Home places: Irish drama since 1990

Clare Wallace and Ondřej Pilný

To appraise Irish theatre of the recent past is an ominous task; to attempt to predict what might be remembered in the future a treacherous one. From 1990 to mid-2006 the Irish Playography database lists 842 plays, devised pieces and adaptations produced in Ireland by Irish theatre companies and other commercial bodies. Since 1990 critical interest in Irish theatre has grown rapidly, spurred on in part by the Abbey Theatre centenary in 2004 and reassessments of its history, in part by the emergence of a vibrant new generation of playwrights and the international success of a handful of Irish directors and dramatists.

In his introduction to *Druids, Dudes and Beauty Queens* Dermot Bolger relates an anecdote about four women in the audience at the end of one of his plays: ‘Two stood up to give the actors a standing ovation . . . while their two companions resolutely sat with their arms folded, disliking what they’d seen so much that they steadfastly refused to clap’.¹ Such contrary reactions, likely to end in ‘a blazing row’,² appealed to Bolger as an ideal response to a theatre production. Responses to the changes in Irish society, economy and culture in this period seem similarly split between outright rejection and standing ovation, and provide a challenging terrain for contemporary theatre and its criticism. The following survey will consider three aspects of Irish theatre since 1990 in an effort to establish a context for the chapters in this section. It will focus initially on writing for theatre from both established writers and the generation that emerged in the early 1990s, then will turn to the theatre scene (directors, theatre companies and performance); and finally consider the critical energies around theatre up to the mid-2000s.

Plays and playwrights

Irish theatre is renowned for its literary character; drama which is verbal rather than the physical is to the fore. Depending on one’s predilection

this may be its greatest quality or its long-term limitation; either way, traditionally it has been a theatre of the playwright, the text and the power of the word. Attempts to sum up what Irish drama is about tend to revolve around the questions of identity in relation to the nation. Thus, in *Twentieth-Century Irish Drama*, Christopher Murray observes succinctly that

Irish drama is a long, energetic dispute with a changing audience over the same basic issues: where we come from, where we are now, and where we are headed. Alternatively, these questions comprise history, identity, home or a sense of place, and visionary imagination.³

The transformation of Ireland in the 1990s has meant that such questions remain at the top of the agenda, not merely for playwrights, but for Irish society and culture as a whole. At a time of much-publicised and selective prosperity, of returned, deracinated emigrants, combined with the influx of racially ‘other’ immigrants and the more general commodification of ethnicity, Irish identity has, unsurprisingly, been in the throes of some considerable redefinition. The status of Ireland’s Celtic Tiger economy, the effects of consumerism and globalisation are the subjects of considerable debate. As Michael Böss and Eamon Maher have noted in their introduction to *Engaging Modernity*, positions taken in this debate tend to indicate the chief and quite divergent ‘attitudes to modernity’.⁴ A prominent, generally positive, approach is to be found in the work of National Economic and Social Council economist Rory O’Donnell, and has also been widely disseminated in popular form through the journalism of Fintan O’Toole. Accordingly the changes experienced since the mid-1990s are seen to be as progressive and necessarily moving away from the traditional nationalist model of economy and social organisation, towards further European integration and a process of ‘re-invention’.⁵ In direct opposition to this view, Peadar Kirby argues that in contrast to the ‘invention’ of Ireland in the 1890s, the ‘re-invention’ of Ireland in the 1990s has occurred ‘through the actions of market-accommodating business and political elites rather than through popular social and cultural contestation of the dominant order’.⁶ Compared then to the nationalist Ireland that preceded it, neo-liberal Ireland is of false provenance and can perhaps lead only to the abyss of post-national disempowerment.

Ultimately attitudes in this debate reveal how globalisation has involved more than an accelerated process of commodification in the cultural sphere. As a result of the development of mass media, telecommunications, computer technology and the upsurge in migration, traditional senses of national identity based on race and place have been

rendered problematic.⁷ What then does this mean for Irish drama? In an article in an *Irish Theatre Magazine* series assessing the state of Irish theatre in 2003, Scottish theatre critic Joyce McMillan notes that Irish theatre's strongholds have traditionally maintained an 'accomplished tradition of public storytelling through performance', eloquence and 'engagement with the life of the nation'.⁸ Though globalisation may be notoriously difficult to define, having acquired in the last decade the qualities of a shibboleth,⁹ in its contemporary incarnation it involves the transformation of how the world is perceived spatially and temporally. As such, its impact may test these strongholds, for as

nations become less significant as political units, and we move into a world in which new media and faster communications create different networks of kinship and organisation across much larger distances, Irish theatre inevitably faces a huge crisis of identity, a deep question about who the audience now is, and how it should be addressed.¹⁰

The fallout of the triumphalist materialism of the 1990s, coupled with loosening bonds between nation and identity, continue to present a challenge for the new playwrights of the 1990s and those who follow.

Yet while the 1990s did herald a break with various aspects of twentieth-century Ireland and Irishness, a reconfiguration of Irish identity was evident in Irish drama well before the rhetoric of globalisation. When in 1992 Tom Kilroy surveyed his own 'generation of playwrights' which grew up in a country characterised by poverty and isolation, he noted how this group – whose early work dates from the 1960s – witnessed and wrote of the transformation of a traditional culture and the accompanying pangs of a changing identity. In Kilroy's view this work struggled to connect the past with the present, to the extent that the drama produced between the 1960s and the 1980s was notable for its self-consciousness, written by 'agnostic believers and uneasy patriots, reluctant farmers and local cosmopolitans, incredulous parents and recalcitrant, elderly children, citizens of a country not always identical to the one of their imaginations'.¹¹ Kilroy's generation of playwrights – Brian Friel, Tom Murphy, Hugh Leonard and Tom MacIntyre – emerged at the beginning of a long second wave of engaged and engaging Irish drama (following the first wave at the beginning of the twentieth century). In the 1980s they were joined by a younger set of talented theatre writers including, among others, Stewart Parker, Dermot Bolger, Frank McGuinness, Sebastian Barry, Christina Reid, Marie Jones and Declan Hughes.

Although the destinies of these writers are inevitably varied, most have continued to be of importance to Irish drama to the present day.

Murray lists Brian Friel, Tom Murphy, John B. Keane, Tom Kilroy and Hugh Leonard among the 1960s dramatists of canonical status.¹² Of these, Friel and Murphy now occupy absolutely central positions in the modern Irish dramatic canon. Friel has continued in the manner sketched by Kilroy, as a 'highly formal artist',¹³ working with themes mapped out in his earlier work of history, memory, forms of identity and exile, and verbal and nonverbal communication. Indeed, for Friel the period is bounded by two major plays, *Dancing at Lughnasa* (1990) and *The Home Place* (2005), which frame a number of new pieces – *Wonderful Tennessee* (1993), *Molly Sweeney* (1994), *Give Me Your Answer, Do!* (1997), *Afterplay* (2002), *Performances* (2003) – and adaptations – *A Month in the Country* (1992), *The London Vertigo* (1992), *The Yalta Game* (2001) and *The Bear* (2002). Although appreciation of Tom Murphy has been slower to gather momentum, the Abbey Theatre's Tom Murphy season in October 2001 marked a breakthrough celebration of his work. The reputation of plays like *The Gigli Concert* (1983) and *Bailegangaire* (1986) has continued to grow, and Murphy's new work – *The Wake* (1998), *The House* (2000), *The Alice Trilogy* (2005) – adds to what is now a substantial oeuvre.

Simultaneous with the development of the group of established writers listed above, the 1990s saw a dynamic new generation of playwrights come to the fore. A number of these have achieved considerable success both internationally and in Ireland; the best known at this time include Marina Carr, Martin McDonagh, Conor McPherson, Enda Walsh and Mark O'Rowe. Along with their immediate predecessors the work of these playwrights might be examined in terms of various stylistic and thematic tendencies. These tendencies do not map out a fixed or comprehensive typology of contemporary Irish drama, rather they are best regarded as currents that at times intermingle, at times diverge, and at other times cut across each other with turbulent effect.

One of the most powerful and provocative of these currents is the tragic-mythic to be found in both new writing and adaptation. In *Theatre Stuff* (2000) Marianne McDonald noted over thirty adaptations of Greek tragedy that had been produced since 1984,¹⁴ and the number has even swelled further since then. Among the most recent are Seamus Heaney's version of Sophocles' *Antigone* entitled *The Burial at Thebes* (2004) and Conall Morrison's *Antigone* (2003); however, perhaps more interesting are new plays that draw upon a combination of the mythic and tragic as does the work of Marina Carr. *The Mai*, *Portia Coughlan*, *By the Bog of Cats* . . . and *Ariel* grapple with the possibility of grafting the tragic onto the contemporary through powerful, often self-mythologising protagonists, and the cadences and idioms of Irish

Midland speech. Yet despite the local references Carr's work eschews narrow naturalism, addressing violent and destructive ontological conflicts and primal forces in human nature. The result is that sometimes the graft threatens to overpower the organism, raising once more the question of the role of tragedy in today's drama and in a present-day context.

A further noteworthy recent example of the tragic-mythic is to be found in Vincent Woods' *A Cry From Heaven* (2005) based on the medieval tale of Deirdre and the Sons of Uisnach. As Harvey O'Brien has pointed out in his review of the production, Woods' version 'takes the form of classical drama, a tale of the tragic folly of those who oppose the Fates, built around larger-than-life human archetypes, who share weighty exchanges in sombre tones'.¹⁵ This may sound like a recipe for disaster in modern theatre, but under the direction of Olivier Py the production was given an expressionistic treatment that shocked some sectors of the Abbey Theatre's summer audience,¹⁶ and testified to a renewed energy in unorthodox performance on Irish stages.

Currents of experimentalism run but intermittently through Irish dramatic writing, and are perhaps more fruitfully discussed in combination with performance. Nevertheless, experimental, non-naturalistic approaches are to be found in the work of Tom MacIntyre – particularly in *Good Evening, Mr Collins* (1995) – and in plays such as Dermot Bolger's *The Lament for Arthur Cleary* (1989) and *One Last White Horse* (1991), and in Woods' impressive mummery play, *At the Black Pig's Dyke* (1992).

A more acclaimed feature of Irish drama and one of its most marketable features is the lyric-narrative. In this period Friel's *Dancing at Lughnasa*, Billy Roche's *Wexford Trilogy: A Handful of Stars, Poor Beast in the Rain, Belfry* (1992),¹⁷ Sebastian Barry's *The Steward of Christendom* (1995) or Conor McPherson's *The Weir* (1997) are fine models of this stylistic strand. The plays maintain a naturalistic frame in which a story unfolds via careful character development and rich contextual reference. These are classic examples of a type of Irish play praised by Joyce McMillan above that wins audiences with a delicate, if formally conservative, blend of linguistic skill, human interest and carefully crafted narrative structures, while being marked by an engagement with individual and/or collective history.

Running parallel to the lyric-narrative is another very popular and traditional form, the melodramatic-comic play. A playwright who has had much success with this particular formula is Marie Jones. *A Night in November* (1995), *Women on the Verge of HRT* (1999) and *Stones in his Pockets* (2000), each of which is unashamedly populist in its

humorous and clever narrative trajectory, provides neat, audience-pleasing resolutions. Melodrama, like tragedy, relies upon catharsis and in this sense may prove an interesting indicator of latent social unease. As Peter Brooks argues in *The Melodramatic Imagination*, the form 'starts from and expresses the anxiety brought by a frightening new world in which the traditional patterns of moral order no longer provide the necessary social glue. It plays out the force of that anxiety with the apparent triumph of villainy, and it dissipates it with the eventual victory of virtue'.¹⁸

Of the playwrights who emerged in the 1990s Martin McDonagh has most successfully provoked a great deal of dissent that belies considerable anxiety and insecurity around perceptions of Irishness. McDonagh preserves most of the elements of melodrama – suspense, sensational episodes and romance – though unambiguously happy endings are in short supply. In *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* (1996), *The Cripple of Inishmaan* (1996), *A Skull in Connemara* (1997), *The Lonesome West* (1997) and *The Lieutenant of Inishmore* (2001) these elements are liberally seasoned with satirical stereotypes of Irishness and stage Irishry. McDonagh's work, despite being embedded in the traditional formulae of Irish drama, also bears a close affinity with British 'in-yer-face drama' of the 1990s, serving the audience a cocktail of blood, gore and offensive language hitherto unseen on an Irish stage.¹⁹

The confluence of melodrama and satire in recent Irish drama is perhaps best illustrated in the adventurously quirky musical comedy *Improbable Frequency* (2004–05) by Arthur Riordan and Bell Helicopter. The play follows the fortunes of crossword enthusiast and British spy Tristram Faraday in wartime Dublin, where he discovers the laws of probability are being distorted and Ireland's neutrality preserved by PAT (a Probability Adjustment Tank), a secret weapon created by Austrian scientist Erwin Schrödinger. Playfully renovating performance conventions, *Improbable Frequency* also humorously unravels the conventions of the history play, so beloved of Irish playwrights.

The history-memory play maintains an important role, however. It was pioneered by Friel and developed in Sebastian Barry's work throughout the 1990s, and new playwrights have also explored this thematic stand. Elizabeth Kuti's *The Sugar Wife* (2005) depicts Samuel Tewkley, a tea and coffee merchant, and his wife, Hannah, and their encounter with an English anti-abolitionist and a former American slave and campaigner. Though set in nineteenth-century Dublin, the play explores themes of business and social responsibility, philanthropy and exploitation that all have significant resonance in the present day.²⁰

One of the greatest challenges in Irish drama from 1990 to 2006 has been how to produce theatre that can deal with or respond to contemporary conditions. Attempts to address this issue are the final current flowing through recent Irish drama to be discussed here. Playwright Declan Hughes has vociferously rejected what he sees as the nostalgic preoccupations of traditional Irish drama, calling for a 'second way of reacting to the collapse of cultural identity in the world: to reflect it, to embrace it, to see it as liberating . . . what we need more than ever are clear-eyed writers who will take the trouble to view the world as it is, in all its complexity, and will then speak the truth'.²¹ Yet how playwrights have approached the business of 'speaking the truth' inevitably reveals a spectrum of interests and methodologies ranging from naturalistic plays by Hughes like *Digging for Fire* (1991) or *Shiver* (2003), or Jimmy Murphy's *The Muesli Belt* (2000); the non-naturalistic, issues-based performance pieces by Donal O'Kelly such as *Farawayan* (1998) or *The Cambria* (2005); plays that take Irish politics as a theme or that reflect upon Northern Ireland, like Gary Mitchell's *In a Little World of Our Own* (1997) and *Loyal Women* (2003), or the docudrama *Bloody Sunday* (2005) scripted by British journalist Richard Norton-Taylor; to plays that fit within the experiential aesthetic of 'in-yer-face' drama like Mark O'Rowe's *Howie the Rookie* (1999) and *Made in China* (2001), and Enda Walsh's *Disco Pigs* (1996) and *Sucking Dublin* (1997). Such a list can only begin to suggest the range of possible inflections of contemporary experience, anxieties and conditions to be found in Irish drama today.

Practitioners and performance

A focus on the state of playwriting alone can give a somewhat distorted picture of Irish theatre as a whole. Theatre cannot belong solely to writers no matter how brilliant their work may be; it necessarily encompasses all the other agents and agencies that physically realise a performance on stage and invest it with meaning. The strength of the role of the writer in Irish theatre has often led to the diminution of the roles of director and performance practices in the ways in which theatre has been traditionally perceived and studied. Since 1990, however, some critics and scholars have drawn attention to this deficit and have begun to propagate a discourse around these aspects of Irish theatre. In a collection of essays on *The State of Play: Irish Theatre in the Nineties*, Anna McMullan reviews the contemporary Irish independent theatre sector. She cites the Arts Council report *Views of Theatre in Ireland 1995* in which attention is drawn to how the dominant role of

the writer has resulted in ‘artists and audiences [being] under-exposed to theatre conceived and made in other ways’.²² McMullan’s point is that performance is ‘making a comeback’. This may be in terms of ‘a wider range of performance conventions’ being deployed by new playwrights like Marina Carr, Sebastian Barry and Dermot Bolger, as well as independent theatre groups who are devoted to performance and physical theatre such as the Galway group Macnas.²³ Irish theatre’s preoccupation with language and text as a means of plumbing the depths of post-colonial identity may also be understood vis-à-vis the complex issues of transmission and posterity. If texts have pasts and futures, arguably performance (in the sense of physical/non-verbal theatre or dance) is frequently a matter of the present and presence. The former may invite reflection; the latter seems primarily engaged with the experiential. Yet, as McMullan rightly points out, ‘[r]efocusing on performance may [also] offer a new way of looking at the texts of the Irish theatre tradition, and at how this tradition may be opened up, regenerated, and made more inclusive’.²⁴

From the perspective of 2006, what can be said of the state of performance, the role of theatre companies, performers and directors? Certainly the diversification observed and predicted by McMullan has been gaining momentum. The following paragraphs will pick out a few highlights. Garry Hynes, the co-founder of the Druid Theatre Company in 1975, is probably Ireland’s most important living theatre director. As artistic director of the Abbey Theatre from 1990 to 1993 she provocatively challenged the very notion of a national theatre representing the nation. The nation she asserts was and continues to be ‘a collection of fictions’,²⁵ and as Ireland changes, the National Theatre must circumvent the risk of becoming ‘hostage to one or other version of being Irish’.²⁶ Since her term at the Abbey, Hynes has been involved in numerous seminal projects. Her commitment to challenging new writing is evidenced in her discovery of the playwright Martin McDonagh, which led to the now (in)famous Druid productions of the Leenane Trilogy, and her direction of Marina Carr’s *Portia Coughlan* (1996), *By the Bog of Cats* . . . (1998) and *On Raftery’s Hill* (2000). Most recently in 2004 Hynes and the Druid Theatre company have revisited all of J.M. Synge’s work in their cycle of productions entitled *DruidSynge*, thus marking ‘Druid’s commitment to affirming Synge’s place in not simply the Irish, but the international theatre canon’.²⁷

Lynne Parker, like Hynes, is co-founder of one of Ireland’s major independent theatre companies, Rough Magic, and has worked extensively as a director with other companies and theatres across Ireland and the UK. Rough Magic was formed back in 1984 by Parker and Declan

Hughes and initially produced work by non-Irish playwrights including Howard Brenton, David Mamet, Caryl Churchill and Michael Frayn. From this starting point Rough Magic began to develop a base of original work, often written by performers and directors involved with the company such as Hughes, Gina Moxley, Donal O'Kelly and Pom Boyd. In 2001 the company inaugurated the Seeds Initiative in association with the Dublin Fringe Festival to develop and stage new writing in Ireland. A second round of the initiative was launched in 2004, and was followed up by Seeds III in 2006, in each case strengthening further the international dimension of the training provided to the young artists selected to participate in the project. The fruits of Rough Magic's propagation of new writing can be seen in impressive new plays like Morna Regan's *Midden* (2001) and Kuti's *The Sugar Wife*. Among Parker's recent directing projects has been the irreverent and surreal musical comedy *Improbable Frequency* discussed above.

The 1990s and early 2000s also saw the rise of a number of talented performers who also write and/or direct. This type of alternative theatre practice has complicated the traditional perception of authorship, described by Brian Singleton and Anna McMullan as 'the male playwright producing narratives of postcolonial cultural stasis or male impotence'.²⁸ Influenced by Stanislavski, Meyerhold, Grotowski and Eugenio Barba, Jason Byrne as artistic director and co-founder of Loose Canon Theatre Company (1996) leads a full-time ensemble of performers in an ongoing actor training programme. The company's philosophy foregrounds the role of the actor in the theatre experience. Since 1996 they have produced principally works of Elizabethan and Jacobean drama (*Julius Caesar*, *Coriolanus*, *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *The Revenger's Tragedy*, *The White Devil*, *The Duchess of Malfi*) as well as modern European classics such as Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler*. In overtly claiming a genealogy of performance/directing, Byrne is remarkable for his attempts to consciously connect with performance traditions that have conventionally not had much foothold in the Irish theatre scene.

Another challenger of the formulae of text-based theatre is the performer/practitioner Olwen Fouéré. As one of Ireland's more formally adventurous artists, Fouéré has become an important feature of the contemporary Irish theatre, acting across the range from the classics of modern drama to avant-garde performance. With composer Roger Doyle, she is artistic director of Operating Theatre (founded in 1980), which has been responsible for various experimental pieces such as *Here Lies* (Antonin Artaud) (2005), *Passades* (2004) or *Angel/Babel* (1999). Fouéré's commitment to powerful physical performance provocatively marks out a new territory on the contemporary Irish scene.

Finally, although it has oft been the target of criticism for its conservatism, Ireland's National Theatre has been home to much dynamic new theatre since 1990. While fostering new writers like Marina Carr and Mark O'Rowe, the Abbey has also continued to celebrate canonical authors like Brian Friel, Tom Murphy and John B. Keane. The Abbey's centenary in 2004 attracted critical and popular (re)consideration of its role as a national theatre. However, the centenary celebrations also were the focus of much controversy when it was revealed that the theatre was in serious financial straits. Since 2005 reform has been ongoing, with the theatre's new director Fiach Mac Conghail working to change its organisational structures and, in conjunction with the government, to secure a new location for it at Dublin's George's dock. Relocation of the theatre will open another chapter in the life of Ireland's best-known dramatic institution, providing it with renewed creative impetus for the next century.

Criticism and commentary

As mentioned at the outset, critical interest in Irish drama since 1990 has mushroomed. First, a number of detailed studies have emerged which re-assess the multifarious interconnections of canonical Irish drama with politics. Among these, Nicholas Grene's *The Politics of Irish Drama* (1999) and Lionel Pilkington's *Theatre and the State in Twentieth-Century Ireland* (2001) deserve special mention, the former for its perceptive textual criticism, and the latter for offering a challenging new perspective on Ireland's national theatres.²⁹

Detailed overviews of recent drama have been provided both by Anthony Roche's *Contemporary Irish Drama: From Beckett to McGuinness* (1994) and Christopher Murray's *Twentieth-Century Irish Drama: Mirror up to Nation* (1997). These have been complemented lately by the new *Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century Irish Drama*, edited by Shaun Richards (2004), which sketches a map of the territory for the general reader. Apart from that, a kaleidoscope of opinions on the state of the art is offered by volumes of critical essays such as *The State of Play: Irish Theatre in the 'Nineties*, ed. Eberhard Bort (1996), *Theatre Stuff*, ed. Eamonn Jordan (2000), *Codes and Masks: Aspects of Identity in Contemporary Irish Plays in an Intercultural Context* by Mária Kurdi (2000), and *Druids, Dudes and Beauty Queens*, ed. Dermot Bolger (2001), together with full-length studies such as Margaret Llewellyn Jones's *Contemporary Irish Drama and Cultural Identity* (2002).

Carysfort Press (Dublin) has become an important venue for publications on theatre (not only Irish), including *Theatre Talk: Voices of Irish Theatre Practitioners*, eds Lilian Chambers, Ger Fitzgibbon and Eamonn Jordan (2001). Carysfort have also embarked on a series of volumes dedicated to the most important recent playwrights, starting with '*Stages of Mutability*': *The Theatre of Frank McGuinness*, ed. Helen Lojek (2002) and '*Before Rules Was Made*': *The Theatre of Marina Carr*, eds Cathy Leeney and Anna McMullan (2003), followed up by *Out of History: Essays on the Writings of Sebastian Barry* (2006) and *The Theatre of Martin McDonagh*, eds Lilian Chambers and Eamonn Jordan (2006). The series represents a priceless resource for future scholarship, especially as it often – apart from offering new work – also makes available the best of the earlier articles on these playwrights, complemented with programme notes for individual productions, interviews and other supplementary material.

In addition, *Irish Theatre Magazine*, launched in 1998, filled the gap left by *Theatre Ireland*. The ITM dedicates significant space to the voices of young theatre critics and is a true hub for the most topical debates; in fact, its pages provide a fairly accurate picture of the current strengths and shortcomings of Irish theatre practice, and also fresh critical perspectives and desires. The preoccupation with Irish theatre as the theatre of a nation – as noted above – is still in evidence; however, it is accompanied by a struggle for a more international theatre, instigated by close contact with cutting-edge European theatrical practices and experiments. Significant coverage is given to alternative forms of theatre (particularly physical and dance theatre and performance) – often in fledgling state in Ireland as yet – and to fringe productions; this in turn demonstrates a wish for a more diverse scene in terms of genre.

The turn of the century has also witnessed a growing importance of online resources. Among these, the Irish Playography stands out in a remarkable manner. Launched by Theatre Shop in 2003, it aims to list all Irish plays produced since the formation of the National Theatre. The project is now nearing completion, and makes Ireland one of the very few countries worldwide to have such a comprehensive database available to practitioners and researchers in an electronic format. Moreover, Theatre Shop has just transformed itself into an Irish Theatre Institute, a body which has been sorely lacking in Ireland. Its Strategic Statement for 2006–12 makes for a fascinating read and raises high expectations indeed: apart from continuing extensive research, the Institute plans to focus primarily on the promotion of Irish

theatre and drama internationally, enabling access to unpublished or out-of-print playscripts and materials, developing a national theatre policy, and offering advice and consultation services to the theatre sector. If the Playography is anything to judge by, Irish theatre is bound to benefit immensely from the enterprise.

The three chapters that follow discuss some of the most topical issues which have emerged in Irish drama and theatre since 1990. Starting from the premise that drama is primarily 'a genre concerned with contradictory forces and unresolved problems' (p. 60), Mária Kurdi looks at innovative ways in which it has addressed the fact of gender inequality in contemporary Ireland. She focuses particularly on the staging of the female body, seen both as 'a sign of social positionality and cultural experience associated with the symbolic' and a reflection of the 'individual desire to remain undefined by communal discourses' (p. 61). The subversive and/or transformative potential of performing female corporeality is documented in a detailed analysis of three plays by women: Gina Moxley's *Danti Dan*, Emma Donoghue's *Ladies and Gentlemen*, and *By the Bog of Cats* . . . by Marina Carr. Kurdi's interpretation of *Danti Dan* stresses above all the deployment of mimicry as a strategy which in the hands of a rebellious teenager dismantles established gender roles and approaches to sexuality. Despite the fact that this brings about 'disorder and destruction', it also aptly exposes latent oppressive tendencies within the social system (p. 67). *Ladies and Gentlemen*, on the other hand, is a play which 'introduces the practice of female cross-dressing as a performative strategy to re-negotiate the ontological status of gender' (p. 68). The delightful mixture of vaudeville, memory play and metatheatricality offered by Donoghue indeed shows that gender can be experienced as a 'subversive performance' (p. 69). Moreover, Kurdi argues that the complex emotions involved in the scenes from 'the protagonist's memoryscape' may be communicated only through the language of the body (p. 70). Finally, miming is observed again in *By the Bog of Cats* . . . , but this time as a target of mockery. Characters are revealed hypocritically imitating respectability in sharp contrast to the desire 'to transgress institutionalised fixities and the binaries of gender and class' (p. 73). In this context, the staging of corporeality serves according to Kurdi as an instrument of demarcation, outlining the boundaries between the world of 'the settled community' and the 'liminal realm of otherness' (p. 72). And although Carr's drama does not explicitly address issues of gender politics in the manner of the two former plays, Kurdi maintains that the pathos of *By the Bog of Cats* . . . is bound to stir the audience into thinking about such issues

nonetheless. What comes out very clearly of Kurdi's discussion is that identity should be understood as a set of performative acts rather than static characteristics. Moreover, the stage might – in Kurdi's view – serve as a laboratory (Jill Dolan's term) in which experimentation is used to negotiate 'socio-cultural inscriptions' (p. 76) such as gender roles and attitudes concerning sexuality, and thus bring about requisite social change.

Carr's work is also explored by Anthony Roche, though from quite a different perspective. Roche's chapter focuses on an exceptional moment in Irish theatre history: in the period 2002–03, there were no fewer than three instances of Irish playwrights putting a contemporary politician on stage, while previous representations of this kind had been extremely rare in Ireland. The three plays in question – Marina Carr's *Ariel*, Sebastian Barry's *Hinterland* and John Breen's *Charlie* – all based their central character on the former Taoiseach, the late Charles J. Haughey (1925–2006), and all in the context of tragedy. The term 'controversial' cannot perhaps fully describe Haughey; on the one hand, he was the undeniable author of many essential steps leading to the economic boom of the 1990s, but at the same time clearly one of the most corrupt leaders Ireland has ever had. Roche – prompted by the Shakespearean allusions in the three plays, together with Haughey's apparent propensity for quoting the Bard – looks at how the Haughey character compares with Shakespeare's tragic heroes and famous manipulators. He finds an interesting parallel in Julius Caesar, riven by 'ongoing internal struggles' very relevant to Haughey's career (p. 94), and also notes Eileen Battersby's linking of the politician with Richard III. The latter he finds to be a very apt analogy, and only regrets that no other of the histories have been considered: although these may not be so deeply lodged in people's memories, they could provide metaphoric images of Irish political life 'which would prove more immediate and less flattering' than any allusions to the tragedies (p. 96). At the same time, though, Roche points out the extent to which artists have been among the chief beneficiaries of financial policies introduced by Haughey: due to legislation unique in Europe, writers may live in Ireland without paying tax on their earnings. This brings Roche to a rather unsettling question, namely to what extent are, for instance, playwrights 'mired and implicated in the same financial double standards which the former Taoiseach promoted?' (p. 87).

Finally, Martine Pelletier extends the consideration of politics and ethics in Irish drama of the period. Her contribution addresses the phenomenon of immigration and some of the attempts by Irish playwrights and practitioners to stage it. She looks at five plays – Brian Friel's *Dancing*

at *Lughnasa* and *The Home Place*, Donal O'Kelly's *Asylum*, Elizabeth Kuti's *Treehouses* and *Departure and Arrival* by Dermot Bolger and Kazem Shahryary – as 'a series of interventions aimed at bringing to the consciousness of Irish and international audiences the plight of those many immigrants and refugees seeking a new life in Ireland' (p. 100). Pelletier observes how a number of productions of the tremendously successful *Dancing at Lughnasa* have stressed a particular nostalgia which is emblematic of 'an abiding need to celebrate what is felt to be lost': namely, the traditional world of rural Ireland (p. 103). She continues by making a sharp contrast between Friel's treatment of Africa as 'a repository of a universal sense of the sacred' and the much more realistic depiction of the continent as a realm torn apart by brutal internecine conflicts in *Asylum*, *Asylum* (p. 102). Despite their generic differences and the clear call for action present in O'Kelly's drama (which would perhaps seem out of place in Friel's work), however, both plays are seen to stress the benefits of the links with Africans for the Irish society. *Treehouses* and *Departure and Arrival* share O'Kelly's concern with the right of refugees and immigrants to look for a new home in Ireland. While Kuti's play is interpreted by Pelletier as a largely traditional, realistic drama dealing with a sense of 'in-betweenness' and the formation of identity between places, the collaborative effort by Bolger and Kurdish playwright (and exile) Shahryary is viewed as 'deliberately bring[ing] to the fore the parallels between Irish emigration and contemporary immigration' (p. 108), implying a 'historical as well as an ethical responsibility' (p. 111) which the Irish may quite reasonably be seen to have regarding in particular the regularly despised economic migrants to their country. Pelletier's portrayal of Ireland through a reading of these plays as a place which is 'reluctantly coming to terms with its multicultural character' (p. 115) concludes with a discussion of Friel's latest play, *The Home Place*. In this, Friel demonstrates that the roots of a still widely accepted outline of Irish national identity lie, notoriously, with eugenics, a doctrine which has been readily embraced by many a totalitarian regime; hence, there is perhaps no need to stress that the traditional concept of Irishness requires a swift and dramatic reformulation in post-Celtic-Tiger Ireland.

Notes

- 1 Dermot Bolger, *Druids, Dudes and Beauty Queens: The Changing Face of Irish Theatre* (Dublin: New Island, 2001), p. 12.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Christopher Murray, *Twentieth-Century Irish Drama: Mirror up to Nation* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), p. 224.

- 4 Michael Böss and Eamon Maher (eds), *Engaging Modernity: Readings of Irish Politics, Culture and Literature at the Turn of the Century* (Dublin: Veritas, 2003), p. 12.
- 5 Rory O'Donnell (ed.), *Europe: The Irish Experience* (Dublin: Institute of European Affairs, 2000), pp. 209–11. See also Fintan O'Toole *Black Hole, Green Card: The Disappearance of Ireland* (Dublin: New Island, 1994) and *The Ex-Isle of Erin: Images of a Global Ireland* (Dublin: New Island, 1996).
- 6 Peadar Kirby, 'Contested Pedigrees of the Celtic Tiger', in Peadar Kirby, Luke Gibbons and Michael Cronin (eds), *Reinventing Ireland: Culture, Society and the Global Economy* (London: Pluto, 2002), p. 35.
- 7 In *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996) anthropologist Arjun Appadurai discusses at length the roles of the media and migration in the redefinition and reimagining of culture in a globalised world.
- 8 Joyce McMillan, 'Ireland's Winning Hand', *Irish Theatre Magazine* 3: 15 (2003), pp. 16, 18.
- 9 Zygmunt Bauman, *Globalization: The Human Consequences* (Cambridge: Polity, 1998), p. 1.
- 10 McMillan, p. 22.
- 11 Tom Kilroy, 'A Generation of Playwrights', in Eamonn Jordan (ed.), *Theatre Stuff: Critical Essays on Contemporary Irish Theatre* (Dublin: Carysfort, 2000), pp. 1–7. 3. Article first published in *Irish University Review*, 1992.
- 12 Murray, p. 162.
- 13 Kilroy, p. 6.
- 14 Marianne McDonald, 'Classics as Celtic Firebrand: Greek Tragedy, Irish Playwrights, and Colonialism', in Jordan (ed.), *Theatre Stuff*, p. 16.
- 15 Harvey O'Brien, review of *A Cry From Heaven* in *Irish Theatre Magazine* 5: 24 (2005), p. 51.
- 16 O'Brien, p. 52.
- 17 *A Handful of Stars* (1988), *Poor Beast in the Rain* (1989) and *Belfry* (1991) were all first staged in the UK at the Bush Theatre and later were published together as *The Wexford Trilogy*.
- 18 Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama and the Mode of Excess* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1976), p. 20.
- 19 Indeed, Aleks Sierz devotes a section of his pioneering study of the genre to *The Beauty Queen of Leenane*. Aleks Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre* (London: Faber, 2000), pp. 219–25.
- 20 Helen Meaney in her review of the play discusses the ways in which 'the past is refracted through the present' and the issues raised in the play – 'the position of women in marriage; sexual politics and the related theme of colonialism and its attendant commercial exploitation; racism; photography as voyeurism; philanthropy as guilt-assuagement' – all find their counterpoints today. See *Irish Theatre Magazine* 5: 23 (2005), p. 91.

- 21 Declan Hughes, 'Who The Hell Do We Think We Still Are? Reflections on Irish Theatre and Identity', in Jordan (ed.), *Theatre Stuff*, p. 14.
- 22 Neil Wallace, 'The Four Estais', *Views of Theatre in Ireland 1995*, p. 30. Cited in Anna McMullan 'Reclaiming Performance: The Contemporary Irish Independent Theatre Sector', in Eberhard Bort (ed.), *The State of Play: Irish Theatre in the 'Nineties* (Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 1996), p. 31.
- 23 McMullan, pp. 29–30.
- 24 Ibid., p. 31.
- 25 Garry Hynes, 'Accepting the Fiction of being National', *Irish Times*, 3 May 1993, p. 12.
- 26 Garry Hynes interviewed by Cathy Leeney, *Theatre Talk: Voices of Irish Theatre Practitioners* (Dublin: Carysfort, 2001), p. 207.
- 27 Beth Newhall, '97 Years and a Day', *Irish Theatre Magazine* 4: 18 (2004), p. 13.
- 28 Brian Singleton and Anna McMullan, 'Performing Ireland: New Perspectives on Contemporary Irish Theatre', *Australasian Drama Studies* 43 (October 2003), p. 3.
- 29 Other important new books on the history and politics of Irish theatre include Mary Trotter, *Ireland's National Theaters: Political Performance and the Origins of the Irish Dramatic Movement* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2001), Ben Levitas, *The Theatre of Nation: Irish Drama and Cultural Nationalism 1890–1916* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002) and Chris Morash, *A History of Irish Theatre 1601–2002* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).