all back down again, guns under the seat and they were all back watching the play again. It was truly amazing: they

weren't going to let anybody shoot the Bishop. That was Fr. Daly and it wasn't going to happen. Now that was the...I think it was the...no, it was *The Flats* if Joan Fallon was in it. She was a doctor, no, her husband was a doctor. And Noreen O' Sullivan, her husband was a doctor. It was just, everybody!

In terms of the group then, the group itself and the role it played in the community, was it first and foremost a theatre group, or was it a community group or was it equal.

Both, it was equal.

And was that the ethos of the group? Because it sounds like Fr. Daly was very much about it being democratic and togetherness because some groups are all about "We are going to win at this festival". There's the director and what he says or what she says goes and it's very…

Liam Neeson was in the Slemish Players at that time, and he is six foot something. My husband was six foot four, and if we were on the night before he played, Kevin would have wrote in the mirror, "Big fella was here". Or if he was on before us, he would write in the mirror, "The Big Fella was here". And we never met; we mightn't have met him until the adjudication and he was just… another fella. It wasn't until the night of, eh, that play...Brian Friel's play what do you call it the first one that they put on, *Translations*? We were sitting in the Guildhall looking at all these people who crawled out of the woodwork. And I turned around and said, "Yvonne, that's yer man out of the Slemish Players!" And she says, "I know, isn't he gorgeous?" [laughs]

But, oh God no, I think it was the happiest years of my life until I got me children, and then I instilled in them what it is like to be on stage. I've always told them it is the most natural high in the world. And, you know, if you go out and celebrate after it it's the greatest leveller because somebody will say to you, "What in utter God possessed you to say that line like that?" You know, great, you're up there and then they bring you back down again and you go home and you go to sleep. It is the most natural, wonderful high in the world.

And how did it compare, your amateur stuff, to your later professional work?

I wouldn't say...the way that Fr Daly trained us, there was no difference really. The only difference was you got paid. Because, you know, the first rule of thumb was you respect your space: you do not go into a theatre and leave a mess: you do not do that. You do not write on your script unless it's in pencil, so that you can rub it out. It was just… I didn't feel any transition at all, really. I just thought, what's the big deal? What's the big difference? There's a play there called *Packie's Wake.* Eddie Kerr put that on here. Now, that wasn't the 71' Players, I can't remember what do you call the group. And it was the old theatre, and they were sitting on the windows, it was crammed, and Pauline was going out the door and he says, "Pauline, that was some play," and she says, "I know, it was fabulous, and the crowds, and we're booked out all week and its standing room only" and he says, "Pauline, don't be telling me that, I'm a fire chief!" You know, it was just, theatre was...they *ate* it. There's something about theatre and Derry and they eat it, they really eat the play, you know? They can tell you things about that play that you didn't see in it, and you think, "God was I blind?" You know, that's true there; that's

really, really true. I just found it no transition at all. In fact, I would say professional plays, if you want to call them that, you know, I wouldn't tell her [gestures towards Muire]. I was going for an audition. There's none of this "there's auditions for a play next week, why don't you go?" When it was amateur it was "there's auditions for a play, ah come on up, sher if nothing else the craic will be great, come on up and, you know, you'll get something to do. It was like a social outing you know?

Sher, you'd only be brushing the stage; you'd only be putting on the cups...the *pranks* that were played on the stage by the 71' Players were *awful*. We did the play *Billy Liar,* and I played the part of the girl with the oranges. I hate oranges: I *hate* them. And every night, I had to eat these wee mandarin oranges, and every night when that plate of mandarin oranges came out it was getting higher and higher and higher, and I looked into the wings one night and here he was standing, "Hee hee hee" And I'm going…[shakes head and smiles wryly]. If you had to drink tea *and* he wouldn't allow you to pretend: if you had to eat on the stage, you ate, you drank. There was none of this pretend waving; if there was a window on the stage there was a window and how he learned that mistake was Mary Hynes, and Mary had to wave out the window so she put her hand out the window [gestures by putting her hand through an imaginary window and laughs]. So, the next night we came in and we were all looking and we said, "Oh God look we've got glass in the windows!" He said, "Yes, Mary, we've got glass in the windows" [laughing]. But he never said, "It's because of you Mary", he just went, "Yes, *Mary*, we've got glass in the windows".

When you talk about people in Derry eating up theatre, what do you see as the different roles of say, community theatre versus amateur theatre. I'm thinking of Frontline and the Playhouse, and other groups like that…

I don't know what you mean.

Is there any difference in terms of their audience or, you know, what they do for people?

Yes, yes, there would be now, there wasn't then. If you're putting on a play with a social meaning, Pat Byrne [Patricia Byrne, Sole Purpose Productions] upstairs, fabulous. But Pat would have her own audience that you might not see at another show. And, if they were putting a play on, say, when we had a hall out in the Brandywell. If the Brandywell were putting on a group it would have been done in the Lourdes hall. Or, if the Bogside was putting on a show it would have went on in the Stardust. We didn't have the Playhouse then. The Playhouse didn't come in until the late eighties.

Oh yeah, 92' it was renovated, wasn't it?

Yeah, but even before that. So there would have been various local community halls dotted around the place and they would have put on plays for their own communities, right? To keep it alive and let the children know that great things could happen on stage, and let's face it Pantomime? If you had one hundred fairies well there's two hundred seats taken already, you know what I mean? And that's not counting the grannies and the brothers and sisters. So, the pantomime held great audiences: really, really great audiences. And then you had the Feís, which

was a law unto itself. But theatre, they just… they loved the plays, and they *read* the plays! You know, people would have had, you would have had your J.B. Keane fans, and they would have known every line nearly of every play, you know, if you missed one. *Sive*...

I was surprised that Keane was popular in Derry, I really thought it was just a rural thing. I'm from Mayo and…

Sive was another great Keane play and you know, in *Sive* where Mena bakes a scone? Well, I'm not the most domesticated person and my mother was in the audience. So, I was mixing the stuff in the bowl and you know, I was mixing it away and put it on the griddle and pushed it in and of course whoever was backstage took off the piece of dough and put on a real one and then in the play I was taking it out and my mother's says, "She never baked that scone!" At the top of her voice! "Carmel never baked that scone!" God sake! And I had this aunt who came from America, and we were doing, I'm nearly sure it was *The Patsy*, and she came to the theatre with her fur coat on her, white gloves and her glasses. Now the wee theatre wouldn't be any bigger than this hall and she stood up and went "Encore Carmel! Encore Carmel!" We were all bowing and they were all going, "Who the *hell* is that?!" And I'm going, "That's my auntie, hello Helen!" So we worked hand in glove and mouth to mouth nearly, it was just amazing!

You were talking earlier about the effect of Field Day … I would have imagined that people would have gone to see that and been like "I want to make plays now" and the amateur movement would have gone huge.

No, the amateur movement died after *Field Day*, that's my opinion. I know for a fact that we stored our flats up in the Foyle, what's it called now, the Foyle Arts Building? It was a Protestant school where you went there and then you went to...*Muire: Was it a prep-school?* No, you went to prep-school and then you went to that, it was part of Foyle and Londonderry OK? And we stored our flats there and Field Day needed a place to store their flats so ours was taken out and burnt.

Burnt? That's a bit extreme!

Yeah, they gave us something like two weeks to find somewhere to put our flats. Fr Daly was Bishop Daly then and he didn't have as much time for us and, you know, they were taken out, left in the rain, soaked, and then they were burned. I really have nothing great to say about when Field Day first came to Derry. And then, of course, it was promised that they would premiere a play every year in the Guildhall. Well, you know? It never happened. Along comes *Translations, Translations* was the first. And then came … I don't know what it was but it was Chekhov, and then it was somebody else but it was never a premiere, ever.

I guess, one of the big positive things that people say about Field Day, well, two of the things was that, one, it was the outside world looking at Derry in a positive light, and also that instead of Derry looking towards centres like Belfast, London, Dublin, where professional theatre happened that now Derry was at the centre of …

For one week…

Yeah…

…and then forgotten about? Come on. It was cruel; it was *cruel* what they did.

I thought that the likes of the 71' Players were there for years before and were providing an infrastructure of theatre, so in a way the platform was there. So, who was the audience for Field Day then?

The audience for Field Day would have been the hinterland, of Donegal and you know, surrounding areas, and they brought a lot of people with them, you know? Of course, like afterwards it was "Dahling! Wonderful dahling!" and it was just cruel, it was cruel what they did. Of course, then, it took a few years, a right few years and then we got the likes of Jonathan Burgess who came and decided, "I'm going to start a professional group!" and did, and is succeeding; he really is succeeding and I take my hat off to him. He is pushing Derry out there and Dave Duggan, Pat Byrne, they're all pushing Derry out, you know? But, you could count on one hand now, how many of these '*professional'* groups appear in Derry. When was the last time Field Day set foot in Derry? Even when Brian Friel died, there was no big, "we're going to put on a whole row of Brian Friel plays". Never happened: the man died and his plays died with him. If it wasn't for the likes of schools who every year have a syllabus… Look at Seamus Heaney, I mean, come on. I would eat the man's boots. He was amazing. Seamus Deane from Lynott Street, another amazing writer. Unbelievable. My sister Nell: amazing! All amazing people. But they're not in Derry. Why? Because we always down our own people. That wasn't about the 71' Players it was, come on, bring it in, we'll do it, we'll do it. We love it. And then, of course, the groups that are going now. I feel so sorry for them because to put a play on, and we only have here and the forum in Derry – the Waterside theatre. Why aren't these plays going on all the time like they were when it was amateur? Amateurs can't afford these theatres; they've got no money. If you've got money then you're not an amateur. There's no such a thing as saying, "Go on, let us put a play on for a week", you know, and it's a door split or 40-60 or, you know, the first thing is money: money, money, money.

And as I say the first thing we were told was to respect our space. There's no such a thing as going in and writing your name on a wall, or leaving cups lying about, or leaving the sink dirty, or the toilet dirty. That just was not heard of: you cleaned up on your last night. You cleaned up, made sure that everything was off the stage: your sets were stacked, your props. Mary, if you gave her a prop there was a sticker put on the bottom of it, she wrote on it who owned it and there was a number. You were given a piece of paper with your number, and then you came at the end of the play. You handed your piece of paper and you got your prop: that's how well and regimented it was run. Money? What's money? But, now? If you have no money then you have nowhere to put your play on. Suck it up. St. Cecilia's? Fabulous theatre; they even have an outdoor theatre, but the school's closed all summer.

It's sad to hear that because for years the Theatre Action Group pushing so hard, and…

Is that TAG? *Yes*. Is that TAG you're talking about? We all gave money for bricks to build a new theatre that was going to be built in Derry. Sher, it never materialised.

And what about the Millennium Forum*?*

Well, the Millennium theatre is expensive, and *here* (Playhouse) is expensive.

It's (the Millennium) more of a commercial theatre?

Well here [the Playhouse] is commercial too. You know, there's no point in me sitting here and saying what I don't feel or what I don't believe. My drama group, Muire and my drama school, put a play on here for one night and they *packed* it; packed it, because if you have children, you have a captive audience, you know? Surely somewhere in the back of somebody's mind a wee tiny glimmer of a lightbulb should go off and say, "Sher, if we took the door, that's grand, that's money coming into my theatre." But no, they had to pay to put their play on here.

Muire: It's expensive.

You know, I had to pay to put their play on here. I'm not going to get into money or anything else, you know, politics as I say, it's not politics Catholic, Protestant, Ulster, the South, whatever: it's indoor politics that's choking drama, choking it.

Unfortunately, it's why rural areas are still thriving in amateur times. See Carrickmore? Carrickmore opens its doors. Every door in Carrickmore, including the credit union, is open. Come on in. And it was so funny because there was two stage managers, there was a Stickie and there was a Provo, and Kevin McCallion *loved* them, because if he had to go off stage right, "have a whiskey!", and if he had to go off stage left, "have a whiskey!" "Great!" he says, "I have two. I'm dual political: I'll support the Provos on that side and I'll support the Stickies on that side: I'm Switzerland Carmel, I'm Switzerland!" Come on, it was brilliant! And, afterwards there was always so much food, you just couldn't not eat it, and the audience: the audience in Derry at this moment in time, I think… Fr Daly always used to say, "You have to train your audience". You have to say to your audience when you're bowing, "Come on down to the back and meet us." And, "don't ever clap your audience" And we used to go, "Why?" You are not the emperor of China. And the emperor of China used to be clapped from the stage because the actors thought that this was a great accolade, so they clapped the emperor of China for coming to see them. It was just the emperor that was being clapped, it wasn't the wee people all about. Never clap your audience. Look them in the eye when you're going down, and put your eyes down. Look them in the eye when you're coming up, and smile at them. And your smile has to say, "Come round the back to hear the craic." So they'd come round, and they'd have their tea. And, I remember this girl; she was a lovely girl but she was a wee bit high-falutin'. And she used to make date and apple sandwiches. Now, I'm talking 1980. You get them in all the restaurants now, date and apple scones as their called. She was making date and apple sandwiches and Fr Daly comes round, "Now, they're *all* for you Carmel!" [laughs] And I says "You are so kind, and because you are so kind you can sit down there beside me and eat the half of them!" And he went, "Well, I have to mingle", and I'm sitting there chewing these date and apple sandwiches and I thought, "Jesus, I'm never going to get these down my throat!"

You know, there was two big Belfast sinks in these rooms, end of story. And the cups were as thick as the Belfast sink. But everybody got their tea out of great big kettles; everybody was sitting in chairs and chat, chat, chat, chat, chat. And, of course, somebody would have said to Jim Patton … his wife designed the sets and built them and he painted them, she painted them. And somebody would say, "C'mere, "great play coming up. Helen: perfect for the part, perfect. "What's that play?" "Blah blah blah" "Right, give us a bit of paper somebody?" They'd write down the name of the play and the author, "...and who did you say would be good in that part? Right, I'll try Helen out for that" And that was how you got your part. The audience picked you. You know, there was none of this great, "You read now and you read now", pfff. The audience would have said, "Great play, fabulous play, put it on, I'll guarantee, I'll give you fiver here and now, you'll fill the hall. Well that's the name of the play…" whatever the name of the play is, "...and put Helen in it. Great, great in that part".

So you had like a loyal following…

Oh, come one, they were there, as we say; every three weeks there would have been a play on in the 71' Players. I mean, look at the list there alone and I don't think that's them all, I think he's dotin'. JB Keane, there's another one, *The Year of the Hiker*. That was the one; that was the play and we were all rehearsing it and Jim Patton directed it. We were rehearsing it and Kevin and me had a falling out. And I was at the top of the – like, if there was stairs there was stairs – Kevin was out celebrating all that evening, they had just finished school and I'd say that his medicine was working and he came in. I was at the top of the stairs and he was supposed to look up the stairs and say, "She was a girl like you." Jim Patton was saying, "Jesus, Mary, and Joseph what is he going to say?" It was a dress rehearsal and he looks up and he says, "And she was a right bitch like you." [laughs]

Is there anything else that you feel should be in any study of amateur theatre in Derry?

Just open your doors to the wee'uns and don't charge them: they don't have money. Especially now when unemployment is high. Most parents or families, well not most but lot of them are on unemployment or benefits. They try to give their children everything. There's not a wild lot of theatres saying, "Come on in here, and you don't have to pay. Put your play on and we'll help you out all we can." It's, "well you're going to have to pay a door split", and they haven't a clue what a door split is, they're looking at you and they're going, "what's a door split?" and I'm going "well if you make twenty pounds they'll take ten." Don't let them grow up to be, "what's in it for me?" It's different when it's your living, but when it's not your living, when it's your hobby it shouldn't be made unattainable. It should be made that, you know, your granny should come and have a wee cup of tea after it.

It's harder on the children now, maybe because of the times that we live in, maybe because the world is so money orientated. I think that these flamin' games that they play...do you know something, do you see poetry? My children in our school, Seamus Heaney; they love him, and they go and they question their parents about these poems. Some of the parents, they don't know, and I find awfully sad.

We had play readings too you know, we had play readings when we were in the 71' Players. Play might never have been done. Just, "what do you think of this play here?" "Oh well, we'll read it" and "give that book over to that one there."

Could you bring in a play if you saw one that you liked?

Yes, yes you could.

We did a play there one night called *The Exorcism*; that was the 71' Players. And it's about a couple who invite a couple to their cottage to have their Christmas dinner. And there's a curse on the cottage and they starve to death. ...And we put on Shirley Valentine and of course I was Shirley Valentine…

[INTERVIEW ENDS]

Interview title: Personal Interview with Pauline Ross.
Interviewer: Finian O'Gorman
Date: 9 September 2016
Method: In person at the Derry Playhouse

Finian: I read in Nuala McAllister's [McAllister-Hart] book that you started with the 71'Players.

Yes, Yeah Yep.

How did you get involved and what were the productions?

Well, it was through Bishop Daly. At the time, anyone involved in the 71'Players: it just didn't come to them when they were teenagers or young adults. People who had a love of theatre were always playing at one thing or another. I used to a lot of dancing choreography and I was doing a little show in what they called the 'Pat's Hall'. It was in the Waterside, which would be the East bank of Derry. And every year we did a show. We had the boy's club and I choreographed the show and I would have acted in some of them. Bishop Daly came one night because it was another priest who organised this – Father Jimmy Doherty who sadly passed – and I was doing a solo dance and I remember it was the first time we used blue light, where everything turned up white. It was *The Good, The Bad and The Ugly* so I made myself a costume out of brown nylon and made myself lots of big fringes like Clint Eastwood's big [chuckle]… but Bishop Daly came backstage and asked me would I choreograph his pantomime.

Was that *Aladdin;* that was a springboard to setting up the group wasn't it?

I'd need to go back, these are the years. I think *Aladdin* might have been 70', 71'.

The story that I heard is that the funds for that: that Bishop Daly asked if he could use the funds instead of putting them back into the Parish, which they usually did; that he could take a portion of it to renovate the minor hall at St.Columb's that provided the space.

There you go, you are telling me something.

[Both laugh]

..but the minor hall was used by two other groups The City of Derry and The Theatre Club

I actually acted with the City of Derry drama group and the director of that group was a fearsome man. He was a teacher at St.Columb's and he would make you tremble in your boots when he was giving you directions. I did *The Crucible* with him and that went to the drama festivals. It was incredible. You know, people moved between groups. They had their core but I sort of moved between groups and the Theatre Club; I'd of done stuff with the Theatre Group as well.

Were there any differences between the groups?

I suppose they were all friends. The City of Derry Drama Group, for me, was primarily teachers like Rusty and Mickey McGillan and then the editor of the Londonderry Sentinel – which was the chief Protestant paper – Sydney Buchanan, was involved in that. Then the Theatre Club, again, a lot of teachers were involved. Now, I would have been sixteen or seventeen and they seemed quite old to me. Mary Murphy, who I also asked to come today, is a wonderful actress; she's from Galway, she came to the city with her husband and he took up an engineering job. She would have been the sort of star of the Theatre Club. The Theatre Club would have done a lot of American dramatists' work. I remember doing *Our Town* with them, and with the City of Derry we did *The Crucible.* The 71' Players, I have to say, were renowned for doing Irish drama, and people loved Irish drama.

So it was more each group had it's own little…

Niche, yeah.

... and different social niche maybe and friends.

Yeah, like that was my reading of it as a young girl. I mean, *Aladdin* was fabulous and pantomimes, here, then, it was a release from what was going on, you know? It was a good night, the craic was mighty, and Bishop Daly was smart in that he had Frank Carson. Frank Carson was here every year to do the pantomime. So, he got big houses, and it would have been a good box office, and his restoration of the little theatre; it was beautiful, and it was comfortable. I still have yet to sit in a theatre, even in the West End and Broadway, as comfortable as seats as Bishop Daly put into the Little Theatre. Big, cushy seats like armchairs. They were gorgeous.

And, of course, the rental then they offered to the groups was much lower. It gave the scope to try new things as well.

Yes. Yeah.

You talk about the release with pantomime and, when it came to theatre and more serious themes, was there an appetite for more serious issues, to do with the conflict directly?

You see, Finian, it was a war, you know? It can get minimised when people call it 'the Troubles'. It wasn't a bit of trouble; it was a war and it was going on every day and it's only now and reflecting back that you realise how serious it was. But, your brain goes into another gear that you cope with the extraordinary and the ordinary, you know, you marry them? And, we all had met somebody, fell in love, had babies, you know, and we brought them up in the 70s, and they were the dark days. But, I think, especially with the Keane plays, and they did Friel: topics that were directed at the Irish experience, you know, like wakes and the American wake and emigration. But then, really there was nobody writing about the conflict. It was later, I suppose – and I think that Carmel was involved in *Freedom of the City* that Friel wrote – it was the first piece, and maybe Stewart Parker.

The Flats **I think as well.**

We did *The Flats* as well. And then Tom set up Them Uns' theatre company and they did *The Plough* and *Dockers* and that. But, the same thing happened with visual artists. It took about ten years from the start of the Troubles before visual artists started to look at it as a subject matter for their artwork, because it's hard to understand it. When we got the restoration money to restore these two buildings that are now the Playhouse, which were St. Joseph's and St Mary's Convent schools, we had to relocate to St. Columb's hall while the builders were in so we were putting plays on in the Little Theatre and in the main hall as well. It was like an Aladdin's cave, because we would go down into the bowels of St. Columb's Hall, where they had the Mary McLoughlin School of Irish Dance, and it was vaulted ceilings and arches. And this is where, again, Bishop Daly; he had the trap and all on the main stage, you know, where ninja turtles and all could come up, or fairies, you know, during the pantomime times. But, there was huge big ledgers and it was: we have to remember that at that time St. Columb's Hall was really like the parish hall of the Longtower church. Now it's, I don't know if it's still the Longtower or St. Eugene's Cathedral. So, there was a core of carpenters and tradesmen that were there all the time. So, they were always maintaining and fixing up the building as well as the church. So, you had a workshop downstairs with all the equipment that carpenters needed.

So, I was delving through one day looking for props for a play we were doing and I came across a big ledger. Today, people would have diaries, or maybe a digital diary. I haven't got that far yet but this big book was from the seventies and it would have been Bishop Daly's secretary, the secretary of the hall, who kept it. It was fascinating, and really, I wanted to steal it but my conscience wouldn't let me so I put it back after looking at it for a few days. And, I made enquiries could they gift aid it because I would have it in a glass cabinet for people to see. Bridie McGuinness was the secretary and she looked after the box office. She looked after everything: the hiring of hall for community groups, and you know there was boxing and the bands, you know like the brass band, everybody used it, it was like, the community theatre for the whole city, the West Bank. But, in this book, Bridie would have had, say, "Rehearsals tonight", say, "*Autumn Fire,* 71' Players" and then if something happened that day, and more often than not a tragedy happened that day, it could have been she put under it, very lightly, "bomb went off in Fergie Street today, somebody killed" or "young (and given name) was shot dead by the British Army today in the Bogside" or "soldier shot at…" whatever. So, it was nearly like a diary of events that was happening during the war. But even, she might have only mentioned the event in a few sentences, you could feel her empathy and compassion and sorrow – and, of course, when Bloody Sunday happened that was in there too. But, it's still down there somewhere buried under a mound of carpentry material and that.

But, we loved it; we loved going to rehearsals, and because it was amateur theatre you know… Now, here in the Playhouse, if we're doing a professional piece of theatre you have the luxury of a three-week and, if you can stretch the budget, a four-week rehearsal period before premiere night. Then we could take our time: you met maybe two or three times a week. You had audition night then when people got their roles; you had your readings and then you went on to rehearsals. It was always, the winter nights, and there was great camaraderie, tremendous camaraderie, and obviously the Troubles got discussed, but then you got into the play and you were in another world, you know, another character.

That image of the ledger is like, maybe there is a ledger like that in halls up and down the country but the difference between there and say, Cork, at the same time is that these events aren't interwoven with them. It's really striking because it's like the mundane and the everyday coupled with the extraordinary.

I'll never forget the day that I went to see *Freedom of the City*. They did it in the Guildhall and I think that at that time it was the first play ever to be played in situ, in the Guildhall where events were happening; a civil rights march outside and people taking cover and running into the Guildhall. It was packed out, and the Guildhall was not a theatre, and that's where Field Day would have premiered their work, and it was tragedy to see such great theatre in a hall where it just wasn't meant for theatre. Maybe organ recitals and tea dances and mayor's balls but not for theatre. It always felt, gosh, we'd had no theatre in this city. We had St. Columb's hall but it was a parish hall, you know so...

In terms of that, I asked Bishop Daly as well because I thought, from an outside perspective, I thought that every public gathering, every club or organisation would have been politicized and he, he was very quick to tell me that theatre was apolitical. I mean, how was that possible? Particularly if it was a Catholic parish hall as well?

Finian, it was, I mean, this city is unique. This city is light years ahead of Belfast in terms of reconciling itself to the past and the hurt and the pain, and the tragedies that happened. But, it happened; it wasn't contrived, it wasn't like a cross-community effort. It genuinely is where arts have a role to play in conflict transformation because people have a love of their art, be it theatre, or music or dance or whatever. And, it was mixed; it was mixed and we never thought, we never ever thought about the cultural divide.

And, I guess there was other areas; I mean, dances as well were usually mixed as well for the most part?

Yeah, yeah they had, after the Battle of the Bogside they had a Fleadh and I think the Dubliners and all came up to play in it just outside the Bogside Inn, and I was at the age; I was a young girl, you got left home. I got left home from the Fleadh after the Battle of the Bogside by a Protestant [laughs] so, you know, now, that sounds strange but it happened...because he was a great dancer and I loved dancing, and I knew him through dance. And there was music, great music at the Fleadh. So, again, it was a connector that was an artform.

So, can we look at that as escapism or is it a suspension of the normal rules of, I don't know, interaction?

It's deeper than that: I really do think that there's a DNA, ehm, cultural streak here … that ...there was music and poetry and drama in homes, apart from the drama of a war, that was natural, it wasn't forced. And it wasn't because people could go to dance school or drama school … it just was always there, because every community had their hall.

When I talk about the Pat's Hall which, by the way, in the seventies was blown up by the IRA and it has never ever been rebuilt, and that was a hall for every member of the community, from

children – particularly the boys clubs juniors and seniors – and then the big hall would have been the community hall where we put on the shows. There would be concerts at Christmas; there was the Rickety Wheel, and then on the top layer… In fact, I modelled the Playhouse on the Pat's hall, on the top layer; where the toilets were, you would go up there and it was dark and smoky because it was a snooker hall for all the unemployed men, you know? So, this was like a three tier building but whether, I don't know how it was blown up but we know it was the IRA that blew it up and whether it was a mistake or not but it was never, ever, still the building is just an empty site, and it was the heartbeat of the community, people loved it you know. Even when I was at school in the sixties, if they were doing the Green Cross Code they put up a screen and it was the first time we would of seen movies – just teaching kids how to cross the road and look after themselves we went into this dark room and this big screen. So, it was important and the community was just… upset when it was gone and the church never rebuilt it so I don't know what happened there.

The plays that the '71 Players did: how did they go about choosing the plays?

It would have always been the director and the directors were Tom, Tom would be my brother-in-law. He is married to my sister in law, what does that make him?

Ehm...loosely connected through family!

Jim Patton was another director and Jim would be very interesting...he was directing, he wanted to do *Sive* and I was reading *Sive* and I met my husband to be and I wanted to go on dates and somehow three nights a week of rehearsals sort of ate into that. On my last night there, I took my sister-in-law Mary and she met Tom and she married Tom! [laughs] Both marriages have failed over the years but that's neither here nor there but theatre brought us together. But, I think it was, and I think it's the same today. It's different here now in the professional world. I would commission plays: the play I commissioned last year, Colm Bateman's *Bag for Life*, is going on a North-South tour in 2017 and you select the writer whose work you like and you commission it, and you try to get production moneys. Then, it was the director who had a passion and, I think, well I told you about Bishop Daly and he stood at the back of the Little Theatre with me and he spoke *every word*. So, he knew if an actor missed a line or anything like that, and you will meet several of his star actors today and they'll fill you in on that. So, I didn't do *Sive* and I sort of stepped back because I got married and had a family. I did the *Plough in the Stars*. I played Nora in the *Plough in the Stars.*

Did you see or did you do *The Righteous are Bold*?

Yes, yes, I was in it. I think I was in it. I was, ehm, the wee group of the...I'm trying to remember, there's young teenagers in it isn't there towards the end?

I think there is, where the girl comes back from England and she is possessed.
It's a really interesting play, partly because there is this huge conservative message in it, moral message.

It's a wonderful title, *The Righteous are Bold*, and they are bold! [laughs] Right or wrong!

I don't know if there is anything to this and it could be complete coincidence but a central thing of the whole play is, basically, about I suppose… there was a huge anxiety about emigration and the fact that, unlike any other phase of emigration, it was a majority of women that were going to England and they were coming back with different clothes, and they were assertive and they were the main breadwinner. So, it was changing society and all of this was kind of like piled on the body of the woman on stage and that was how it was represented. But, when the callout for that play went out in Derry it was around November of 71', and that was around the time that, you know, there was huge notoriety about the women who were tarred and feathered. And, I thought that it was a very strange coincidence that in the news in Derry at the time a lot of these issues are being centred on the bodies of women in real life and then this play comes along at the same time…

That wouldn't have been a coincidence. It was Bishop Daly that directed that, aye, as far as I know. I need to check that but I'm sure that it was him, because I think I worked with him on that. Because, he also directed, I'm sure it was him, it's such a long time, *Autumn Fire.* And, again, *Autumn Fire* was looking very boldly at a situation. I don't know if you know the story of *Autumn Fire*, where there's a farmer, and his wife dies. He has three sons, and you know, then the sons inherit the land and, doesn't he find himself a young wife. I was playing the young wife and one of the sons; they fall in love. And, again, I mean, explosive play, like, the subject matter was dealing with you know, because like, you did not think that Irish farmers with grown up men sons would go off and find themselves a young wife. They all do, now [laughs], but I'm sure it was Bishop Daly that directed that. Was it Bishop Daly that directed that?

I mean, when I saw *The Righteous are Bold* as well I mean, it was in the seventies and even then the kind of, say, the religious aspect of it was slightly outdated, I mean, it's very conservative, but I mean, that whole aspect to do with the central, the main girl, it was really interesting.

But, with *The Righteous are Bold,* Bishop Daly knew exactly what he was doing.

Wow.

And, I mean, he would have had his finger on the pulse of what was going on, with the conflict as well. He loved theatre and he was a highly intelligent man, and it did bring people out of their homes. It really brought people out, the '71 Players, and the Theatre Club, and the City of Derry all had their niche audiences that supported, you know?

And those audiences were, who was in the audience, if you had to characterise it?

Probably the more professional class, really, and that's one of the reasons I set the Playhouse up was I worked in the credit union movement for fourteen years, and when you have pockets of unemployment in the city in the sixties of eighty-percent in some housing estates...poverty was a big thing, access to money. You know, you couldn't get a bank loan. If you were living on a dole cheque you couldn't open a bank account. It shows you how the trend has changed; now you can't get it unless you have a bank account! You know, we live in a paperless society. But

anyway, John Hume brought the credit union movement to Ireland and it's good to see it thriving in parts of London like Islington and that, and it shows you the levels of poverty that's happening there. But it democratised money because, you know, people with no income, with what we called *brú* you know, were able to save and able to borrow money, you know? And, I witnessed myself, people that were entrepreneurial starting with small loans, and now they are business people in the town, all these years on, and I wanted to do the same for the arts. I wanted to democratise the arts, because unless your parents were working, was one thing, unless they had an awareness of how important culture and the arts are in a child or teenager's life growing up; they want it to be an integral part and that's something that's pushed aside to a Friday afternoon like Primary schools do you know? And, then it's seen as being on the periphery of their lives all their lives, you know? I wanted to set up a community space that had dance, theatre, visual arts, and that was in a neutral location so we are here between the Fountain estate, the only enclave left in the West Bank with 300 Protestant loyalist people living there, and the Bogside, so it's ninety-seven percent Catholic, Nationalist, Republican in the West Bank and we have a segregated housing, we have segregated schooling, so, how else can you get people together and try to create creativity in the arts? But, back to your audiences: when I think back on it, again, it was only through the civil rights movement that raised an awareness of the discrimination that was going on – both in terms of jobs and housing – and of course the whole gerrymandering thing about voting. But, looking back, I would say a lot of school teachers: wives and husbands, families, bank people…

You are perfectly placed to answer this question, which I am really interested in: I think that Derry is a fascinating example of the role of, say, amateur theatre through the likes of the 71' Players; the role of community theatre through, say, the Playhouse here or maybe Derry Frontline; and then the role of conventional, professional theatre if we look at the likes of Field Day. This is a massive question, but what do you see as the role that those different types can play within a community?

Age brings, I suppose, a bit of wisdom, but it also brings experience and I've been involved from when I was no age in amateur theatre, then in community theatre through the Playhouse, but also now professional theatre and we work with Field Day theatre company. In fact, on the 30 September, this month, we have a second Field Day lecture and Bernadette Devlin McAlliskey is giving it and Michael Farrell who was the Queen's University lecturer who started the People's Democracy and that first march from Queens to Derry with the Battle of Burntollet, which is quite infamous now. And, Bernadette is giving the Field Day keynote lecture; and Bernadette now – her life, I think – is devoted to working with refugees and migrants in County Derry. We were so proud of her, you know, when you think of that image of her with the brick, breaking it up for stones, and the next she is standing up giving a speech in Westminster – the youngest ever MP, you know? That's when you realised women have power: women have strength, intelligence, and determination and resilience; resilience is a big word. So, when Field Day was conceived, because I love theatre I was very excited because Friel was doing adaptations of Chekhov or, they were doing great, great, tragedies, Seamus Heaney was translating, so to go to the Guildhall it was frustrating because it's not a theatre. You know, you cannot make the coldness of for what for Catholics in the city, be they nationalist or republican or whatever, is the seat of Unionist domination of the majority; you know, the minority have control over the majority of people here. It was just, the wrong venue but it was the only venue. Field Day had

tried for several years to buy an old church and redesign it and make it into a state-of-the-art theatre but money is never; it's never easy to come by. And these people had great careers that are getting bigger and bigger. If you look at, you know, Heaney and Friel and Stephen Rea, and Tom Paulin. But, anyway, for us, for people like us in the city who loved theatre and were part of theatre and would have done anything: made costumes, you know, brought their...like, most of the sets, people will tell you … most of the sets that were in these plays were brought from people's houses, do you know: three-piece suites, coffee tables, beds, and there was no budget for sets. You just brought whatever you had that suited, you brought it. And, I still do that mind you here, when money's tight; it's being resourceful!

As long as you get them back… [laughs]

Usually not in the same condition mind you [laughs]. But, anyway, for the people involved in the amateur theatre movement it was wonderful – even sitting in a hard seat, not like Bishop Daly's big cushioned armchairs we had in the Little Theatre. But, to watch great works of art; great works of literature with superb actors, directors, lighting designers, set designers. It brought that to us, because none of us could have ever went to London, you know, to see that type of theatre so it was great. And Stephen Rea and Seamus Deane; they still have that ambition. We had the Sam Shepard play here two years ago, three years ago, in the City of Culture year, and Sam was here for two autumns in a row doing the research and writing the play and that's great. But then the next night, now, that night in the theatre when Sam Shepard's play opened I think that there was four Oscar winners that were here and I thought, this is bloody great! But then the next week you could have a piece of community theatre and you have a great audience and a great feeling, a great vibe, it's all; it's that mixture. Now are you going to talk to anybody from Frontline?

No I hadn't planned to.

Now, that would be very interesting because that's another type of theatre. That's community activism; that was community activism at the hard core and their first play, they rehearsed in here. Now, I hope I'm not being nostalgic Finian but they rehearsed over the Christmas period and they may even have had Christmas dinner here; they may have had a communal Christmas dinner here while they were still rehearsing. But, the week prior to their play opening, Frontline's play opening, I think the entire company were arrested and taken to Castlerea holding centre. And, some of the men were held in – you could hold them for seven days then – and some of them, through the secretary of state over there, you could extend that and they were held for longer. So, it's not too many cities that would happen in, but it happened here and they were rehearsing here. But, the play was over four hours long! Because they had so much that they needed to say about what was going on in their community. They had so much to say and it was so vitally important to them to say it publicly, through the medium of the arts and theatre in particular.

And, was that providing an outlet for people who wouldn't have that outlet through amateur theatre? Are we talking about different people who were involved?

Yes, this was, there was a guy, Dan Baron Cohen, I think he went to Oxford and then he went on to Canada or something. But Jim Keyes is still here and Jim's a great, I think Jim might work in

the; he has a big project which is a legacy project looking at different things in the Troubles and Stephen, I forget Stephen's second name, but he's still involved as a community activist and still using theatre and storytelling and trying to unravel, unpick, and make sense; tell a story, which is important. People's stories need honoured.

It's similar to *Theatre of Witness*…

Theatre of Witness was a huge development for us. It touched thousands of lives. We actually were just at the Glencree Centre for Conflict Transformation giving a presentation on Theatre of Witness two months ago; got standing ovations because the work is authentic. It's people telling their own stories. But Teya Sepunik – the founder of Theatre of Witness – is also a trained counsellor; she's been a counsellor for thirty years. So we all, we all had, I had the comfort of knowing that these people, all of them suffering from some kind of trauma, post-traumatic stress disorder that involved victims, survivors, combatants, security force personnel; we even had the governor of the Maze Prison at the time that Billy Wright was shot dead in the prison, he was part of the Theatre of Witness. I think they are on DVD's if you want them but I think you can get them online. It had the power, when Theatre of Witness went to theatres and we were in Armagh, and Dublin, and Omagh, and all around, Belfast, you'd have an audience of both sections of the community. Now, we could have had a UDA quartermaster on stage, or an IRA volunteer, and they were very brave you know; we were going to places like Ballymena and, you know, different places that, say, Armagh you see is sort of a Republican stronghold. But they were brave, you know, the UDA quartermaster on the first night, the premiere, because we had a Q&A every night after it. I can give you some of the reflections, what the audience say about it. A man stood up, now, we were worried because we had an RUC officer involved and we couldn't put him on stage because the Dissidents had just put out death threats to RUC officers so I had to put his part on film. But a man in the audience stood up and said "I was burned out of, my family was burned out of their house by the UDA and thank you, coz' tonight you've put a face on them for me." And, it sort of reconciled them in a way you know there are thousands of reflections. It sort of demolished an audience. They listened very, very deeply and when the show's over they don't move. There's silence for a long time. And nobody leaves the theatre; they all want to stay to create the conversation.

Carmel McCafferty arrives

Carmel, was it Bishop Daly that did *The Righteous are Bold*?

Carmel: He was in it anyway, because Tom Connolly took sick and he had to go on and do the young curate.

[INTERVIEW ENDS]

Interview title: Personal Interview with John Travers.
Interviewer: Finian O'Gorman
Date: 8 February 2016
Method: Telephone

Finian O'Gorman: Hello John. Thanks for taking my call today. Can I just check how long you have available?

John Travers: I'm ok, whatever you need.

So I'd say it will be thirty minutes max.

That's okay.

So, I guess we'll start with how you first got involved with theatre?

So, Ballyshannon has a town theatre. Originally, it was a dancehall and a cinema. Then it was used for drama and musicals. Over the years it has been improved. There was stage facilities, it has become more of a theatre now. It's no longer a cinema. But, you have a good venue and live performances in your local town. We had a very successful drama group called The Premier Players. They won the All-Ireland in 1957 with a one-act, with *Spreading the News,* and in 1961 they won in Athlone with *The Old Road*. So you were used to seeing drama of a very high standard. Then the drama festival has been running in Ballyshannon since 1952. So, again, my Father was involved in that. From about ten years-of-age I would have been going to the drama. I suppose that's what originally sparked the interest.

The dancehall; who owned the dancehall at the time, was it the local parish people?

It was privately owned until 1992 and then the local town commissioners bought it and they set up a trust, The Abbey Centre Trust and I was the Secretary of the Trust for about 20 years. We accessed funding from the International fund for Ireland from the Department of Arts, Culture and the Gaeltacht. We have improved the place considerably. It is a sort of multi-purpose arts centre now.

Oh, fantastic. Why do you think that amateur theatre is so popular in Ireland?

Because it is community-based and for most people it is not a matter of 'going to the theatre': it is a matter of going to the drama; going to see the play. Very often, people have a fear of buildings. If it is a community facility where they go in for bingo or for musicals or concerts, they are used to going the building. They are not afraid then to go; the fact that the community dimension is there. For a lot of people, the teamwork that's involved in running a musical or a play is an attraction for a lot of people. You make friends. One of our team; he is a retired Guard, based in Dublin. He came back to live in the area. The first thing he said is that he felt that life had moved on. He knew very few people. He joined the drama, joined the musical and straight away you build up a circle of friends very quickly. You are involved, you know?

So, for a lot of people it's more interest in community rather than say, specific interest in theatre?

Well, I suppose for other people the interest starts in September when the evenings are getting sort of longer. They want to get involved in something that is going to pass the winter for them. That's a major attraction. I suppose each community is different. Some of the urban areas are quite different in that now they have developed sort of theatres, the bigger centres like the [unclear], An Grianán and the [unclear] Castleblaney, so they would have possibly more professional productions coming. It's interesting, the drama festivals. There is no drama festival in Dublin. The nearest is in Rush which is a suburban village. Derry has a festival which is an urban area. Sligo doesn't have a festival. Galway doesn't have a festival. Limerick doesn't have a festival. Cork doesn't have a festival. So, it tends to be strongest, I think, in the smaller towns and the medium sized towns; and sometimes very often, very rural areas. The most successful in recent years has been Kilmeen in West Cork and it's a crossroads.

Absolutely, yeah. There is still very much an impression that amateur theatre is a predominantly rural movement as well.

Yeah, well there are very strong parallels between it and GAA in that the club championship is Crossmaglen Rangers and Crossmaglen is a very small town. Occasionally, you see [unclear] Rangers from Cork or St Vincent's or Kilmacud in Dublin coming through. But St. Brigid's in Roscommon, Cushendall in the hurling, [unclear] down in Kilkenny. A lot of successful teams are actually from rural areas. Occasionally, you have the urban ones and it's the same in the drama. Most of the successful ones have been rural but occasionally there's Estuary in Dublin who have won an All-Ireland but it used to be Strand players and Anna Livia and so on in Dublin. But you have very few of the [unclear]. It is probably true to say it is strongest in the rural areas.

That's interesting. Within areas as well, a common association is that it is an upper-class or middle-class pursuit. Do you think that holds within areas around Ireland or in Ballyshannon specifically?

Most definitely not. You will find that we have about 150 season-ticket holders who will come to a festival nine nights. A cross-section of those, it is probably predominantly a female audience. An explanation for that is that drama festivals were held in Lent when there was no dances. The men very often were off the drink in Lent. The women would go to the drama for their hobbies. They would get out during Lent and the Father would do the babysitting and that was her treat. Women would take their week's holidays for the drama festival. It is certainly not. The strongest festivals are the ones that are not sort of snobbish and the festivals that are facing the greatest challenge, I would say, are the ones that are full of dress suits and the ones that are air kissing and thinking it is a theatre festival and it's all very upper class and it's not a place [unclear]. The places we enjoy most are the likes of Tubbercurry and Carrickmore and Kilticlogher where the facilities aren't nearly as good as in some of the larger centres; but the atmosphere and the knowledge of the audience is great. You have a farmer coming in and talking about plays that he has seen and you would look at him and you would say, "that fella doesn't know much about

drama," but he would be extremely knowledgeable. So, to me, the success is not about a class-based thing. Amateur drama is for the people.

But, on the other hand, historically like very quickly, well within ten years, the All-Ireland divided into the Open and Confined [categories]. Is that an indicator of some kind of hierarchy?

The history of that is that it used to be Rural and Open. A group could decide which competition to enter. We were off the circuit ourselves for a number of years and we went back on the circuit in 2011. We went into the Confined section which was formerly the Rural because we felt we didn't know if we would be good enough in the Open, number one, and number two we thought the festivals wouldn't take us because we hadn't been on the circuit for a while. We won the All-Ireland the first year, and we then had to go Open. But, the idea was – the presumption was – that rural small towns would not be able to compete, but that very quickly changed. That's why they changed the name to Open and Confined. Som you could have a fairly large town deciding to go in the drama circuit and they would enter into the Confined section because it's more a matter of standard. You decide. If you want to start up a drama group, you can decide which circuit you want to enter. But if you go down through it, Cornmill in Carrigallen. I'm sure you were never in Carrigallen?

No.

But it's one of the strongest bases of drama in the country. Kilmeen in West Cork, and you go down to Ballyduff down in Waterford. There are a whole lot of small towns. They are excellent. The ones that we had originally, the strongest one, Tommy and John McArdle started the group was The Ballintra Players in Monaghan and sure it was just a crossroads. They started off in the Confined and went to the Open. That isn't an indication of rural v urban. It is an indication of an 'A' and a 'B' basically, where you choose your own level.

Another element of drama which is interesting, similar to the GAA, is that it is an all-island movement. I'm just wondering how, particularly at the height of the Troubles, that amateur theatre avoided any sectarian issues? You know, theatre is so based on culture and then Irish theatre is so historically rooted in things like nationalism and identity and that. So how does amateur theatre negotiate that terrain, apparently successfully?

Well there was Carrickmore: the main Ulster Festival. It didn't run for three years: 72', 73',74'. The Troubles were probably at their worst then in the 70s. But, they came back very, very quickly. They have been going ever since. They did manage to have groups from the North and the South. Now, there are groups from Antrim and Down. There are a few festivals there: Newtownabbey, Bangor, Portadown. There is the AUDF. Are you familiar with that?

I am, I am indeed, yeah.

And the AUDF festivals; they nominated to Athlone and they also, so if you are competing on the circuit, you can qualify to go to the Athlone finals or the Ulster finals. So, you have groups from the South we've been in the Ulster finals for the last four years. So, I think the fact that the

Ulster groups were going south, and the Southern groups were going north. And there was only one occasion – in the Larne Festival which is no longer affiliated to the ADCI – where, whatever tensions were there, some group from the South was told, "don't come, you are not welcome." That was not by the committee, obviously, but by loyalists who said southern groups not wanted. Now, obviously there was the hiccup, as I said you know the Miami Showband thing?

Yes

Music, country music and the showbands; they transcended the border. If you went to a Catholic or a Protestant area they have the same taste in music. And, in drama you have some of the playwrights are Protestant playwrights. You have Marie Jones is a Protestant playwright who writes about issues. We were in one of her plays, *The Girls in the Big Picture,* which was very much a Protestant community in Antrim. And then you have *A Night in November*, which is about the Troubles. So the playwrights, even though the majority would be from a nationalist point of view, the plays; a lot of them do transcend. You see a lot of plays are American and English. So, the subject matter wouldn't necessarily have been about our native culture. Just take, for example, last year's programme in Athlone: *Taking over the Asylum, Drawer Boy, Stolen Child*, *God of Carnage*, *39 Steps, Trad, The Kings of the Kilburn High Road* and *Conversations of the Homecoming*. So, that gives you an idea of the mix of plays that you had. Now, I would say that the AUDF festival on the East of the province would probably pick plays that were neutral or English and would have avoided the clash.

When I was Chairman of the Ulster region I succeeded Bertrand Gallagher from Portadown who was a very proud member of the Orange Lodge in Portadown. But he also was the Chairman of the Amateur Drama Council of Ireland. So drama seems to have been, I suppose, like rugby; you have the "Ireland's Call" which managed to allow people to identify with the Ireland team even though you might regard yourself as British, but you can still play for the Irish rugby team. People can compete in the drama North and South. Because it was a neutral territory like country music in the showbands was neutral. It steered very clear of the sectarian problem, you know? That was one of the strength of it, you know?

That was an interesting element – that the festivals could potentially not accept plays that would be divisive. So, I guess that was one way that it was managed?

Yes. And you pick plays to suit your audience wherever you are. Consequently, there is a bit of the understanding, the unionist community in the All Ireland context are in a minority. They still continued to have their own festivals and they picked mostly their own groups in those festivals but they still will have a quota of Southern groups. The audiences like to see the mix. While, at the same time, if they were to pick all of the strongest groups in the South for their festivals their own community groups would then lose out and consequently you could lose a festival and then lose your group if you lose your audience, you know? It is, I suppose, steering a course which looks after your audience and gives them plays which are likely to succeed. Plus, I suppose a lot of the drama audiences will accept plays that may be out of their comfort zone, which I suppose everybody has to do. But, you still have to choose the play to suit your audience. Sometimes you say, "we are not taking that play". It would be the play rather than the group. You would say, "We are not taking a group from the South. We are not taking that play because it might be a

play that might be offensive to our audience." When it comes down to it, "bums on seats" is the money.

Yeah and, as you mentioned, the same kind of local issues arise in terms of competition and, you know, their own groups being beaten or shown up so that applies around Ireland.

Yeah, I suppose if you went down through the results in Athlone over the sixty-four years and analysed those, you could see how many times groups from the North – Newpoint or Hollywood, Clarins or whatever – how many times they won Athlone. So, they would have done reasonably well. So, the standard is quite high up there.

You think it is a similar standard?

In recent years, it hasn't been. They don't have the Confined in the AUDF circuit. Everything is Open basically. I think it would probably serve them better to have more Confined because the Confined groups tend to be more local but that's a decision, I suppose, they will have to make.

I'm thinking, the comparison you made with rugby, as well, like – it could be definitely argued that rugby is definitely an upper or middle class sport. That's, potentially, why there is an all-Ireland element to it. Would the same apply to theatre in the North? You know, amateur theatre in the North separate to theatre in the South?

Well, if you go to the AUDF Final, there's a very definite atmosphere there. Again, Mary Peters would be there. She would be the patron of it. It would be more an upper class pursuit there. That would be their audience. Now, less so in Derry. But, certainly around the Newtownabbey festival and the Bangor festival. I suppose, they have their audience and some people like to dress up and have loads of dress suits and have a very formal atmosphere and that's what they choose to do. I would say that the audience would be predominantly better educated and more professional, you know?

Yeah, that's interesting. I guess, perhaps there is a historic reason for that. You know the old cliché of the black North? The perception of this kind of Presbyterian anti theatre culture? So, I guess, the AUDF – when it started would have been predominantly upper class as well?

Yes. Predominantly, I suppose, urban. [unclear] rural.

Yeah, that's interesting

Bangor is a big town and Hollywood is basically like Dun Laoghaire you know? The outskirts of Belfast – Hollywood would be Rory McElroy territory and big rugby territory and a very strong drama group. But they wouldn't have the community support that some of the rural ones would have.

Right, I know what you mean.

Their audiences wouldn't be as big.

That's interesting. As regards the relationship between amateur and professional theatre in Ireland, how do you view that relationship, I suppose, historically and at the moment?

Well, I suppose one of the efforts that is being made in recent years by the Abbey in Dublin, the Abbey award in Athlone: a group is selected to perform in the Abbey in Dublin. The launch of the All-Ireland in Athlone; the launch is in the Abbey Theatre. So, the link is there with the Abbey and the Chairman of the Abbey would be very keen on keeping a very strong link between the amateur and the professional. But, I suppose, it's just hard to know whether you can generalise. There's, maybe, an inferiority complex among some people who don't like the word "amateur." And the perception may be that amateur is not as good as professional. Similar to the GAA, where the GAA is professional in everything but fame. The budgets that are spent in preparing teams and the professionalism of the preparation in every respect and, the same thing, the professionalism of groups even though they are amateur and not getting paid. The standard is extremely high in amateur drama. I'd say it is highest in amateur drama in the world. But, there is sometimes a feeling maybe among some professionals that the standard wouldn't be as high and they would look down on the amateurs. The Drama League of Ireland was the Amateur Drama League and they changed their name to the Drama League of Ireland. Part of that might have been that amateur would have been perceived in a negative way. Number two, trying to get funding from the Arts Council, the Arts Council do not fund amateurs. I'm Chairman of The Amateur Drama Council and we work very closely with the Drama League of Ireland. I'm addressing their AGM next weekend, and one of the areas we would be trying to address is that the link should be much stronger between amateur and professional for our mutual benefit and that the funding from the Department of the Arts and the Arts Council for amateur should be on a more structured basis. And, finding ways to support amateur which can feed into professionals. For example, do you know the way you would have artists in residence?

Yeah.

If you had actors in residence and those actors could be facilitators with amateur groups, with Transition Year groups in school it would be of mutual benefit. The actor's income would be precarious at times. And, if they had an income stream by being an actor in residence and in exchange where they would then be available in terms of education and development of the arts, the acting skills and the technical skills in the amateur movement and feeding on. There has been, over the years, I mean Sean McGinley, Seamus O'Rourke, Pat Moylan, Padraic McIntyre, Charlie Bonner, Moya Doherty and Liam Neeson. They are names of people who competed on the amateur circuit and went on. Moya Doherty acted in the Athlone finals.

Wow.

She opened the Athlone Finals last year as the Chair of the RTE Board. She emphasised the importance of that, so there are quite a few. Liam Neeson acted on the amateur circuit with Slemish Players and then Seamus O'Rourke, who is now basically professional. Pat Moylan is Director of some of the theatres in Dublin. Sean McGinley. You know, those people would have been inspired. Also, there is a grey area in what is amateur and what is professional. Some of the

people involved in, you know, theatres like the Ardowen or An Grianán or the Hawkswell. Some of those were also involved in amateur drama groups. Now, they are not being paid for their role in the amateur production, but they are actually raising the standards in terms of the technical, lighting and set. So, there are linkages; there are people who have started as amateur and gone on to professional. But, I think that the links could actually be made closer.

It's interesting in the example that you proposed there; you mentioned an Actor in Residence. I'm just wondering why you didn't use Director in Residence? Is it possibly because there could be some resistance within the amateur movement? For example, if you have someone who has directed in the area for 20 years how open would they be to someone whose twenty but maybe has trained professionally? Is there, kind of, a bit of resistance there, potentially?

Well there is, to a certain extent, a liberal interpretation of what is amateur and what is professional. If you got very strict there would be a whole lot of people that couldn't be involved, especially in the technical area. Now, the difficulty would be, say, in the AUDF circuit you can employ a Director and pay him but you couldn't on the ADCI circuit. But, I'd say there would be a problem if the professional was producing your festival production. But, if he was producing plays for the group with a view to bringing on new talent, and developing that new talent. That sort of relationship could be worked out.

And, do you think that a lot of groups are using professional expertise or advice?

Well, what a lot of groups would do is have workshops. Like, we would have had Padraic McIntyre in to do workshops in acting and so on. You bring in lighting technicians to do workshops so that goes on. I'd say one of the areas that we are looking at is the possibility of getting adjudicators to go and see groups who are not competing on the festival circuit. And, if you are involved in a group not in the festival circuit, that you enter a competition where the adjudicator goes out looks at your play in your own hall and then does the same in other places and then decides which of those groups are the best and which is the best actor and so on. The musical societies do something like that. There is no sort of All-Ireland final as such for musical societies but AIMS, the organisation – the Association of Irish Musical Societies – they send out judges who look at the local musicals and then they decide at the end who is the winner of the musical productions that year. So, by doing that, by having adjudication available to groups, you would hope to bring more groups on to the circuit.

It's funny you mentioned the adjudicators because, I guess, historically that has always been one of the primary links between professional and amateur theatre. And, I'm wondering when people think about how an adjudicator judges performances; are we operating on a standard that is amongst amateur groups or is every amateur group aspiring to professional standard?

Well, I'd say most groups are aspiring to professional standards. And, the difference is if you are doing plays locally and not in the circuit, our expression is "Ah f[unclear] it'll do, don't worry about it!". On some little point, our expression is "it'll f[unclear][unclear] do, don't worry about it". But, if you are in the festival circuit you are looking at every minute detail. And, as you get

adjudication you may change your set or change the way you perform, the way the act is performed when you learn from the adjudication. Certainly when you get, like last year there was two *39 Steps* in Athlone and I saw one of them. I saw the West End version and the Letterkenny version was every bit as good as the West End version. So, the difference in standard is at the top, and occasionally in the Confined you get an absolutely magnificent Open standard production in the Confined – not always, but some of them are absolutely excellent. But, certainly they are aspiring to professionalism. And the amount of money they spend on sets, professionals couldn't spend it because, to actually erect the sets and tour with them, they couldn't afford to do it, you know. So very often professionals only tour with small casts. There would be huge funding and the sets tend to be minimal enough, you know? So, certainly the amateurs aspire to professional. We have an actress now who is a very good actress. She keeps on going to Gormanstown Summer School every year. And she goes to other workshops in order to improve and we would say she is great. But she would be very self-critical and trying to look for ways in which she can improve. I don't know if you ever came across Silken Thomas?

Yes.

When they were coming out, sure their productions were absolutely magnificent. And you have Prosperous now who are taking over that mantle. They will have a production this year *One Man, Two Governors* and that, I'd say, will be magnificent. It might win an All-Ireland because you might get somebody with a simpler play almost perfectly, whereas if you get a very ambitious project, you might fall short. So, Silken Thomas; that happens sometimes with them. But, certainly, they aspire to professional standards.

And do you think that aspiring to experimentation, as well; do you think that's rewarded within the movement on the festival circuit?

Well, there is an argument there to say that comedies don't win and over the years probably if you analyse, maybe about fifteen-to-twenty percent of these were comedies. And, people talk about a "festival play" in that, the bigger your cast the more likely you are to have weaknesses. Whereas, if you have a small cast that are very good; if you have a small cast you have to be very good. But, it is so competitive so maybe experimentation isn't rewarded at times. It's hard to know. I, strangely, found that everybody wants to win but at the same time they appreciate what other groups are doing. They could enjoy productions that didn't win but they saw the value of them. Now, a couple of years ago Cornmill won the All-Ireland with *The Devil's Ceilí* and it was certainly experimental. I don't know if you ever saw it?

Yeah, I did. The technical effects in that: I have never seen anything like that, amateur or professional. It was incredible.

There is an argument; people say they shouldn't have won. The adjudicators said F[unclear] it, no I know the markings game. That's something spectacular: something different. He said "No, I'm going with my heart rather than my head."

And what was the argument that it shouldn't have won based on?

You see, the acting demands, there is forty percent going for acting and whereas for presentation there is only fifteen percent. So, you know, you couldn't get 110 percent of the technical marks [unclear]. So there is other plays that required a smaller cast but were very demanding in terms of the acting role. Some people felt it certainly should have gotten the Abbey award. It deserved to be seen in the Abbey in Dublin. But, there was an opinion there that if you strictly followed the marking scheme… But, then other people say that they deserve it for taking a chance. Seamus O'Rourke from Cornmill: he was their best actor and he is gone professional now. For several years he qualified for Athlone with plays he had written himself and this year Cornmill had a play called *From the Belly of a Whale* which is written by Charles McGuiness and is directed by Charles McGuiness. Now, he has taken a gamble and it may work out. But, I am sure people are going to want to see it because they haven't seen it before – it's going to be different. He's experimenting and they want to acknowledge that. I'd say a lot of the groups will want to see it. Whether it will win is another matter. Now, I find in the one-act finals they have become extremely popular. They will sell out before they start. They now have to go to bigger venues because people go to see other people's work and enjoy it and emphasis is on celebrating. There are very few awards in it, only three or four awards, and people go to see and acknowledge excellence. Even though you might not win, you'd still be happy for the people who do win. It's possibly a little bit less competitive. And there is more, sort of, mingling of the actors and groups over that weekend because it's over a Friday, Saturday and Sunday. They all see all of the plays rather than in Athlone you wouldn't be able to get in because you couldn't get a ticket. You might see your own play and little else. I don't know if you know that with Athlone the season tickets are sold out in advance. You couldn't buy a season ticket unless somebody dies!

Yeah. It's unusual because you can see in Athlone the closer you get to the front row, the older people get as well! It's like a production line going into history, you know? I don't want to hold you too much longer now but I just have one or two more questions. One of them is about the split that occurred in the 70s in the finals. Now, I kind of have a good outline of the events but I have mixed reports on what was the root cause of it. Some people say it was down to personalities clashing. What's your own take on it?

Interestingly, I want to talk about it to some extent. Our play is a Harold Pinter play this year called *Old Times*. It's a memory play and your memory might be quite different from my memory. And, sometimes you actually heard something which you presumed to be true and you think "I was there", and you believe you were there. My memory of it is that the Rural finals were in Loughrea, and that they didn't rotate. And, that there were complaints about the running of the festival from the groups; and, that the people involved in The Amateur Drama Council didn't respond in a positive way to the complaints. And, as a result the very strong personalities involved in the groups said "okay that's fine; we'll run our own festivals". And, it's a little bit like Martin Luther when he had his disagreement [unclear] thesis in the door of the cathedral. If somebody said, "Okay Martin, you have a very good point here, let's discuss it. We'll set up a committee and you'll be on the committee," instead of saying, "sorry withdraw those or else"… I think that it was the body language: the reaction. In the GAA, the GPA was set up. Eventually, they had the cop-on to make the GPA an integral part of the GAA rather than being an outside body. But, I think it was probably strong personalities. Sometimes you have an attitude of people who run festivals that the festival is more important than the groups and vice-versa. Where would the groups be without the festival and then of course, the group saying, where would the

festival be without the groups, you know? So, both of them need each other. But, I think that some people probably didn't appreciate the arguments and listen to the arguments of the other side and avoid a split.

In Ballyshannon, we won the All Ireland in the 60s. We then didn't qualify, went off the festival circuit, started to run plays locally and then there was a split over something. There was a drama club; The Premier Players is the name of the group that won the All Ireland. They set up the festival. The festival continued on. The Premier Players disappeared. The drama club was set up and the drama club started to compete in the DLI circuit and went to the DLI festivals. We said "this is crazy," so the drama club amalgamated with the festival and we changed our name to Ballyshannon Drama Society. And, we are affiliated to the ADCI as a festival and to the DLI as a group. I have a copy of the letter that we sent to both organisations suggesting that it was crazy to have two festivals and that they should actually follow our example and amalgamate in some sort of a federal solution. Now, they did eventually come around to recognising that the most successful festivals were the ADCI festivals. But, the one-act circuit is run by the six and six. I don't know if you are aware of that?

The one act circle, that's by the DLI is it?

Its run by six from the DLI and six from the ADCI.

Ah, right. Very good.

And that was meant to be the vehicle, the six and six committee; the vehicle for encouraging more and more coming together of the two organisations. Now, we speak at each other's events; we are invited to each other's events. I'm speaking to their AGM in Kilkenny this weekend and the Chairman of the DLI was speaking at the ADCI AGM. So, the relationships are getting closer, and they need to become closer, but the vehicle that was used was the one-act circuit to be run by the two organisations through a six and six committee. I think, in terms of funding and talking to the Government, people are beginning to say, "Are we weakening our position by having two organisations running drama?" and "Can we come together even closer, say we speak with the one voice?" And, consequently, we have greater clout with the professional movement with the funding agencies, basically.

But, to cut a long story short, I think it was a disagreement over the running of the Confined rural finals in Loughrea that wasn't responded to positively by the ADCI. Consequently, the very strong personalities – I think there was a Fr. O'Brien and a Fr. Young involved and they said "ok, that's alright" and then they ran their own festivals. All of those festivals now have been amalgamated into the ADCI circuit. Sligo didn't survive, but Kilticlogher and Ballinamore and Shercock: all of those were DI festivals that just became automatically members of the ADCI. The split was solved. In order to keep lines of communication open, the six and six idea was used. But, I'm trying to push as greater scope for that six and six, more than just running one-act finals together to pursue other areas where we can work towards our mutual benefit.

Yeah, there is a lot to be said for that, particularly with the Arts Council for the first time kind of acknowledging amateur theatre in the new 10 year plan so it's definitely a time to

strike while the iron is hot in that regard. I'm interested again so, with the initial split, do you think there was essentially the Athlone All-Ireland didn't really care what happened?

No, no. It was the Confined finals. It may have been that was the straw that broke the camel's back. My understanding of it was the ADCI was set up to develop amateur drama in Ireland through the running of festivals from early, but other things … but that it very quickly became an organisation that ran the festivals and didn't develop amateur drama otherwise. It was a Patsy Crowe who was Chairman of the ADCI who was involved with the Premier Players here. Himself and a few like-minded people said "how about an organisation for the groups?" and out of that came The Gormanstown Summer school which itself caused a split: now you have the Limerick one and the Gormanstown one. That was another day's work. The Amateur Drama League came out of the amateur drama council but possibly they developed separately and they didn't have close enough co-operation. Structures didn't allow themselves to meet. Maybe the groups didn't feel they had any input into problems that were arising in festivals. The catalyst for all of that became their discontent in the running of the Rural finals as it was then, in Loughrea. Now, that's my memory of it. I don't know if that corresponds with yours. Certainly, personalities involved would have had a major effect. Strong personalities on both sides, you know?

Yeah, like any organisation I guess.

I'd be a players man even though I'm involved in the festival. I'd be very much wanting to make sure that groups were well looked after. And the same as in football: "You don't want to be eating sandwiches at the match," sort of thing, you know? "You don't expect to be fed? You don't want hot showers, do you? We togged out behind the ditch and jeez what do you want?"

It's so important, it really is. I'm from rural Mayo so played a lot of football when I was younger and then when I went to school I got a chance to play a bit of rugby. I'll never forget we went to a rugby blitz. At half time I saw these Wasps jerseys hanging in the club house. I said "What are they"? "Oh there's one for each person on the winning team." And we were given a hot meal half way through the day. You know, we were just being really well looked after and I was thinking that some of the GAA blitzes we went on we got a few oranges, you know, and a few little bottles of water. I think that is generally changing now.

It would be same with some of the Managers like Jim McGuiness. The back room teams, the attention to detail for the players is colossal you know. That's what it takes to be successful. Where are you from in Mayo?

Charlestown.

Oh yeah, well you are a product of Paddy Henry. They were a terrific group. They won the All-Ireland [unclear]x *Tea House* and then *August Moon* and then they had *The Dresser*. They had so many. They had Sam Shepherd plays; they had such a variety of stuff you know.

Yeah, my parents would have been involved with the group there so that's how I got into theatre and why I got interested in the topic as well.

Yeah, you'd be similar to myself. Your parents being involved. Is Dan O'Connell still alive I wonder?

No he's not. He passed away four or five years ago I think.

As an actor. He was professional standard.

Yeah, so I believe.

He was terrific altogether.

There's one more thing I wanted to double check. You know the incident in Larne? Do you know round about when that happened where the group were told to stay away?

I think it was around the time of the H Block. You know, the hunger strikes? I've a funny notion it was later than that. D'ya know the Anglo-Irish agreement, that time? Or the flags: I'm not one-hundred percent sure, but I could make enquires on it.

Yeah, that'd be brilliant. Or if there is someone I can speak to that'd be fantastic as well.

Yeah, it would probably be interesting to talk to someone from the AUDF standpoint. You know the festivals on the West like Derry and Carrickmore and Newtownstewart, Strabane and Enniskillen. They would be more from nationalist areas. They are very careful, (my wife works in the North of Ireland in Enniskillen) and when you meet people you talk about neutral subjects like the rugby or the weather. But, you'd avoid talking about the football match in Fermanagh and Donegal until you found out who you were talking to. And, in the drama people had a way of being able to work together and avoid any confrontational areas. There's definitely an East/West sort of difference within the Northern Ireland circle. The ones in the West would be more ADCI and Athlone, and going to the Ulster Finals wouldn't mean as much. Whereas, for the AUDF and the groups on the East, there's a lot of them there that are trying to survive and keep their culture, their traditions alive you know. And, not to be swamped and some of them are very open. There's a [unclear] got to the All-Ireland final last year. He might be a good man to talk to. He would have done Athlone a few times and he would have been involved with groups and adjudicating North and South. He would be very respected. He would be a man who would probably give you a good inside view, you know, on the thinking of the AUDF side of drama and how they managed to keep both sides going during the Troubles.

Yeah, that would be great. I will get in touch with him. I was also speaking to Billy Burns.

Yes, he'd be good too.

He gave me a great response. Loads of material and stuff like that: it was good to talk to him as well. Yeah, I will follow that up. If you can think of anyone else I can speak to, particularly in relation to that incident in Larne that would be interesting as well. It would be good to talk to someone about that.

Yeah, I'll enquire now. Give me a week or so on it.

Fantastic.

And I'll get back to you. And I'll do a bit of thinking in terms of when it happened and therefore which issue was the one that caused the problem, you know. My recollection is the fact that it was a Southern group rather than the play that they were doing but I could be wrong.

Right. There was another incident that I heard of recently where *Alone it Stands* was at the All Ireland in Athlone and apparently it was given quite a harsh adjudication.

Is that the one about the rugby match?

Am I getting the name wrong? Not *Alone it Stands* but the one about the unionist who starts following Ireland in the 90s.

Oh that's the one man show*, A Night in November*.

***A Night in November*, that's it. But apparently it was very harshly adjudicated at the All Ireland a few years ago and people were suspecting that there might have been a sectarian bias there that was unspoken**.

You mean that the adjudicator was a Protestant?

I think so, yeah.

Yeah, well the author was a Protestant, Barry Jones.

Yeah, but I think that the implication is that there would be resentment to the pro reconciliation in the play or something like that you know.

Well, I think that watching that play in Ballyshannon: we did it here and some of the committee would be Protestant, very liberal church of Ireland Protestant. You were slightly conscious of thinking the Protestants don't come out of this very well but on talking to the [unclear], they said "Ah they were Presbyterians not Protestants". And, there would be a big difference between the Church of Ireland and the [unclear] Presbyterians. You know, the Presbyterians' language and there would be no drama festivals on Sundays you know.

Yeah, yeah.

They would be a different culture to a lot of the Church of Ireland people who would be a lot more broad-minded you know.

Right, that's interesting.

Well, certainly you would have felt… I remember at the time feeling your man didn't think much of his own people. It doesn't paint a very good picture but then, of course, you say well that play was written by Jones you know. It's just strange he is such a [unclear] playwright. But, she deals with difficult subjects. Anyway, leave that with me. I'll see what I can do.

Okay, I will do and, listen, thanks very much John. You have just given me a wealth of information there. I really appreciate your time.

Okay. No problem.

Take care. Bye bye.

[INTERVIEW ENDS]