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‘A Portrait of the Citizen as Artist:  
Community Arts, Devising and Contemporary Irish Theatre Practice’

In 2011, Dublin Theatre Festival featured the work of three key emerging companies who engage with devising at the center of their working practice: ANU Productions (*Laundry* and *World’s End Lane*), Brokentaklers (*The Blue Boy*) and THEATREclub (*Heroin*). These productions explored the histories of Dublin’s Monto red light district and inner city prostitution, Magdalene Laundries, abuse in state-run industrial and reformatory schools, and the heroin epidemic. Working through devised techniques, these companies mixed multiple genres in their work including documentary theatre, immersive theatre, dance, physical theatre and installation but were most crucially connected by their use of community cast members in performance or as collaborative partners through research, interviews or work with community groups as part of their devising practice. I use ‘community’ here to imply non-professional participants unified in these cases as communities of place and interest. This chapter explores the relationship between community engagement and devising in Irish theatre history through connecting the formation of the community arts movement in late-1970s Ireland to contemporary devising practice focused on engagement with community as a core working practice.

For ANU, Brokentaklers and THEATREclub, the inclusion of community cast members in performance or as collaborative partners through research, interviews or work with community groups as part of their devising practice have become hallmarks of their work, as was evident at the 2011 Dublin Theatre Festival and in all their output since.<sup>1</sup> ANU Production’s *World’s End Lane* and *Laundry* were dependent on a relationship with the community as ‘vital to how these pieces are developed and staged’ (‘Re: Community Engagement and “Laundry”’). This relationship included the use of physical space in the community, personal interviews and local records for research by the company as part of the devising process through partnership with the North Inner City Folklore Project among other groups. *Laundry* was developed in partnership

with fourteen community participants and also featured performances by some community cast members including Laura Murray and Tony Murphy, who owned and managed the Scrub a Dub Launderette used as one of the sites for the performance.

*Heroin* was conceived while THEATREclub's Grace Dyas was working under the auspices of CREATE's 'Artist in the Community' scheme through the Arts Council in Rialto. She writes: 'I started to devise a piece of work with the Men's Group at Rialto Community Drug Team. They wanted to make a piece about street language... If I would help them with their piece, they would help me with mine' (Dyas). Unlike ANU or Brokentalkers, THEATREclub do not feature community cast members in their productions, but rather partner with them exclusively for the creation of the work.

For Brokentalkers, as Chris McCormack observes, their work gives a 'voice to people in society you don't often hear, whether it's the immigrants in *Track*' an audio tour of Dublin narrated by Chinese narrators 'or the kids in Dublin Youth Theatre' in *This is Still Life* 'or the gay men in *Silver Stars*,' played by a group of mostly community performers who performed in Séan Millar's song cycle under co-artistic directors Keegan and Cannon's direction. In each of these examples, non-professional or 'community' participants were collaborators and partners in the creation and/or performance of the work. Keegan elaborates on Brokentalkers' reasons for this approach:

We always kinda felt, still do, that theatre is quite an elitist closed-off art form that involves a clear separation between the artist and the audience, and we always had a problem with that. We always thought that it is within everybody's capabilities to be creative and to express themselves. (McCormack)

Like THEATREclub's *Heroin*, engagement with interviewees in the creation of the work happened prior to the performance of *Blue Boy*. In performance, Brokentalkers partnered instead with professional dance theatre company Junk Ensemble in the presentation of the work.

For prominent *Irish Times* columnist Fintan O'Toole, the 2011 Dublin Theatre Festival was highly significant as it made evident a split in contemporary Irish practice- an opposition he termed as 'smooth' vs. 'rough' theatre. Smooth described the Abbey's co-production of Sean O'Casey's *Juno and the Paycock* with the National Theatre of Britain and the Gate's Production of Hugo Hamilton's *The Speckled People* while the rough belongs to theatre that is 'hard, edgy, and highly political and is happening, to a large extent, outside conventional theatre spaces.' (O'Toole). He went on to state, 'What makes this festival so important is the way it has brought together a number of younger artists who are not just dancing on the grave of the well-wrought play but actively inventing new ways in which theatre can function in a public and highly political space.' (Ibid.) The seemingly 'new ways' in which ANU, Brokentalkers and THEATREclub use theatre to function in 'public and highly political space' depends centrally on their involvement of community members as participants in the co-creation and devising of the work. But rather than signaling new trends in contemporary Irish theatre making, this chapter suggests that the intersection between community participation and devising in their work makes visible a sustained and politically engaged genealogy of devising practice related to community arts active since the late-1970s at least.

This chapter therefore challenges O'Toole's assertion that the 2011 Dublin Theatre Festival marks a move toward the creation of 'new ways' that Irish theatre can function in a public and highly political space by historicizing the formal practices of contemporary companies including ANU, Brokentalkers and THEATREclub in longer Irish genealogies of community arts. I trace the influences of community arts on contemporary (devised) theatre practice in order to propose strategies for how artists, critics and audiences might more thoroughly account for how

these emerging companies participate in longer debates about the role of the Irish artist, and the arts in the lives of Irish citizens.

In doing so, this chapter is necessarily limited to considering primarily the use of drama and theatre in the Irish community arts movement. Yet even with this more narrow focus, this chapter will be in no way a comprehensive history of groups who have worked in this way since the 1970s, a history that yet and urgently has to be written. I also distinguish here quite explicitly between ‘amateur’ and ‘community’ drama. In Ireland, amateur drama generally implies the mounting of scripted work by non-professional (i.e. non-paid) performers. However, community drama, according to Declan Gorman, ‘refers to original work for performance that has been generated from within communities, often in the context of community development or educational objectives’ (11). Finally, from its origins, Irish community arts has been characterized by a cross-border history and network of direct influences between artists and organizations, North and South. A full consideration of this dynamic interplay lies outside the scope of this chapter, but will figure occasionally throughout.

### **Community Arts and Irish Theatre History**

Community arts refers to work produced collaboratively by what CREATE, the Irish national agency for collaborative arts in social and community contexts, describes today as ‘communities of place’ or ‘interest’ working usually in partnership with a professional artist or group of artists (‘About Create’). Speaking from an Irish perspective, Rhona Henderson refers to it more broadly as ‘socially engaged arts’ (159) while Susan Coughlan characterizes it as ‘a political and social movement with a desire for cultural democracy at its heart’ (115). Recently, Irish debates over terminology have considered whether ‘collaborative’ or ‘participatory’ arts might be more flexible and inclusive categories to describe this field. This chapter primarily mobilises community arts as the key term to describe this area of practice due to its utility in tracing the genealogy of the field, which has only more recently turned towards ‘participatory’

and ‘collaborative’ as synonyms. Sandy Fitzgerald, a leading innovator in the field of Irish community arts, including as founder and former director of the City Arts Centre in Dublin, even argued in 2004 that ‘this change’ in terminology ‘went unnoticed and unchallenged by the community arts sector itself’ (79).

The interplay between devising and community engagement in the work of ANU, Brokentalkers and THEATREclub decisively reveal the origins of Irish experimentation with devised performance techniques in the formation of the community arts sector in Ireland in the mid-late 1970s and early 1980s. This genealogy of influence however has been neglected in critical discussions and reviews of these contemporary companies’ work.<sup>2</sup>

It has not been observed for example that ANU Productions’ Monto Cycle that includes the works *World’s End Lane*, *Laundry*, *The Boys of Foley Street*, and *Vardo Corner* reprises the structure and themes of Mick Egan and Peter Sheridan’s Monto Trilogy devised with Dublin’s City Workshop in the north inner city in the early 1980s. The Monto Trilogy includes the works *The Kips*, *The Digs*, *The Village*, *A Hape A Junk* and *Pledges and Promises* and is described as ‘created through improvisation and research by members of the City Workshop’ and ‘scripted by Mick Egan and Peter Sheridan’ (Egan, Sheridan et. al 1). Sandy Fitzgerald narrates the aims of this ‘groundbreaking drama project’ as to ‘show that a community arts project could work, not as art for the people, but by the people’ (258-259). The participants were ‘housewives, unemployed dockers, and kids out of school’ brought together by ‘the newly established Department of Education Teamwork Scheme’ and Peter Sheridan (Fitzgerald 72). ANU’s cycle and the City Arts Workshop’s trilogy cover almost identical thematic areas: the history of prostitution in the area, the Magdalene Laundry, heroin addiction and issues of labor and the history of the Dublin docks and unions (the subject of ANU’s 2013 cycle *Thirteen*).

The critical silence on ANU’s Irish influences and predecessors reflects the place of community arts in the study of Irish theatre and performance. Sandy Fitzgerald forcefully claims

that ‘arts commentators rarely mention community arts, and when they do, damn with faint praise, condescension or outright hostility’ (1). Few major works or edited volumes have dealt with this area of practice. Exceptions include David Grant’s 1994 *Playing the Wild Card: A Survey of Community Drama and Smaller-scale Theatre from Community Relations Perspective*, Fitzgerald’s own 2004 edited volume, *An Outburst of Frankness: Community Arts in Ireland-A Reader* and Bill McDonnell’s 2008 *Theatres of the Troubles: Theatre, Resistance and Liberation in Ireland*, a study of the role of Republican and Loyalist popular theatres during the Troubles. In addition, the origins of Northern Ireland’s all-female Charabanc Theatre Company as a collaborative and community-based group, has been the subject of sustained scholarly attention (Lojek, 82-102; Dicenzo, 175-184; Martin, 88-99). However, only *An Outburst of Frankness* addresses community arts work in the Republic of Ireland in any detail.

As a further example, the 2012 *Collaborative Arts Performance Pack* by CREATE, the national agency for collaborative arts in social and community contexts, features case studies of four Irish-based artists or companies including Brokentalkers, Louise Lowe (representing ANU), Dylan Tighe (Co-Artistic Director of The Stomach Box) and Helene Hugel (Artistic Director of Helium) and four international groups Young@Heart (United States), Rimini Protokoll (Germany), Clod Ensemble (UK) and the Red Room (UK). It was designed to be used by anyone in order to ‘satisfy your curiosity about contemporary performance techniques and to stimulate new approaches toward making work in collaboration with a range of participants and audiences.’ (CREATE, ‘Script’ 7). For CREATE, Irish contemporary performance technique *is* collaborative practice, an assertion that like O’Toole’s, associates this practice with the now without citing an established Irish genealogy of this work. In doing so, however, CREATE suppresses the vital history of their own organisation.

A need for organisation and centralisation of resources in the community arts sector led to the 1983 formation of CREATE’s first iteration as ‘Creative Activity for Everyone’ (CAFE).

This was an umbrella organisation for community arts on the island of Ireland as a whole. CAFE originally described 'its main objective as "community and individual development with creative activity as a means to that end"' and is credited with 'holding the first community arts conference, the setting up of the first community arts database, the publication of a funding handbook and the organizing of the first community arts workers course' (Fitzgerald 259). This organization would be officially rebranded as CREATE in 2003.

Their 2012 interactive guide on collaborative arts *as* contemporary performance technique (written by *Irish Times* chief theatre critic Peter Crawley) indeed states that it is not a 'exhaustive history of performance' or 'a history of socially engaged practice or of community arts' (CREATE, 'Script' 7). Yet, the complete absence of earlier Irish histories of community arts (and indeed the organization itself) limits the ability of the pack's targeted audience (those interested in working through collaborative performance techniques) or scholars to historicize the practice of these contemporary companies in not only an artistic, but a political and social context, for both practical and academic purposes.

The wider marginalization of community arts practice in a critical context might be explained by reservations about the aesthetic quality of the work or a lack of access to texts, other performance ephemera or recordings of live performances. Indeed, the characteristic hallmark of a community arts project across national contexts is the habitual emphasis of process over product and the involvement of 'non-artists' (i.e. untrained and not professional) in creating and presenting work for public consumption. As Brian Singleton recently argued regarding Irish theatre studies, 'Often the justification for canon formation is determined by the literary quality of the playtext all the while ignoring completely the extent and the significance of the cultural and sometimes political intervention an actual performance might have generated in a particular historical moment' (*Masculinities and the Contemporary Irish Theatre* 13). He too claims that Irish 'popular and community theatres are barely afforded a mention in most histories' (Ibid.).

Declan Gorman forcefully argues that ‘the virtual exclusion of community drama from the theatre publishing industry is overtly or unconsciously a political act by the industry’ (22). Baz Kershaw concurs in a British context noting that an ‘incomprehension of the cultural significance of the movement’ of alternative and community theatre ‘is the result of an analytical perspective which insists on treating performance in terms of its *theatrical* significance’ (43). I would push on Kershaw’s assertion to argue that in an Irish context, community arts as it operated in tandem with the experimental theatre sector in the 1970s-1990s was and continues to be a site where some of the most cutting edge developments in innovative theatrical strategies are tested.

### **The Irish Community Arts Movement**

The founding and growth of Irish community arts in the mid-late 1970s responded directly to sectarian conflict, poverty and drug issues, serving divided communities, encouraging cross-community work and working in at-risk neighborhoods. Sandy Fitzgerald details:

Very real community actions, such as the housing movement of the time, gave people some confidence and strength to move forward. Again, as had happened in England, the intersection of small groups of people who had artistic skills with community groups led to the realisation that being creative was also about having a voice and affecting change... People became politicised and informed but they also became witnesses for themselves and their communities. They wanted to tell their story and they began to feel the power of these stories. (70)

In a 2003 public forum on the history of community arts, Mowbray Brates, co-founder of NOW in Belfast, summarized the aims of community art’s emergence in Ireland in this way:

There seems to be two broad strands... People who would be looking to push the boundaries of art, liberating art from museums and theatre spaces. Then there would be the direction of political activism and community development, the use of art in a creative

way to further political campaigns, specific single issues. And I suppose then there would be people who would want to look at democratizing culture. (Fitzgerald 11)

Artists and groups working in the community saw the arts as a way to give a voice to those marginalized within the broader society. The arts could potentially give individuals or groups the opportunity to tell their story in various artistic mediums but could also provide training in practical work skills, or empower the process of community development through linking practical initiatives to community arts.

In 1980s' Dublin in particular, many individuals came to community arts practice through temporary or Community Employment Schemes run by FÁS, the Irish National Training and Employment Authority. These schemes aim to reverse the trend of high unemployment among young adults, as well other long-term unemployed persons. These programmes are 'designed to help people who are long-term unemployed and other disadvantaged people to get back to work by offering part-time and temporary placements in jobs based within local communities' (Citizens Information: Public Service Information). Before working through these schemes, some artists still working today, including Ollie Breslin, current artistic director of Waterford Youth Arts, had never encountered the arts. Breslin observes:

Unemployment to me [was] the key. At that time unemployment was huge and I think that was really a big part of why a lot of these things happened because there was a radical side to the arts. I suppose people were fed up with the system and wanted to make a statement against the system and manifest it in some way. (Fitzgerald 11)

Fitzgerald notes, 'there was time when the FÁS grants to the arts far outweighed the total Arts Council budget and these grants were almost exclusively for community arts projects because of their intrinsic social and community perspective' (77). He elaborates 'The leaders in this early movement in community arts were invariably artists who had come from disadvantaged

communities, people who had broken through the system despite all obstacles, to emerge as actors, writers, directors, photographers, film-makers and musicians' (Ibid.).

The definition of community development as defined in a 2006 report from Combat Poverty continues to echo the originary aims of community arts in Ireland. According to Brian Motherway, community development refers to a 'process whereby those who are marginalised and excluded are enabled to gain in self confidence, to join with others and to participate in actions to change their situation and to tackle the problems that face their community' and prioritizes 'collective action for social change, with an emphasis on empowerment and participation, and a focus on process as well as outcomes' (Motherway, Preface; i). In a 1994 report on a partnership between CAFE (Creating Art for Everyone) and the Combat Poverty Agency which studied the work of five community arts projects, one of the major aims of the project was listed as identifying 'ways in which the community arts could be used to tackle poverty and disadvantage' (CAFE (Creative Activity for Everyone) and Combat Poverty Agency, 1-2). Dublin's Fatima Mansions, for example, has been the site of community-based actions towards regeneration since the 1980s that have consistently drawn on the arts through the support of Fatima Groups United, 'the representative body of residents and community groups through which the grassroots energy, needs and views of the community are represented and supported' ('About Us'). Significant arts actions include the 1997 community wide Halloween Parade, 'Burning the Demons: Embracing the Future' which utilised street theatre and was described by the Rialto Learning Community as marking 'a new departure in community organising and the beginning of a fifteen-year journey towards social, economic and cultural change' ('The Rialto Youth Project Arts Programme'). From 2004-2009, Fatima Groups United worked with funding from the Irish Youth Foundation to draft a cultural arts strategy aimed at creating 'a new and sustainable arts provision...to be fully integrated and managed within a community framework'('Arts and Cultural Strategy').

I will now turn towards the evolution of drama and theatre in the Irish community arts sector, focusing on devising as a core early technique in this area. In doing so, I establish the history of devising as not only a formal, but a politicised practice in Irish theatre. Community arts' politicisation of formal theatre practices, such as devising among other interdisciplinary arts techniques, challenged dominant theatre-making trends (i.e. the literary theatre with its comparably or superficially clear hierarchy of production roles) as a reflection of wider social inequalities and uneven hierarchies.

### **Devising and Community**

Group devising through improvisation and/or collective writing (which may later be shaped for performance by a facilitator) figures centrally in terms of drama and theatre produced within the framework of community arts. As Deirdre Heddon and Jane Milling observe in regards to the United States and the UK primarily, 'Devising emerged as a core feature and methodology within the burgeoning field of community arts in the 1960s' (130). Their observation holds true in Ireland as well, perhaps owing to the direct and indirect influence of the British community arts movement.

The influence of both devising techniques and community arts would begin to make an impact in Ireland in the mid-late 1970s leading to the formation of TEAM Educational Theatre, 'Waterford Arts for All, and Grapevine and Moving Theatre in Dublin, all operating by the end of the 1970s' and beginning of the 1980s (Fitzgerald, 70). The 1978 founding of the Neighbourhood Open Workshop (NOW) in Belfast was another key event of this period. While initially founded by a 'group of people working as volunteers on summer play schemes in Belfast,' the creation of NOW would lead to the development of the Crescent Arts Centre '(at the time Belfast's only "neutral" community arts centre)', the 'Play Resource Warehouse in Belfast' and 'the Belfast Community Circus School' (256). NOW's artistically interdisciplinary and community

development engaged evolution demonstrate the central role of the community arts movement in innovating new aesthetic techniques and methods as well as intervening in local politics.

Dublin's TEAM Educational Theatre Company, which grew out of a partnership with the Abbey Theatre, was devising plays with and for young audiences as early as the mid-1970s. They began devising *with* groups before shifting to a practice of commissioning playwrights primarily to produce theatre *for* young audience. In the mid-1970s, TEAM first worked mainly through devising between facilitators and groups of schoolchildren. Their facilitators included Peter and Jim Sheridan, as well as Annie Kilmartin (founder of Moving Theatre), resulting in the devised works *Wonder Ponder Time*, *Women at Work*, *That's Mad* and *Sunflower* (Irish Theatre Playography). As TEAM's work evolved, the company worked less with devising and more often through commissioning playwrights including Frank McGuinness, Mary Elizabeth Burke-Kennedy, Paula Meehan, Jim Nolan and Maeve Ingolsby. Moving Theatre, like City Workshop, had an aim to 'devise plays about issues that touched the hearts of its audience' (Fitzgerald 259). Unlike City Workshop and more similarly to TEAM, Moving Theatre devised theatre *for* rather than *with* audiences, but they also ran the MADCAP (Moving Arts and Drama Community Action Programme) aimed at community participants, blurring lines between community arts and professional work, as ANU does 30 years later.

The work of City Workshop and Moving Theatre illustrates that many early Irish devising practices responded formally to the political concerns of artists and groups who viewed community arts and development as interlinked movements, while the example of TEAM situates Irish genealogies of devised theatre centrally within the ambit of community and/or educational theatre. Rather, devising as utilized by these three companies (and especially City Workshop and Moving Theatre) plays out the desire for artistic democracy in conjunction with activist practices that sought to intervene in local social and political structures. Other Irish artists at the time such as Tom MacIntyre, Patrick Mason, and Tom Hickey were experimenting with devising

techniques such as in their landmark 1983 collaboration on adapting Patrick Kavanagh's poem *The Great Hunger* at the Abbey, but their work falls outside the scope of this chapter as it is situated more firmly in relationship to the 'impact of movement and European performance techniques on the Irish theatrical style' (Fox 7), an interrelated but distinct genealogy of the evolution of devised theatre practice in Ireland.

A quite partial list of notable theatre groups and centres in the Republic working through a community arts practice from the late 1970s to the present include in Dublin: TEAM Educational Theatre (1975); Dublin Youth Theatre founded by Paddy O'Dwyer (1977); Peter Sheridan's City Workshop (founded with the support of Mick Egan as well) (1980); Annie Kilmartin's Moving Theatre (1982); Wet Paint Arts founded by Niall O'Baoill with significant contributions by Kathy McArdle and David Byrne (1985), and the Balcony Belles, established out of the North Wall Women's Centre in Dublin's Sheriff Street and facilitated by Fiona Nolan. Declan Gorman also names the Rialto Youth Project, the Parents Alone Resource Centre, and KLEAR, 'a woman's adult education project in Kilbarrack' as initiatives that used drama through the work of facilitators Joni Crone, Kathy McArdle and Jo Egan respectively (12-13). Elsewhere, notable groups include in Galway, Macnas founded by Ollie Jennings, Tom Conroy, Páraic Breathnach, and Pete Sammon (1985); in Waterford, Waterford Arts for All (1979); and in Drogheda, Upstate Theatre Project founded by Declan Gorman and Declan Mallon (1997). This list does not include short-term community arts theatre projects funded through more limited grants or initiatives including the North Clondalkin Arts and Drama Group as only one example.

Formally, as a sampling, Gorman describes the early 1990s work of Balcony Belles as 'topical and folk-historical dramas set in the inner city of Dublin' and the Rialto Youth Project's late 1990s plays produced under the guidance of Kathy McCardle and John Bissett as 'social realist plays...that compare with the best international published works in this tradition' (12). Their plays include *Here Today, Where Tomorrow*; *In the System* and *Inside Out*. More recent

community drama work from Upstate, which Gorman co-founded, has explored site-specificity in works like *Journey from Babel* and *Ship Street Revisited* and were devised by community participants working with directors Gorman and Declan Mallon (*Journey from Babel*) and director Paul Hayes and playwright Colm Maher (*Ship Street Revisited*).

From its origins, debates about how to make theatre in the field of community arts were intimately related to discussion of who should have access to the arts and what access meant at Irish state policy level beyond this sector on its own. Tellingly, the growth of community arts dovetailed with the expansion of the Arts Council's remit and resources from the 1970s-90s, resulting in an overall expansion of the place and role of the arts in Irish society, in terms of rhetoric and funding resources. For theatre in particular, the growth of the independent theatre sector that climaxed in the 1990s owes its existence to the collision of community arts with debates over the role of the arts and Arts Council funding in serving Irish society at large through the professional arts sector.

### **Form and Funding**

Shifts in Irish arts policy on the themes of access and outreach began in the mid-1970s, emerging alongside and in dialogue with the influence of the burgeoning community arts sector. Sandy Fitzgerald highlights the appointment of the Arts Council's first regional arts officer, Paul Funge, in 1976 as a move that 'represented a formalization of the acceptance of "arts-as-development" rather than "arts-as-separate" within society' (255). Paula Clancy looks even earlier to the 1973 Arts Act which expanded the scope and function of the Arts Council, adding cinema for example to a list of arts forms that previously included only 'painting, sculpture, architecture, music, the drama, literature, design in industry and the fine arts and applied arts generally' ('Arts Act 1951'). At the time of its passage, then Taoiseach Liam Cosgrove observed:

There is a danger that many people may regard the arts as the preserve of a privileged coterie. We must actively promote and encourage a wider approach than this: a philosophy that art in all its forms, is a means by which a fuller and more satisfying life may be achieved by the people at large. (Qtd. in Clancy 86).

It is not made explicit in Cosgrove's statement whether he is talking about increasing access only or access and participation opportunities in the arts, but the push for increased participation in the arts characterised the community arts movement that emerged in the immediate aftermath of his statement. For activists and artists like Sandy Fitzgerald, Mowbray Bates, Jim and Peter Sheridan, Annie Kilmartin and Ollie Breslin, access meant 'validation of the idea that ordinary people can take an active role in building culture' through direct participation as arts-makers and the 'encouragement of critical thought and action amongst both the people participating and the observer' (Ibid. 89). By 2003, the most recent Arts Act stipulated for the first time that the Arts Council must not just stimulate 'public interest in the arts' but 'promote knowledge, appreciation or *practice* of the arts' ('Arts Act 2003') [*emphasis mine*].

Baz Kershaw's influential *The Politics of Practice: Radical Theatre as Cultural Intervention* makes a persuasive case for the impact of British radical theatre rooted in a community and alternative ethos on the 'culture of a nation' (Kershaw 50) during the period of the 1970s-80s, a similar period under consideration here. Kershaw documents that during this period the British 'alternative theatre movement had grown from almost nothing to the position of contributing almost a third of the product of subsidized theatre, for just over a tenth of the total subsidy' (Ibid.). Sandy Fitzgerald makes a similar claim for the total proliferation in Irish arts between the late 1970s and the present, claiming:

... the unprecedented growth in creative activity and cultural development within the thirty-two counties of Ireland is heavily indebted to community arts, spanning, as it does, an exhausting array of activity including arts centers, festivals, youth projects,

disability projects, community training programmes, artist in residence schemes, prison workshops and school programmes. (Fitzgerald, 1)

Fitzgerald highlights here a proliferation in art forms and community spaces as a hallmark of the Irish community arts movement. The Irish community arts coalesced in a moment characterized by unemployment, emigration and the heightening of conflict in the North that eventually gave way in the 1990s to the advent of the Celtic Tiger. Unprecedented increases in arts funding during the 1990s were accompanied by new state-level attention in arts policy to the social as well as aesthetic function of the arts in Irish society. During the Celtic Tiger, as Brian Singleton notes, ‘public funding of theatre through the Arts Council rose by 300 per cent’ during the 1990s before peaking at €81.62 million in 2008 (*Masculinities and the Contemporary Irish Theatre* 6). It would be inaccurate to say that the community arts movement was entirely responsible for the 1990s and early-mid 2000s growth in independent theatre companies that increased arts funding made possible. However, the broadening of infrastructural support for the arts locally through sustained efforts by the Arts Council, and related state supported agencies like CREATE, is undeniably indebted to the field of community arts and its agitators.

### **Devising the Contemporary Through Community (Arts): The 1990s to now**

The connections between the expansion of the independent theatre sector and the community arts movement provides the most crucial link that brings us from ANU and their contemporaries back to Sheridan and his predecessors and collaborators. However, study of the independent Irish theatre sector at large has been limited and new work in this area by Christie Fox, Bernadette Sweeney, Brian Singleton, and Aoife McGrath, as well as Willie White and Peter Crawley’s edited collection *No More Drama*, has focused primarily on physical and dance theatre, often first emphasising European influences on the evolution of Irish theatrical form since the 1990s. The role of the political has also been discounted during this period with Singleton claiming with regret that in the 1990s, ‘political performance, though, was a rare commodity and

theatre tended to shy away from national political debates for the most part' (*Masculinities and the Contemporary Irish Theatre* 6). Turning to the popular and community theatres Singleton lamented earlier as excluded, however, might yield a different history of this period when considered in relationship to the evolution of the independent theatre sector. This alternative genealogy suggests that contemporary Irish companies that utilize devised technique alongside community engagement do not represent an entirely new wave of theatre making, but continue and rejuvenate a mode of politicized experimentation with theatre and performance form that has been ongoing since the 1970s.

The range and energy of activity in community arts practice from the 1970s onward was matched by experimentation with performance in the streets and fringe theatre spaces in cities including Dublin, Galway, Cork and Waterford. This work involved many artists also working in community arts or social protest movements such as Peter and Jim Sheridan, Mannix Flynn, Annie Kilmartin, Thom 'The Dice Man' McGinty, Fiona Nolan, and slightly later, Declan Gorman, Raymond Keane, Donal O'Kelly, Charlie O'Neill and their contemporaries. According to Charlie O'Neill, these artists' performance experiments addressed explicitly political subjects such as nuclear proliferation, poverty, unemployment, and women's rights (O'Neill). Of this group, Gorman and Charlie O'Neill have been the most persistent chroniclers of these events through articles, editorials and reports on the role of the arts such as those O'Neill has produced for Fatima Groups United and the Rialto Youth Project, including his most recent role as the editor of *An Arts Plan for Rialto 2012-2016* and Gorman's various news and website articles, as well as his critical introduction to Upstate's self-published anthology of several community drama works, *Out in the Country*.

In an early 1990s piece of writing produced for Calypso Productions, a theatre for social change company originally co-founded by O'Neill and Donal O'Kelly among others, Gorman

traced the trajectory of community arts and political theatre in Ireland straight back to the foundation of the Abbey.

In Ireland, the National Theatre Society was closely linked to the emergence of a liberation movement in the early years of the century. More recently, in the 1950s, Brendan Behan's *The Quare Fellow* is said to have influenced the decision by the British Government to abolish hanging. In the 1970s Jim and Peter Sheridan pioneered a wave of modern Irish social realism in the Project Arts Centre, cultivating awareness and public outrage at the injustices of urban life with controversial plays on the burning issues of the day. In the '80s it was the turn of Passion Machine and Wet Paint with dramas set amongst the marginalised youth of Dublin. Co-Motion, meanwhile, explored international issues, presenting such work as Peter Weiss' anti-colonial play *The Song of the White Man's Burden*. By 1989 visual artists and theatre workers from all the main Irish companies were collaborating with advocates of social justice to mount the massive Parade of Innocence street theatre campaigns, highlighting miscarriages of justice. (Gorman, 'Theatre for Social Change').

Gorman's positioning of the 1990s as a decade inaugurated through a passion for the intersection between theatre, community arts and political activism is a counter-narrative to more recent accounts of this period in Irish theatre history which have instead focused on the important turn to 'forms that were non-realistic, and often highly physical, and approached texts with a corporeal irreverence,' (Singleton, *Masculinity and the Contemporary Irish Theatre* 6) deemphasizing the importance of political performance during this period.

Indeed, a physical and dance theatre movement in Irish theatre coalesced in the 1990s through the work of companies like Barabbas, Blue Raincoat, Corn Exchange, Fabulous Beast, Macnas, and Pan Pan. Fox names this body of work 'the Irish theater of movement' and she argues this shift 'changed the nature of theater in Ireland, permitting a recognition that actors had

bodies and that these bodies might be useful in communicating the effects of ...societal changes' related to the upheaval of the Celtic Tiger in the 1990s (3). She continues:

...the new theater de-privileged text and emphasized physical performance. Much of it was in search of a distinctly Irish type of physicality or gesture...created from a synthesis of ancient Irish performance forms such as mumming and European forms such as the commedia dell'arte and French mime. (5)

Fox connects this shift to a break from Irish literary traditions that she maintains have dominated theatre criticism even more so than theatre production. Fox's study connects formal innovation primarily to increasing European influences on Irish artists through exposure to work in the Dublin Theatre Festival and Galway Arts Festival, newly available funding from the Arts Council for artist exchanges and visits in the 1990s and Irish artists training in Europe, particularly in French mime, as with Mikel Murfi, one of Barabba's founders. Crucially, Fox also traces the turn towards a broader adaptation of a 'collaborative method which, combined with devised theater and a decentering of the text, mirrored the disintegration of Ireland as a shared place or communally recognizable society' (7). It is precisely this collaborative method that I have linked back to the community arts movement, and its early experiments with devised techniques of theatre making. The work of this sector not only mirrored the disintegration of Ireland back to itself, but used the arts to interrogate the sources of this disintegration from the perspective of those experiencing it within marginalised community contexts. Not only this, the frequent alliance between community arts and community development positioned the arts as having an importance to serve not just as a mirror of the nation, but as a set of tools for rebuilding the nation from the bottom up.

A history of the community arts sector ultimately offers an overtly politicised framework through which to understand how the arts have functioned in Ireland since the mid-1970s. The 1990s and 2000s in particular brought massive changes, not only economic expansion and

collapse, but unprecedented inward-migration and the revelation of multiple damaging Catholic Church scandals. It is these more recent events that ANU, Brokentalkers and THEATREclub respond most explicitly to, and this is perhaps why their work has not been placed in reference to earlier histories of community arts as they make a mutual turn towards political critique and formal methods that empower both minority histories and members of the community themselves as collaborators and performers. They respond to their own immediate context and diverse (and international) artistic influences but do so by drawing centrally on the minority theatre history of community arts. By locating contemporary theatre practice that uses collaborative and devised techniques in the history of community arts (and development), it is possible to theorise more concretely about not only how the arts might be economically beneficial to the economy as a resource, as a ‘welcome mat for the heads of state, investors, stars and tourists’ as argued by the National Campaign for the Arts 2013 ‘Republic of Culture’ video. Instead, community arts methodologies provide critical tools through which the arts have been used to consciously call into question the limits of participation and inclusion in Irish society. By drawing on the insight of these tactics, the Irish arts may ultimately move closer to achieving another goal of the ‘Republic of Culture’ campaign, the creation of a ‘truly inclusive and creative state and not just an economy’ (Ibid.)

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#### ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Since 2011, a list of the productions that they have devised in partnership with community participants includes: Anu Productions, *Boys of Foley Street* (2012), *In Development: Vardo Corner* (2013), *Angel Meadow* (2014), *Vardo Corner* (2014); Brokentalkers, *Have I No Mouth* (2012), *Abacus: A Short Film* (2013), and *Frequency 783* (2014); and THEATREclub, *The Family* (2011), *History* (2013).

<sup>2</sup> See Houghton 65-93, Singleton (2013) 21-36 and Weaver.