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All We Say is ‘Life is Crazy’: – Central and Eastern Europe and the Irish Stage

Patrick Lonergan

If you had visited the Abbey Theatre during 2007, you might have seen a card displayed prominently in its foyer. ‘Join Us,’ it says, its purpose being to convince visitors to become Members of the Abbey – to donate money to the theatre and, in return, to get free tickets for productions, to have their names listed in show programmes, and to gain access to special events. The choice of image to attract potential donors is easy to understand (Figure 1). The woman, we see, has reached into a chandelier to retrieve a letter, and we can tell from her expression that the discovery she’s made has both surprised and delighted her. Why is she so happy? What does the letter say? And who is that strange man, barely visible, holding her up at such an unusual angle?

As well as being eye-catching, the image is also an interesting analogue for the experience of watching great drama. The woman’s face is surrounded by darkness, as if she were an audience member in a darkened auditorium; the lights of the chandelier are like an illuminated stage at which she marvels. In other words, this image doesn’t just aim to get people’s attention: it is hinting to them the delights that they might experience as Members of the Abbey Theatre.

It might come as a surprise to learn that this image is not taken from an Abbey Theatre production. It isn’t even taken from an

Irish play. The still comes from a production by the Polish Theatre company TR Warszawa, from their adaptation of the Danish film *Festen*. The Abbey hosted a visit by this company in 2004, when, to celebrate Ireland's presidency of the European Union and its own centenary, the theatre welcomed visiting productions from Poland, Slovenia, and Hungary.¹ *Festen* seemed very popular while it played in Dublin, generating a lot of discussion, despite its short run.² The production was notable for its theatricality and its dramatic power— and,

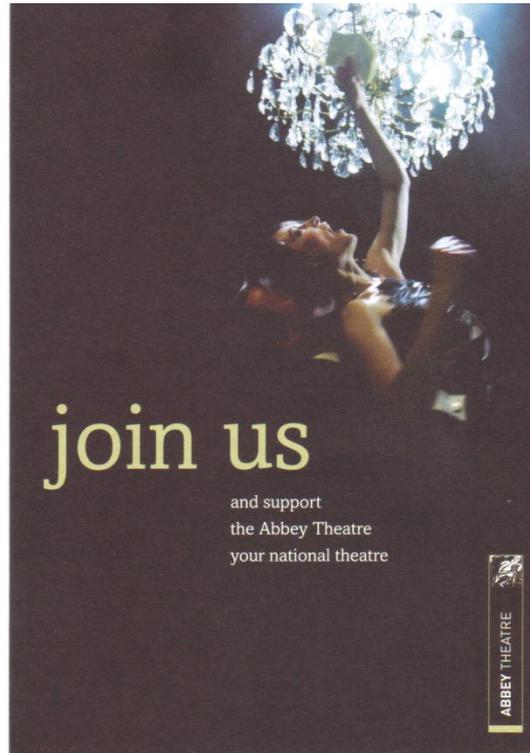


Figure 1: ABBEY THEATRE PROMOTIONAL CARD, 2007

particularly, for its treatment of the theme of child abuse. Although there had been plays about sexual abuse in Ireland before, most of them had placed that issue at a distance from audiences: it was shown happening in rural Ireland in the plays of Marina Carr, such as *On Raftery's Hill* (2000), and it was suffered by a working class Dublin male in Mannix Flynn's *James X* (2003). But *Festen* confronted Irish audience with the reality that sexual abuse occurs in families that are middle class, urban, cosmopolitan, and professional – in families that are, in fact, just like those of the Abbey's audience. So although the production appeared for only four nights at the theatre, *Festen* offered Irish audiences a rare opportunity to face a difficult issue: this Polish presentation of a

Danish story was allowing them to come to terms with an Irish problem.³

You won't uncover much of this history by glancing at the Abbey's brochure. And unless you had actually attended the production of *Festen* at the Abbey, it would be very difficult to find evidence of its significance: there were a few overnight reviews of it, and it featured prominently in reviews of the year in culture for 2004 – but no substantial treatment of its relevance to Irish life exists.⁴

The Abbey's use of this image from a Polish production thus tells us two important things about the presence of work from Central and Eastern Europe on the Irish stage. The first is that such work has actually appeared in Ireland: audiences throughout the country have been seeing productions like *Festen* not just for years, but actually for decades – often in the original language. As I discuss in more detail below, those productions have had an impact upon Irish audiences but, perhaps more importantly, they've also influenced the development of new Irish writing. And the second thing that we learn from the Abbey's use of that image is that there is a lack of documentation about many important productions. Because writing about Irish theatre continues to involve discussion of plays written by Irish authors, or plays performed by Irish companies, it is often very difficult to find accurate information about what is often the most interesting element of Irish theatrical culture – the plays that are seen by Irish audiences.

This essay aims to take a step towards resolving this problem. I want to discuss the presentation of characters from Eastern and Central Europe on the Irish stage, which tends to characterize them as abject figures who are deserving of sympathy from an audience presupposed to be Irish. This status contrasts strongly with the impact that people from that part of Europe have had on Irish theatrical production. I conclude by broadening the discussion out to consider the status of international work within Ireland. In doing so, I aim to point out some of the gaps in our historical record of Irish theatre, while suggesting how those gaps were created – and continue to exist.

The arrival of ten new states to the European Union in 2004 has of course had an enormous impact upon Ireland, which has welcomed thousands of immigrants from Eastern Europe, particularly Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia. The arrival of so many people from such countries has changed the terms of debate in Ireland about immigration – and this has been reflected upon the stage to a certain extent. It is a feature of Paul Mercier's *Homeland*, which was produced at the Abbey in 2006, and which concerns a man who returns to Ireland after being away for 20 years – as a result of which much of the play involves his being surprised at how much things have changed. His surprise is often provoked by the language that he hears spoken in contemporary Dublin. The play features Polish chambermaids and Russian shopkeepers, whose presence is used mainly for comedic purposes: we don't actually learn anything about any of these people, but simply observe the Irishman's surprise at their presence.

And if we aren't being asked to laugh at those characters, we will instead be encouraged to pity them. There is for example the young Ukrainian woman in Michael West's *Everyday*, performed in Commedia dell'arte style by Corn Exchange in 2006. Because she doesn't speak English, the only thing we learn about her is that she is mistreated by Irish people: a sleazy landlord, a neurotic mother for whom she works as an au pair, the clientele of a city centre pub where she works as a barmaid. The play offers closure for this character by having her fall in love with a failed Irish rock singer – who, conveniently enough, also happens to teach English as a foreign language.

These presentations could be seen as evidence of the **develop-**ment of a second phase in Irish theatre about multiculturalism. Emerging in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the genre's first phase considered that issue strictly in relation to racism and racial difference, with a strong emphasis on asylum-seeking and the status of refugees. Since patterns of migration to Ireland have changed so much since 2004, those considerations have broadened to consider language and religion as well. In both 'phases', Irish writers' attempts to address multiculturalism have often been aesthetically unsatisfying and politically unadventurous. Some are directly educational, designed for schools as theatre-in-education or, as in the case of Calypso's *Mixing it on the Mountain* (2002),

devised with children from multiple racial and ethnic groups within Irish schools. Others are educational in that they set out to challenge audiences' attitudes to ethnic difference. Some do so by borrowing from the cinematic model of the (usually black) boy-friend who is brought home for dinner, to prove to a conservative father-figure (or the audience?) that he is really 'just like us'. One example of this is Ken Harmon's *Done Up Like A Kipper*, which appeared at the Peacock Theatre in 2002. Although the play principally concerns a Dublin taxi-driver's fear that he has contracted AIDS after being attacked with a blood-filled syringe, there is also a sub-plot involving the relationship of his daughter with a young black man from Coolock, a working class suburb on Dublin's north side. Kim tells her mother about this new boyfriend, Nathan. 'There's something else I haven't told you. About Nathan. Just so it doesn't come as a shock.... He's black.... Wait'll you see him. And. He's just so not an absolute wanker', she says.⁵ Kim feels compelled to make the same announcement to her father: 'Just so as it doesn't come as any great surprise to you, Nathan is black'.

GINO. What's that supposed to mean?

KIM. He's black, Daddy, Nathan is black.

GINO. He's black? Fair play to him... And what's your point?

Ah, hold on. The hills are alive with the sound of music. This is what this is about. You think I'm a racist, don't you (61).

Part of the movement of the play involves Nathan's integration into this working class Dublin family, which is effected by his speaking in a working class Dublin accent (although in performance, his accent was instead from rural Cork – but the impact was intended to be the same), using standard Irish idioms such as 'Jaysus' (38), and singing Irish folk songs. In case the audience fail to comprehend the messages being conveyed by these strategies, Nathan will conclude the play by declaring to Kim's father that 'you're the same as meself'. Not 'myself', note, but the more Irish 'meself' (85). It's interesting that whereas Nathan speaks in a Dublin accent, his girlfriend uses the syntax and intonation of American sitcom ('he's just so not an absolute wanker').

Other plays in this vein include Jim O'Hanlon's *The Buddhist of Castleknock* (Fishamble Theatre, 2002), and Roddy Doyle's *Guess Who's Coming For The Dinner* (Calypso, 2000), all stories about

'colourful' working class Dublin families, who use 'colourful' language throughout the action, which proceeds through a series of mishaps before we see the family welcoming the outsider into its arms. That such plays imitate a genre developed in Hollywood over forty years ago gives some indication of the quality of work on the subject.

Another common strategy in the first phase of Irish multicultural theatre is to present the outsider as a 'victim', often an asylum seeker whose deportation should make 'us' hang our heads in shame – a theme most successfully developed in Donal O'Kelly's 1994 *Asylum! Asylum!* Such approaches do not necessarily promote respect for difference, but may instead ask an audience presupposed to be white to sympathize with an abject other. Ethnicity is simplified as being about race, and an 'us and them' mentality is often strongly reinforced. Furthermore, it is worth asking whether an audience member who willingly chooses to attend a play billed as anti-racist, often produced by companies specifically devoted to social change, is expected to need **per-**suasion that racism is a bad thing.

It is notable that so many of these plays share a conception of migrants into Ireland, whether they're male or female, Polish or Nigerian. The character of the immigrant on the Irish stage is typically represented as an abject figure who embodies the needs of all immigrants. The purpose of such characters is not to represent a person who happens to come from Poland, or Nigeria, or wherever it might be – but instead to act as an emblem that will remind audiences who (for the reasons I explain below) are presupposed to be white, wealthy and Irish-born of their responsibilities. Far from being an example of interculturalism or multiculturalism, such theatre instead tends to reinforce a particularly narrow conception of Irishness, allowing a culturally homogeneous group – the Irish theatregoer – to register their sense of distaste for such phenomena as racism, sex trafficking, or economic exploitation. As well as being problematic in its own right, this mode of presentation risks obscuring the contribution that people from such countries have made to our theatre, and to Irish society generally.

Probably the best example of this phenomenon is Charlie O'Neill's play *Hurl*, an exploration of how 'an Ireland of difference

has made a different Ireland', according to the marketing.⁶ Premiered by Barabbas Theatre Company in July 2003 at the Galway Arts Festival, where it played to mixed reviews, it was re-worked for a Dublin Theatre Festival production in October of the same year. The central idea in the play is that a group of asylum seekers, refugees, immigrants, and Irish people of **varying ethnicities** come together in a small town in rural Ireland to form a hurling team. Hurling is of course a sport played almost exclusively in Ireland, where it is immensely popular, with competitions between local clubs, and teams from each of Ireland's thirty-two counties, attracting huge support. As such, it is an example of how local rivalry and identification with place may be used positively within Irish culture. The choice of this sport is interesting in other ways too. Hurling is a traditional Irish sport and, since the mid-1990s, it has successfully transformed itself from being a traditional, rural-based activity to becoming a highly **professionalized** and commodified element of postmodern Irish life. Many other aspects of Irish tradition made a similar transition from rural to postmodern during the same period: Irish dancing transformed into *Riverdance*, and Irish music into popular 'Celtic' albums from Enya and The Corrs. Gaelic sport is exceptional however, in being the only aspect of Irish culture that has made this transition without any form of endorsement from abroad: it is an exclusively Irish success story that is an intrinsic part of Irish life, and it's more or less unknown outside of the country. Given that Irish culture generally is so globalized, the choice of hurling as the vehicle for a play about multiculturalism is therefore an **imaginative** gesture.

No attempt is made to pander to an Irish audience with this choice: in the play, the team states that they wish to play hurling *not* so that they can prove themselves worthy of inclusion in Irish society by their ability to use an emblem of Irishness (as with the 'meself'/'myself' symbol in *Done Up Like a Kipper*), but because it is a good game that will relieve boredom for those team-members who, as asylum seekers, are not permitted to work.

The narrative is not particularly original, presenting a conventional plot about a sports team winning against the odds (another example of an Irish play about multiculturalism taking inspiration from popular American film – in this case, the baseball

movie). Yet its treatment of racism and prejudice will surprise many members of the audience. The play shows that the issue of multiculturalism cannot be treated simplistically, presenting characters notable for their variety rather than their deviation from Irish notions of 'normality'. Some members of the hurling team are asylum seekers, others are refugees, others are Irish-born children of immigrants, and the audience meets characters from Africa, Eastern Europe, Latin America – and Ireland too. *Hurl* thus makes clear that no single narrative can encompass the experiences of immigrants in Irish society.

Similarly, the mode of performance utilized by Barabbas emphasizes versatility.⁷ The playing area is empty, with only a goalpost at the rear of the stage, so the actors use boxes to create sets, as required. The cast switch easily through characters and accents, men playing women, black and Asian actors playing white characters. This enacts the idea that identity does not have to be fixed. The style of narrative shifts from storytelling to the use of miniature sets, tableaux, puppetry, and dance, showing the audience that there are many ways of presenting the same story, which supports the play's theme very well.

Perhaps surprisingly, the problems with the play arise in its portrayal of Irish characters. This is illustrated by the following exchange between a Chinese man and another sports fan:

Chinese man. Lovely day for the game.

Man 2. Begod it is. The finesht.

Pause.

Man 2. Chinese?

Chinese man. Well...yyyes. ...

Man 2. D'you mind me ashkin...are you one of them...refugees?

Chinese man. No I am not. I'm a teacher.

Man 2. A teacher no less. What do you teach?

Chinese man. Irish (*Sequence 9*)

It is likely that the audience will, like 'Man 2', assume that the Chinese man is a refugee or recent immigrant to Ireland; that he is a teacher will disrupt their expectations, since they will realize that he therefore contributes economically to Irish society. That he teaches Irish will come as a further surprise. By having their own

surprise made objective through the presentation of the exchange between (as the script tellingly puts it) the 'Man' and the 'Chinese Man', the audience's potential discomfort at its own assumptions may be displaced. This displacement will be facilitated by the fact that, unlike the Chinese Man, the Irish man is marked as different as a result of his speech patterns. 'Begod it is. The finesht' he says, marking the character as being from a poor, rural background, with the slang word 'begod', his ungrammatical syntax, and his pronunciation of the sibilant s as 'sh' all examples of a form of Hiberno-English that is becoming increasingly rare throughout Ireland.

This negative mode of presentation is used for numerous *Irish* characters. Sophisticated characterization is not needed for this kind of drama, so it is not necessarily a problem that the play includes a melodramatic villain, and a team-coach whose gruff exterior belies a heart of gold. There is however apparent authorial confusion between narrative type – which is acceptable – and social stereotype, which is not. Sylvie, a character from Fatima Mansions, an area of inner city Dublin then infamous for gangsterism and drug abuse, is presented as inarticulate and prone to violence, in keeping with stereotypical representations of Irish working class males. The play includes unoriginal jokes about the Christian Brothers' 'skill' with sticks, a joke designed to appeal to the urbanized, and recently secularized, middle class audiences' outrage at clerical child abuse (creating an interesting contrast with the Abbey's visiting production of *Festen* a few months later). In the Galway production, the audience is asked to laugh at the pretentiousness of Dublin TV presenters; but in the Dublin production, those TV presenters are from rural Ireland, and are characterized as inept and inarticulate. The representation of the rural in this play is often very negative. Many rural characters are described as 'ignorant' and 'muck savage', and all use a version of stage Irish speech straight out of Boucicault, but unlikely to be heard in any modern Irish town or village. The worst example of this is the characterization of the play's villain, Rusty Cox, whose speech patterns and physical appearance are firmly in the tradition of the caricatured Irishman identified by critics like Curtis and Foster.⁸ Barely articulate, self-serving, and presented as simian, Rusty is the cause of the deportation of the play's hero to Sierra

Leone, which concludes the piece. The effect of this characterization is to displace racism onto the so-called 'arsehole of rural Ireland', which is also called the 'third world but with more clothes on' (Sequence 1). At no stage is the audience asked to consider the racism of Ireland's businesses, government and media, or, for that matter, themselves.

There is a further problem: all of the immigrants in the play are characterized as victims of one kind or another. The Chinese schoolteacher is a victim of 'Man's' ignorance. And we also see this in the presentation of a scene in which two Bosnian schoolfriends meet by chance after a ten-year gap in a Dublin lapdancing club, as narrated by Miroslav, the male:

I am Bosnian, come to this country. In 1994 I live in west. I work – for cash – very dangerous – on building sites. Two boys I work with, they bring me to see All-Ireland final in Croke Park when county wins...Team win first time in many, many years. My friends go crazy. I go crazy too. I drink 20 pints. Peuhh! I have never go to a lap dancing club. But we go. Mad, you know. I couldn't believe. There I see Katerina, dancing. She is from my school in Kumanovo in Bosnia. Peuhh! Crazy. I not see her in 10 years. We talk for few minutes. But Katerina and me – is embarrassed you know. Very soon nothing to say. All we say is life is crazy. Us in Dublin. Me in furry hurling hat. Her in furry g-string. She doesn't offer number – and I don't give mine – to meet again. Difficult. The lads are pissed off – they want her number of course. (*Sequence 3*)

Presumably, the audience is supposed to believe that Miroslav arrived in Ireland as a refugee from the Yugoslav civil wars of the early 1990s; Katerina may also have done so, but she is typical of the large number of young women who migrate from Eastern and Central Europe to Western Europe to work in the sex trade. The awkwardness of their exchange exposes one of the fundamental truths about Irish immigration. Ireland is for many a refuge from war and poverty, but it has also disgracefully exploited many immigrants.

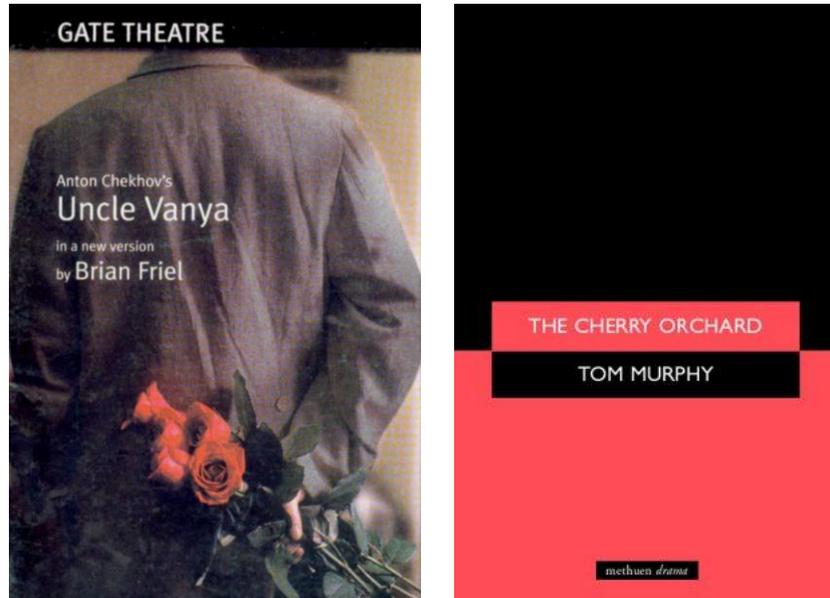
It is likely that the characterization of the rural Irish other in *Hurl* will mean that the audience relates most to the play's non-

Irish characters, whose speech generally is represented in standard form, and whose concerns and attitudes will generally be easier for the audience to relate to (with some exceptions, such as the presentation of Miroslav, above). This kind of intersubjectivity powerfully undermines Irish attitudes to race. Unfortunately, the play continues to promote an 'us against them' dynamic in its representation of *Irishness* as other, a strategy that can only ever result in misrepresentation.

A further problem with *Hurl* is that it was produced as part of two arts festivals, in Galway and Dublin. The composition of *Hurl's* audience was therefore strongly predetermined by its appearance within a festivalized framework. Ireland's theatre festivals exist to combine theatre with corporate sponsorship and tourism; the price of tickets to shows in Festivals generally are among the most expensive in Ireland (and they certainly exceed the weekly allowance of an asylum seeker living in Ireland, which, in 2003, was 19 euro). The inclusion of a play that presents positive messages about multiculturalism within such a framework needs to be treated with caution. It is worth considering who is being addressed in such a situation, and on whose behalf the message is being presented. It could be argued that the existence of such plays as *Hurl* arises not from an attempt to reflect life in Ireland accurately, but rather to use the positive messages conveyed by the play to service the needs of corporate sponsorship and tourism: the message conveyed by *Hurl* is that racism is a bad thing, that immigrants should be accepted if they adopt Irish practices, and that the only people in Ireland who are racist are ignorant farmers from rural areas. The fact that the play aims to challenge certain stereotypes is problematic: in putting characters from central and Eastern Europe, and from other countries, onstage, writers like Charlie O'Neill appear to have assumed that people from those countries will not actually be present in the audience.

This is by no means a new problem: the apparent insularity of Irish theatre has been shown in attitudes towards plays that are translated for Irish audiences – when greater emphasis will be always placed upon the identity of the Irish translator than the original author, as shown below. Brian Friel's name is given greater prominence in the marketing for the 1999 Gate Theatre production of *Uncle Vanya* and Tom Murphy is given exclusive credit for the

2004 *Cherry Orchard* by his publisher (Figure 2). Many such adaptations also Hibernicize the plays – not only putting them into an Irish idiom, but occasionally relocating them entirely to the country itself. There have been some attempts to preserve the foreignness of such works, but producers appear nervous about audiences' reactions to such an approach, and there is a tendency to highlight the familiar at the expense of the new.



Programme and Poster for Brian Friel's *Uncle Vanya*, Gate Theatre, October 1998

Tom Murphy's *The Cherry Orchard*, published as part of the Abbey Playscripts series, 2004

Histories of the modern Irish stage are dominated by considerations of Irish playwriting, which is frequently represented as a linear narrative that stretches from Synge to Friel, and on to Marina Carr and others. While many valuable studies have adopted this approach, the emphasis on dramatic writing overshadows the importance of many other aspects of Irish theatre. One important issue that has received insufficient consideration is that many Irish theatre companies were established *not* to produce new Irish work,

but to challenge a perceived Irish insularity by producing work from abroad, or by importing other cultures' ideas about theatre to Irish settings. For example, the defining moment of the early Irish dramatic movement – *The Playboy* controversy of 1907 – occurred at much the same time as productions on the Abbey stage of Molière's *The Doctor in Spite of Himself* (1906), Maeterlinck's *Interior* (1907), Suderman's *Teja* and Molière's *The Miser* (1908). Goldoni's *Mirandolina* (1910), Hauptmann's *Hannele* and Strindberg's *There are Crimes and Crimes* and *The Stronger* (1913).⁹ From 1918 to 1928, the Abbey stage and resources were frequently given over to the Dublin Drama League, which produced plays that, with only two exceptions, were written by contemporary authors from abroad, such as Eugene O'Neill, Jean Cocteau, Pirandello, and d'Annunzio.¹⁰ As Christopher Fitz-Simon points out, 'the fact that these authors attracted good attendances proves that there was a desire in Dublin – if not any other part of the country – to experience the breeze blowing across the seas from America and from the European mainland'.¹¹ A desire to experience the 'breeze blowing' from America and Europe motivated the Dublin Drama League, and led ultimately to the foundation in 1928 of the Gate Theatre, which was to provide Ireland with 'a kaleidoscopic cross-section of modern European and American drama, at a time when Ireland floated in cultural isolation in mid-Atlantic'.¹² A similar impetus was evident in the 1950s, not only with the establishment of the Dublin Theatre Festival, which has always included Irish and international work in its programme, but also with the opening of the Pike Theatre, the small company that premiered much of the work of Brendan Behan and Samuel Beckett. Alan Simpson describes the establishment of the Pike in 1953 as an attempt to provide an alternative to the work that was then dominating the Irish stage. 'We wanted our theatre to be a revolutionary force of small means which, by its ingenuity, would stir up the theatrical lethargy of post-war Ireland', he writes, explaining that the purpose of the Pike was to present plays that 'for one reason or another, would not otherwise be seen in Dublin'.¹³

Contemporary Irish interest in work from abroad follows the tradition established by the Gate and Pike. Its roots are in the late 1960s and early 1970s, with the foundation of the Focus Theatre and its adjoining Stanislavsky Studio in Dublin, and the **estab-**

lishment of Druid Theatre in Galway. The Focus was one of the first theatres in Ireland to introduce ideas about performance from abroad, while also being at the vanguard of the movement to professionalize the Irish theatre by emphasizing the importance of training. The work of Focus came to fruition in the collaborations between Patrick Mason, Tom Mac Intyre, and the Stanislavsky-trained Tom Hickey at the Abbey in the 1980s. Druid, founded in 1975, is now known principally for its commitment to the development of new work by such writers as Martin McDonagh, Tom Murphy, and others. But its history shows how Irish theatre companies benefit from producing work from abroad, particularly in their early years. The majority of Druid's earliest productions were by writers who were not Irish. During its first year in existence, it presented Fernando Arrabal's *Orison* and Williams's *The Glass Menagerie*; subsequent years saw productions of Edward Albee, Alan Ayckbourn, Tom Stoppard, and many other international playwrights. Almost half of Druid's earliest productions were of work from abroad; this figure fell during the 1980s as the company's interest in new writing grew, until in the 1990s it ceased altogether, the 1992 production of Polish dramatist Teresa Lubkiewicz's *Werewolves* being its last production of an international play. The company's evolution into a producer of new Irish writing seems therefore to be based in its work on foreign writers during its early years. This establishes a model of a company spending its formative years producing work from different cultures before turning to new writing. The company's Artistic Director Garry Hynes suggests as much, telling Eileen Battersby that the company's commitment to new Irish drama wasn't always the most important part of its activities. 'We did Ionesco and Edward Albee,' she states, adding that it took a while for Druid to 'grow up and look at Irish writing'.¹⁴

Such a model of 'growing up' to look at Irish work is evident in the development of many other Irish companies. The most prominent of these is Rough Magic, founded in 1984 with a remit of producing new work from abroad. During the first five years of the company's life, it produced fourteen international plays, eleven of which were Irish premieres. Rough Magic's Artistic Director Lynne Parker outlines the importance of international work to the company's development. 'Irish theatre, when we started off, was

quite inward looking', she says. 'There was the posh stuff being done at the Gate, and there were the Irish classics being done at the Abbey ... We felt very strongly that we were of a generation whose main influences were British and American television and American film as well, and that we were definitely being influenced by other cultures'.¹⁵ Rough Magic can thus be seen as another company established as a result of its founders' perception that Irish theatre needed to connect with the global influences on Irish life. Like Druid, Rough Magic moved quickly from producing foreign plays to commissioning new Irish writing, so that after their Irish premiere of Timberlake Wertenbaker's *Our Country's Good* in 1989, it produced no further international work until 2000, when it brought Richard Greenberg's *Three Days of Rain* to the Project Arts Centre. In the intervening eleven years, the company had nurtured several young Irish writers, including Gina Moxley, Pom Boyd, Arthur Riordan, Declan Hughes, and Morna Regan.¹⁶ There is again a link between Rough Magic's production of international work in its early years, and its later development as a producer of new Irish writing.

Indeed, throughout the Irish theatre sector, both at present and in the past, the evidence suggests that the production of international work acts as a stimulus for the development of Irish writing and practice. The importance of an international perspective both to young and more established Irish writers may be illustrated by contrasting two essays published in *Theatre Stuff*. The first is by Thomas Kilroy (born in 1934) and the second by Declan Hughes (born in 1963). Kilroy, whose first play premiered in 1968, describes himself as of the earlier generation of writers, whose work he defines as 'a mixture of traditional material and formal inventiveness'.¹⁷ The emergence of a younger generation of writers has caused Kilroy to feel an 'eerie sensation of watching some of the work of one's contemporaries and, worse still, of one's own, becoming historical while one is still alive' (2). As a writer and a founder member of Rough Magic, Declan Hughes has been one of the dominant voices of that younger generation. Asking why contemporary Irish literature continues to ignore contemporary Ireland, Hughes complains that Irish writers 'persist in defining ourselves by the ethnic, the pastoral (and that qualified form, the tragic pastoral). Even if we do it in an iconoclastic way, the

iconography remains powerfully the same: half door, pint bottle, sacred heart'.¹⁸ Kilroy's interest in tradition is sincere, but makes him feel 'historical' while he is still alive, yet Hughes considers tradition to be 'habit in fancy dress' (11) and is impatient with it. There is however a great deal in common between the two writers. Kilroy notes with approval that, when Tom Murphy decided in 1959 to write his first play, he declared that 'one thing is fucking sure, it's not going to be set in a kitchen' (5). Forty years later, Hughes, in similarly iconoclastic mood, also writes with distaste for 'the country kitchen' (11), and in doing so carries on a tradition of Irish dramatists being motivated by the desire to undermine received notions of Irish identity and culture.

The most evident shared feature of both articles is a frustration with received forms of Irishness. Irish dramatists are motivated by the desire to undermine received notions of Irish identity and culture, frequently by looking abroad. The role of foreign work in facilitating such iconoclasm is very important, as is the persistence of the iconography against which these writers rebel. The assertion that Irish theatre is insular appears actually to have *driven* the development of theatre companies and writers in Ireland for much of the last century. This demonstrates that insularity is a feature of Irish culture, yet it also reveals a history of writers and theatrical practitioners engaging with international work throughout the twentieth century, often in very positive ways. The production of foreign work in the twentieth century in Ireland has happened in a haphazard way, driven by individuals and groups on an *ad hoc* basis. This shows that there has been a high level of production of foreign work in Ireland, but the uncoordinated – and generally unrecorded – nature of these developments has led to their disappearance from Ireland's cultural memory. Perhaps this is because so much international work in Ireland has been positioned as coming from the periphery of Irish society and theatre, presented as a means of challenging a dominant ideology or practice. Although they were not necessarily perceived as 'marginal' by their audiences, many of the most important producers of international work began their careers on the fringes of Irish society: Edwards and MacLiammóir as gay men in Catholic Ireland, Druid as a regional company headed by a woman, Rough Magic as an urbanized, cosmopolitan company headed by a woman

from Northern Ireland. Another problem is the apparent perception that international work is something a company explores in its infancy: Garry Hynes's suggestion that one must eventually 'grow up' and look at Irish work is telling in this regard. Nevertheless, this reveals the importance within Ireland of international work: it has motivated and inspired the development of a great deal of Irish drama. The peripheral and iconoclastic status of that work is also important, but it is also clear that Irish theatre has not ignored international work. When writers or theatre companies have turned to writing from abroad, they have done so as a means of challenging mainstream Irish culture, which is perceived to be moribund, conservative. Yet the individuals who use foreign work in this way almost always end up returning to the mainstream. Tom Murphy used Lorca as a route to Synge. Druid Theatre arrived at the country kitchens of Martin McDonagh's *Leenane* via the plays of Edward Albee and Fernando Arrabal. And many other examples may be cited.

Theatre from Eastern and Central Europe has certainly influenced Irish theatre. The visits to Dublin of the Moscow Art Theatre in 1968 and 1975 had a huge impact on Irish performance and writing; it seems no coincidence to me that the visits of that company with *Three Sisters* and *Uncle Vanya* were followed within four years by the production of Chekhovian plays like Friel's *Aristocrats*. In 1980 and 1981, the Wrocław Contemporary Theatre visited Dublin and, again, had a huge impact, their approach to movement directly influencing works such as Tom Mac Intyre's *The Great Hunger*, and the original production of Frank McGuinness's *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme*.

Yet we must move beyond this model of influence – with international work the cause and new directions in Irish writing an effect – to view the international as a fully integrated part of Irish theatre. There is evidence of the development of such an attitude. Fabulous Beast's *Giselle* appeared in 2003 and is, arguably, the most significant new Irish production of the decade thus far. A relocation of the *Giselle* myth to the Irish midlands, the play reveals the consequences of the arrival to a small Irish town of a Slovakian dance instructor, who teaches the locals how to blend traditional Irish dancing with Slovakian line-dancing. The

Hungarian director László Marton has also had a strong influence on Irish theatre in recent years, notably in his 2003 production of *The Wild Duck*, which was adapted by Frank McGuinness. Finally, we see that performers from Europe are taking their place on the Irish stage in greater numbers. A particularly striking example of this is the appearance of the Slovakian dancer Vladislav Benito in Fabulous Beast's *The Bull*, a 2005 adaptation of *The Tain*, in which he played Cuchulain.

There is also a fascinating history of theatre travelling to Ireland from Russia and Poland and Slovenia, and countless other countries from that part of Europe – and those shows have had a lasting and important influence on the development of Irish theatre – and Irish society too. Also of importance is that people from Europe are taking the stage in Ireland. Impact Theatre Company in Limerick has begun to stage plays in Polish, and the 2007 Dublin Fringe Festival also features productions by Polish people living in Ireland. Perhaps most significantly, people from that part of Europe have begun to write plays about Ireland – and those plays are themselves being produced in the country. In 2007, the Dublin Theatre Festival hosted the première of a new play called *Kebab*, written by the Romanian playwright Gianina Cărbunariu. It's about a trio of young Romanians who move to Dublin in search of a better life. 'If you work hard and stuff, they really appreciate you over there,' says the play's heroine. '*It's different* over there'.¹⁹ Unfortunately, this young woman is exploited by her boyfriend and another Romanian man, and becomes involved in a murky world of prostitution and pornography. *Kebab* can be compared to plays like *Philadelphia*, *Here I Come!* or *A Whistle in the Dark* in its treatment of how the emigrant must face a clash between the destination they imagine, and the real place to which they arrive. Interestingly, however, it is not Philadelphia or Coventry that's being considered here, but Dublin. In production at Dublin's Project Arts Centre, *Kebab* took on a further layer of meaning, with the lines being delivered in contemporary English accents. This meant that the audience watched Romanian characters speaking about their life in contemporary Dublin – in strong south London accents. This calls to mind the strategies used by Friel in *Translations*, but it also draws interesting contrasts between Ireland's colonial past and its

globalized present, the shifting dynamics of Ireland's status in the world dramatized by the delivery of lines in this production.

As productions like *Kebab* appear with greater frequency, we will indisputably require revised ways of thinking about Irish theatre – and those strategies will also allow us to think about old Irish plays in interesting new ways. Yet it would be a mistake to see those changes as introducing something new: Irish drama has always been international, although this fact has been for too long unacknowledged. It is important that as the demography of Ireland changes, its theatre provides space for the articulation of new voices – and perhaps a first step towards doing so is for scholars to reveal a history that up to now has been unfairly ignored, neglected, and forgotten.

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- ¹ The other productions were *Dance in Time* (*Össztánc*) from Vígszínház, Budapest (17-20 March) and a Slovenian adaptation of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* by Mladinsko Theatre Ljubljana (12-15 May).
- ² *Festen* ran from 28-31 January. My comments are based on attendance of the production on 29 and 31 January. The production was also discussed at length during a debate on 'National Theatre and the Nation', which took place at the theatre on 31 January 2004.
- ³ It should be noted that the Gate Theatre produced David Eldridge's translation of *Festen* for the 2006 Dublin Theatre Festival. While that translation was written for a London audience, the cast as directed by Selina Cartmell tended to deliver lines in their own Irish accents.
- ⁴ See for example Helen Meany's review on 30 January 2004 in *The Irish Times*: 12. Writing in *The Sunday Tribune* on 26 December 2004, Rachel Andrews described *Festen* as the 'only sublime experience of the Abbey year' (33).
- ⁵ Ken Harmon, *Done Up Like A Kipper* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2002): 26. Subsequent references are cited in the text.
- ⁶ Dublin Theatre Festival, 'Festival Programme 2003' (Dublin: Dublin Theatre Festival, 2003): 11.
- ⁷ I attended *Hurl* on 14 July 2003 at the Black Box Theatre in Galway, and was permitted to watch a videotaped performance of its Dublin run by Barabbas. Unless otherwise specified, my comments about the play relate to both productions. Quotations are taken from an unpublished version of the script, which is presented in numbered 'sequences' (rather than acts or scenes). References appear parenthetically in the text, followed by the sequence number.
- ⁸ Cf. L.P. Curtis, *Apes and Angels*, Rev. ed. (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institute, 1996) and R.F. Foster, *Paddy and Mr Punch* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1993).
- ⁹ Information adapted from the appendix to Lady Gregory, *Our Irish Theatre* (New York: Capricorn, 1965): 265-66.
- ¹⁰ Cf. Brenna Katz Clarke and Harold Ferrar, *The Dublin Drama League* (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1979).
- ¹¹ Christopher Fitz-Simon, *The Irish Theatre* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1983): 184.
- ¹² ---, *The Boys: A Biography of Micheál MacLiammóir and Hilton Edwards* (London: Nick Hern Books, 1994): 13.
- ¹³ Alan Simpson, *Beckett and Behan and a Theatre in Dublin* (London: Routledge & Keegan Paul, 1962): 1-2.
- ¹⁴ Eileen Battersby, 'The Image Maker', *The Irish Times* 12 June 1997: 13.

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- ¹⁵ Lilian Chambers, Ger FitzGibbon, and Eamonn Jordan, eds, *Theatre Talk: Voices of Irish Theatre Practitioners* (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2000): 394
- ¹⁶ It should be noted that many of the writers developed by Rough Magic had originally been actors. Liz Kuti, Arthur Riordan, Gina Moxley, and Morna Regan are prominent examples of this phenomenon.
- ¹⁷ Thomas Kilroy, 'A Generation of Playwrights', *Theatre Stuff*, ed. Eamonn Jordan (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 1999): 3. Subsequent references are cited in the text.
- ¹⁸ Declan Hughes, 'Who the Hell Do We Still Think We Are? Reflections on Irish Theatre and Irish Identity', *Theatre Stuff*, 12. Subsequent references are cited in the text.
- ¹⁹ Gianina Cărbunariu, *Kebab*. The quotation is from an unpublished translation which I consulted as editor of the programme notes for the 2007 Dublin Theatre Festival. The emphasis is added. A version by Philip Osment was published by Oberon Books in 2007.