From the Stage of the Abbey to the Streets of the Monto: The Development of "Immersive" Theatre in Ireland

by Shaun Richards*

In a letter to Seamus Deane in 1974 Brian Friel said that he was "sick of the naturalistic style" and his *Philadalphia, Here I Come!* (1964) and *Dancing at Lughnasa* (1990) went some way to breaking down the naturalist/realist set while still, however, maintaining the distinct spatial division between on-stage action and audience. This article proposes to examine the progressive interrogations and fragmentations of the naturalist/realist ranging from Martin McDonagh's *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* (1996) to Mark O'Holloran's *Trade* (2011). It closes with an account of the work of Louise Lowe and ANU, particularly *The Boys of Foley Street* (2012) which was part of their "Monto Cycle," and also references *Vardo* (2014) and the more recent *The Lost O'Casey* (2018). The production of this "immersive" theatre company will be read through a lens informed by the Situationist-influenced work of Jacques Rancière and the study of performance art by Erika Fischer-Lichte.

Keywords: naturalism/realism, modernization, immersive theatre

In a letter written to Seamus Deane in 1974 Brian Friel complained about the dominance of naturalism in the Irish theatre:

> I'm as sick of the naturalistic style as I'm sure you are – And the dilemma is this. The use of everyday and recognizable melodies and harmonies effects a quick and direct relationship between audience and stage – that's an attraction and can be valuable. But it's as soon as you establish that relationship – and it's made precisely because the tunes are familiar – that an almost instant communion becomes a trap (Deane 2009: 12-13).

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Friel was echoing Hugh Leonard's earlier declaration that "Irish playwrights as a whole are trying to break away from a naturalistic form." (Linehan 1970: 14) And both were repeating, albeit for different reasons, an issue raised by Gabriel Fallon in his 1955 article, "The Future of the Irish Theatre," where he lamented the fact that the Abbey, Ireland's National Theatre, "should find itself after fifty years deeply sunk in the pit of naturalism" (Fallon 1955: 99).[1]

Produced ten years prior to Friel's comments to Deane, Leonard's *Stephen D* (1962) and Friel's own *Philadelphia, Here I Come!* (1964) were seen by Tom Kilroy as alive to "the fluidity of expression possible on stage with modern lighting, design and direction." (Kilroy 1982: 136) And *Stephen D* was clear in its attempt to create what Leonard termed "a very flexible piece of stage material" in which "the dialogue between Stephen and the President was delivered as they walked down into the auditorium and completed a circuit of the stalls, during which time the house lights were switched on." (Leonard 1964: 5 & 7) Although Friel's play is less radical than Leonard's in that it holds to the stage and retains the realist set of the kitchen it also contains a bedroom, and "These two areas – kitchen and Gar's bedroom – occupy more than two-thirds of the stage. The remaining portion is fluid: in Episode I for example, it represents a room in Senator Doogan's home." (Friel 1984: 27) But while these two plays tested the frame of realism, and in Leonard's case entered the auditorium, they still maintained the fundamental separation of a "real" space occupied by the audience and a "fictional" space which was the location of the drama; and that ensured that the audience, no matter how much they empathised with lives on-stage, were observers and never participants in what unfolded. The proscenium arch theatre and the realist/naturalist set dominated Irish theatre throughout the twentieth-century with a tendency to a state-supported conservatism of subject matter which further emphasised the passivity of the audience; in the theatre, as in society, they were not encouraged to question the script which had been written by others. However, in the first decade of the twenty-first century Irish theatre was marked by the development of productions which challenged the spatial relationship between audience and stage, and indeed blurred the distinction between the theatrical and extra-

[1] "Naturalism" is the term used by Fallon but both naturalism and realism "advocated a total reproduction of unstylized, unembellished reality, stressing the material aspects of human existence." (Pavis 1998: 236) They are therefore used interchangeably.

theatrical worlds as audiences were rendered uncertain as to which reality they encountered was performed and which simply a real world impinging on the space of performance. This article seeks to examine this spatial turn in Irish theatre, along with an account of the theories of performance by which it was informed – and their socio-political underpinning.

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In his article "Naturalism in the Theatre" (1881) Emile Zola decried "the conventional formula" and asserted that the theatre should adopt "the naturalistic formula which makes the stage a study and picture of real life." (Zola 2001: 13) In practice this meant the on-stage realisation of the off-stage world as inhabited by the audience which involved creating what Roman Jakobson termed the "maximum of verisimilitude." (Jakobson 1971: 38). To achieve this end the box set of the realist theatre was furnished with the objects and articles recognised by the audience as features of their daily lives "replicating the external world in its visual and tactile particularity." (Garner 1994: 61) As Bert O. States oberved in *Great Reckonings in Little Rooms*, "The pleasure of naturalism may be likened to the pleasure of minature, which allows us to see a replica of the familiar world contained, as we can never see it while we are in it." (States 1985: 112) The point, however, was not simply that audiences should marvel at the accuracy of the representation but that they should gain a deeper understanding of their world through that "truthful, objective and impartial representation of the real world, based on meticulous observation of contemporary life." (Nochlin 1990: 13) The idea that theatre, like all art, should provide insights is fundamental to the analysis developed by Viktor Shklovsky and his view that art was a technique "to recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, in to make the stone *stony*. The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects 'unfamiliar'[*ostranenie*]." (Shklovsky 1965: 12) It is precisely this clarity of vision which Friel felt had been lost as the cosy connection between an audience and an over-familiar rendition of reality on a stage dedicated to naturalism meant that a once radical form only now encouraged comfortable conservatism.

However, despite Friel's strictures and the disaggregation of the realist set in *Dancing at Lughnasa* (1990) in which "Slightly more than half of the stage is taken up by the kitchen … The rest of the stage

is the garden adjoining the house," (Friel 1990: np) realism and the proscenium arch continued to dominate Irish theatre through the final decades of the twentieth-century. This is nowhere more apparent than in the reception of Conor McPherson's *The Weir* (1997) which conformed to all the naturalist norms of Irish theatre, being set "*in a rural part of Ireland, Northwest Leitrim or Sligo*" with a stage set of "*a small rural bar.*" (McPherson 1997: np) The play triumphed in Dublin, London and New York. Not only did it win the Laurence Olivier Award for Best New Play for the 1997-98 season but McPherson won the US Critics' Circle Award as the most promising newcomer. Reflecting on the play in 2016 McPherson emphasised its realist setting as key to its success: "I often think that for a play to really work, and for people to love it, it has to be like a little snowglobe – where you can look into it and it's a perfectly contained world that has its own logic. And *The Weir* has that. It's a complete world." (Killeen 2016)

The year before *The Weir*, however, Martin McDonagh's *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* (1996) had already appeared to prove that dramas played out the traditional realist single of "*the living-room/ kitchen of a rural cottage in the west of Ireland*" (McDonagh 1999: 3) still had critical currency. But, as observed by Fintan O'Toole, "It is easy to be fooled by the apparently traditional, naturalistic form of the plays" (O'Toole 1993: xi-xii) which are actually parodic demolitions of the plots of peasant plays from *Playboy of the Western World* (1907) to *Bailegangaire* (1985). McDonagh simultaneously pushed the set to a decidedly non-naturalist extreme in *The Cripple of Inishmann* (1996), using the set of a village shop with "shelves of canned goods, mostly peas," (McDonagh 1997: 1) so exagerating the minute detail of realist theatre to reinforce the fact that is a stage representation of a stage representation of a shop; naturalism's concern with a minutely rendered stage reality being played for comedy. But, as noted by Declan Hughes, even when the naturalist set was used in an iconoclastic way "the iconography remains powerfully the same," still able to haunt the Irish stage (Hughes 2000: 12).

While McDonagh's *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* made the rural set the place of black comedy, Marina Carr's *By the Bog of Cats* (1998) made it a place of disturbing otherness in which fated lives stalk a world akin to that of Greek tragedy: "Dawn. On the Bog of Cats. A bleak white landscape of ice and snow. Music, a lone violin." (Carr 1998: 13) But Carr's objective is quite other than naturalism, indeed, as Eamonn Jordan argues, following Hanna Scolnicov, "Although the superficial impression created is of theatrical realism, the disparate

elements do not coalesce into meaningful mimetic structures." (Jordan 2010: 7) In this context *The Weir* stands as an anomaly, its references to German tourists suggest the contemporary while its set of a rural pub replete with a peat fire stands for the seeming solidity of traditional theatrical forms.

The Weir was produced in 1997, the year in which the *Irish Times* introduced its theatre awards, and two plays from the second decade of the next century illustrate how far the questioning and fragmentation of realism had advanced. Enda Walsh's *Ballyturk* and Mark O'Rowe's *Our Few and Evil Days* won Best Production and Best New Play respectively in the awards for 2014. In 2006 Walsh had already said that he wanted to "explode" the naturalist play "and bring it somewhere else" (ivi, p. 248) and in *Ballyturk* he dismantles every aspect of the naturalist set. Audiences are faced with "a very large room – too large" in which "the back wall looks vast – its painted surface powdery to the touch. On this wall a large mustard curtain is drawn – where possibly a window is." (Walsh 2014c: 221) This suggests that this could be a naturalist set, but when the back wall slowly tears off with ripping wallpaper, aggressively sparking power cables and buckling water pipes what is revealed is "a beautiful blue light – onto a small hill of perfect grass." The stage directions state (somewhat doubtfully) that this is "what must be the outside" Walsh 2014c: 251). But *Ballyturk*'s objective is theatricality rather than reality. Indeed, as Walsh commented on his intention in the play, "we wanted an audience to experience form shifting radically." (Walsh 2014c: viii)

Mark O'Rowe's *Our Few and Evil Days* seems to reject Walsh's iconoclasm, the *Irish Times* critic, Peter Crawley, noting that the dialogue was so "fastidiously naturalistic" that he wondered if O'Rowe had "genuinely fallen for realism." "The impression is enforced by Paul Wills' set," Crawley continued, "so staggeringly convincing in construction, from its ceiling to functioning kitchen taps, it's almost surprising he stopped short of a fourth wall." (Crawley 2014) Indeed, so detailed was the set that even the off-stage utility room, which could be seen through an open door, was rendered with the same degree of detail as the onstage room. This might appear to be a return to a fetishistic realism, however the almost fetishistic meticulousness of the detail suggests otherwise. In *The Return of the Real* Hal Foster argued that the "illusionism" found in the "superrealist" figures of artists such as Duane Hanson is intentionally pushing illusionism "to the point of the real." By these means, argues Foster, "illusionism is employed not

to cover up the real with simulacral surfaces but to *un*cover it." (Foster 1996: 152) Although Foster's concern is with the "neo-avant-garde" of modern art, his argument that such heightened illusionism draws attention to its very artificiality resonates with what Helen Meany termed the "hyperreal" set of *Our Few and Evil Days* which demands that it is reflected upon rather than simply accepted as the necessary frame for the dramatic action (Meany 2014b).

However, central to the argument I want to develop is the fact that for all their radicalism these plays by Walsh and O'Rowe maintain the traditional spatial relationship between stage and audience. Meanwhile, outside of the established theatre structures of the Abbey and the Gate new companies emerged in the wake of the financial crash of 2008 whose work was frequently innovative of economic necessity, featuring only one or two performers in bare or stripped-down sets. And what they aimed at was a new relationship with the audience.

The premise of Amy Conroy's *I ♥ Alice ♥ I*, staged by HotForTheatre in 2010, is that it is "a documentary piece" about two middle-aged lesbians who have agreed to tell their story in a piece of verbatim theatre featuring the actual participants. In preparation for the production "Both the 'Alices' have been working with the director for nearly a year. They have been questioned and interviewed, directly and indirectly, alone and together. It has been a balancing act, keeping them happy and onboard. They are not actors, so performing live is a huge challenge for them." Consequently the Alices will forget words and can refer to a script which, along with "notes and transcripts from the interviews and the making of the show" is on a back wall of the set, in the centre of which, and as part of the effort to make them comfortable, is "a table and chairs from the Alices' house." (Conroy 2012: 197) However the authenticity of the documentary is exploded in the conclusion when the Alices face the audience as the lights fade up and "*Slowly the wigs come off and the actors reveal themselves*." (ivi, p. 219) The fictive nature of the event was emphasised by the fact that one of the Alices was played by the playwright herself as the audiences' sense of what is real and what is performance is subverted.

A similar questioning of the division between performed reality and the reality of the audience's own world is seen in Mark Halloran's *Trade*, produced by THISISPOPBABY in 2011. It has all the characteristics of the realist set: "The room is small and shabby. A queen-size bed with polyester quilt covers. A window onto a yard." (O'Halloran 2012: 49) And with references to Ballybough and Fairview Park, a diegetically rendered "real" off-stage world is correspondingly evoked. However,

while the set of "A cheap B&B in Dublin's North Inner City" could be placed in a conventional theatre space it actually premiered in a site-specific space of "a bedroom of an actual guesthouse on Dublin's north-side" (Conway 2012: 10) to which the audience were walked by Dublin Theatre Festival volunteers after meeting at Belvedere College, a nearby private school. The room then is "real" and framing it within the context of performance gives audiences an intensity of experience that can be lacking in conventional theatre spaces. This also demands a reduction in the size of an audience from the hundreds which can be accommodated in an auditorium to the handful that could squeeze into a bedroom and one of the striking features of many of the new plays which fracture the frame of naturalism are the small spaces in which they play, and the subsequent physical relationship between action and audience – which is also related to their subject matter.

Test Dummy (2016) by Catriona Daly played in Dublin's Theatre Upstairs above Lanigan's Bar on Eden Quay – a venue which seats no more than 40 people – and it was performed in traverse, the single actor walking between the audience who were ranked on either side with the front rows being no more than a matter of feet apart. Performed as a monologue, cataloguing the sexual abuse of a young woman who talks of her debasement directly, confrontationally, to the audience, and with an unsettling proximity as in the narrow space there was nowhere for the audience to hide from her powerful physical presence. This can be understood in terms developed by the ethnographer, Edward Hall who concluded that 'virtually everything that [human beings do] is associated with space," central to which was "distance-setting;" the sense of a personal space which should be maintained (Hall 1968: 95). While he observed that there were significant cultural variables in this regard, a broadly "western" expectation of the "intimate" space to be preserved was within 19 inches of the individual (50 centimeters) and a "personal" one from 19 inches to 3 feet (50 to 150 centimeters). As Patrice Pavis noted, "as mimesis of social interaction, theatre reproduces these spatial laws." (Pavis 1998: 290) The protagonist of *Test Dummy* breaks into the both the personal and the intimate space of audience members as she recounts the brutal realities of her life. This is disquieting in ways that the same performance in a conventional theatre space could not produce; in the proscenium arch theatre there might be empathy but there is no direct confrontation with the physical presence of the actor. However, despite the intensity of an audience's engagement with the protagonist in *Test Dummy*, and the reduction of the distance between them which created that intensity, there is still a

separation; audiences ultimately know that they occupy a real world from which they observe a fictive rendition of another.

Writing in 2013 Fintan Walsh observed that over the past six years Ireland "plummeted from the heady heights of neoliberal abundance and excess into political, economic, social and cultural turmoil" which, he concluded, has "altered the way [theatre] work is made, and the kind of work that's made." (Walsh 2013: 2-3) *Trade*, *I ♥ Alice ♥ I* and *Test Dummy* are just three examples of a new kind of work whose informing premise is articulated and significantly developed by Louise Lowe, director of ANU theatre company:

> I believe that the very concept of theatre is being interrogated at the moment, questions are being asked that cannot be answered behind a fourth wall, and there is a lot more play to be had. I am excited and exhilarated by work that challenges the traditional role of the audience, pulling them from behind the wall and placing them in the very centre of the work (ivi, p. 57).

And in a comment on her own "Monto Cycle," she stated that:

> the real power of theatre… lies in the moment when you as an audience member become the performer at a dining table, or when a phone rings and you answer it (*The Boys of Foley Street*); the moment when suddenly in the middle of a scene an actor calls you by your name or you decide to steal a bottle of methylated spirits (*World's End Lane*); or the moment you share a dance in the dark (*Laundry*). It's in the moment and that's the point (ivi, p. 59).

The idea that the moment when audience members become performers constitutes the real power of theatre evokes Jacques Rancière's concept of the "Emancipated Spectator." In his book of that name, translated into English in 2009 (the year ANU was founded), Rancière states that:

> being a spectator is a bad thing for two reasons. First, viewing is the opposite of knowing: the spectator is held before an appearance in a state of ignorance about the process of production of this appearance and about the reality it conceals. Second, it is the opposite of acting: the spectator remains immobile in her seat, passive. To be a spectator is to be separated from both the capacity to know and the power to act (Rancière 2009: 2).

Therefore, he concludes,

> a new theatre must be built, or rather a theatre restored to its original virtue, to its true essence, of which the spectacles that take this name offer nothing but a degraded version. What is required is a theatre without spectators, where those in attendance learn from as opposed to being seduced by images; where they become active participants as opposed to passive voyeurs (ivi, p. 4).

Rancière is clearly working in a critical framework established by Guy Debord and the Situationists, especially in Debord's *Report on the Construction of Situations* (1957) and *The Society of the Spectacle* (1964). Debord develops the Marxist theory of alienation into an all-encompassing critique of capitalism which operates according to a system of "spectacle" a concept which determines that members of society passively consume an image of the world as it is presented to them, never able to intervene actively and determine outcomes which they have chosen. The radical alternative, to which he was dedicated, was the "situation" in which individuals were active agents. Indeed:

> The construction of situations begins beyond the ruins of the modern spectacle. It is easy to see how much the very principle of the spectacle – no-nintervention – is linked to the alienation of the old world. Conversely, the most pertinent revolutionary experiments in culture have sought to break the spectators' psychological identification with the hero so as to draw them into activity by provoking their capacities to revolutionize their own lives. The situation is thus designed to be lived by its constructors. The role played by a passive or merely bit-part playing "public" must constantly diminish, while that played by those who cannot be called actors, but rather, in a new sense of the term, "livers," must steadily increase (Debord 1974: 13).
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> As the theatre was the prime example of the consumption of the spectacle it too must be abolished and, in an anticipation of Rancière, Debord wrote "the construction of situations will replace the theatre." (ivi, p. 15)

Although there were no formal relations between the Situationists and the avant-garde FLUXUS group there was a mutual debt to Dada in that both subscribed to a form of disruptive guerrilla art in which conventional art forms and their spatial relationship to the viewer/spectator were disrupted. Both these avant-garde movements fed into the development of performance art which:

> aspired to redefine theatre by redefining the relationship between actor and spectator. Theatre was no longer conceived as a representation of a fictive world, which the audience, in turn, was expected to observe, interpret, and understand. Something was to occur *between* the actors and the spectators and that constituted theatre. It was crucial that *something* happened between the participants and less important *what* exactly this was. The aim no longer lay in creating a fictive world, within which the channels of communication were limited to the stage, i.e. between dramatic characters, as the basis for the external theatrical communication between actors and audience to take place. The pivotal relationship would be that between the actors and the spectators (Fischer-Lichte 2008: 21).

Initially developed in Europe during the 1950s and 1960s, performance art started to appear in Ireland in the early 1970s "as Irish political turmoil aroused fervent artistic response and international feminist ideas began to influence Irish society and cultural discourse." (Phillips 2015: 8) In turn, the practices of performance art informed the development of new theatre companies established in the opening decades of the twenty-first century such as Pan Pan and ANU which "have used structural performance processes such as extended durations, the use of improvised script and action, real actions (as opposed to simulated "acted" gesture), nudity, expanded reality and identity, site specific performance, real life testimony and audience participation." (ivi, p. 13) As summarised by Miriam Haughton:

> Contemporary Ireland has witnessed a paradigm shift in modes of theatre-making in the Celtic Tiger and post-Celtic Tiger eras, such as the increasing volume of site-specific performances or offsite performances, verbatim theatre, and works which request or demand active participation from their audiences. [...] Driving this change is a focus and urgency directed at crafting, revaluing and re-questioning the affective experience of reception, in particular, in one's capacity as a political (not passive) body in live space and time (Haughton, 2014: 375).

The work of Louis Lowe and ANU has been to the forefront of this movement, and specifically in the "Monto Cycle" of *World's End Lane* (2010); *Laundry* (2011), *The Boys of Foley Street* (2012) and *Vardo* (2014), all set in the Monto, Dublin's old red-light district whose name was derived from Montgomery Street, the present-day Foley Street. Although just a five-minute walk from the Abbey Theatre, Foley Street has been a place of social deprivation and drug addiction for decades and is not normally on the itinerary of Abbey audiences. The project covers four periods in the history of the area from the 1920s to the contemporary moment, with *World's End Lane* set in the 1920s when the area's brothels were closed down in a moral crusade spearheaded by the Legion of Mary and *Vardo* set in the contemporary moment of East European sex workers as history violently repeats itself.

My own experiences of *The Boys of Foley Street* and *Vardo* match those of other participants/commentators in that the dominant emotions are those of shock and uncertainty, especially in *The Boys of Foley Street* which deals with the period in the 1970s and 80's when the area was the centre of a drugs epidemic and consequent violence. Peter

Crawley's *Irish Times* review opened with "'Are you afraid?' a young woman asks me directly with angry, accusing eyes.' And his comment, 'There's no point denying it," (Crawley 2014) captures the disturbing quality of the productions in which the frequent intrusion into the "intimate" space of individual audience members makes Foley Street a place physically and emotionally experienced rather than simply observed and reflected upon. As audiences for these productions are limited to four, with these being further spit into pairs, there is simply no possibility of hiding in a crowd from the confrontation, and uncertainty, which is inscribed in the performance from the first moment as vividly captured in Susan Conley's review:

> We – there are two of us, thankfully – put on the headphones and listen to excerpts from that programme, and dutifully look about the place, Foley Street itself, idly wondering if the man squatting in the distant doorway is an actor, or if that girl with the mad hair is in the show. Standing around with expensive headphones on doesn't seem to be a good idea, and this instinct is underscored when someone walks by, aggressively demanding to know what we're listening to – oh, the show has begun.
>
> What follows is a constant challenge to the witness' – my – boundaries. The entire creative team, headed by director Louise Lowe, every designer, every technician, and particularly, every actor, have created a space in which all expectations of safety are thrown into question. This feels unbelievably dangerous. There is this terrible tension between 'this is only a show' and 'holy crap, am I really getting into this car, even if this is in fact only a show?' We are forced to respond to queries, not only because the querent is standing right up in our faces, but also because it would be anti-social not to do so. In some instances, it would actually be inhuman not to do so (Conley 2012).

Louise Lowe, the project's director, has acknowledged that she is "not interested in audiences sitting back in comfort for two hours;" rather she holds that "we need to take advantage of the live nature of theatre, the energies that exist in any space, what that can lead towards, and the visceral effect that that can create." (Keating 2009) My own most visceral shock in *The Boys of Foley Street* came in a flat in a derelict block of social housing, reconstituted in the style of the 1970s, to which my audience partner and myself had been driven. Further separated, I was directed into a small toilet and stood facing the mirror of a bathroom cabinet on which a scene of domestic abuse was projected. The silent horror of spectatorship was broken by a voice behind me, that of a young woman sitting on the toilet who asked that I helped her repair her torn dress – effectively the one ripped in the assault in the video I had been watching. Taking the proffered safety pin and repairing the

torn clothing demanded a gesture of human concern which removed any sense of performance.

The Boys of Foley Street ran at hourly intervals through the day and into the night, but rather than simply rerun the same events the performance changed according to the time of day, further intensifying the immersive quality of the experience as no experience was ever definitive and all audiences encountered the relatively unknown. This was Lowe's objective, as she acknowledged that she "hates exposition" (Richards 2012) with the result that audiences were projected into situations which are as unexplained and potentially as unpredictable as in reality. Accordingly, passers-by could take on an edge of potential menace, for the separation between performance and the everyday was not always entirely clear. The result being that audience choices and actions carry a weight of moral responsibility never demanded in the static spatial relationship of stage and auditorium.

These immersive performances are a long way from the naturalist style which, as Friel lamented, created a comfortable "trap" in which audiences were never confronted by new perceptions of reality. But despite ANU's commitment to a form of theatrical "*ostranenie*" the shock of the new can lose its cutting edge as captured in Helen Meany's comment that *"Vardo* seems a little contrived and a little anticlimactic for those who have experienced the rest of the cycle." (Meany 2014a) This is confirmed by my own experiences of *The Lost O'Casey* (2018) in which the protagonist of Sean O'Casey's *Nannie's Night Out* (1924) is projected onto the unforgiving streets of contemporary Dublin. Familiarity with other ANU productions meant that performers could be recognised and shock anticipated. There were innovations such as entering the side of the Abbey stage and watching a sequence of O'Casey's original play through a Perspex screen, but the "real" of performance was never mistaken for the real of the streets. Despite such caveats, however, with the example of the work of ANU, Brokentalkers, THISISPOPBABY and other companies there is no longer one dominant form on the Irish stage. As Mark O'Rowe responded when I asked him about the return to a conservative form in *Our Good and Evil Days* (2014) after the radical staging of *Terminus* (2007): "sometimes the subject dictates the form" and the family drama about buried secrets required "a very traditional form" in 'the conventional proscenium arch." (Comyn 2016) Choices on the theatrical pallette are now more varied than in the moment of Friel's complaint and determined by authorial choice rather than theatrical orthodoxy.

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