

Re-Running the Rising: Centenary Stagings

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Through 2016 I was one of the three judges for the *Irish Times* Irish Theatre Awards, established in 1997 to honor outstanding achievement in the field. Our job was to attend all new Irish productions of plays and operas throughout the island, North and South, and decide on awards for Best Actor, Best Actress—we put in a plea for gender neutral denomination of performers but it has not been acted on so far—Best Director, Best Designer, among others. It made for a busy year but it represented a fascinating opportunity to survey the state of contemporary Irish theatre. Inevitably, given that this was 2016, the centenary of the Easter Rising, many of the plays were Rising-related: revivals of previous plays about the event, dramatized reconstructions, plays taking off at one tangent or another from what happened in 1916. I saw a total of 152 shows through the year; of these no less than 16, over 10%, had an Easter Rising theme of one sort or another. In choosing to make such plays the subject for my paper, I am conscious that these are necessarily unfamiliar texts, very few of which have been published. There was a revival of *The Plough and the Stars*, premiered in 1926 just ten years after the Rising itself, but for the most part these were original shows designed for the occasion, many of which will never be seen again. That means that most of my essay has to be devoted to description and plot summary rather than interpretation and analysis. Such interpretation and analysis, in fact, is not my purpose here. I intend rather to show how the 2016 Rising plays, taken collectively, are of significance both in so far as they relate to realism and experimentation, and as they also illustrate different traditions of representing Irish history, whether realistically or experimentally.

Irish theatre through the modern period has generally been dramaturgically conservative. From the setting up of the Irish Literary Theatre in 1897, the national theatre movement was dominated by playwrights; significantly the first three directors of the Abbey, W. B. Yeats, Augusta Gregory, and J. M. Synge were all dramatists, not actors or directors. Irish drama through much of the twentieth century down to our own time has been text-based, broadly representational, valued for its language above all, not for its scenographic effects. In the last thirty years that has been changing, with increasing number of companies moving away from the reliance on the script and the playwright towards work based on ensemble creation, stylized forms,

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visual imagery, music, dance, and movement. While internationally Irish theatre is still identified with the work of individual playwrights from Synge and O'Casey through to Conor McPherson, Martin McDonagh, Marina Carr, and Enda Walsh, within Ireland groups such as Pan Pan, Corn Exchange, ANU Productions, and many more have challenged that tradition. The range of 1916 shows over 2016 reflected that spread of styles, as different companies came up with different answers to a single question: how does one represent for twentieth-first century audiences the significance of what happened a hundred years ago?

So that is one way in which these plays can be seen as twentieth- and twenty-first-century Ireland artistic productions, moving between realism and experimentation. But they are interesting also in relation to alternative historiographic and commemorative ways of remembering the Rising. I personally have lived through the fiftieth, the seventy-fifth and now the hundredth anniversary of 1916, and have seen how the circumstances of the period governed the way in which those occasions were treated. In 1966 there was a major celebration at a time when some of those active in the Rising were still alive: Éamon de Valera, one of the leaders of the rebellion, was then our President, and a considerable number of veterans watched the processions from outside the General Post Office, the central symbol of the rebellion. We were all proud of the independent state that had been achieved, though the Taoiseach Sean Lemass laid stress on its modernity, looking forward as well as back (Higgins, Holohan, and O'Donnell 31). In 1991, the seventy-fifth commemoration, conditioned by over twenty years of political violence in the North, was a muted affair, so muted that some Republican commentators complained of the "elephant of revolutionary forgetfulness" (Kiberd).

In 2012, looking forward to the centenary, the Irish government decided to make 2016 the centerpiece of a "Decade of Centenaries," which would include a range of key events from that time that had special significance for different communities on the island ("Decade of Centenaries"). So in 2013 we remembered the Dublin Lockout, a crucial date for the Irish labor movement, and in 2014 the beginning of the Great War in which so many Irishmen served in the British Army. 2016 was commemorated not only for the Rising but for the Battle of the Somme, such a devastating event for the British forces, particularly for men of the Ulster Division from Northern Ireland. The whole conception of the decade of commemorations reflected the politics of twenty-first century Ireland and its concern to give "parity of esteem" to the different traditions of the island. And of course this was the basis for the debate which so vexed Irish historians in the late twentieth century, the arguments between those who held to a nationalist

narrative of colonization and resistance, against so-called “revisionists” who claimed a more nuanced and complex rendering of Irish history.

What I am proposing, therefore, for this overview of 1916 shows staged in 2016, is to look at two sets of variables. On the dramaturgical side I discuss the spread between conventional and innovative, realistic as against experimental types of representation, while at the same time commenting on political positioning between nationalist and revisionist perspectives. I have divided up the plays into groups on the basis of their styles rather than their politics from the most traditional to the most innovative. I have included a complete listing at the end of the paper; the invaluable Irish Playography website can be consulted for full details of many of the performances.

Conventional

Let me start with three of the more conventional plays, one from Dublin, one from Waterford, and one from Cork. *McKenna's Fort* was a one-man show written by Arnold Thomas Fanning about the life of Roger Casement staged in the Dublin Project Theatre. It took its title from the fort where, according to this version, Casement spent his one night in Kerry in April 1916; he had landed from a German submarine, bent on stopping the rebellion, knowing that he was not bringing the German men and armaments he had hoped for. In the play, the night is given over to a retrospect on his life: his early background, his service in the British consular service in the Congo, meeting Joseph Conrad there, his exposure of the oppression of native peoples in South America, his conversion to Irish nationalism, and his doomed mission to Germany to recruit Irish POWs to the Republican cause. There was also plenty about his sexual encounters with young men and his obsession with the size of their genitals: the author was not evidently one of those who subscribed to the theory that the so-called Black Diaries were forgeries.¹ It was deftly done, well-performed by the actor Michael Bates, giving a sense of Casement's loneliness and isolation, someone who, because of both his sexual orientation and his peculiar political trajectory, could fit in nowhere. But it showed the limitation of this sort of theatrical biopic. There is only so much that can be done to render a life story on stage—occasional minor changes of costume, lighting, and sound—while sticking more or less to the facts. One was no nearer to solving the mystery of what motivated Casement, the knighted British diplomat turned Irish rebel.

Johnny I Hardly Knew Ye by Jim Nolan, long associated with the Red Kettle Theatre Company in Waterford, could hardly have been more different. It was set in the office of a local newspaper of a fictional small Irish town of Inishannon, the occasion the build-up to the centenary commemoration of

1916. It was absolutely up to the minute, played in February 2016 in the run-up to the Irish General Election about the run-up to an Irish General Election. The central figure is the veteran journalist who was sacked from his position on a national daily for his uncompromising investigative reporting, now reduced to the position of acting editor of the *Inishannon Chronicle*. His paper has been bought up by a large company, and he is being pressured by the new commercially minded managing director to sensationalize stories and slant the news in favor of the more conservative sitting Fine Gael government, against the upcoming challenge of the left-wing Republican Sinn Féin party. The big local event is to be the opening of a peace park, commemorating two local men: one who had a (very tenuous) part in the Rising, the other who served in the British Army, all part of the careful political balancing act of the Decade of Centenaries. The editor comes up with the explosive discovery that the site of the park was also the burial place of one of the so-called “disappeared,” a murder victim of the paramilitaries from the 1970s Troubles.² Will this uncomfortable truth be told, upsetting all the orchestrated and politically advantageous ceremonies around the opening of the peace park? The audience had to wait until the very final moment of the play to find out. It was nicely built up, with all the different personalities of the reporters on the paper sketched in, the set properly shabby and dishevelled. It was, in fact, an old-fashioned well-made play, with the upfront moral issues of an Arthur Miller, if not an Ibsen, but hardly cutting edge for twenty-first-century theatre. There seemed to be no necessary correlation between dramaturgy and political point of view. *Johnny I Hardly Knew Ye* was politically edgy but theatrically extremely old-fashioned.

Thomas Kent, 1916 Rebel, staged in Cork’s Everyman Theatre, was the exception: it was painfully orthodox in its style and completely unreconstructed in its nationalist hagiography. This was the good old story of the making of an Irish rebel, the battle between heroes and villains in the freedom struggle. Thomas Kent was one of four brothers from a family farm in Castlelyons, Co. Cork, and when we first meet him he is working in the US, promoting the Irish language as the owner of the Boston *Irish Echo*. Letters back and forth between Thomas at his Boston desk on one side of the stage, and his indomitable mother at the other in the family kitchen with its beautiful wooden dresser lined with shining crockery, ponderously built up the picture of the iniquities of the landlords and the sufferings of the imprisoned Land Leaguers of the 1880s. Thomas returns to join the fight with his brothers and all four go to jail for their boycotting activities. Their trials were narrated by two supposedly comic old fellows with heavy Cork accents who provided a choric commentary throughout. After an hour and twenty minutes of such

stuff, the 1890 Parnell divorce scandal ended this phase of the story, but at the interval there were still twenty-six years to cover.³

Happily, the action fast-forwarded in the second act to one of the few truly comic moments in the play. Terence McSwiney, future Sinn Féin Lord Mayor of Cork, who was to die on hunger strike in Brixton Prison, asks Thomas to command the local battalion of the Irish Volunteers. Thomas, as a special favor, asks that it should be a teetotal battalion: no consumption of alcohol. Terence gulps a bit and says yes, but suggests it might not be the most attractive way to recruit men. But indeed true to his pledge, when Thomas is in the condemned cell he hands over to the priest his Pioneer pin, token of his lifelong abstention from drink. This, along with the last parting with his mother, left not a dry eye in the house. Because, unlike the hard-hearted cynical *Irish Times* theatre judges—we all three happened to be there together on the same night—the Cork audience loved the play and were on their feet to give it a standing ovation. It was a very special occasion for them: it was 100 years to the day since Kent had been executed and there had been a municipal commemoration early on. Thomas Kent was Cork's own hero, their railway station called after him, the only man executed in 1916 outside Dublin. It made me aware that, for all the government strategy of political balance and parity of esteem there were still Irish communities, like that Cork audience, who were fully committed nationalists and liked their plays straight.

Mixed styles

Much more typical dramaturgically were shows in mixed styles, and again often with mixed political attitudes. So, for example, *Wild Sky* by the talented playwright Deirdre Kinahan brought out the tangle of different allegiances among young Irish people in 1916, some of whom were committed activists working for women's suffrage as well as Irish independence, some like the poet Francis Ledwidge, who joined the British Army, and some who got involved in the Rising almost by accident. The central narrative here was a more or less standard love triangle but it was performed partly in dance, interspersed with the singing of ballads of the period. *Fornocht Do Chonac / Naked I Saw You* was an Irish language play adapted from an original text by Eoghan Ó Tuairisc, performed with English language subtitles, in An Taibhdhearc, Galway's permanent Irish language theatre, which took its title from a poem by Patrick Pearse: the poet turns aside from the naked beauty of love to the love of country and revolution for which he will die. Like *Johnny I Hardly Knew Ye* it was set in the contemporary period and figured a reclusive dropout sculptor living in a caravan who is persuaded out of retirement to create a Pearse memorial for the local town. It used inset video as well as a

more or less realistic set and the climax came with the appearance of a little girl as a dream vision of the lost innocence of the revolution.

Much better and more interesting was *Rebel Rebel*, a two-hander played out in the tiny space of Dublin's Bewley's Theatre, devised by Robbie O'Connor and Aisling O'Meara. It featured two Abbey actors who were historically involved in the Rising, Helena Moloney and Sean Connolly (no relation of James), intertwining their real life relationships, their actions in the rebellion, with a metatheatrical frame in which Moloney was offstage in the Abbey wings waiting to play Cathleen ni Houlihan in Yeats and Gregory's famously allegorical play about the earlier 1798 Rebellion.

Companies staging plays for children also had 1916 stagings and, in both of these, the emphasis was on the cost of the Rising rather than its glories. So, for example, *Maloney's Dream/ Brionglóid Maloney*, a bilingual show in English and Irish credited to Marc Mac Lochlainn, but created collectively by his company Branar, figured a hotel keeper called Maloney who returns to Ireland having inherited a hotel on Sackville Street (later of course to become O'Connell Street) determined to turn it into the best hotel in Europe. He finds it extremely run down with a comically incompetent staff, but manages to turn it round so as to have a grand opening on (needless to say) Easter Monday 1916. All the parts were taken by six actors who also doubled as musicians with attractive brio and inventiveness, using puppets and masks for variation in some scenes. What it brought out, however, was the devastation created by the Rising for the businesses in the neighbourhood, as first the Volunteers, then the British Army, commandeered all the hotel's resources and the place ended up a burnt-out ruin. Appropriately for a children's show there was an upbeat ending when Maloney vows to re-build.

In *The Messenger*, written by Mike Kenny for Barnstorm Theatre Company, the Rising was seen from the viewpoint of the working-class children of the city. Almost all of the children were played by adult actors with the exception of the central figure of the Bullet, Charley Brady, who aspires to be the fastest messenger in the city. Video projections of period Dublin streets behind Charley created the illusion of his running, while most of the set was completely non-realistic. This one, though, did not have a soft landing for the children, as in the final moment of the play we see Charley hit by a bullet as he attains his highest ever speed.

It was inevitable that in 2016 the Abbey Theatre would have to stage *The Plough and the Stars*; and that in itself constituted a problem. After its controversial, iconoclastic premiere, *Plough* has become the Abbey's favorite play, more often revived than any other in its repertoire. Before 2016, it had been staged as recently as 2012. Many Irish theatregoers would have all but

known it off by heart. For 2016 the Abbey promised a *Plough* production unlike any seen before, and that it certainly was. On the first night, the audience faced the blank safety curtain shutting off the stage, a stand microphone in front of it. After we had all stood to attention for the entrance of President Higgins and his entourage, a teenage girl in a red football jersey walked up the aisle on to the stage and, unaccompanied, sang the National Anthem in Irish, Amhrán na bhFiann. She sang it extremely well, but just as she came to the final high notes she started to cough blood, and we realised she was the consumptive character Mollser. At that point the curtain lifted, and Mollser joined all of the other characters who stood there in tableau before the action started.

It was a stripped down *Plough* with none of the normal representation of the run-down tenement flats so standard in O'Casey productions. Instead, there was a high scaffolding tower which represented the building. The Clitheroes' flat was rendered with mere tokens of furniture: a single bar electric heater at which Uncle Peter warmed his dress shirt; the flimsiest of flimsy cheap modern wardrobes. The costuming was equivalently modern; like Mollser in her football jersey and sneakers, Jack Clitheroe came in as a contemporary construction worker wearing a high-vis jacket, Nora in a supermarket checkout uniform; Bessie Burgess, when out on the town in Act II, appeared in a fake leopardskin coat. But it was not consistently modern; Fluther Good, for instance, had something approximating to period costume with the obligatory bowler of the 1920s. There was also a sense of ad hoc eclecticism in the way in which modern references were used. For example, in Act II, the Voice of the Man, mouthing the speeches of Patrick Pearse, came from an unseen TV, hung high on the front of the stage, which the Barman zapped on and off with his remote control. It was a very ingenious and effective way of rendering O'Casey's theatrically awkward device of imagining the Speaker on a long platform behind the bar who only comes into view from time to time. It also provided an added piece of business between the Covey and Rosie Redmond. When she was making her play for him she switched the channel on the TV to something suitably romantic, whereupon he marked his resistance by switching it back again. But the television appeared to be a flickering black and white machine of a sort that could hardly have been seen in an Irish pub since the 1960s. Rather than an up-to-the-minute contemporary period, the reference point was to some remembered technological modernity of the past.

The production revelled in a full-throated theatricality as far as possible from naturalistic representation. The stand microphone, on stage for most of the action, was used repeatedly to move the action towards music-

hall or cabaret: Jack sang most of his song to Nora in Act I amplified out to the audience, Rosie Redmond ended Act II with a rousing version of her bawdy ballad, while the drunken Fluther in Act III belted out his paean to himself, "For Fluther's a jolly good fellow." The physical comedy of the fights in Act II was heightened up to slapstick level, the Barman tossing the combatants back and forth, ending up carrying a diminutive purple-suited Covey bodily out the door. At the same time, the non-representational staging was used to heighten the pathos. Throughout Act II, when all the others were off in the bar, we saw Nora left alone sitting high up in the scaffolding tower, while Mollser sat on the other side of the stage playing with her mobile phone. The change of scene from Act III to Act IV was a frenetic disco dance by Mollser center stage. It could have been seen as a sort of dance of death, given that she was in her coffin by the next scene, but it also suggested the sort of normal modern teenage life that a consumptive child of her time like Mollser would never have.

That transition from Act III to IV was the most scenically spectacular move in the play because it involved lowering the scaffolding structure on to its side. It thus provided the sense of shut-in space necessary for the final act where the remaining characters take refuge in Bessie's attic flat. The effect of that scaffolding coming down on to the stage also suggested the collapse of the city, mimicking the ruined buildings that figured in so many photos of the aftermath of the Rising. The mixed style of the Abbey production of *Plough* worked well because it replicated the mixed style of the play itself. O'Casey poses real problems for a director who tries to render his drama in a homogeneous naturalistic style because it is in fact a hybrid: old-fashioned melodrama cut with broad farcical comedy, realistic dialogue heightened up to ornate rhetoric; a deliberately cacophonous conflict of modes. It is by this unstable theatrical mixture that in *Plough* he challenges the drama of the Rising as the rebels tried to construct it, unifying, sacramental, unequivocally tragic. Many of these mixed style shows, like that of the Abbey *Plough*, gave us tangential perspectives on the Rising, emphasizing the complexity of the contexts of the event, its different effects on bystanders and participants. The site specific shows that I want to consider next tried to bring us closer in to the action itself.

Site specific

Site specific plays are like those old-fashioned thrillers where, in the final scene, the detective assembles all the suspects and asks them to re-enact the murder scene, precipitating the revelation of who was the culprit. The principle is that by staging a show in the very place where a historical event

took place audiences may be able to time-travel back to the event itself and experience it for themselves. The most literal example of this among the 1916 shows was *Inside the GPO* by Colin Murphy. He is a journalist who drew on original documents for his recreation of the scene in the headquarters of the Rising in Dublin's GPO. So that is where we found ourselves on an April evening, 100 years on, sitting in the great entrance hall of the General Post Office, waiting for it all to begin.

The first time travel signal was the command from the gallery above for us all to stand up for the National Anthem. But of course it was not Amhrán na bhFiann as at the Abbey *Plough*, but "God Save the King" that was played, a startling reminder that in 1916 Ireland was still part of the British Empire. The first speech heard, in fact, was from Arthur Hamilton Norway, Secretary of the Post Office at the time; this was delivered again from the gallery, on the occasion a month before the Rising when a major refurbishment of the building had just been completed. Throughout the play Norway's wife Louisa provided an alternative point of view on the Rising: her speeches were based on the memoir she published in 1916, *The Sinn Féin Rebellion As I Saw It*. Though she, like her husband spoke from the gallery, suggestive of their hierarchical position as members of the governing class, above the rebels on the floor of the hall, her account brought out the destruction involved in the Rising. In particular, there was the sense of devastating loss of the mementoes of their dead son Frederick, who had been killed at age nineteen in the Western Front. But obviously the main action was devoted to the excitement of the Rising in all its day-to-day urgency, with loud noises off a reminder of the artillery used by the British forces as the week went on. Much of the drama came from the tensions between the leaders: the idealistic Pearse as against the more practical Connolly who was very much in charge of the military operation; the romantic O'Rahilly, who had tried to stop the Rising happening but then fought with the others in the GPO, as against the tough-minded activist Sean McDermott. Still by the end of the show, the audience did have a sense of just what the Rising achieved in inspiring the Irish people with a vision of independence voiced in the Proclamation.

It was the men who signed the Proclamation who were the subject of *Signatories*, a play devised in University College Dublin. The plan was to invite several contemporary Irish writers to create individual monologues for each of the seven signatories of the Proclamation. But here evidently another sort of politics came into the equation. All the seven signatories were men. One of the notable features of the many books published in and around 2016 was the focus on the part women played in the rebellion. R.F. Foster's book *Vivid Faces* showed how the feminist strand, which was an important element in the

revolutionary fervor inspiring the revolutionary generation, was suppressed in the largely conservative patriarchal state that emerged after Independence. Senia Pašeta's *Irish Nationalist Women* from 2013 and Lucy McDiarmid's 2015 *At Home in the Revolution* provided analyses of the roles women had played in the period. The outraged reaction to the all but all male program of the Abbey for 2016 had sparked the Waking the Feminists action demanding gender balance in Irish theatre. It was no doubt with that consciousness that three of the writers asked to contribute to *Signatories* were female—Marina Carr, Emma Donoghue, and Éilís Ní Dhuibhne—and Elizabeth Farrell, the nurse who carried Pearse's flag of surrender to the British forces, was given a monologue of her own at the very start of the show.

This, too, was a site specific play designed to be staged in Kilmainham prison where the seven signatories were executed in May 1916. It was a promenade performance in which the audience were moved from station to station standing to listen to each of the monologues. After what was effectively a prologue by Farrell, providing an overview of the Rising and the conflicted feelings it created in retrospect, the challenge for each of the writers was to come at the life and character of each of the leaders. Thomas Kilroy, for instance, suggested that Pearse's actions were an overcompensation for an inner sense of weakness fostered by a dominant father. Most playwrights had the signatory himself speak the monologue, but some came at their subject from another angle. So, for example, Hugo Hamilton testified to the power of James Connolly's personality by having a woman several generations later remember stories about him told her by her nursemaid. Éilís Ní Dhuibhne gave her monologue to Min Ryan, fiancée to Sean McDermott, remembering him with a surprisingly distant, at times satiric vision. Inevitably, given the eight different writers involved, it lacked coherence as a whole, and one had to admire the ingenuity of the idea rather than gaining any very new insight into the Rising as a whole.

ANU Productions, responsible for the other three site specific productions on my list, are specialists in this mode. The company has a history of immersive, interactive performances, in which tiny audiences of no more than two or three each time, are brought to places of past events and taken through dramatizations of that past. Their most famous show was *Laundry*, which re-created the conditions of the Magdalene laundries where unmarried mothers were effectively incarcerated in church-run institutions. For 2016, they mounted a triptych of shows to expose people to the action of the Rising. All year long, several times a day, you could board the 1916 Tour bus in O'Connell Street and literally travel back in time with stops in Stephen's Green where you met both a runner for the rebels and an Irish soldier in the Dublin

Fusiliers, or Dublin Castle where the daughter of James Connolly told of her last visit to him. *Sunder* brought us to Moore St, close to the GPO, where the rebels made their last stand. We were directed (by individual mobile phone) to urgent, secretive debates as to whether to surrender or not in places which were now a help yourself Indian restaurant, or a Polonez foodstore, testament to Ireland's contemporary globalization. ANU's most ambitious piece was *These Rooms*, based on an event late in the Rising where residences in North King Street were attacked by British forces and 15 civilians killed. ANU collaborated with the dance company CoisCéim on this production which was set in a disused bank at 85/86 Dorset St, on the site of the birthplace of Sean O'Casey. For this show, the bank was re-designed as a 1966 pub in which the audience of about a dozen watched the fiftieth anniversary celebrations on television, only to have the space erupt into a dance performance. This was followed by separate groups of two or three of us hustled through a labyrinth of rooms behind the bank/pub in which we participated in individual scenes from the North King Street story in all its strangeness and terror. If *Inside the GPO* gave the central drama of the Rising, and *Signatories* insights into the minds of the leaders, the ANU site specific shows were designed to make us feel what it was to live through these chaotic times.

Experimental

As I started with the most conventional of the 1916-related shows of 2016, I thought to conclude I should pick out two of the most experimental in form. *Sacrifice at Easter* by Pat McCabe—best known as a novelist for *The Butcher Boy* (1992) and *Breakfast on Pluto* (1998)—could have been included in the site specific category because it was staged in the Elizabeth Fort in Cork. This is a fascinating monument, a very well preserved fort high on the slopes of Cork City above the river Lee, built by the British in the early seventeenth century but used until very recently as an Irish police barracks. It was wonderful to be able to walk round its walls as audience members in a show starting at 10 p.m. midsummer with its magnificent views at twilight. However, there was no real connection of the site with 1916 and indeed apart from the title it would have been hard to know this was a commemorative play at all. It consisted of a number of satiric playlets witnessed by audience members mostly standing in the main courtyard, sometimes performed from a central stage but also from on top of the walls or at the entrances at the rows of houses within the fort where the policemen and their families had lived. There was one very funny piece in which a variety of performing hopefuls auditioned to appear in a 1916 commemorative production, but for the most

part the pieces were vignettes lampooning contemporary Ireland, the wholly inadequate result of the rebels' sacrifice at Easter.

Without doubt the most experimental show of the year was *It's Not Over*, staged by THEATREClub. The unfinished business of the title was the revolution started in 1916. The cast played as dissident Republicans still carrying on the struggle, and most of the episodes featured key incidents from the period of the Troubles: Bloody Sunday, the shooting of the three IRA volunteers in Gibraltar, the lynching of two British soldiers in Belfast, the Omagh bombing. But there was no clear trajectory of action, no narrative thread. The show, all four and a half hours of it, was free form, live-directed by Grace Dyas and Barry O'Connor who whispered in the ear of one performer or another what they were to do next. The Samuel Beckett Theatre in Trinity College Dublin, where it was staged, was stripped bare of seating; there were some chairs but for the most part the audience moved around in the same space as the actors. It was multi-media simultaneous staging. In a corner of the space, one or other of the performers sat at a table before a microphone, reading continuously from a pile of typescript from what sounded like eyewitness accounts of events in Northern Ireland, sometimes audibly, sometimes not. There was a low platform stage behind a red curtain on which Act I of *The Plough and the Stars* was performed, lines unchanged but with a balaclava instead of Nora's "swanky" hat from Arnotts, and Uncle Peter toting an automatic rifle rather than brandishing a dress sword. Above this stage, black and white video of old newsreels played on a loop. Act II of *Plough* was staged in the cash bar at another corner of the space where audience members could buy drinks throughout. Beside that was a stand where three live musicians played and sang.

The show was knowingly metatheatrical. From time to time, one or another of the actors appeared at a stand mike, introduced him or herself and apologized for the fact that the show had not started giving a series of excuses, rows with the Dublin Theatre Festival management, ideological disputes between the cast members, and so on. Each one ended with the same statement: "I refuse to commemorate 1916." So this was an anti-1916 commemorative show that kept not starting because it was about 1916 not being over. It was impossible to know quite what the political point of view of the play was. We were made to feel inside the atmosphere of unreconciled contemporary Republican circles with repeated question and answer sessions for potential recruits, only occasionally ironized. The most pointed protest against the violence was a very real dead fawn which was carried round on the shoulders of a dancer performer, dripping blood: the deer had been identified in one of the speeches as a symbol of freedom and innocence.

This was a show that divided audiences and critics; those who disliked it thought it pretentious, tasteless, and politically unacceptable. For others of us it had an urgency and energy one had to admire. The central conceit of the avant-garde theatre makers as dissident Republicans refusing to accept conventional mainstream politics and mainstream theatre was followed through with imagination and wit. It was in its way a striking latter-day tribute to *The Plough and the Stars*. What O'Casey had done in 1926, ten years after the event, was to deconstruct the Rising by showing it up in relation to the messy, complicated human dramas that surrounded it. What *It's Not Over* did was to deconstruct *Plough*, with any or all histories of the Troubles, in similar ways. It thus represented one highly ambitious way to respond to the key questions which faced all Irish theatre companies in 2016, which I have been trying to track through this essay. How do we as a nation, a hundred years later, regard the Easter Rising, the event that led to the formation of our state? And what contemporary style of playmaking can most effectively bring home to a twenty-first century audience the answer to that first question? The range of answers reflected in the various shows I witnessed through the year may give at least some idea of the competing traditions of understanding and representation at work in the Irish theatre in 2016.

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Notes

¹ After Casement had been convicted of treason for his part in the Easter Rising and sentenced to death, the British Government privately circulated extracts from the so-called "Black Diaries" recording his homosexual encounters with young men, as a means of discrediting him and resisting appeals for clemency. Many nationalists have claimed these diaries were forgeries, though it is now generally agreed that they are genuine.

² The burial place of such people whose bodies have never been found, mostly killed by Republican paramilitaries, has continued to be the subject of political controversy.

³ The Irish parliamentary party in the House of Commons, led by Charles Stewart Parnell, split in 1890, after he had been cited as co-respondent in a divorce trial, bringing to an end for a generation hopes of a measure of political independence for Ireland.

List of Plays

For full details on most of these productions, see Irish Playography, <http://www.irishplayography.com/>; in other cases, I have added URLs for more information.

Dineen, Ferghal, and Eoin Ó hAnnracháin. *Thomas Kent, 1916 Rebel*. 9 May 2016. Everyman Theatre, Cork. Lantern Productions. Web. 5 Jun.

2018. <<http://www.lanternproductions.ie/production/thomas-kent-1916-rebel>>
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