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“Staging the ‘New Irish’:  
Interculturalism and the Future of the Post-Celtic Tiger Irish Theatre”

Charlotte McIvor

On March 16, 2003, Arambe Productions, Ireland’s first African-Irish theatre company, debuted with an evening of performance titled *African Voices in Ireland* at the Project Arts Centre in Dublin. Performers told stories, recited poems and proverbs, staged a dramatic reading of an excerpt from Abel Ugba’s novel *Dear Mama*, presented a skit based on BBC’s *The Weakest Link*, and mounted a scene from Irish playwright Jimmy Murphy’s *Kings of the Kilburn High Road*. The diverse African backgrounds of the featured performers from Kenya, Liberia, Mozambique, Nigeria, Somalia, South Africa, and Senegal communicated to that evening’s audiences the size and scope of the African community within Ireland as well as their huge range of talents in the performing arts.

Arambe Production’s work with Murphy’s *Kings of the Kilburn High Road* did not end that evening. Their experiment culminated in an acclaimed full-scale production of Murphy’s play with an all African-Irish cast that opened to enthusiastic reviews at the Dublin Fringe Festival in 2006 before traveling to the U.S. for a performance at the University of Notre Dame. However, during a workshop leading up to the production at a “multicultural event” in Dublin, Arambe’s founder Bisi Adigun was confronted with the following question in the talkback: "So tell me," one man began, "do you think it is right for you people to come to this country, take our jobs, take our houses, and now you've started acting our plays as well? Don't you have plays of your own?" (“Getting back to ritual” 14).

This man’s confrontational query voices anxieties about the growth of minority ethnic communities,<sup>1</sup> particularly communities of recent migrants, in the Republic post-Celtic Tiger and the consequences of this demographic shift for not only the Irish economy, but for the future of

Irish national identity. The man's claim to "our jobs," "our houses" and "our plays" casts Adigun and Arambe Productions as perpetual outsiders, who cannot see that the "right" version of the Irish nation remains animated by the 19<sup>th</sup> century nationalist slogan and moniker of the contemporary political party Sinn Féin: "ourselves alone," "ourselves," "we ourselves." The "our" implied here is Irish-born, white, Catholic and settled.

Yet, inward-migration during the Celtic Tiger period, coupled with other key shifts in public rhetoric and policy,<sup>2</sup> challenges simple perceptions of what now constitutes an "Irish" identity. For the first time since the early days of the post-Independence nation, the Republic of Ireland achieved net migration in 1996. Consequently, the Republic's non-Irish born population rose from less than 5 to 12% in little more than a decade (Office of the Minister for Integration 7). This figure represents more than 420,000 migrants, a number which has almost doubled since the 2002 census (Ibid). At present, more than 188 nationalities reside in the Republic from throughout the EU, Africa, and Asia (CS0 8). These growing minorities have been referred to as the "New Irish," albeit often uncritically<sup>3</sup> and interculturalism has become a major buzzword in government, NGO, and activist circles, resulting in new public initiatives and programs aimed at integrating new communities, encouraging anti-racist practices, and educating the Irish-born public about diversity. These efforts, however, have not always been met with unequivocal support.<sup>4</sup>

I argue the work of minority ethnic artists like Adigun reframes the parameters of national belonging and tests the limits of interculturalism as official discourse in the post-Celtic Tiger nation. Apart from Adigun, artists such as George Seremba, Gianina Cărbunariu, Ursula Rani Sarma and Kunle Animashaun also figure as prominent faces of the "New Ireland" working as directors, actors, and playwrights. In this essay, I cluster together a series of recent

productions and new plays by minority ethnic theatre artists in order to argue for their central role in the landscape and future of the contemporary Irish theatre. I examine two recent new productions of J.M. Synge's *Playboy of the Western World* mounted by Pan Pan Theatre and Adigun and Irish novelist Roddy Doyle at the Abbey Theatre which directly engage the Irish theatre canon as a site of entry into Irish national belonging for minority ethnic communities, but do so on extremely different terms. I then juxtapose these *Playboys* with new plays by Gianina Cărbunariu and Ursula Rani Sarma. I focus on both new productions of "Irish" plays and new writing by minority ethnic artists in order to address the last question of Adigun's interlocutor: "Don't you have plays of your own?" Through the two *Playboys*, I demonstrate that an answer to this question is deeply dependent on analysis of how the arts are being positioned as a tool of intercultural exchange domestically and internationally post-Celtic Tiger and the resources available to minority ethnic artists or those wishing to do "intercultural" work as a result. Furthermore, using Cărbunariu and Sarma's work, I interrogate what a play of "their" own is and could be for minority ethnic artists within Ireland beyond a play imported to the Republic from their country of origin. Their plays stretch the limits of what can be understood as "Irish" drama through flexible uses of Irish settings and explicit address of themes of globalization<sup>5</sup> and transnationalism in order to reframe the material and imaginative borders of the Irish nation.

### **Towards an "Intercultural" Contemporary Ireland**

The search for new critical paradigms through which to position minority ethnic theatre work in the Republic today requires extensive engagement with the term interculturalism as currently used in Irish state, government, social and arts policy. Yet, as Jason King argues, few Irish theatre critics have even considered "what the contours of an Irish interculturalism would look like in specific theatre practice" ("Black St. Patrick Revisited" 42). Post-Celtic Tiger,

“interculturalism” has been adopted as the term of choice over “multiculturalism” to describe the process of integrating and diversifying Irish society and culture. The aggressive emphasis on “interculturalism” as the name of post-Celtic Tiger social policy regarding cultural difference, issues of diversity, (anti-)racism, and integration explicitly communicates the Republic’s desire to best its European (and U.S.) neighbors in its treatment and management of minority ethnic communities. In the Republic, “interculturalism” as used within government and social policy describes practices aimed at using the occasion of inward-migration to work towards mainstreaming services for new and pre-existing minority communities, addressing root causes of poverty and exclusion such as racism and environmental factors, increasing awareness of diversity amongst the Irish population through media, arts, and sport events, and equalizing participation in civic and social activities.<sup>6</sup> Thus, the injunction to change is ideally not only directed at migrants, but towards Irish society as a whole.

The Republic’s use of “interculturalism” as a keyword of government, social and arts policy comes at a moment when the term has begun to attract renewed attention in theatre and performance studies at large. Ric Knowles argues:

[i]nterculturalism is an urgent topic in the twenty-first century. As cities and nations move beyond the monochromatic, as human traffic between nations and cultures (both willing and unwilling) increases, as hybridity and syncretism (the merging of forms) become increasingly characteristic of cultural production everywhere, and as nineteenth-century nationalism gives way to twenty-first century *transnationalism*, it becomes imperative that the ways in which cultural exchange is performed be critically re-examined (3).

As Knowles argues, interculturalism is “not new” (6) although “its theorization in the western academy” dates only from the “1970s or 1980s” (6). Critical treatment of interculturalism, however, has focused most on staged contacts between the “East” and the “West” that originate with a European modernist tradition and is associated with “theatres of widely differing cultures

[engaging in] an ever-increasing tendency to adopt elements of foreign theatre traditions into their own productions” (Fischer-Lichte 27) as well as training practices. This work has been attacked for being “overdetermined by the West” (Lo and Gilbert 37) and frequently culturally imperialistic. Indeed, Julie Holledge and Joanne Tompkins note that: “Interculturalism in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century continues to be a theoretical, theatrical and cultural minefield” (10). Yet, Knowles defends the term’s potential because “it seems to me important to focus on the contested, unsettling, and often unequal spaces *between* cultures, spaces that can function in performance as sites of negotiation” (4). For Knowles, shifting geopolitical realities of migration and the diasporic cultures it creates demand a more complex vocabulary of interculturalism which interrogates how this mode of performance can “function[...] if approached ‘from below’ rather than from the position of privilege...how inequities in the cultural mix can be dissolved and solidarities forged across difference” (6). The Irish government indeed strives to create those “solidarities across difference” but their aims are interrupted not only by the voice of the man in the audience demanding the safety of “our plays,” our nation, but by the practical extensions of their own policies. Theories of Irish interculturalism transform rhetorics of multiculturalism in order to emphasize mutual responsibility, interaction, and overall structural change, but in practice, minority ethnic communities are often treated in isolation from one another and considered primarily in relationship to normative Irish-born populations, frequently take a back seat in planning the very intercultural projects aimed at “their” communities, and continue to be threatened daily by racism and discrimination, especially in the wake of the global financial crisis’ impact on the Republic.

Thus, Knowles’ hope for an interculturalism “‘from below’” must compete in the Republic of Ireland with the challenges of navigating top-down state investment in this term,

both imaginative and material, as well as shrinking funding for intercultural and anti-racist projects in the contemporary financial climate. Adigun and Doyle's *Playboy*, in particular, dramatizes the tensions inherent in interculturalisms touted as emerging from "below" in fact being mediated by institutions from above, in this case, namely the Abbey, Ireland's national theatre. This project claims interculturalism but its institutional enmeshment suggests that it might rather be categorized as what Lo and Gilbert name "[m]ulticultural theatre [which] functions within a statist framework premised on ideals of citizenship and the management of cultural/ethnic difference" (36). The productions I explore stage the tensions in theories of Irish interculturalism between advocating for multiplicity and management, presenting this work as completely voluntaristic<sup>7</sup> yet administered and supported by the state.

An investigation of the interplay between social and aesthetic theories of interculturalism exposes the embodied challenges of dealing with diversity, race, ethnicity and racism in post-Celtic Tiger Ireland. Ultimately, the Republic's appropriation of this term reprises the weaknesses of the multiculturalist policies it seeks to reject. However, I illuminate how emergent discourses of Irish interculturalism assist in understanding and locating the work of minority ethnic theatre artists in a critical discourse that has had difficulty accommodating their presence. The artists featured here test the limits of theories of post-Celtic Tiger interculturalism(s) and reveal that this term in practice frequently reproduces Western European multiculturalism's most familiar shortcomings, such as ghettoization and tokenization.

### **Post-Celtic Tiger Playboys**

Michael: So, what's the story?

Sean: There's a fella, he's coming this way!

Michael: You're some sort of refugee or asylum seeker, yeah?

Sean: Is there a war?

Michael: Are you involved, a terrorist, a freedom fighter, one of the lads?

Sean: Is it a tribal thing?

...

Sean: He's nobody. He's black. He's a Nigerian, for the love of God!

Pegeen Mike: He's done something wrong. He's running from the law.

...

Pegeen Mike: I never thought I'd feel like this. For someone who isn't even Irish!

*Playboy of the Western World: A New Version*<sup>8</sup>

The 2007 teaser trailer for the world premiere of Bisi Adigun and Roddy Doyle's *Playboy of the Western World: A New Version* taunts its audience with one central question: "Who is the Playboy?" The mounting of Adigun and Doyle's new version at the Abbey Theatre for the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of *Playboy's* premiere in 2007 acknowledged the growth of Nigerian and African communities in the Republic by way of adapting the arguably most important text of 20<sup>th</sup> century Irish theatre to reflect African(-Irish) influences and bring the play "bang up to date."<sup>9</sup>

In 2006, Dublin-based Pan Pan Theatre also produced a new production of Synge's iconic play, a Mandarin Chinese *Playboy of the Western World*. However, their objective did not include highlighting minority ethnic communities in the Republic through a partnership between Chinese and Irish theatre artists.<sup>10</sup> Rather, Pan Pan's collaboration with Chinese artists in Beijing embodied the agenda of the newly formed Culture Ireland which was formed in 2005 as an agency which "creates and supports opportunities for Irish artists to present their work at strategic international festivals, venues, showcases and arts markets" ("Culture Ireland"). Pan Pan premiered their piece in Shanghai in collaboration with Chinese artists and then brought it to Dublin for a limited engagement at the Project Arts Centre.<sup>11</sup>

Both *Playboys* approach theatrical interculturalism as "the meeting in the moment of two or more cultural traditions, a temporary fusing of styles and/or techniques and/or cultures" (Hollidge and Tompkins 7). Yet, these *Playboys'* individual spins on interculturalism reveal



how this term is capable of containing differing priorities of the Irish state in encouraging artistic innovation, furthering the prestige of the Irish arts in an (inter)national context, and representing diversity within the Irish state itself. Pan Pan, like Adigun and Doyle, used Synge's play to put into practice their own theory of the contemporary potential of Irish theatrical interculturalism. However, for Pan Pan, mounting their *Playboy* brought Ireland "bang up to date" by reaching literally outside of the nation through transnational artistic networks made accessible by the formation of Culture Ireland. This experiment recalls the working method of several key intercultural theatre practitioners such as Peter Brook, Ariane Mnouchkine, Robert Wilson, Tadashi Suzuki and Ong Keng Sen. These practitioners' work is frequently founded on collaborating across national boundaries via elite artistic networks of exchange but has been criticized for being potentially driven by "a sense of Western culture as bankrupt and in need of invigoration from the non-West... Intercultural practice in this mode is largely an aesthetic response to cultural diversity" (Lo and Gilbert 39). Conversely, Adigun and Doyle's *Playboy* investigated interculturalism in a domestic context vis-à-vis West Dublin, albeit under the auspices of the nation's most elite (state-sponsored) theatrical institution. However, placing these two *Playboys* in conversation with each other ultimately demonstrates how contemporary Irish discourses of interculturalism and use of the arts as cultural diplomacy in international and domestic contexts frequently marginalize the very minority ethnic communities that the work claims to represent or speak for.

Adigun and Doyle's *Playboy* casts a critical eye on post-Celtic Tiger issues of race, racism and national belonging by staging an encounter between a Nigerian asylum seeker and a bar full of irreputable Irish-born characters. The symbolic gesture of re-visiting Synge's canonical play reworks Irish theatre literally from the inside: inside its canon and inside the walls

of the National Theatre. *Playboy of the Western World: A New Version* attracted significant press when staged at the Abbey in 2007 and was brought back in 2008-2009 by popular demand.<sup>12</sup> This success was interrupted, however, by a protracted legal battle initiated by Adigun and his company Arambe Productions over the rights of the Abbey and Doyle to produce the play in 2007 and 2008-2009.<sup>13</sup>

Together, Adigun and Doyle reinvent Synge's isolated Mayo public house as a contemporary shrine of Irish kitsch masquerading as a pub off the M-50 motorway. This isolated bar serves as a headquarters for medium-size gangster Michael, his daughter Pegeen Mike, and his hapless sidekicks, Philly and Jimmy. An arranged marriage between Seán and Pegeen is still in the works, but it is a business deal designed to gain "protection" for Pegeen's family. Christopher Malomo, a handsome young man on the run after killing his father in Nigeria, however, disrupts these plans with his sudden and dramatic arrival (Figure 1.1). This *Playboy*, however, falls victim to the dramaturgy of Synge's play, not gathering enough courage to push convincingly against the text or break past its proscribed ending. Therefore, their project breaks down from the moment Christopher appears as an outsider with no real claim to the space he enters, whether Pegeen's bar or the Abbey's stage, because there is no way he will be permitted to stay at the end of the three acts. Christopher and Chief Malomo leave at the conclusion of the play in order to spread the news about the "villainy of Ireland," and Christopher's previous plan to remain lingers as nothing more than a cocky would-be murderer's far-fetched fantasy. The threat of the Malomos' stories about Ireland's violence, villainy and poor hospitality reaching foreign places looms as a reminder of the frequent verbal and physical racism endured by recent migrants, particularly of African descent,<sup>14</sup> but does not depict migrants, asylum seekers or

otherwise, as already truly present within Irish society. Instead, they continue to be rejected upon arrival.<sup>15</sup>

Adigun and Doyle's *Playboy* eloquently captures Christopher's fear and isolation but does not create credible conditions for his happiness. Ultimately, the production succeeds most in exposing the spectres of racism neatly packed away within the humor and deep belly laughs that form the play's backbone. The Irish-born characters' fluency in world geography, politics, and asylum procedures recur as a theme throughout the play and provide much of the new version's humor. Michael, Pegeen's gangster father, prompts Christopher:

Michael: Where are you from?  
Christopher: Africa.  
Michael: Big place.  
Christopher: West Africa.  
Michael: Nigeria. Now there's a surprise.<sup>16</sup>

These characters are not ignorant Irish encountering a "black fella" with horror and disgust for the first time on a dark and stormy night, but media and computer literate individuals who know their geography and can anticipate the stories of migrants in their midst. Arguably, the audiences' knowing laughter regarding references to inward-migration and globalization throughout the play subtly implicates them in the creation of a contemporary Ireland which claims worldliness but resists making space for Christopher or other migrants. However, that may be a punchline hard to extract from the production itself as Synge's original ending stands in as the excuse for the necessity of the Malomos' departure. Despite claims that their *Playboy* is "a perfect synergy of creativity rooted in two distinct cultures" (O'Toole 9), Adigun and Doyle ultimately stage a version of interculturalism that continues to isolate Irish-born, African, and other minority ethnic communities from one another, barely capable of acknowledging each other's existence, let alone working towards a mutually transformative co-existence.

Pan Pan's *Playboy* conceptualized interculturalism as a transnational endeavor and capitalized on the creative capital of artists from multiple continents. The piece was jointly produced by Pan Pan, Beijing Oriental Pioneer Theater, Vallejo Gantner, artistic director of New York-based Performance Space 122, and Beijing-based independent film and stage producer Zhaohui Wang. Pan Pan's director Gavin Quinn argues that the choice to adapt *Playboy* came about because "it was the best-known play. We decided that it would be foolish to go in and try to do our own work. Something else that was more obscure and less perhaps tangible."<sup>17</sup> The play rehearsed in Beijing and was presented entirely in Mandarin Chinese, ultimately performing at both Beijing's Pioneer Oriental Theater and Dublin's Project Arts Centre. Written in what Quinn described as a "street dialect," Pan Pan re-imagined the play in a Chinese hair, nail, and massage parlor and staged the piece with Chinese actors despite the fact that director Quinn spoke no Chinese. Quinn describes the concept of Pan Pan's production being focused around: "the whole idea of the immigrant worker coming to the city for the first time which is a major political issue in China at the moment." This adaptation roughly followed the dramaturgical structure of the original text just like Adigun and Doyle's *Playboy* (Figure 1.2). The concept of Pan Pan's *Playboy*, however, embodies Lo and Gilbert's negative indictment of imperialistic intercultural theatre as "largely an aesthetic," and by implication, shallow "response to cultural diversity" (39).

Despite the long presence of Chinese communities within Ireland, Pan Pan's Chinese *Playboy* was created well beyond the borders of the nation. Pan Pan's interpretation of "interculturalism" in a contemporary Irish context celebrates global exchange by locating China outside Ireland, despite the rapid growth of Chinese and other minority ethnic communities North and South. Apart from limited outreach to Dublin Chinese audiences, Irish-Chinese

collaboration through Pan Pan's *Playboy* occurs via a creative structure that preserves discrete national identities through matching artists based on cultures of origin and then scrambling these associations. Chinese actors are transplanted into an Irish play. *Playboy* is adapted to a contemporary Beijing setting, but the Irish director cannot even speak the language of his actors or the translation. These manufactured and carefully maintained distances between collaborators and the sites of production ultimately stage an intercultural exchange founded on limited communication and blind reliance on a ready repertoire of "best-known" Irish plays rather than immediate points of intersection based in the now.

Adigun had alleged four years before his *Playboy* in *Irish Theatre Magazine* that: "a truly multicultural Ireland would accept a Nigerian actor playing Christy Mahon alongside a Chinese-born Pegeen Mike in J.M. Synge's iconic *The Playboy of the Western World*" (qtd. in Adigun 64). Adigun's desired Chinese Pegeen Mike materialized in 2006 with Pan Pan in Beijing, but she did not stand *alongside* Christopher Malomo. In Pan Pan's *Playboy*, Chinese Pegeen Mike draws a connection between Ireland and China in matters of global and artistic trade, but she cannot be imagined alongside a Nigerian Christy in Dublin, Ireland. The migrant characters at the center of both new interpretations bear the weight of each *Playboy's* conceit, but are ultimately kept separate both from one another and other minority ethnic communities in the Republic today. In both Pan Pan and Adigun and Doyle's new version, the migrants, the outcasts and the lower-classes embody the effects of new poverties and oppressions engendered by globalization's unequal consequences. Asylum seekers and "immigrant workers coming to the city for the first time" are singled out as the new representative voices of Synge's play, but their appearance onstage does not necessarily give these characters a voice which situates their experiences in the networks of power and privilege which bankroll the very productions of the

plays in which they are starring. These reinvented *Playboys* intend to showcase a new Irish openness to the “other” in/and the world, but they talk past the very subjects they are supposedly portraying.

The interculturalisms brought to life by Pan Pan, Adigun and Doyle depend on separation and difference as a point of departure, rather than interconnectedness and mutual transformation as the cornerstones of a re-imagined Irish interculturalism. Post-Celtic Tiger Ireland aims to process and accommodate new residents from European, post-socialist, postcolonial, and various non-Western origins as part of a process aimed at fundamentally transforming the aspirations of the Irish “nation” as now understood.<sup>18</sup> The choice to separate the Chinese Peegen Mike and Nigerian Christopher Malomo not only by concept, but by continent, communicates that while official policies of Irish interculturalism reject ghettoization and tokenization, different minority ethnicities are not necessarily being imagined in relationship to one other, rather only to the Irish-born majority. These *Playboys* are linked ultimately only by their source text and broad thematic conceits, despite the linked present and future of the Irish, Chinese, and Nigerian characters they bring to life.

### **Minority Ethnic Female Playwrights at Home in the World**

Unlike the *Playboys*, Gianina Cărbunariu’s *Kebab* and Ursula Rani Sarma’s *The Magic Tree* offer a view from within the post-Celtic Tiger nation that acknowledges the intersectionality of global networks rather than only using these networks to confirm stable formulations of Irish identity as discrete and exclusionary in terms of national belonging and culture. These plays exceed the borders of the Irish nation while remaining determined by urban and rural spaces within the country, whether Dublin or the west of Ireland and address crosscutting themes of gender, violence, ethnicity, labor and alienation. Cărbunariu’s *Kebab*

and Sarma's *The Magic Tree* present contemporary issues not simply as a clash between the Irish and "others" suddenly present within their society. Rather, these plays locate Ireland within global networks of exchange, imagination and violence and insist that this broader view is a constitutive element of forging post-Celtic Tiger theatrical interculturalisms.

Gianina Cărbunariu is one of Romania's most notable young playwrights and directors, but has never spent significant time in Ireland. Her play, *Kebab*, was developed at the Royal Court Theatre in London as part of the 2007 International Season but nonetheless premiered at the Ulster Bank Dublin Theatre Festival in a translation by Phillip Osment.<sup>19</sup> Her play tells the story of three young Romanian migrants to Dublin who come with big hopes that are predictably dashed upon arrival. Dissatisfied with her income from working in a kebab shop, underage Mădălina's boyfriend Voicu presses her to go into sex work. Through this line of work, Mădălina reencounters Bogdan, a fellow Romanian migrant studying Visual Art that she had become briefly acquainted with on the plane. After meeting Voicu, the three decide to go into business with each other producing violent sex videos starring Voicu and Mădălina for the internet. Bogdan however decides to break from the twisted ménage-a-trois that he has become entangled in. The casualty of this decision is a now pregnant and still underage Mădălina who disappears from the final scene of the play.

*Kebab's* status as an "Irish" play is indeed shaky. While it premiered at the Dublin Theatre Festival, no Irish characters appear in the play, the play was written outside of Ireland, and the playwright has never spent significant time in the country. However, this play makes a strong case for inclusion within discussions of Irish drama for being the only major work to take on the subject of migrants' exploitation by the sex trade within Ireland. Granted, the characters driving this involvement are Romanian and half of the work takes place on the deterritorialized

worldwide web, but the setting in Dublin is far from incidental. Reports over the last several years have identified the growing issue of sex trafficking to Ireland, including underage girls. This rise in activity followed the deflation of the Celtic Tiger. These women are primarily Eastern European, African, Asian, and South American. Monica O'Connor and Jane Pillinger's 2009 report *Globalisation, Sex Trafficking and Prostitution – The Experiences of Migrant Women In Ireland* communicated that: "More than 100 women and girls were identified as having been trafficked into Ireland for the sex industry in a 21-month period" (Holland). This number, however, only represents those women whose cases were documented.<sup>20</sup>

*Kebab's* genesis outside of Ireland dramatizes the transnational roots of social change within Irish society today, particularly regarding its darker underbelly of corruption, greed, and violence. The character Mădălina's violent stint in the Dublin sex trade implicates Ireland at large and probes the fallout from the Celtic Tiger from the perspective of one of Ireland's most disenfranchised "new Irish." At one point in the play, Mădălina wonders out loud why they just didn't go to America. Bogdan and Voicu assure her that America would have been no different. This moment, however, does not imply that the setting of *Kebab* is interchangeable. Rather, it calls our attention to why Ireland has become so much like America.

Sex and violence are also the point of departure for Sarma's *The Magic Tree*. Lamb, a young woman in her 20s, seek refuge in an empty house on her way to fleeing her life in County Cork through a journey to Thailand. Gordy and his friends, Lenny and Doc, have followed her to the house planning to rape her after meeting through a club devoted to extreme pornography. Gordy is supposed to trick her into relaxing, but as they begin to talk, he discovers a deep connection with her. The class difference between the characters is played up throughout the first act. Doc taunts Lamb as he prepares to rape her: "I see girls like you all the time. All the



fucking time, walking down the street with your designer gear looking down on guys like us...but I know you're thinking about it...wondering...what it would be like" (Sarma 56). Gordy turns on Doc, killing him with a flowerpot, and then pretending to kill Lenny as well to dispose of all witnesses before following Lamb abroad. The next act jumps to the Choeung Ek killing fields in Cambodia where Lamb and Gordy have fled. Against this gruesome backdrop, more secrets emerge between the pair. Obsessed, Gordy even offers to be her dog, but Lamb's past makes connection with others insurmountable. Lamb's privilege and self-interest is juxtaposed with the latent horror of their surroundings. She insists on the beauty of a tree, the "Magic Tree" (Sarma 80), previously used as a site for the execution of children, as Gordy recoils from her lack of connection to the human landscape.

Sarma's alienated characters inhabit a world where connection and a firm grasp on moralities seem all but impossible. The characters' relationship to wealth, whether flush or wanting, inspires self-interested nihilism that knows no boundaries. The shocking plot twists of the play: a rape ring, the revelation of Lamb's decision to let her "special needs" sister drown, and the haunting backdrop of the killing fields animate a world where "just when it seems something beautiful might emerge, the opposite appears" (Sarma). The Cambodian setting is not a prop for the self-realization of these characters but rather a brutal diagnosis of their lack of connection to not only themselves and their home, but the world at large. Lamb only comes to the country out of a vague sense of interest and is therefore able to look past the poverty and the bones buried beneath and around her. In this globalized Cambodia, even the child begging for coins knows that Ireland means "Roy Keane" and "Guinness" (70-71) but Lamb can only conceptualize of her place in time and space as immediately related to her present desires.

As in Sarma's other plays *Blue* and *touched*, barren Irish landscapes are the backdrop for explorations of deep and yearning moral vacuousness, but the ethically bankrupt and alienated post-Celtic Tiger Ireland that she presents puts a new spin on the rural and the Irish that has not always been translatable to Irish audiences. Sarma takes up the overdetermined theme of the West of Ireland, but she inhabits this landscape not to push the Irish theatre backwards towards an imagined past. Rather, she forces a reckoning with Irish futures that exceed what has already been imagined, whether through mystical trips to the killing fields of Cambodia, or the simple shock of her name on a theatre program.

Sarma states: "I am not sure what my place is in Irish theatre. Basically, the companies that have been fostering and nurturing me are abroad" (Keating). She relates this disconnect to her identity as an Irish-Indian woman:

I guess it comes from that question I sometimes ask myself: whether or not I can ever be fully Irish, or perceived as Irish, with a name like Rani Sarma. But it also has to do with how people are always pigeon-holed: they look at you as a woman, then as a playwright. Then you become "an Irish female playwright" instead of just an artist (Ibid).

Sarma refuses to be pigeonholed as "an Irish(-Indian) female playwright" but her success is perhaps ultimately constrained in the Republic by this identity. This is the double-bind of her status as a minority ethnic female playwright working in Ireland today, but like Cărbunariu, her challenging of borders of experience in post-Celtic Tiger Ireland rework paradigmatic Irish theatre tropes to place them in broader global contexts. This is a version of Irish theatrical interculturalism that cannot avoid so-called identity politics by nature of the playwrights' identities, but that uses the perspective of speaking from multiple locations in terms of race, ethnicity, gender and class to speak back to narrow conceptions of Irish identity which perhaps cannot yet conceptualize an Irish-Indian playwright born in Cork. The performative possibilities posed by Cărbunariu and Sarma's work suggest that models for representing post-Celtic Tiger

Ireland must be found outside the Irish theatre canon. Dramaturgical models are needed that stretch the borders of the Irish nation literally and figuratively while taking account of artists' individual positionalities as Irish-Indian female playwrights or otherwise. Knowles argues that a new vision for interculturalism necessarily:

involve[s] collaborations and solidarities across real and respected material differences within local, urban, national, and global intercultural performance ecologies. I use the word 'ecology' in relation to embodied, theatrical, urban, national, transnational or virtual intercultural spaces for two reasons: first, everything that happens within an ecosystem affects everything else within that system; second, the health of an ecosystem is best judged by the diversity of its species rather than the competitive success of individual components or species (59).

The work of Cărbunariu and Sarma breathe dramatic life into the global ecologies which gave birth to contemporary post-Celtic Tiger Irish interculturalism through placing "real and respected material differences" into a transnational context which accommodates "embodied, theatrical, urban, national, transnational [and] virtual intercultural spaces." The intersectionality of their theatrical vision should be heeded as a compass for the future of Irish theatrical criticism and production.

Christopher Malomo may be forced out of Dublin in order to return to Nigeria with his father at the end of *Playboy of the Western World: A New Version*. But his departure represents only one coming and going on the Irish stage. The work of Arambe Productions through *Kings of the Kilburn High Road* and multiple other projects and the efforts of Cărbunariu and Sarma among others represent myriad manifestations of post-Celtic Tiger Irish theatre that expand the boundaries of the Irish nation not only regarding who comes onstage, but in fact ultimately challenging *where* that work can originate from in the first place. The contingent and overlapping networks of these artists' influences, journeys, and obstacles map the multiple possibilities of Irish theatrical interculturalisms which are already in motion as well as gesturing

towards the challenges faced by the post-Celtic Tiger Irish theatre to come, which must contend not only with the “new Irish” but with the increasingly difficult task of determining what exactly *is* Irish drama. The answer to this question lies in the stories of linkage and reversal told by Adigun, Cărbunariu, and Sarma that force audiences to reach outside the “Western World” with not only their imaginations, but through belated recognition of what the connections already being forged in their midst. The work of these artists provides an answer to Adigun’s detractor that minority ethnic artists do indeed have “plays of their own” which reflect a future in Ireland where “the health of [its] ecosystem [will be] best judged by the diversity of its species rather than the competitive success of individual components or species.” This health, however, must be ultimately measured against the ecosystem’s ability to provide space for “collaborations and solidarities” that recognize *and* contest “real and respected material differences.”

**Figure 1.1**  
**Christopher Malomo (Chuk Iwuji), flanked by Pegeen Mike (Ruth Bradley) on the left and**  
**Widow Quinn (Hilda Fay) on the right, in an advance publicity shot**  
**for the 2008-2009 revival of *Playboy of the Western World: A New Version***  
**at the Abbey.**



Figure 1.2

**Pan Pan's *Playboy of the Western World* in Beijing.**  
**Kun Guafu/Widow Quinn (Bai Shuo) and Sha Sha/Sara Tansey (Zhang Ting Ting)**  
**try to convince Ma Shang/Christy Mahon (Cheng Jung Nian) to flee in drag before he is**  
**killed in retaliation for the murder of his father.**  
**Photograph: Ros Kavanagh**



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## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> I use the term "minority ethnic" here following Deepa Mann-Kler who observes that in Ireland: Traditionally the term ethnic minority has and is still being used. However, it creates the impression that 'ethnic' is a terms applied only to minority groups within a given society. However, all people-Black or white- belong to an ethnic group. The smaller ethnic groups are then denoted to the prefix 'minority' and the larger ethnic groups by the term 'majority.' If we were to take on ethnicity on global terms then the prefixes would be all reversed, with the Chinese and Indian communities forming majority ethnic groups (64).

Given the complicated racial history of the Irish, not to mention the frequently troubled place of the indigenous (white) minority ethnic group Travellers within Irish society at large, I follow Mann-Kler's lead on this term. The use of "minority ethnic" to refer to migrant communities communicates that the project of interrogating race, racisms and ethnicities in the Republic does not just apply to dissecting the identity of "Others," but rather requires that Irishness must be recognized as a constantly evolving ethnicity.

<sup>2</sup> In the shadow of the struggle for independence and the Troubles, debates over identity in the modern Irish nation have frequently been organized vis-à-vis binaries of Loyalists versus Republicans, Catholics versus Protestants, and

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the Irish versus the British. However, the Celtic Tiger period brought a wider embrace of possible Irish identities, such as renewed acknowledgment of the Irish diasporic community by President Mary Macaleese among others (Office of the Minister of Integration 7) and the pluralistic intents of the Good Friday Agreement which granted citizens of Northern Ireland the choice to possess both Irish and British citizenship.

<sup>3</sup> Bryan Fanning cautions that the identity of “new Irish” in fact seems to refer to naturalized citizens of the Republic. Given the repercussions of the Citizenship Referendum and the likelihood that some portion of the new migrant population will remain mobile and choose not to naturalize, Fanning argues that it is imperative to recognize that: “What is certain is that any national project of immigrant integration will have to come to terms with the inadequacies of citizenship as a badge of social membership and as a vehicle for social cohesion” (146).

Furthermore, he urges understanding that, “Immigrants may become embedded in Irish society without necessarily proclaiming themselves as ‘New Irish’ but in doing so challenge institutional definitions of Irishness” (152).

<sup>4</sup> Fears over the implications of growing minority ethnic communities for the future of the nation and Irish identity have reverberated throughout the Republic leading even to the abolishment of guaranteed rights to citizenship for children born in Ireland. In the midst of controversy regarding alleged “maternity tourism” by African female asylum seekers, a Citizenship Referendum to the Constitution abolishing automatic citizenship for children born in the Republic passed in 2004 with an 80% majority. The broad popular support for this Citizenship Referendum has been widely attributed to (racialized) anxiety regarding high and sudden rates of post-Celtic Tiger inward-migration especially directed towards African communities living in the Republic (Lentin and McVeigh; Fanning; Shandy; Luibhéid; Tormey).

<sup>5</sup> Globalization has indeed been identified as a keyword for the future of Irish theatre criticism by Lonergan, Karen Fricker, Brian Singleton, Shaun Richards and José Laners among others, as in the 2004 special *Modern Drama Issue* “Critical Ireland.” Joe Cleary insists that “postcolonial critique impels Irish Studies in the direction of conjunctural global analysis” (44) yet this mode of analysis vis-à-vis post-Celtic Tiger Irish theatre has largely bypassed acknowledgment of the growth of minority ethnic communities through inward-migration related to the economic boom as a manifestation of globalization’s processes.

<sup>6</sup> The National Consultative Committee on Racism and Interculturalism (NCCRI), an Irish independent expert body bringing together governmental and non-governmental organizations, defines interculturalism as the “development of strategy, policy and practice that promotes interaction, understanding, respect and integration between different cultures and ethnic groups on the basis that cultural diversity is a strength that can enrich society, without glossing over issues such as racism” (*Spectrum* 43). The National Action Plan Against Racism “provides an intercultural framework based on the five themes of Protection, Inclusion, Provision, Recognition and Participation” (Ibid).

<sup>7</sup> This is captured well by the aspirations of the state-sponsored Taskforce on Active Citizenship. Their plan for action argues that the granting of political and social rights is predicated on the expectation that new immigrants as well as all Irish-born residents will reciprocate by actively participating in a new and transformed Irish public sphere. A Taskforce on Active Citizenship was formed by then Taoiseach Bertie Ahern in 2006, and composed of members of community groups, voluntary organizations, NGO’s and government offices. The values of active citizenship are defined in their resulting report thus:

**Active Citizenship** is about **engagement, participation** in society and valuing contributions made by individuals, whether they are employed or outside the traditional workforce. In practical terms, this engagement and participation may mean membership of a resident’s association or political party or lobby group, or volunteering to help out in a local sports club, or caring for a family member or neighbor, or simply being active and caring about the local neighbourhood, the environment as well as larger global and national issues (“Report of the Taskforce on Active Citizenship” 2).

<sup>8</sup> This text is taken verbatim from a teaser trailer for *Playboy of the Western World: A New Version* which was featured on the production’s MySpace site for the 2007 premiere (<http://www.myspace.com/playboyanewversion>).

<sup>9</sup> The Abbey Theatre marketed Adigun and Doyle’s *Playboy* as a “bang-up to date” version for both the 2007 premiere and 2008-2009 revival.

Druid Theatre also mounted a new *Playboy* in 2005 as part of the celebrated premiere of their DruidSynge cycle, which was an epic production of Synge’s major plays in repertory including *Playboy*, *Riders to the Sea*, *The Tinker’s Wedding*, *The Well of the Saints*, *The Shadow of the Glen*, and *Deirdre of the Sorrows*. Druid presented the plays either as a full cycle in an eight and a half hour performance with three intermissions and a 90-minute dinner break or in three parts. Part I: *Riders to the Sea* and *Deirdre of the Sorrows*. Part II: *The Tinker’s Wedding* and *Well of the Saints*. Part III: *Shadows of the Glen* and *Playboy of the Western World* (“Performances”).

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<sup>11</sup> Significantly, Pan Pan's intercultural Chinese *Playboy* also came at a moment when the Irish state was in the process of intensifying its economic and cultural relationship with China. In 2010, the Irish ambassador to China, Declan Kelleher stated: "Ireland and China have a close and friendly relationship which is growing all the time...I am delighted at the progress that is being made and the contacts that continue to be developed, not only in the political and economic, but also in the education, cultural and human spheres" ("Ireland-China Relations"). Alan Buckley, Enterprise Ireland's China director reported in January of the same year, "We are definitely seeing a rise in day-to-day interest from Irish companies interested in doing business in China...The State agency now has four offices in China" (Lynch 18). Following this in June 2010, President Mary McAleese predicted a "very bright future" for relations between Ireland and China ("Irish President Upbeat on 'bright future' in ties with China).

<sup>12</sup> Yet, before the premiere of 2007's *Playboy* at the National Theatre, only Donal O'Kelley's *Asylum! Asylum!* (1994) had explicitly addressed contemporary post-Celtic Tiger minority ethnic experiences on either the Abbey or Peacock stages. Looking towards the future, current Abbey artistic director Fiach Mac Conghail is vocally committed to increasing diversity on the National Theatre's stages. He notes: "Almost half of the people we have working in the front-of-the-house staff are immigrants. But that experience hasn't been reflected on our stage yet" (Cullen). When asked about discovering the next Sean O'Casey, Mac Conghail responded: "I wouldn't be surprised if that person was Polish or Nigerian" (ibid.)

<sup>13</sup> Adigun contends the version produced did not carry his consent and that he was not properly financially compensated. There have been to date three "sets of proceedings arising from the stagings of the modern *Playboy*" (Carolan 4). Mary Carolan of *The Irish Times* reports: "Adigun claims the Abbey, against his wishes and in conjunction with Doyle, remounted a distorted version of it on its stage between December 2008 and January 2009, which was directed by Fay" (4). This matter has yet to be resolved, and the Abbey and Doyle have repeatedly refused to comment. Fintan O'Toole argues that "such conflicts can never be fully resolved, because theatre is too unstable a form to be entirely controlled and owned by anyone" (9). However, the thorny fall-out from Adigun and Doyle's intercultural adaptation perhaps dramatizes the difficulties of staging the "New Irish" experience in a landscape of uneven power dynamics and loaded histories.

<sup>14</sup> Ronit Lentin and Robbie McVeigh report:

a needs analysis survey conducted by the African Refugee Network published in October 1999 showed that 89.7 percent of the respondents experienced racism in Ireland; racism included verbal abuse (68.75 percent), physical abuse (25 per cent), being arrested (6.25 per cent). 79 per cent of the respondents said they were refused service in pubs and nightclubs (3).

In June 2009, the Irish increase in racist crimes was identified as the third highest in the EU, overall "between 2000 and 2007, reported racist crimes in Ireland increased by 31.3 per cent." (Smyth). Furthermore, 54% of Sub-Saharan Africans living in Ireland reported discrimination due to their ethnic or minority status in the 2009 European Minorities and Discrimination Survey carried out by the European Union Fundamental Agency for Human Rights ("European Minorities and Discrimination Survey," 6).

<sup>15</sup> My comment here refers to controversies about the asylum process in Ireland which has been criticized for the amount of time taken to process cases as well as high rates of rejection. For example, in May 2010, "the Refugee Appeals Tribunal rejected 92% of the appeals it ruled on in the last year" marking a "fifth successive annual rise in the rejection rate for asylum appeals" (Smyth, "Tribunal Rejects 92% of Asylum Appeals 8). In the same year, 75% of asylum applications were rejected "which is slightly higher than the rejection rate in the EU" (Smyth, "75% of applications for asylum here rejected" 3).

<sup>16</sup> This and all further quotes from the play were copied verbatim on the evenings of the performances that I attended. Their accuracy, therefore, is not verifiable. There is no published version of this script and extremely limited access, if any, to a working copy due to the legal issues surrounding the piece.

<sup>17</sup> Gavin Quinn, (Artistic Director, Pan-Pan Theatre), interview with the author, June 2008. All quotes from Quinn that follow were part of this interview.

<sup>18</sup> Irish interculturalism is thus further theorized by the NPAR as: "a two-way process that places duties and obligations on both cultural and ethnic minorities and the State to create a more inclusive society." Department for Justice, Equality, and Law Reform, *Planning for Diversity*,

<sup>19</sup> Following these runs, *Kebab* has enjoyed considerable international success, as well as challenges. *Kebab*: was banned by a private theatre in Bucharest only days before the premiere, due to "indecent language." After it was rescued by Teatrul Foarte Mic Theater in Bucharest (a group that also encouraged

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Carbunariu's career as a theater director), *Kebab* later become one of the most frequently toured productions abroad; it caught the attention of theatres around the world, from Japan to the U.K. and from Denmark to Greece. (Moldovan).

<sup>20</sup> The authors of the report stressed that:

...the 102 listed were just the women they managed to identify through contacts with service-providers. They said there were more than 1,000 women in indoor prostitution at any one time. Examining Irish "escort" internet sites, they found women representing 51 nationalities. Some 97 per cent of women advertised were migrants. They ranged in age from 18 to 58, averaging 25 years, with evidence that some were as young as 16. They were advertised in hotels, apartments and as call-outs to homes in 19 of the 26 counties. (Holland)