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# Introduction: The Irish Theatre in Transition

*Donald E. Morse*

*The Irish Theatre in Transition* celebrates the creative and richly vibrant Irish theatre. This theatre, since its foundation, has always been in healthy transition with the exception of a few dormant years, and from its beginning has asserted its unique national and cultural value while seeking to take its place internationally. For a small nation located on a small island, Ireland today produces an amazing number of different theatrical performances each year in a variety of venues, both north and south. *The Irish Theatre in Transition* is designed to show some of the myriad ways that this theatre can and does accomplish transitions, how it reflects the changing conditions of a changing society and nation; how it innovates often by returning to its roots or by adapting abandoned but still viable theatrical conventions; how it continually reinvents itself and experiments with new media; how it moves beyond the local and dares to imagine new audiences and welcome new playwrights.

The book begins with a foundational essay by the eminent Irish drama and theatre scholar, Christopher Murray, who traces Irish theatre from its inception as a Little Art Theatre, through its incarnation as the Irish National Theatre to what is now called simply 'the Irish theatre'.<sup>1</sup> Over a century after its founding, one cannot help but be struck by that theatre's fertile history of performances, its world-famous playwrights, its abundance of play-scripts and varieties of productions. In Murray's now-famous phrase, this theatre for most of the twentieth century has held a 'mirror up to nation' even when that nation did not particularly care to see what was reflected there. Playwrights and productions returned back to their audiences some of that audience's most vivid experiences, deepest concerns, fears and joys. As Irish society and the Irish theatre underwent a significant transition, those concerns shifted

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from national identity, faith and cultural values to economics, sex, gender and demographics.

After Murray's critical assessment of the first hundred years of the Irish theatre, 15 theatre scholars, acknowledging his argument, analyse and comment on aspects of that theatre up to the present day under the rubrics: 'Engaging with a Changing Reality', 'Enhanced Theatricality', 'Reframing Transition', 'Inventiveness and Expanding the Stage' and 'On the "Re-Foundation" of the Irish Theatre'. Much of Part II, 'Engaging with a Changing Reality', is taken up with the rise and demise of the Celtic Tiger, that violent economic aberration caused by uncontrolled property development, unregulated rogue banks and corrupt politicians that helped create instant millionaires.<sup>2</sup> Yet, as Eamonn Jordan points out in Chapter 2, Irish theatre was slow to respond to this amazing twenty-first-century transformation of Irish society heralded by the arrival of the Celtic Tiger economy, leaving that particular mirroring in the hands of a new generation of novelists who probed and prodded and warned against all the excesses evident in Irish society. With the precipitous collapse of the Tiger economy, built as it was on the sands of property development as strictly investment rather than as a possible social good, corruption at the highest levels of government and an irresponsible banking system, the Irish were cast adrift. Unemployment soared, pensions disappeared, construction stopped and property values fell – 'up like a rocket and down like a stick', to borrow James Joyce's pithy phrase in *Ulysses* (371). The theatre itself became deeply affected by such drastic fluctuations in the economy not only in the choice of what plays to produce but also in how to finance them, which may have led to the increasing popularity of monologues and 'two-handers'. Against this rise and fall Jordan offers a cogent post-Tiger reading of Conor McPherson's *The Night Alive* (2013).

At about the same time, Ireland underwent other drastic changes in a far-reaching sexual revolution, an influx of immigrants and an increasingly aging population. Each of these changes provoked a different theatrical response, leading to different kinds of transition, as several essays document. Few countries, for example, have undergone such a rapid sexual revolution and an equally seismic shift in sexual morality as Ireland in the twentieth century. In Chapter 3, José Lanteris analyses four plays written between 1931 and 1971: Mary Manning's *Youth's the Season ...?* (1931), Brendan Behan's *The Quare Fellow* (1954), Thomas Kilroy's *The Death and Resurrection of Mr Roche* (1968) and Brian Friel's *The Gentle Island* (1971). Each was produced before the laws that decriminalized homosexuality were adopted. These plays may have held a

‘mirror up to nation’ but that nation preferred to look away. Later, other twentieth-century Irish playwrights dared to record the enormous change that occurred as society retreated from turning a blind eye to difference and refusing to recognize the Other and then moved forward to accepting and sometimes even embracing difference.

Plays written after the Irish sexual revolution, such as Stella Feehily’s *Duck* (2003) and *O Go My Man* (2006), present a very different picture of relations between men and women than had been found in the earlier predominant Irish plays, as Mária Kurdi demonstrates in Chapter 4. As Murray points out in his essay and Kurdi concurs in hers, there has been a paucity of productions by Irish women dramatists. Nor has there been any great increase in the number of works by women playwrights or the number of women playwrights with work produced on stage since the 1990s. Like Paula Meehan’s *Mrs Sweeney* (1997) discussed by Murray, Feehily’s plays are set in contemporary Dublin and also focus on gender issues, dissolving relationships and problems between the generations.

In addition to considering the economic and sociological problems left in the wake of the Celtic Tiger’s demise, several Irish playwrights began to focus on Ireland’s aging population and the problems this new demographic reality presents.<sup>3</sup> Prominent among them, Frank McGuinness has written a series of plays culminating in *The Hanging Gardens* (2013) on what he calls ‘the politics of aging’ (Jackson 2). As the segment of Ireland’s population over 65 doubles, which is expected to occur in less than 20 years, the number of people within it susceptible to dementia will treble (*Dementia in Ireland* np). McGuinness memorably portrays the effects of dementia in *The Hanging Gardens* not only on the one suffering but also on his family. In Chapter 5, Donald E. Morse contends that the play owes a great debt to Ibsen’s *Ghosts* that McGuinness had earlier translated. As a contemporary Irish playwright, McGuinness discovered solutions to dramatic problems by reaching back to the Norwegian playwright who originally provided the model for the New Literary Theatre that would eventually become the Abbey Theatre. A theatre that, in McGuinness’s eyes, offered ‘a new way of interpreting the world’.

As a vital art form, the theatre also changed by becoming more consciously theatrical and self-reflexive, experimenting with variations of play-within-a-play, for instance, and returning to Jacobean forms of the grotesque. As the essays demonstrate in Part III, ‘Enhanced Theatricality’, much of the vitality of the Irish theatre in transition derives from the ability to innovate as well as to adapt proven techniques from theatre history. One of the oldest theatrical devices successfully adapted by

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Irish playwrights is the play-within-a-play. In Chapter 6, Csilla Bertha discerns three distinctive kinds of play-within-a-play as employed in contemporary Irish plays: first, the theatre-within-the-theatre most familiar from the mousetrap play in *Hamlet* and used in the internal play-within-the-play by McGuinness in *Carthaginians* (1988); second, the framing *theatrum mundi* made famous by Calderón and adapted by Jim Nolan in *Blackwater Angel* (2001); and third, the ‘self-conscious theatricality’ of a stage-within-a-stage created by Tom Kilroy for *The Secret Fall of Constance Wilde* (1997). Such metatheatrical devices encourage self-reflection on the part of both characters in the plays and the audience as well as serving playwrights and theatre-makers as the means for reflecting on the art of the theatre itself.

Between 2010 and 2012, Eric Weitz argues in Chapter 7, three innovative productions modified or did away with traditional notions of performance, audience and/or playing space, as well as attempted to redefine the relationship between performer and spectator: the stage worlds of *City of Clowns* (2010 Barabbas Theatre Company), *Politik* (2012 The Company) and *The Boys of Foley Street* (2012 Anu Productions) meet spectators face to face, including them bodily in the here and now of performance, rather than standing upon the fictional distances customarily guaranteed by the proscenium convention. Within that performance world, laughter that occurs on stage – in contrast to laughter elicited in an audience by events on stage – carries semiotic implications. After examining the laughter on stage in John Millington Synge’s *Well of the Saints* which creates audience empathy towards the central characters, Weitz evaluates the variety of stage laughter and its effect in the three contemporary plays.

In contrast, Ondřej Pilný, in Chapter 8, suggests that Mark O’Rowe reaches back into theatre history to draw upon the neo-Jacobean grotesque but makes the grotesque fresh by combining it with clichés derived from American action films. O’Rowe constructs a bleak and hopeless world in *Terminus* (2007), where nearly everybody is intent on doing harm to others. That play offers a disturbing version of the sublime in a terminal parody of JPW singing like the great Italian tenor in Tom Murphy’s *The Gigli Concert* (1984), as a serial killer flawlessly sings a sentimental love song by a pop diva and solicits from his immediate audience a ‘combination of adoration and wonder’.

Yeats insisted on the importance of producing first and foremost Irish plays for the nascent Irish nation and training theatre professionals in how to play them, but he also stressed the importance of Shakespeare and the desirability of producing masterpieces from the

world repertoire. The history of Shakespeare productions in many ways parallels significant transitions in the Irish theatre as does the production of other foreign plays. Both have proven highly influential for Irish playwrights and directors. In Part IV, 'Reframing Transition', the discussion of alternative ways of framing transitions includes a discussion of Shakespeare productions, representative samples of a full year's worth of productions throughout Ireland and an analysis of one hundred years of Irish plays being produced in London.

As previously mentioned, Yeats's model for his Irish Literary Theatre was the theatre of Ibsen and Bjornson in Norway, which he viewed as in opposition to the commercial theatre of England. But while Ibsen became a major influence on Irish drama in the twentieth century, Yeats himself quickly became disenchanted, dismissing Ibsen's model as 'too limited to realism, too confined to the simulacra of daily life, too lacking in [...] the expression of deeply felt passion', according to Murray ('Centenary' 42), and so looked for inspiration to Shakespeare. Before the year of his death, the Abbey Theatre would produce three Shakespeare plays: *King Lear* (1928), *Macbeth* (1934) and *Coriolanus* (1936), as examined in detail by Murray in his 'footnote' to Abbey history, 'Early Shakespearean Productions by the Abbey Theatre'. In Chapter 9, Patrick Lonergan continues the story of Shakespeare productions at the Abbey from where Murray leaves off and concludes that 'the history of Shakespeare at the Abbey tells us a great deal about that theatre's institutional memory, and about its institutional insecurities [... as well as] offer[ing ...] new ways of thinking about the staging of Irish plays'. Lonergan also emphasizes the pivotal role played by directors who began to see Shakespeare not as a 'foreign' threat to Irish identity, but recognized in his work a dynamic force capable of renewing the Irish theatre. The productions themselves helped invigorate the theatre also by bringing in new practitioners, thus illustrating the importance to Irish culture of non-Irish writers.

The theatre, like all art, does not progress but accumulates, thus the past becomes important not only in its own right but also as it provides a store house of examples of techniques that might be adopted, scripts presently neglected that might be revived and reinterpreted, documented unique ways of producing familiar plays that might inspire revivals, and so forth. Examining the first hundred years of the Irish theatre and its several 'foundings' and refoundings (pace Murray) leads to better understanding of how the Irish theatre has gone through several transitions over time. If we were able to experience, say, a year of available Irish theatre, we might then acquire an awareness



of how it has transitioned away from one set of choices and towards another set; how variables, such as 'fashion, personnel, funding, venues and audiences' each exert pressure on the medium. Nicholas Grene, in Chapter 10, provides exactly such an experience in his 'snapshots' of performances across Ireland throughout 2006. Such 'snapshots' provide a means of reframing the discussion of the Irish theatre in transition by taking into account at least partially the large number of plays produced in Ireland all across the country and in venues both north and south.

Yet it is also important to be aware of not only what is but also what is not in transition, of what has not changed vis-à-vis the Irish theatre. For example, one measure of success for Irish plays and playwrights has always been foreign productions, most recently New York but historically, and also continuing into the present, London. To assess accurately the Irish presence on the London stage, Peter James Harris, in Chapter 11, surveys almost a hundred years of all the London productions of Irish plays and playwrights. Harris demonstrates that the percentage of Irish plays produced in London has been remarkably consistent over those hundred years, thus calling into question the received notion that there has been a recent Irish 'invasion' of the London theatre. At the same time his research reflects a significant transition in the Irish theatre from colonial to postcolonial to what might be called 'post-postcolonial'.

The theatre also reconceptualized such fundamentals as audience and stage by experimenting with the relationship of performance to spectators and by creating theatre at unusual sites. It also flirted with television and film, including each as part of productions, while some directors and playwrights tried to extend theatre by transporting theatrical performances into such media. But by far the biggest shift occurred because of the current transition from 'the second Renaissance of Irish drama', a generation of well-established playwrights who have dominated the Irish stage from the 1960s, including Brian Friel, Tom Murphy, Thomas Kilroy, J. B. Keane and Hugh Leonard, to the 'middle generation', with Frank McGuinness and Stewart Parker prominent among them, and on to still younger generations who are represented here by Stella Feehily, Mark O'Rowe, Conor McPherson and Pat Kinevane, among others.

The inveterate Irish theatregoer John Devitt raised a pertinent issue when he asked, 'Is the theatre the art form of the eleventh hour', by which he meant the hour 'when some things are fading and other things replacing them, but the things that are fading are still vestigial presences?' (107–8). The answer for the Irish theatre would appear to be 'yes' as that older generation's plays continue to be produced while the younger generation works to reinvigate the Irish theatre thus

assuring yet another future transition. In Part V, 'Inventiveness and Expanding the Stage', Helen Heusner Lojek argues, in Chapter 12, that McGuinness's plays defy any easy expectation that Irish drama will concentrate on characters of a particular personal/sexual/political orientation. A prolific contributor to the current flush of significant Irish drama, McGuinness's inventiveness may be matched only by the great variety of his subjects as he refuses to let audiences rest comfortably in assumptions about that drama's form or content. His plays have succeeded in English-speaking areas and on the European continent as well as provoking commentary from the Arab world.

Actor/playwright Pat Kinevane's work represents some of the best of the new generation in performance-based theatre that has become a staple of twenty-first-century Irish theatre. In Chapter 13, Joan FitzPatrick Dean demonstrates how Kinevane brings to the fore people ignored or forgotten in Irish society giving voice to the silent and bringing the abject into full view while creating memorable theatre by blending mime and dance with stories and – often – utilizing masks.

Irish theatre has not been slow to embrace technological innovation, especially that of film and television, to the point where the television camera on stage with its captured image projected above, beside or behind the stage action had become a cliché by the turn of the century. Stewart Parker, the prominent Northern Irish playwright, eschewed TV cameras on stage in his plays yet averred that he 'loved' writing for television which he regarded as 'the real national theatre' (19). Clare Wallace contends, in Chapter 14, that 'Parker's plays for television and radio are important as they serve to realign and perhaps even decentre our understandings of his work, giving us a more composite sense of his achievement'.

Productions of Samuel Beckett's plays have often been captured on film, including the first New York production of *Waiting for Godot*, but it was Beckett himself who worked closely with Malin Karmitz and Jean Ravel in 1966 to translate *Comédie (Play)* from a stage play to a film.<sup>4</sup> Earlier in 1964 he demonstrated how to use the camera as the point of view in his *Film* starring Buster Keaton. Anthony Minghella borrowed Beckett's technique from *Film* for a unique production of *Play* in 2001 that substitutes the camera for the spotlight thus creating spectator dissonance. In Chapter 15, Dawn Duncan shares her classroom success in using the film of *Play* to teach students as they move from passive viewing to active analysis.

In the concluding Part VI, 'On the "Re-Foundation" of the Irish Theatre', Stephen Watt's wide-ranging, authoritative essay on 'Sam

Shepard, Irish Playwright' (Chapter 16) follows Murray's lead in noting that the Irish theatre has undergone not one but several foundings and 're-foundings'. In the twenty-first century, however, the Irish theatre in one of its most surprising transitions or 're-foundations' moved to include non-Irish authors within its definition of the Irish playwright, which has, in turn, resulted in greatly expanding the notion of the Irish audience. The latest iteration of the Irish theatre thus clearly welcomes the stimulation found in producing the plays of other nations. Over 30 years ago Patrick Mason, then the Abbey Theatre Director, issued a manifesto on the theatre's goals that expanded Yeats's original remit for the theatre to include 'masterworks of world theatre', thus encouraging directors to produce plays from the international repertoire. In the twenty-first century a special relationship developed between the Irish National Theatre, the Abbey, under the direction of Fiach Mac Conghail and American playwright Sam Shepard, who wrote two quite different plays for the Abbey and the distinguished Irish actor Stephen Rae, *Kicking a Dead Horse* (2007) and *Ages of the Moon* (2009). Watt contends that this appropriation appears to have become a two-way street. As his analysis of several Shepard plays, especially *Ages of the Moon*, demonstrates, the foreign playwright's work begins to not only echo but also take on characteristics of the Irish theatre, such as storytelling and regional speech patterns. Perhaps the Irish theatre has gone through yet another transition and produced a new distinctive voice. All of which reflects a vibrant theatre in transition ready, in Christopher Murray's words, 'to refresh and maintain energy for life itself' (p. 13, below).

## Notes

1. Christopher Murray's essay, 'The Foundation of the Modern Irish Theatre: A Centenary Assessment', appeared originally in the *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies (HJEAS)* 4.1-2 (1998), and all citations are to this essay both in this 'Introduction' and in all other contributors' essays. (All contributors to this volume had access to Murray's essay and many refer directly to it.) Murray kindly revised the essay substantially for this volume.
2. For an extensive discussion of the rise and demise of the Celtic Tiger and its causes, see Morse, "'The economics of utter idiocy": The Rise and Demise of the Celtic Tiger'.
3. The *Dementia in Ireland 2012* report claims that 'the number of older people aged 65 and over [is] expected to double [...] from approximately 0.5 million today [2012] to over one million by 2031' (np).
4. For a detailed discussion of Beckett and Karmitz's translation of *Comédie (Play)* from stage to film, see Herren.

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