REVIEWS

Women in Contemporary Irish Theatre: Widening the Space
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Haughton, Miriam, and Mária Kurdi, eds. *Radical Contemporary Theatre Practices by Women in Ireland*. Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2015. 251 pages. ISBN 978-1-909325-75-3. Pbk. €20.

Garry Hynes, the director and co-founder of Druid Theatre Company, confesses in the foreword to this fine collection of essays and interviews that "Being a woman in Irish Theatre is still very difficult" (v). In "Lynne Parker: Radical Director," Charlotte Headrick also notes that "celebrating women directors and women dramatists has not been the norm in Ireland" (170), which is why *Radical Contemporary Theatre Practices by Women in Ireland* is so important. In their introduction, the editors, Miriam Haughton and Mária Kurdi, observe that "there exists a wave of female theatre artists creating groundbreaking work in Ireland" (13). The often challenging work chronicled in this book is especially significant at a time when Irish society is changing, with the power of the Roman Catholic Church in decline.

Traditionally, Irish theatre has focused on literary texts, while traditional Catholic culture has made the body, especially the female body, almost a taboo subject. In "Collectable Junk: Moving through a Decade of Dance Theatre," twins Megan and Jessica Kennedy discuss their career creating works of imaginative dance theatre with their company "junk ensemble." Their work does not use much text, preferring song, music, and dance to "make dance stories" (21). Haughton and Kurdi contend that "the significant and rapid development of dance theatre, in which 'junk ensemble' holds a leading role, has been an inspiration for the increasing acceptance of and respect for the body and its identity forming potential in Ireland" (6).

The issue of the body on the Irish stage is further explored in Shonagh Hill's "Olwen Fouéré's Corpus: The Performer's Body and Her Body of Work" and Cathy Leeney's "Second Skin: Costume and Body: Power and Desire." Hill's study of Fouéré's "corpus" focuses particularly on her performance in a production of the French drama *Sodome, My Love*, while Leeney examines the role of costume on the contemporary stage in both *Sodome, My Love* and Rough Magic Company's 2010 production of *Phaedra*.

In *Sodome* and her many other roles, Fouéré has often played characters drawn from mythology and in Hill's view, created work which

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"serves as a document of corporeal resistance to myths of femininity" (38). The radical contribution made by Fouéré to Irish theatre lies in her "engagement with corporeal means of expression in a theatre tradition which affords prominence to the literary text" at the expense of "a critical neglect of bodies" (31). Leeney argues that "in theatre, costume has a particular significance in the interrogations of representations of female power and desire," as exemplified in how "powerful women are costumed in contemporary performances" (41). *Phaedra* "stages for the twenty-first century the damaging and unrelenting agon of woman's self-fulfilment, the irony of her agency against herself" (51), while in *Sodome*, "the challenges posed by Fouéré's woman of Sodome bear the pressures of current anxieties about woman as commodity, woman as powerful, woman as desiring" (53).

Many female theatre practitioners have addressed the dark history of how Church and State in twentieth-century Ireland treated unmarried mothers and others deemed to be "sinful" and "evil." Miriam Haughton's harrowing essay, "From Laundries to Labour Camps," examines *Laundry* (2011) by ANU Productions, directed by Louise Lowe, a powerful site-specific work performed in and around a former Magdalene Laundry in north inner city Dublin. The Magdalene Laundries were a part of Irish life from 1767 until the 1990s. Within the walls of the laundries, which were run by orders of nuns, the women were slave laborers in all but name, working in silence and often in semi-darkness. In *Laundry*, Lowe and her team set out to bring these silenced women out of the shadows and the silence by bringing the audience to the places where they suffered. Haughton describes how she "entered the convent building as a consumer who bought a ticket as part of the Ulster Bank Theatre Festival 2011, and exited as a citizen confused and horrified by [her] shared history with a regime characterized by such unjust despair to the weak and struggling members of society" (58). ANU Productions used the personal testimonies of many of the Magdalene women and other historical documents to create *Laundry*. Haughton's essay gives a strong and detailed description of the fifteen separate performances that make up the work, including the reading out of the names of those incarcerated in the laundries, names she was asked to remember and repeat out loud, "incorporating the act of remembering into the act of witnessing" (62).

The ways in which Church and State regarded motherhood is examined through the career of performance and visual artist Áine Phillips, whose radical theatre practice Caitriona Mary Reilly discusses in "The Fetishization and Rejection of Womanhood in the Performance Works of

Áine Phillips." Phillips's *Redress: Emotional Labour* "brings to life the spectres of the Magdalene women" and is described by Reilly as "an important example of radical contemporary performance in Ireland today" (81). The radicalism lies in the use of multiple female artists and the fact that *Labour*, and some of Phillips's other works deal "specifically with the female experience" (81), and this is particularly so in *Sex, Birth and Death*, which addresses the almost taboo subject of abortion. In engaging with issues such as abortion, motherhood, mental and physical disability, Phillips "creates radical performance works which interrogate and undermine national stereotypes of womanhood" (85).

If Irish theatre has been primarily male dominated for much of its history, it has also been overwhelmingly heterosexual. The voices of queer men and women were rarely heard on the main Irish stages until recently. Samuel Yates's "We Will be Seen: Documenting Queer Womanhood" examines Amy Conroy's successful and acclaimed play *I (Heart) Alice (Heart) I*, which "challenges the conventional Irish canon and socio-cultural mores and norms it embodies" (90) in a groundbreaking work that reconciles queerness with Catholicism. The portrayal of homosexuality also features in the work of the Northern Irish theatre practitioner Shannon Yee, the subject of Fiona Coffey's "Blurring Boundaries and Collapsing Genres." Yee, who was one half of the first couple to have a civil partnership ceremony in the United Kingdom in 2005, has multiple minority identities which mark her out from the white, male, heterosexual dominant voice in Irish theatre; she is gay, of Chinese-American heritage, and has an acquired brain injury (ABI). Her piece *Trouble* documents the experience of being gay in Northern Ireland during the Troubles (1969-98). Yee has also explored the issues of living with ABI in *Recovery*. She is one of a number of Northern Irish theatre practitioners who have "embraced experimental and non-conventional theatre techniques" (135). Yee's "honesty and truthfulness of . . . subject matter, the innovative and immersive experience of her performances, and her emphasis on engendering better understanding, compassion and empathy for those on the margins of Northern Culture make her work radical, innovative and vitally important" (136). Emma Creedon in "Performative Reappropriation: A Case Study of Taking Back Our Voices," examines a controversial 2012 Abbey Theatre production in which six professional actresses worked with a number of former prostitutes to create a drama which "focused on female objectification and gender discrimination within the workplace" (108). This work was, as Creedon argues, "a performative act of reappropriation [and] a reclaiming of ownership over women's bodies" (120).

Karen Quigley interviews Veronica Dyas, a freelance artist in "HERE AND NOW, There and Then." "Starting from my grandmother's lifetime, within two generations I have been able to do a professional piece on my own, a woman in Ireland, and speak about sexuality, about sexual violence. That is radical" (196). Dyas has also dealt with the crisis that engulfed Ireland after 2008 as the "Celtic Tiger" economy collapsed, telling her own story of being in arrears on her mortgage. The state of the Irish economy has also been explored in the work of performance artist Stephanie Preissner, whose work, using verse and rhyme, is the subject of Kasia Lech's "Pain, Rain, and Rhyme." Preissner's piece *Solpadeine is My Boyfriend* references the mass emigration of young people from Ireland since the start of the economic crash, with the central character seeing all her friends leaving, as she becomes addicted to tranquillizers.

In "'The horror, the horror': Performing 'The Dark Continent' in Amanda Coogan's *The Fountain* and Samuel Beckett's *Not I*," Brenda O'Connell focuses on the work of the performance artist Amanda Coogan, who chooses "to express herself, to abject herself, in order to draw attention" to and "speak about the ongoing controversies surrounding women's bodies and lack of choice in Ireland" (132) and compares it to Billie Whitelaw's landmark televised performance of Beckett's *Not I*. O'Connell sees both performances as challenging "patriarchal systems that represent the female body as natural and passive, and woman as unrepresentable, transgressive and marginal" (132).

The final part of *Radical Contemporary Theatre Practices by Women in Ireland* consists of interviews with a number of women working as directors, designers, and producers. Hendrick interviews Lynne Parker, the multi-award winning artistic director of Rough Magic Theatre Company, whose work she describes as "radical and cutting edge" (170). Probably no other director has done as much as Parker to "promote writing by women and to open the door for young directors" (179). On the whole, her work has "gone against the traditional norms in Ireland" (170). Parker and Rough Magic have encouraged new writing by women, and Hendrick's interview recalls, for example, how Parker encouraged actress Gina Moxley to write her acclaimed play *Danti-Dan* because she felt Moxley "had a play in her" (174).

It is an extraordinary fact that in 2014-15, nine of the fifteen producing theatre companies in receipt of grants from the Arts Council of Northern Ireland were led by female artistic or executive directors. Every established theatre company in Northern Ireland employs women in senior posts. Matt Jennings interviewed four of these directors: Paula McFetridge, Zoe Seaton, Emma Jordan, and Caitriona McLoughlin, who each gives a fascinating insight into aspects of theatre practice in Northern Ireland today.

Jordan, for example, sees the work they are doing as "trying to push some of the boundaries of the traditional narrative, playwriting form of Irish theatre outwards" (182).

Noelie Ruiz's interview with Aedin Cosgrove, co-founder of the highly innovative Pan Pan Theatre Company, examines the growing role of women in stage and lighting design. Cosgrove tells Ruiz that being a woman was never an obstacle for her, although very few women were working as lighting designers when she started and she did feel at times that it was harder for women to get respect and that men "got more assistance in that manly, comradely way" (219). Cosgrove shares a great anecdote about the time she went to her local county council looking for 10kw of power for the installation she was building. No one in the council would believe her at first—never having met a female lighting director before. She became known as "the 10kw girl," and, as she tells Ruiz, she got her 10kw power in the end. Tanya Dean interviews the multi-award winning producer Anne Clarke, founder of Landmark Productions, who, as Dean explains, has taken "a radical approach to the traditional Irish theatrical production model" (223). Clarke's enthusiasm for her work and for theatre shines through in the interview. "That's the great gift of being an independent producer, of finding something that you absolutely feel you have to get on the stage" (234).

The essays in *Radical Contemporary Theatre Practices* make a rich and highly valuable contribution not only to Irish Theatre Studies but to the wider scholarship of modern Irish society as well. It is very much to be welcomed that the work of so many Irish female practitioners has now been documented and analyzed in such an erudite collection, which will contribute to the ongoing debate on the role of women in the theatre of twenty-first century Ireland.

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