“. . . ultimately alone and walking around in your own private universe”: Metatheatre and Metaphysics in Three Plays by Enda Walsh

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Speaking with Michael Billington in 2014, Walsh suggests, “It’s a playwright’s job to explore [the] feeling that, however many good days you may have, you are still ultimately alone and walking around in your own private universe.” Since his breakthrough play *Disco Pigs* (1996) Walsh has been crafting an idiosyncratic and at times frustratingly gnomic theatre language. Interiority and private universes are writ large across Walsh’s work to date, not least in 2015, a year that proved a remarkably crowded one. His adaptation of Roald Dahl’s *The Twits* opened at the Royal Court Theatre in London in April. He produced an art installation, *A Girl’s Bedroom*, for the Galway International Arts Festival in July. His opera *The Last Hotel*, with music by Donnacha Dennehy, premiered at the Edinburgh International Festival in August and has since been on tour in Dublin, London, and New York. A film version of *The Last Hotel* produced in December is to be broadcast on Sky Arts in 2016. He has been at work with Canadian director Jaron Albertin on *Weightless*, an independent film for which he wrote the screenplay. And finally along with Belgian director Ivo van Hove, Walsh was part of the creative team on *Lazarus*, a musical by David Bowie, which began a sold-out run at the New York Theatre Workshop in December 2015 and now, in the wake of Bowie’s death, is likely to transfer to London. The recent pace of Walsh’s career seems to approximate that of some of his plays leaving critics and scholars grappling for a vocabulary, while the eclecticism of his output presents a challenge to those seeking a critical overview or a narrative that might readily dovetail with existing ones about Irish theatre. Although insightful work by Patrick Lonergan, Ondřej Pilný, Lisa Fitzpatrick, and Eamonn Jordan has contributed to the interpretive field, scholarly interest in Walsh has been significantly more dispersed and less intense than that generated by his contemporaries, Marina Carr, Conor McPherson, or Martin McDonagh. It is only in 2016 that Carysfort Press’s publication of *The Theatre of Enda Walsh*, edited by Mary P. Caulfield and Ian R. Walsh, begins to more fully address this deficit.

Walsh’s plays have been persistently anti-naturalistic, owing much to the legacies of absurdism and expressionism. Yet they also have a hyperactive character all their own, obsessively returning to patterns of storytelling and performance that adumbrate questions of being and mortality. As such they

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seem dissociated from readily identifiable social, historical, or political concerns. This impression is cultivated by Walsh himself, who openly shuns the prevailing tendency in British playwriting to engage with current issues (Walsh, "Foreword" viii). At the same time Walsh's work also resists co-option into the familiar, resonant concerns in the Irish dramatic tradition, succinctly described by Christopher Murray as history, identity, and home (224), and approaches such motifs only in a most abstract and indeterminate manner. As if to forestall attempts to interpret his work as accounts of Irish life, in a 2008 interview for *Theatre Voice* with Aleks Sierz, Walsh states plainly: "Theatre does not come from a real place for me." In lieu of these coordinates Walsh's theatre has tended towards an increasingly self-conscious exploration of the space and texture of performance that blends the metatheatrical with the metaphysical. As Lisa Fitzpatrick notes, "The emphasis on the 'facts' and the need for 'truth' in performance, the question of what 'truth' in performance might be, the efficacy of performance in shaping life and the world" (448) are at the core of what Walsh has been producing since 2000.

In the Foreword to the second collection of his plays published by Nick Hern in 2014, Walsh claims that in contrast to the work before 2006, which was "driven by language," he now "is more concerned with a play's shape" (viii). Clearly, for those tracking his development as a theatre-maker, the manic energies of storytelling, so vital to his plays from the 1990s, had already begun to mutate by 2000 with the dominant semi-Beckettian stage image of *Bedbound*. *Bedbound*, *Misterman* (1999), *The Small Things* (2005), and *The Walworth Farce* share a focus on aberrant and confining narrative performance, but a fault line lies between *The Small Things* and *The Walworth Farce*. The frenetic pace and surreal tone of the plays remain constant; however, there is, I want to suggest, a subtle but crucial difference in emphasis between carrying *on* and carrying *out* such a performance. In this new phase in Walsh's dramaturgy, an elaboration of ritualized, repetitive, and carefully choreographed action in symbolically charged spaces is accompanied by the fragmentation of mimetic and diegetic readability. At the heart of this work a fundamental set of anxieties is to be discovered. *The Walworth Farce* (2006), *Penelope* (2010), and *Ballyturk* (2014), each in different ways, are plays about performance and performativity vis à vis creativity and death.

Perform, transform . . . or else

Before turning to the three plays in question I want to linger briefly upon the discursive space of performance and performativity in a more general sense. In *Performance: A Critical Introduction* (1996), Marvin Carlson notes some of the reasons for the rise in "'performance' as a metaphor or analytic tool for . . . practitioners" (195). Central among them is "the fact that performance is associated not just with doing, but with re-doing, . . . how human patterns of activity are reinforced or changed within a culture and how they are adjusted when various different cultures interact" (195). While critical emphasis may vary or prioritize one more than another; corporality, presence, the experience of being in an audience, and interpretive involvement are the compass points of the affective space of theatrical performance (Carlson 198). Inevitably imbricated with the emphasis on performance as re/doing is the term performative, which arrives problematically and circuitously from the work of linguistic philosopher John L. Austin (1962). Perhaps more compelling than a rehearsal of the now well-dissected distinctions between linguistic, gender, and theatrical understandings of the performative is the reach of the concept of performance by the twenty-first century. As Jon McKenzie argues in *Perform or Else: From Discipline to Performance* (2001), since the Second World War performance has developed into a multifaceted and pervasive paradigm to the extent that it has become "an emergent stratum of power and knowledge" (18). By extension he suggests, via the ideas of Jean François Lyotard, that "in a certain sense, performativity is the postmodern condition" (18) and comes with its own demands. For McKenzie cultural, organizational, and technical spheres each have their models of performance and their challenges of (social) efficacy, efficiency, and effectiveness. In the cultural sphere, performance tends to be understood as formally self-conscious, liminal, and productively disruptive. Its efficacy lies in altering patterns of perception, "challenging social norms and symbolic structures" (McKenzie 38).

Carlson surveys the purpose of this expanding field of activity positively, asserting that "[p]erformers and audience alike accept that a primary function of this activity is precisely cultural and social metacommentary, the exploration of the self and other, of world as experienced, and of alternative possibilities" (196). McKenzie also notes how cultural performance's efficacy has long been attributed to its "resistant and transgressive potential" (30). Drawing on Judith Butler's seminal work on the performativity of gender, however, he goes on to flag the ways performance and performativity have both transgressive *and* normative dimensions (166).

The choice may, therefore, be not whether to perform, but how to perform. It is a tension that, I want to argue, finds expression in Walsh's work of the period, the challenge of performance is ambivalent containing within it efficacy and failure, breakthroughs and breakdowns, liberties and captivities.

In *The Transformative Power of Performance* (2008), Erika Fischer-Lichte maintains that "the performative turn not only gave rise to new types of performance but brought about the aestheticization and theatricalization of all types of performance" (196). The expansion of performance has altered theatre-making in myriad ways, but one of immediate pertinence to Walsh's work is the postdramatic. In late-twentieth- and early-twenty-first-century theatre, transgression and resistance, Hans Thies Lehmann argues, are articulated in a prevalent postdramatic attitude and aesthetic which deconstruct the dramatic (*Postdramatic Theatre* [1999, trans. 2006]). Lehmann charts the ways in which postdramatic aesthetics are expressed in relation to text, body, space, time, and media in ways that rupture drama's fictions of coherence and logic. Enda Walsh's work cannot be described as postdramatic in any wholesale sense; he still describes himself as a playwright and he still proclaims an interest in story and character. Yet works like *Room 303* (2014), *Ballyturk* (2014), and *A Girl's Bedroom* (2015) increasingly tend in that direction. Lehmann's study of postdramatic techniques can, therefore, serve to partially illuminate the shift in Walsh's theatre-making post-2006—works that marshal metatheatrical games, metaphysical questions, and kinetic intensity to generate its effects.

***The Walworth Farce:* "This story we play is everything"**[1]

The Walworth Farce, first staged by the Druid Theatre Company at the Town Hall Theatre, Galway on 20 March 2006, followed by an Irish tour, was performed at the Traverse Theatre, Edinburgh in August 2007 and then produced at St Ann's Warehouse, New York and the National Theatre, London in 2008, before eventually returning for a run in Galway that same year. In January 2015, Landmark Productions mounted a revival of the play starring Brendan Gleeson, Brian Gleeson, and Domhnall Gleeson at the Olympia Theatre in Dublin, which swiftly sold out and garnered another wave of admiring reviews. *The Walworth Farce* has also been a boon to scholars of Irish theatre, because of the ways in which it folds in upon itself in a metatheatrical game while simultaneously unfurling questions about the truth of place, the practice of belonging, and identity as a performative construct. The genre dimensions to this game provide the outermost frame to the play's ludic attitudes to form and performance. In effect Walsh brings two types of play into collision. The first is obvious from the title; as Eamonn Jordan contends, "Farce, whether boulevard farce or tragic farce, is concerned with sexual taboos, violence, anarchic licence and death" ("Stuff from Back Home" 335-36). Farce pairs an escalation of plot intricacy with a simplification of emotion and a flattening out of character into type or caricature. In other words, the effects of violence, sexual promiscuity, disorder, and even death are muted, never deeply felt. Walsh approached farce as a tradition unfamiliar in Irish theatre, and while this point might be slightly debatable (in terms of television drama *Father Ted* being a case in point), certainly there is no equivalent to Joe Orton's plays of the 1960s, or Michael Frayn's *Noises Off* (1982). As in Frayn's well-known farce drama, the play-within-a-play structure serves to multiply the metatheatrical potential of the performance situation; *The Walworth Farce* is a farce with an embedded farce.

Walsh undoubtedly revels in the playfulness, physicality, and menace intrinsic to the genre; however, he bends the form to his own purposes by gesturing towards representational patterns of Irish experiences concerning exile and diaspora, at the same time incorporating his personal experience of obsessive compulsive disorder. In conversation with Joe Dowling and Fintan O'Toole, Walsh discusses how he wrestled with the heritage of what he calls the Irish "immigrant play," the great "lonesome drama" of dislocation with its attendant risks of mawkish sentiment ("In Conversation"). He says: "I knew I wanted to write the play that every Irish playwright has to write—the old Irish people in London—but [I knew] I ha[d] to explode that kind of play and bring it somewhere else" (qtd. in Jordan, "Stuff from Back Home" 353). An immediate point of reference in Irish theatre, acknowledged by Walsh himself, is Tom Murphy's *A Whistle in the Dark* (1961) ("In Conversation"), but *The Walworth Farce* also inverts *Conversations on a Homecoming* (1985) and ironizes the iconic and tragic narrative performance of *Bailegangaire* (1985). The implications of this tangle of genre references has necessarily been the focus of many of the critical responses to the play. So, for instance, in *Dissident Dramaturgies*, Jordan argues that Walsh "is contesting the very sensibility of the world of Murphy's drama, deeming it to bear no resemblance to the reality of Ireland in the new millennium" (224). Situating the play in relation to the political and economic transformations in Ireland since the 1990s, Charlotte McIvor finds that "[u]ltimately, *The Walworth Farce* captures multiple narratives of transnational Irish histories, pinpointing themes of immigration, emigration, race, and home. Ireland would be unrecognizable to this trio if they were able to escape their own story and return home" (462). Chris

Morash and Shaun Richards extend the implications of Walsh's play still further, contending that it stages the "cultural and theatrical demise" of "a dramatically viable Irish sense of place" (118).

Each of these interpretations of the play reinscribes the "somewhere else." Walsh takes this recognizable "kind of play" within the contours of existing Irish cultural identities, but the play also radically destabilizes their primacy. Ostensibly Walsh takes this story of exile and identity to London, yet the named place of the title is patently no more real than the Cork to which the characters refer. According to stage directions, Dinny and his sons, Sean and Blake, are discovered in a dingy flat on Walworth Road. The décor of this space suggests it has changed little since the 1970s, except for its progressive destruction, and as the play unfolds it becomes clear that the three characters exist in a bizarre nostalgic time warp, desperately attempting to make a fiction of a past live through performance that has a ritualistic quality. Their obsessively maintained universe is radically altered by the appearance of a character from an apparently parallel "real" world: the young, black Tesco employee, Haley. Her arrival precipitates Blake's stabbing of Dinny and Sean's murder of Blake, but Walsh refuses to collapse farce into realism; the briefly contiguous universes diverge once more with no omniscient perspective offered. As Haley flees the gory scene, Sean prepares to "lose himself in a new story" (85).

The world of a play in which three adult men compulsively re-enact a story of a multiple murder and escape to London from Cork on a daily basis in order to compete for an acting trophy patently refuses to be understood in terms of sociological realities or a televisual aesthetic. It cannot make sense on these terms; *The Walworth Farce* presents audiences with stage space and performance text that is overcoded, overflowing with signifiers, utterly cluttered with objects, semi-familiar narratives of identity, and fragmented associations. It is, in effect, the opposite of Beckettian minimalism and tends towards a postdramatic attitude to "sign density" (Lehmann 89) that is deliberately excessive. Jordan asserts that it is "a world . . . malformed by a twist of the curious and dangerous imagination of Walsh, as nothing is 'integrated,' no closure is possible, [there remains only] the failure of resistance to the inevitability of history or farce, or history as farce, farce as history" (Jordan, "Stuff from Back Home" 354). But is *The Walworth Farce* really about serious questions of Irish history at all? The metatheatrical, deliberately unrealistic nature of the play seems to point elsewhere. Rather, it questions and resists the very premises of identity politics via its emphasis on the texture, space, and efficacy of performance.

Looking closely at the set and stage directions reveals that what could be merely a naturalist box set interior is already distorted and damaged. The partitions between the rooms (and doors are fundamental to traditional farce) are broken, the wood frames exposed. As depicted by Walsh, the space itself physically prefigures the stress on generic, narrative, and ontological coherence. Sabine Dargent's design for the Druid Theatre Company production extended the space upwards giving the impression of rooms with improbably high ceilings. The effect is one of suggestive distortion: the conventions of a box set and the divisions usually required by farce are visually referenced but are deformed, disrupting what Lehmann calls "the structure of . . . mirroring" (150), which dramatic theatre involves.

The action within this space is performative in the sense that it becomes evident that its characters make themselves through these actions repeatedly in the present moment. That performance within the world of the play is amateur—its underpinnings are exposed—it is hilariously bad, vulnerable, and, at the moment when Dinny makes Hayley's face whiter with moisturizer (78), racially offensive. It is disrupted by human error, prop failure, and by the arrival of an unwelcome audience in the shape of Haley. And yet it continues, it is imperative—they must "perform or else." Walsh invites us as audience to appraise the intricate palimpsest of professional actors performing characters who are ineptly performing a poorly constructed story with far too many characters. He invites us to appreciate the precarious labor of performance and the delicate mechanisms of suspension of disbelief we bring to it. Most significantly he prompts us to reflect upon the fundamental performativity of identity be it personal or national. As Jordan aptly observes, "[t]he notion that the performance is 'everything' is a profoundly distressing concept" (337), but what if we look at the play's conclusion differently? Significantly at the play's end Sean is about to "lose himself in a new story" (85). Thinking through performativity in relation to gender identity, Judith Butler suggests,

> The subject is not *determined* by the rules through which it is generated . . . *but rather a regulated process of repetition* that both conceals itself and enforces its rules precisely through substantializing effects. In a sense, all signification takes place with the orbit of the compulsion to repeat; "agency," then, is to be located within the possibility of a variation on that repetition. (145)

Walsh probes the extent to which such processes of compulsive repetition constitute our worlds, asks whether our realities are just as bizarrely and blindly constructed as the rooms the characters inhabit.

Counterintuitively, Sean's move to "lose himself in a new story" might, perhaps, be seen positively, as an image of agency, an alteration of normative performative practices through variation on repetition.

***Penelope*: "truth in such wonderful delusion"**[2]

Penelope was commissioned as part of the project entitled Odyssee Europa, which invited six playwrights to produce works responding to Homer's *Odyssey*. The plays were staged in different theatres in Germany in the Ruhr region between February and May 2010. The English version of *Penelope* opened in July 2010 at the Galway Arts Festival before touring to Edinburgh, Helsinki, New York, and London. Walsh's sampling of the *Odyssey* hones the story of Penelope's surviving suitors and their last ditch attempts to seduce her and save themselves before her avenging husband arrives. Like *The Walworth Farce*, *Penelope* overflows with images of performance: the performing body, spectatorship, linguistic virtuosity, technological mediation, and even mime. The actions of the male characters on stage are aligned in relation to Homer's epic poem making the imperative—perform or else—explicit. Death waits in the wings. And the trophy for best actor in this instance would appear to be Penelope herself, their silent, beautiful, ageless muse and audience. *Penelope* shares the claustrophobic quality of *The Walworth Farce* and elaborates a complex of allusive and absurd images, yet it is a more uneven play because it straddles competing senses of precarious performance.

Despite Walsh's reluctance to creatively engage with social or political realities, the scenario for *Penelope* is, as he admits in his Foreword to the play in 2014 and elsewhere, in part a response to the financial crash of 2008. Apart from Eamonn Jordan and Ondřej Pilný comparatively few scholars or reviewers have probed the play as a satirical allegory on the demise of the Celtic Tiger. Having usefully identified the correspondences between the characters' names—Fitz, Dunne, Quinn, and Burns—and those of "prominent Irish business moguls, bankers, and developers who were directly involved in the downfall of the Irish economy" Pilný ventures that this dimension to the play was side-lined due to its generic and thematic eclecticism (171-72). It was also modulated in both Walsh's discussions of the play in the media and in the review coverage; in one interview, he describes it primarily as a "weird, existential comedy with guys in their swimming trunks. They hate one another and they're competing [with] each other for this woman's love" (Lowry).

In retrospect (and with the Greek financial crisis of 2015 so fresh in the public imagination) this seems increasingly like the elephant in the room. *Penelope* is saturated with references to business, economy, and failed performance. Walsh provides a plethora of signs, ironies, and allusions not only in the concept-heavy set, but also in the stage action. We have a fantastically improbable scene of a dry swimming pool filled with a cluster of multigenerational failed Irish businessmen at a time when the Irish economy had lost liquidity. They are isolated on an island and cannot swim. Their Ionian paradise has dwindled into a purgatorial space of failure and imminent death. They are stripped to their swimming costumes, exposing vulnerable, aging bodies no amount of hubris or bluster can disguise. There's blood on the wall, soon revealed to be that of a fellow competitor who, under the malign influence of Quinn, has just committed suicide because of the hopelessness of their situation. Within minutes of the opening action Quinn and Dunne fall into discussion of the children's story *The Magic Cooking Pot*, which is praised by Quinn as a cautionary tale of "investment and growth or the fast development of an unstable economy" badly in want of "regulation" (9). And central to the stage equipment is the altar-like presence of a "large gleaming Taunton Deluxe Barbecue raised on a wooden pallet" (3), which does not work. Allegorically signaling the bygone days of Celtic Tiger conspicuous consumption, the broken barbecue is dismissed by Dunne as "a garden tragedy" (16). Its signifying potential is directly addressed by Fitz when he declares that it is "mocking us by sitting here! It's placing unworkable images in our heads, boys" (16).

Faced with their impending demise foretold by an uncannily shared dream, Fitz, Dunne, and Quinn briefly consider the possibility of working together as a seduction team to secure a better chance of survival. Even this is framed in the language of business: "A group of men with a common ideology, a collective direction! . . . We're building a company right here!" (22). Yet the proposed collective action for the good of all collapses in an increasingly vicious individualist bid for competitive advantage as Penelope's CCTV obliges each to perform. Penelope observes from a height and at a distance, a compelling and capricious force; she remains an unreal figure who might better be conceived of as a sphinx-like personification of the market than as a real woman in any sense. The performance labors of the men below are compulsory but futile, since, as already scripted by Homer, Penelope will remain loyal to the most powerful competitor, who will in turn destroy those weaker.

Simultaneous with this set of interpretive possibilities is the play's obvious foregrounding of performance itself and its effects upon an audience. Here again Walsh unfolds these motifs at multiple levels. The first is visual and spatial. The stage space is split between the swimming pool and the glassed-in space above, where, until the final minutes of the play, Penelope watches the live footage of the suitors declaring their love. The scene, reminiscent of a reality television game, duplicates the action and multiplies the senses of spectatorship and surveillance. In the original English-language production designed again by Sabine Dargent, the stage space was vividly divided. Penelope's space was backlit in royal blue, contrasting with the distressed beige tiling of the pool space. The impression is of two orders of reality one atop the other. Penelope is initially seen sitting on an upstage platform above the pool with her back to the audience watching the proceedings below on a large television. Strikingly, Penelope's CCTV camera is positioned in the space of the audience. When Dunne and Fitz below are hailed by the camera and compelled to perform on cue they direct their words to the camera and in doing so conflate the audience in the theatre with Penelope as spectator and addressee. Yet the situation is not so simple: the audience necessarily also witnesses what goes on between the characters when the camera is off and watches the acting on stage simultaneously with its capture on the small screen, which they can also see. The question implied by this complex of spectatorial levels is whether the audience shares Penelope's role or responsibility in some meaningful way. Regrettably, such reflection is muffled by the dense packing of multiple mimetic, diegetic, and symbolic layers.

This formal self-consciousness is carried forward by *Penelope*'s second major feature. In the midst of the comic, mean, and, finally, murderous macho posturing, Walsh embeds four solo performances. The stylistic differences between these solo performances and their impacts feed back into the play's self-reflexive consideration of existential crisis. While all share the same aspiration, to move Penelope's heart, each approaches the task with a different method and each topples into solipsism. Beginning with Dunne's hammy lyricism, continuing with Fitz's fumbling existentialism, Quinn's manic love-mime, and concluding with Burns's deeply ambivalent contemplation of possible worlds, Walsh places questions of verbal and physical performance, value, and ethics front and center in the play. Notably their performances not only fail to elicit the desired response from Penelope, but are critiqued and derailed by the men themselves. As each enacts his version of "love" (a floating signifier if ever there was one), it is patently obvious that the performative fails, love is absent, and they cannot redeem themselves through words or a re-enactment of great lovers of the past. Dunne's lewd and self-regarding monologue is hilariously propped up by directions and prompts from Fitz and Quinn but is prematurely switched off by Penelope. Fitz manages to get Penelope out of her chair, but Quinn in jealousy distracts him by burning his book and the moment of connection evaporates. As Dunne offers Fitz a note or two on how to improve his acting, Quinn and Burns beat each other. Quinn's quick-fire sequence of costumed mimes of history's great lovers almost raises a smile from Penelope just before the others knife him to death. Burns, covered with Quinn's blood, speaks of another world where affection, friendship, and love might exist, another world in which "Love is saved" (51), in which, significantly, these men no longer exist.

Once again Walsh tests the power of performance, exposing vulnerability and failure at the level of stage action, but the focus and effects of the play are much more dispersed and diffuse than those of *The Walworth Farce*. This is likely the result of the conditions of the play's gestation, namely Walsh's co-operation with German dramaturg Tilman Raabke, who initially invited him to create something for the Odyssee Europa project, and the prevailing influence of the postdramatic style of theatre-making in Germany where *Penelope* was first produced. Consequently, the theme of performance as a power struggle and performance as a means of fending off death jostles with the comic and satirical potential in Walsh's verbose scenario. The deeper challenges of the spectatorial situation are displaced by vivid, but, finally, quite static, stage images. The physical presence of the semi-naked bodies of the performers ironizes the aspirations they express. Ultimately, the machinations of midlife male angst angled yet again towards a mute, youthful female object of desire—no matter how figurative she may be—produce a normative, rather than transformative, performance.

***Ballyturk*; "none of it's real"**[3]

Ballyturk premiered at the Galway International Arts Festival in July 2014, followed by a tour in Ireland and a high-profile run at the National Theatre London. The play was received warmly by audiences (social media was awash with rave responses) and generally won positive reviews from critics. With remarkable consistency viewers and reviewers remarked upon two aspects of the show: first the force and energy of the acting, and second, its general inscrutability. In *Ballyturk*, Walsh has further amplified elements evident in the previous pieces: frenetic repetition, anxious self-conscious performance, possible worlds, narrative fragmentation, and death. The metaphysical and metatheatrical motifs that structure *The Walworth Farce* and *Penelope* now blossom into a full existential extravaganza in which images and physical display seem to override plot or character. Indeed, *Ballyturk* takes the notion that performance is everything to its logical conclusion and turns inward to drill down into Walsh's anxieties about his own creative processes.

Lehmann suggests that:

> Effectively, the category appropriate to the new theatre is not action but *states*. Theatre here deliberately negates, or at least relegates to the background, the possibility of developing a narrative. . . . This does not preclude a particular dynamic within the "frame" of the state—one could call it a *scenic dynamic*, as opposed to the dramatic dynamic. (68)

This seems of much relevance to the way *Ballyturk* operates. The scene described by Walsh is of a room that is "too large" which "[a]ppears to be a one-roomed dwelling area" with what might be a curtained window in the back wall upstage (221). The objects within this dwelling are not naturalistically arranged; even though a table and chairs sit in the middle of the floor, the side walls are "covered with stacked furniture and drawings" (221). Jamie Vartan's stage design magnified the uncanny potential of the scene by fixing shelving units high up on the side walls, well beyond feasible reach. Similar to the stage images of *The Walworth Farce* and *Penelope* the space stretches upwards in a manner that promises a symbolic dimension to the action below.

The play's title suggests a vaguely Irish place. Yet any expectations that the fictional world of Ballyturk might materialize vanish when the curtains on the back wall are drawn, to reveal not a window but the word Ballyturk, "in red-neon Celtic calligraphy" (234). Advertising its own fictionality in this way, place explicitly becomes both an object and a text. Pinned below the sign are numerous sketches of faces—the characters belonging to its story. As in *The Walworth Farce*, place is conjured in a symbolically resonant stage space through performance in re-enacted story episodes that are exaggerated and deliberately unreal, but in *Ballyturk* narrative fragmentation is exacerbated, as if the performers do not quite know what to do with the scenarios they are enacting, or where they are going. Stories are arbitrarily selected by throwing darts at the children's drawings pinned to the set, voices are intermittently overheard through the walls providing absurd, vicious and, above all, broken variations on the theme of rural life in the style of a Patrick McCabe novel.

While the names of the inhabitants of Ballyturk feature prominently in these fragments, the performers on stage are nameless, being designated only by numbers. The disjunction between a Beckettian stripping of character and the proliferation of identities in the far-fetched realm of Ballyturk crystallizes at two moments within the play. The first occurs when No. 1 and No. 2 respond to the existence of the unknown that has appeared in the shape of a fly. No. 1 is traumatized, No. 2 is in denial but they attempt to distract themselves by summoning Ballyturk. No. 1 begins by listing the names of all the people of the town while No. 2 poses as them. Metaphysical crisis is offset by the plethora of recited proper names and their fleetingly farcical embodiment in an openly unconvincing performative display. The second moment occurs when No. 3 appears. One of the first questions he asks is: "Did ya give each other names by the way? […] And why not?" (258). The play in this way returns to metatheatrical issues, interrogating the nature and function of fictional character. It doubles back on Samuel Beckett's erosion of character and the rupture of identification between spectator and dramatis personae that it heralds, by asking the characters themselves why they have not taken the trouble to christen each other. At the same time there persists the irony that despite their nameless states, the performers in *Ballyturk* were fascinating to audiences in part precisely because they are so well known; much of the aura of the play, exploited amply by pre-show publicity, is the result of the celebrity of actors Cillian Murphy as No. 1 and Stephen Rea as No. 3, to a lesser extent Mikel Murfi as No. 2.

As in the plays already discussed, the characters labor to fill the space with performances. In *Ballyturk* No. 1 and No. 2 engage in clownish, athletic and visceral routines that seem to have an almost ritualistic significance but the purpose of which remains oblique for much of the show. Their performance work seems primarily governed by a postdramatic "aesthetic of repetition" (Lehmann 156) as opposed to a dramatic logic. The ominous zaniness of the play's closed universe is fractured by the appearance of a fly. The presence of this innocuous invader elicits an apparently disproportionate response from No. 1:

> 1. It feels like we may be less of what we were in a place we don't know wholly now. (*Slight pause.*) Do you feel that way?
> *A slight pause.*
> 2. Barely.
> 1. 'Barely' is enough. (246)

But it becomes clear that the very existence of the fly alters the world in which stories of Ballyturk can be created, retold or re-enacted. Their performance following the killing of the fly escalates to a feverish pitch, precipitating metaphysical crisis in No. 1, who smashes his head repeatedly against the wall. Their antics are finally interrupted when the back wall is torn away to reveal a grassy hill and No. 3, the rather static *deus ex machina* of the play. No. 3 describes himself as a "collector" and explains that he has come to take one of them to die. What remained implicit in Walsh's previous plays is now laid out explicitly: "none of it's real," says No. 3, their lives are figments of the imagination (258). In a sequence of "scenically dynamic formations" (Lehmann 68), the play concludes with a set of resonant images: No. 1 crosses to death, the back wall of the stage closes and from behind a small hidden door a seven-year old girl replaces No.1 in the dwelling. The priority of formal effects is clear here. As Walsh says, "[l]ike the characters, the play feels directionless and lost—thrown from one atmosphere to another. The question of what an audience takes home—what they experience—kept being asked. With *Ballyturk* we would tell a story—but more significantly we wanted an audience to experience form shifting radically" (Foreword viii). Compared to *The Walworth Farce* and *Penelope*, *Ballyturk* certainly feels much more devised and form determined. The routines the characters 1 and 2 enact showcase their physical stamina. The plot seems almost accidental, their story-telling performances are piecemeal as if neither the unnamed figures nor the playwright can discover the courage of their narrative convictions. The play spirals downwards towards the message "life is short" and tangles itself in veiled concerns about the value and purpose of creativity. The effect of the metaphysical turn in the play is curiously deflating. The arrival of No.3 was understood by several commentators in Beckettian terms, it is as Peter Crawley puts it, "strangely anti-climactic, as though Godot had shown up." This is counterpointed with the obvious kinetic vitality and compelling effect the performance had on audiences. Above all, the states of vulnerability and the precarity of the realities generated by narrative and physical routines indicate that for all its frenetic convolution *Ballyturk* is a play about interiority. The scene it unfolds is that of the playwright's own consciousness in which his sensibilities and fears are mobilized and personified, trapped in a disturbing circulation of compulsive reiteration and re-enactment that becomes the substance of the work itself.

Precarious performances

The Walworth Farce, *Penelope* and *Ballyturk* have much to connect them. A shared exploitation of the disorientating potential of costume, an emphasis on the physicality of re-enactment, unglamorous images of the male body, the limited space afforded to female roles, the displays of loquaciousness, the centrality of compulsive, repetitive and imperative performances in conceptually overcoded spaces are prominent when the plays are analyzed together. Despite his rejection of mimetic relevance, Walsh undertakes an intense exploration of states of precarity that arguably moves from more recognizably public and political to more private and personal concerns. The result is a body of work in which metatheatrical techniques, performativity and reflections on mortality are tightly entwined with restless creative self-consciousness. As Walsh himself tells us: "all the plays are effectively about theatre, about writing, about what's the point of it" ("In Conversation").

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