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Performance and Queer Praxes: Recent Paradigmatic Shifts

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Performance studies and queer studies are two of the most significant paradigmatic shifts to energize the analysis of Irish theatre and performance in very recent times. The development of these critical approaches can be seen to respond to the growth of more experimental, performance-centred methods of making and interpreting practice, and the emergence of a wide range of identities within theatre and performance sites, and the Irish social and cultural landscape more generally.

The expansion of the independent theatre sector in the 1980s, the diversification of arts education and training, and the increased exposure to international work via festivals and global touring supported by funding bodies such as the Arts Council and Culture Ireland have all contributed considerably to the enrichment of Irish theatre and performance. Some of the most exciting companies to emerge in the past decade, such as Brokentalkers (2001), Playgroup (2002), THISISPOPBABY (2007) and THEATREclub (2008), work in highly interdisciplinary and collaborative ways, extending and redefining the scope of Irish theatre and performance. Further, the creative interventions of these groups often foreground the lives of people living on the margins of history and contemporary society. In terms of form and focus, this work has demanded fresh critical engagement from scholars.

An example of the fruitful intersection of performance and queer praxes can be seen in the work of Brokentalkers, a company that has been exploring documentary and collaborative methods since its establishment. Led by Gary Keegan and Feidlim Cannon, one of the group's most successful productions to date has been *Silver Stars*, a reality-based song cycle composed by Seán Millar. Primarily constructed from interviews with older gay men who left Ireland in the mid- to late twentieth century because of their homosexuality, the piece gives life to individuals who suffered under familial, cultural and religious oppression. Performed by a cast of mainly non-professional gay Irish actors, the production presents these recollections through songs, music, storytelling, choreographed movement and recorded documentary footage. Commissioned in 2008 by The Bealtaine Festival, which promotes creativity in older age, the show advanced to the 2009 Dublin Theatre Festival, followed by touring success at the Under the Radar Festival in New York and the Tampere Festival in Finland in 2010. In the wake of the Ryan and Murphy reports (2009), which exposed physical, emotional and sexual abuse in religious-run state institutions throughout the twentieth century, this richly affective piece recovers subjective experience and

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asserts the power of performance in the ongoing negotiation of Ireland's troubled past.

Another case in point is the work of THISISPOPBABY, a young company dedicated to mining the fertile borders between queer, pop and contemporary Irish culture. One of the ways the group has sought to realize this goal is by curating international work, as with the Queer Notions arts festival hosted by the Project Arts Centre since 2009. Perhaps most importantly, however, THISISPOPBABY has devoted substantial attention to nurturing and staging new Irish work. Led by Jenny Jennings and Phillip McMahon, to date the group has developed and produced work by some of the country's most exciting writers, performers and theatre-makers, including the plays of McMahon and Mark O'Halloran, the solo performance work of Panti and Neil Watkins, and the documentary theatre projects of director Úna McKevitt.[1] Focusing on queer issues, as well as evolving provocative visual and performative aesthetics, the company has also been instrumental in fostering new theatre audiences. In 2010, THISISPOPBABY queered the Peacock space of the Abbey theatre throughout the summer months with *Werk*: curated performance-club nights that featured contributions by many of the country's leading artists and cultural commentators, including work by directors Wayne Jordan and Annie Ryan, actors Derbhle Crotty and Andrea Irvine, the satirical hip hop duo the Rubber Bandits, and academic and politician Ivana Bacik.

My own research in Irish theatre and performance studies has aimed to look beyond texts and theatre spaces, to examine the expression of sexuality, and its policing, in pageants, parades and protests in historical and contemporary contexts. In co-editing *Crossroads: Performance Studies and Irish Culture* in 2009, my colleague Sara Brady and I sought to emphasize that the categories of 'Irish culture' and 'Irishness' were themselves highly performative, and not confined to drama texts or theatre stages.[2] To this end, we published essays that centralized performance in the production, negotiation and contestation of Irish culture among national and diasporic networks, by addressing topics such as sport, storytelling, technology, murals and festivalization in historical and contemporary moments, often with an emphasis on expanding notions of nationality, community and citizenship.

Another strand of my research has involved identifying and anthologizing queer theatre and performance practices in Ireland, focusing on work to emerge following the decriminalization of homosexuality in 1993. Up until quite recently, this field was largely underresearched. However, scholarship by David Cregan on the dramaturgy of Frank McGuinness has been instrumental in illuminating the queer textures of canonical Irish drama and theatre.[3] Cregan's edited collection *Deviant Acts: Essays on Queer Performance* also creates a valuable space for a concert of queer practices and critical voices to chime.[4] More recently still, Brian Singleton's *Masculinities in the Contemporary Irish Theatre* provides a detailed analysis of the representation of non-hegemonic masculinities on the stage since the 1990s, in a way that powerfully destabilizes the patriarchal, literary presumptions of Irish theatre practice and scholarship.[5] Participating in this conversation, I edited a volume of plays and performance documentation that thematically or aesthetically vibrated with a queer resonance, titled *Queer Notions: New Plays and Performances from Ireland* (2010). This book aimed to archive queer

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theatre, and potentially stimulate the production of a repertoire of similar work in the future. With this project I wished to illustrate how instrumental queer artists in Ireland have been in thwarting staid notions of Irishness through experimenting with inherited theatrical conventions. While some artists still write literary plays, I observed that increasingly performances emerging from fringe or experimental quarters were based on real-life experiences, often constructed through workshop processes, and/or shaped by documentary or post-dramatic dramaturgical choices. To this end, it seemed necessary to incorporate not only playtexts, but visual and literary documentation of performances that have taken place in theatre, public and social spaces, highlighting the multiplicity of influences and languages being used in the making of and participation in queer work. In this publication I maintain that queer arts practitioners and practices have been instrumental in redefining contemporary Irish theatre and performance. The recent deployments of performance and queer critical strategies to make and analyse Irish theatre and performance are important developments that prompt further attention be paid to the variety of ways in which meaning is made and unmade in Irish culture, and to the identities and subjectivities aligned with and invested in these forms.

NOTES

1 Some of the recent work of McKevitt, McMahon, Panti and Watkins has been collected in my edited collection *Queer Notions: New Plays and Performances from Ireland* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2010).

2 Sara Brady and Fintan Walsh, eds., *Crossroads: Performance Studies and Irish Culture* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

3 David Cregan, *Frank McGuinness's Dramaturgy of Difference and the Irish Theatre* (New York and Oxford: Peter Lang, 2011).

4 David Cregan, ed., *Deviant Acts: Essays in Queer Performance* (Dublin: Carysfort, 2010).

5 Brian Singleton, *Masculinities and the Contemporary Irish Theatre* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

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