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Ireland: Context - Sociopolitical Background

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Ireland

Tanya Dean

Context: Sociopolitical background

Historical

The period from the 1990s through to 2020 saw a profound shift in the identity of the Republic of Ireland. The early twentieth century was focussed on the move from a colonial to a postcolonial existence, and the majority of the first decades of independence were spent struggling as one of the poorest countries in Western Europe and taking tentative steps onto the single market as a member of the EU (then EEC) after 1973. However, the period of the 1990s to late 2000s saw the nation gradually assert itself as an increasingly liberal, notionally secular, economically vigorous member of the global economy. The ‘Celtic Tiger’ period (named after the so-called Asian tiger economies) of roughly fifteen years saw unprecedented economic growth in Ireland (Dorgan, 2006). However, this proud new national identity would be shaken in the wake of the 2008 global economic crash, exacerbated by an unsustainable housing bubble in Ireland. Following the 2008 crash, a number of Irish financial institutions faced the possibility of imminent collapse due to insolvency. The decision taken by the government to guarantee the banks to the tune of a €64-billion bailout and the imposition of austerity measures led to widespread public disillusionment and cynicism about the Irish government (Fanning, 2016). The austerity budgets naturally resulted in a major reduction in funding for Irish theatre, which saw the severe reduction or cessation of support to numerous Irish theatre companies, such as Barabbas Theatre Company (Dublin), Island Theatre Company (Limerick), Calipo Theatre Company (Louth), Livin’ Dred (Cavan), Red Kettle (Waterford), Performance Corporation (Sligo), and Tall Tales Theatre Company (Meath), to name but a few.

Cultural

Whereas the 1937 Constitution of Ireland seemed to enshrine patriarchy and religious conservatism as integral values of the Republic (noting as it did the particular importance of the woman’s ‘life within the home’ as an essential support to the state, and the ‘special position’ of the Roman Catholic Church in Ireland), a series of elections and referenda from the 1990s onwards seemed to signal Ireland’s move towards a more progressive idea of nationhood. The election of two female presidents — Mary Robinson from 1990-97, followed by Mary McAleese from 1997 to 2011 — were taken as totemic shift in Irish

politics towards a more liberal society. In 1995, a referendum seeking to overthrow the constitutional ban on divorce in Ireland narrowly passed by a margin of 0.3% of the vote. Increasingly, public focus was drawn towards the failures of the state towards women. The public outrage following the tragic death of Savita Halappanavar in 2012 due to being denied a termination during her miscarriage (Holland and Cullen, 2012) culminated in a referendum in 2018 where 66.4% voted to repeal the controversial Eighth Amendment (which stated that the right to life of the unborn child was equal to that of the mother), thereby making abortion legal for the first time in the Republic of Ireland. The repeal sentiment found its way into Irish theatre, both in fictional iterations — such as Eva O'Connor's *My Name is Saoirse* (2014) and *Maz and Bricks* (2017) — and as autobiographical testimonial, such as Tara Flynn's *Not a Funny Word* (2018).

The 2014 publication of the McAleese Report on the state involvement with the Magdalene Laundries (religious-run institutions for the incarceration of unwed mothers and 'fallen women', notorious for their abusive treatment) prompted nation-wide anger that the government had colluded with religious orders to fund and support the Magdalene Laundries, the last of which, Gloucester Street Magdalene Convent in Dublin, closed in 1996. The discovery in 2014 of the remains of at least 796 children and babies that had been buried in a disused septic tank at the Bon Secours Mother and Baby Home in Tuam, Co. Galway, prompted yet more public outrage at the history of state-sanctioned treatment of vulnerable women. The Magdalene laundries and their legacies have been explored by theatre artists in diverse works, such as Patricia Burke Brogan's *Eclipsed* (1996), ANU Productions *Laundry* (a site-specific performance in the disused Gloucester Street Magdalene Convent, 2011), and Grace Dyas's *We Don't Know What's Buried Here* (2018). The Report of the Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse (known as the Ryan Report), published in 2009, threw an equally damning spotlight of the culture of widespread physical and sexual abuse of minors in the Catholic-run, state-funded reformatory and industrial schools. The report was used as the basis for *No Escape*, a verbatim play compiled by journalist Mary Raftery and programmed by the Abbey Theatre in the Peacock Theatre in 2010.

Meanwhile, LGBTQ+ rights have slowly gained traction both politically and civically in the previously conservative nation, most notably on 24 June 1993, when the Criminal Law (Sexual Offences) 1993 Bill was passed in the Oireachtas Éireann (the legislature of Ireland), finally decriminalising homosexuality. In 2015, Ireland became the first country in the world to make same-sex marriage legal by popular vote, with 62% of the country voting in favour of marriage equality in a referendum. A notable performance is often credited with hugely

bolstering the momentum of the Yes Equality campaign; on 1 February 2014, drag queen Panti Bliss strode onto the stage of the Abbey Theatre following a performance of *The Risen People*. At the time, Panti's alter ego Rory O'Neill was being threatened with legal action by conservative advocate and groups for describing them as homophobic during a television interview. In a short speech — also known as a 'Noble Call' — on that stage, Panti gave a dignified and impassioned account of homophobia and oppression in Ireland; the video of Panti's Noble Call would go viral nationally and internationally, highlighting the fight for LGBTQ+ rights in Ireland (Bliss, 2014).

Ethnic

The population of Ireland expanded by over 25% during the last forty years to over 4.7 million, with the most recent census noting 17.3% of the population identified as having been born outside of Ireland (Central Statistics Office, 2017); this points to a major shift, propelled by the Celtic Tiger years, to Ireland as a migration destination. In 2010, the Arts Council of Ireland developed a Cultural Diversity and the Arts policy and strategy in order to 'encompass inclusive arts programming and, most particularly, intercultural arts practice that involves artists and/or communities from a range of national, ethnic or cultural groups' (Arts Council of Ireland, 2010). Charlotte McIvor notes that '[t]hrough this policy and strategy, Create and the Arts Council charged the Irish arts with responding to and accommodating minority-ethnic individuals and groups. They also offered the arts as a key site through which to initiate contact between majority- and minority-ethnic groups living in Ireland' (McIvor 2016,10-11). McIvor highlights intercultural companies and artists working in Ireland whose work reflects and interrogates this diversification in Irish society: Arambe Productions (Dublin, 2003-present), Camino Productions (Dublin, 1998), Polish Theatre Ireland (Dublin, 2016-present), and many others.

Travellers are an indigenous Irish minority (recognised as such by the Irish government only in 2017), defined by the Irish Traveller Movement (ITM) as having a 'shared history, cultural values, language customs and traditions...their culture and way of life, of which nomadism is an important factor, distinguishes them from the sedentary (settled) population' (Irish Travellers Movement, n.d.). The Traveller community face high levels of social exclusion and inequality in Irish society, which has been mirrored in Irish theatre: as playwright, activist, PhD and member of the Traveller community Rosaleen McDonagh notes in the introduction to her 2016 play, *Mainstream*, '[t]raditionally Irish theatre has misappropriated & caricatured Traveller identity. Diversity, accessibility and

opportunity are slow in coming. Irish theatre has a glaring deficit' (McDonagh 2016, ix). Theatre artists like McDonagh, John Connors, and Michael Collins have fought for space for Traveller voices and stories on Irish stages in recent years.

Linguistic

The Irish language (*Gaeilge*, in its own term) is constitutionally recognised as the national and first official language of the Republic of Ireland, with English recognised as the second official language. However, English remains by far the dominant language in use in the country. Theatres like Taibhdhearc na Gaillimhe (Galway, 1928-present) and companies like Amharclann de hÍde (Dublin, 1992-2001), Aisteoirí Bulfin (Dublin 1967-present), Fíbín (Galway, 2003-present), and the bilingual company Moonfish (Galway, 2006-present) all offer presentations of original and translated works for theatre in Irish (O'Leary, 2017).

Cultures of theatre-making: National, urban, rural

The Abbey Theatre

It is impossible to speak of cultures of theatre-making without first drawing attention to the Abbey Theatre, Ireland's national theatre. Since its premiere productions in 1904, the Abbey has been the weighty focal point of Irish theatre culture. In 1922, the same year as the Irish State was founded, then Minister for Finance Ernest Blythe announced that the government would be awarding an annual subsidy to the Abbey, thereby making it the first English-speaking state-subsidised theatre in the world. But with that funding and the aura of the term 'national theatre' has come an increased pressure on the company to be thought of as the Atlas obliged to shoulder much of the obligations of Irish theatre, and at times an uncomfortable public scrutiny. Part of this scrutiny comes from the traditionally high share the Abbey Theatre receives of the Arts Council's national theatre budget (for example, the Abbey received €7 million in 2018; approximately half the Arts Council's theatre budget for that year). In 2004, the Abbey's exuberant year-long celebration of its centenary under then-Artistic Director Ben Barnes was ignominiously tainted by revelations that financial mismanagement had left the theatre €3.5 million in debt, prompting a series of public recriminations. Fiach MacConghail, who took over as Artistic Director of the Abbey following this debacle, steered the theatre back to financial security, but left under something of a pall in his final year when his 'Waking the Nation' programme for the 2016 centenary of the 1916 Easter Rising was widely lambasted for only including one female playwright and three female directors out of ten productions, leading to the creation of the

#WakingTheFeminists movement. The co-Artistic Directors from 2016-2021—Neil Murray and Graham McLaren—were praised for their dynamic programming and for expanding the Abbey’s work to bring in more companies and send out more work on national tour. Yet on 7 January 2019, an open letter was written to the *Irish Times* and the then-Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, Josepha Madigan TD; it was signed by 312 freelance theatre practitioners expressing concerns about the Abbey Theatre's current production model, in particular noting that the model favouring co-productions with other national and international companies had caused ‘devastation’ in the Irish industry, with less diversity and reduced employment (Falvey, 2019).

Under the current artistic leaders — Artistic Director Caitríona McLaughlin and Executive Director Mark O’Brien — the Abbey Theatre identifies its remit as ‘We are your national theatre. We make urgent theatre and are committed to lead in the telling of the whole Irish story’. (Abbey Theatre, n.d.) The Abbey generates its own in-house productions (with a particular remit to revive works from the Irish canon, owing to its cultural obligations as the national theatre), as well as co-producing work by other theatre companies and artists. Under the auspices of the Abbey’s New Work Department, playwrights, theatre-makers and new plays are fostered through bursaries, commissions, productions, and writer development programmes. The annual Abbey programme varies from year to year, but generally offers a preponderance of scripted works, with the occasional devised or dance theatre piece.

Dublin

The 2010 report, ‘The Living and Working Conditions of Artists in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland’ noted that Republic of Ireland artists were more likely than the wider population to live in Dublin, the capital city of Ireland (McKimm, McAndrew, Hibernian Consulting, Arts Council, Insight Statistical Consulting, Arts Council of Northern Ireland, 2010). This is certainly reflected in Irish theatre, where centralisation tends to pull a lot of artists to live in or close to Dublin, which leads to concomitant criticism that Irish theatre is too Dublin-centric, to the neglect of the rest of the country. In terms of infrastructure, the capital contains more theatres/performing arts spaces per capita than anywhere else in the country. The best-known of these besides the Abbey are the Gate Theatre and Project Arts Centre. The Gate, founded in 1928 by Hilton Edwards and Micheál MacLiammóir, offers a programme that includes new Irish and international writing, but is best known for its sumptuous stagings of classic works and adaptations of classic texts (including Oscar Wilde, Samuel Beckett and Tennessee Williams, and adaptations of authors like Jane Austen,

Charles Dickens and F. Scott Fitzgerald). The Project Arts Centre was founded in 1966 as an artist-led collective to offer an alternative space to the more established theatres; it now functions an acclaimed multi-disciplinary receiving venue for contemporary visual and performing arts. The nicknamed 'M50 circuit' consists of arts centres along the M50 motorway commuter belt, i.e., axis (Ballymun), Civic Theatre (Tallaght), Draíocht (Blanchardstown), and Mermaid Arts Centre (Bray), which often collaborate to support tours of productions. Each of these arts centres primarily programme works by touring Irish theatre companies, as well as occasionally producing their own work and serving as community hubs (with art exhibitions, outreach programmes and community arts). The major theatre companies in Dublin are Rough Magic Theatre Company (led by Lynne Parker, dedicated to new Irish and international writing as well as imaginative stagings of classical works), ANU Productions (led by Owen Boss and Louise Lowe, renowned for their multi-disciplinary and politically-engaged site-specific works), Pan Pan (led by Aedín Cosgrove and Gavin Quinn, particularly noted for their postdramatic reimaginings of classical works), Landmark Productions (led by Anne Clarke, known for acclaimed stagings of primarily plays but also musicals and operas across the commercial and art-led spectrum) and Fishamble: The New Play Company (formerly known as Pigsback, led by Jim Culleton, dedicated to fostering and producing new Irish plays and playwrights).

Regional

For Ireland's regional companies, artistic ethos is intertwined with geographic specificity, producing work that is infused with a fierce pride in their home cities and counties. For example, the most famous of the regional companies is undoubtedly Druid Theatre Company, based in Galway City, who describe themselves as 'anchored in the West of Ireland and looking to the world' (Druid Theatre Company, n.d.). Druid's Artistic Director Garry Hynes is famously the first woman ever to win a Tony Award for Best Director (for *Beauty Queen of Leenane* in 1998). Druid are most renowned for staging new works (in particular, premiering the Leenane Trilogy by Martin McDonagh), and for creating marathon cycles from the works of classic authors (DruidSynge, DruidMurphy, DruidShakespeare and DruidGregory) In Cork, Corcadorca (led by Pat Kiernan) is perhaps best known for its site-specific and promenade theatre productions that treat the city of Cork as a canvas for theatrical imagination. Blue Raincoat in Sligo (led by Niall Henry) are notable particularly for being Ireland's only professional ensemble-based company, staging modern European classics, new writing and new adaptations for stage. With their annual A Country Under

Wave festival, Blue Raincoat programme performances and events that are inspired by the landscape, history and people of Sligo.

Festivals

The festival calendar in Ireland allows for theatre companies to present their work as part of a larger cultural celebration. In Dublin, the Dublin Theatre Festival combines work from leading Irish companies as well as international artists. The Dublin Fringe Festival offers a platform for work of a more experimental nature, particularly from emerging artists. The Galway International Arts Festival combines music, visual art, and performance from an international line-up. The Kilkenny Arts Festival similarly brings a diverse mix of national and international theatre, music and performance to the medieval town of Kilkenny. Baboró Festival in Galway is a festival focussed entirely on theatre for young audiences.

Institutional structures: Funding bodies

Arts Council of Ireland

The main source of continuous financial support for the arts is the Arts Council of Ireland, a government agency that awards funding via artform and cross-artform platforms, including annual funding, project funding, bursaries, touring support, travel and training support, residencies, support-sharing, and other avenues. The Arts Council serves as the federal arts funding body, but also disseminates funds to a network of thirty-four local arts offices, often part of local councils, which disseminate additional designated funds on country and city levels.

The post-2008 austerity cuts led to a severe reduction in Arts Council funding, which meant that the council had to re-prioritise their funding allocations. Most companies and artists now do not receive regular funding and instead apply on a project basis or as artist support.

With the exception of the Abbey Theatre, those companies and organisations who are on annual funding agreements have no guarantee of funding stability or continuity from year to year, which makes long-term planning particularly hard in the Irish theatre context.

Culture Ireland

In order to support the promotion of Irish culture worldwide, Culture Ireland was set up in 2005 to create opportunities for Irish artists and companies to present their work at noteworthy international festivals, venues, and platforms. As well as awarding funding to applicants to bring their work abroad, Culture Ireland also works to create key platforms to

bring Irish work to international audiences and presenters at festivals and Biennales. Initially set up as a stand-alone government agency, Culture Ireland was incorporated into the Department of Arts, Sports and the Gaeltacht 2012.

Conclusion

At the time of writing, Ireland is still firmly in the grips of the global COVID-19 pandemic. For over a year, Irish theatre has been crippled by the numerous lockdowns and restrictions on public gatherings imposed by the government in an attempt to stem the spread of the virus. This unprecedented period has highlighted many of the challenges endemic to the Irish theatre industry; companies being unable to plan long-term due to the unpredictability of current funding models; the precarity of freelance careers leaving artists financially vulnerable; the struggle of younger artists and less-established companies to survive in a country with a limited audience base, particularly when competing against more established, government-funded organizations. Yet this period has also highlighted the strengths that fuel Irish theatre; the ingenuity of artists and companies, who found new and innovative approaches to creating work in new platforms (online, multi-media, outdoors, etc.) that challenged the traditional model of theatre; despite its variance from year-to-year, the federal financial support of theatre that serves as a stabilising force for the industry, as well as being totemic of a national sentiment that at least endeavours to be hospitable to the arts, evidenced by the increased funding made available to the Arts Council by the government of Ireland in 2021; and the closeknit community of the industry, which could be seen as companies and support organisations pivoted rapidly to find ways to offer platforms, opportunities and supports to theatremakers. This global crisis serves as a synecdoche of the strengths and challenges of contemporary Irish theatremaking, and may also, I think, serve as a watershed; how the industry heals and adapts post-pandemic will signal the next chapter of Irish theatre history.

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