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Breaking Forms: The Shift to Performance in Late Twentieth-Century Irish Drama

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CHAPTER ONE
DEFINING THE MOMENT

Leaving the Pub and the Kitchen Behind

Perhaps it was the idea that the century was drawing to a close, a century that saw Ireland gain its freedom from Britain and the establishment of a literary-based theatrical tradition known all over the world for evoking human emotions and pathos, for presenting an Everyman such as Christy Mahon to the world. And perhaps after the Irish theatrical revival of the 1970s, which saw the rise of great playwrights like Brian Friel and Frank McGuinness, the “next wave” of Irish drama simply had to move in a different direction.

Irish theater and cultural critic Fintan O’Toole has suggested that “we have been through a particular movement in our theatre and in our society over the last 30 years, and that that movement is now at a close.” He continues: “The drama which has been present in our society has moved on, and the theatre is moving on with it. . . . If this is true, then we have to find new ways of talking about it, of evaluating it, even of defining what is and is not dramatic” (2000, 48). This serves as a good starting point for this book, as part of my goal is to redefine what is dramatic and to take some steps toward finding a way of talking about this “new” drama present in Irish society. The long tradition of Irish theater is literary, text-bound, and privileges the author. In the late twentieth century, a new type of Irish theater in direct opposition to this tradition gained popularity. This new theater de-privileged text and emphasized physical performance. Much of it was in search of a distinctly Irish type of physicality or gesture, created from a synthesis of ancient Irish performance forms such as mumming and European forms such as the commedia dell’arte and French mime. Physical theater practitioners sought to define a new style of movement and of theater that reflected Irish society more fully. The movement, as I see it, began in the 1970s, but did not really take hold until the Irish economy improved in the late 1980s and especially the 1990s.

Christopher Murray identified the 1980s—a time of rapid social change in Ireland evidenced, to pick an example, by the divorce referenda
Decroux, Jacques Lecoq, and Marcel Marceau. These French movement specialists brought a dimension of mime and physicality to the idea of performance hitherto unknown to the Irish audience.

For the Irish actor, however, French movement would not entirely suffice, which is why the work of Mikel Murfi, one of the founders of Barabbas... the company, breaks through boundaries. Christopher Berchild writes:

Murfi stands at the forefront of a new direction in Irish performance that embraces continental European physical theatre disciplines in order to develop a fundamentally Irish sense of expression. Irish physicality, which can be considered compact at best, seems to defy more traditional physical performance techniques of broad and exaggerated movement; it therefore has received little critical attention. (2002, 50)

It is the purpose of this book, then, to provide the beginnings of that critical attention and to examine the impact of movement and European performance techniques on the Irish theatrical style. I contend that the shift to performance is not just a fad, nor practiced merely by a few fringe companies; rather, it held sway in Irish theater throughout the 1990s and has exerted a pressure on mainstream Irish theater. It is not the purpose of this book to say that the Irish literary tradition is “bad” or is somehow irrelevant. Rather, I hope to define a moment in Irish theater that I believe had lasting impact and consequences and to help develop a critical vocabulary with which to talk about and analyze these works. We need to learn how to talk about these performance techniques if we hope to expand our discussion of Irish theater beyond the literary. As Stephen Watt has argued, “a hierarchy in which the play, the closed and infinitely reproducible work, resides at the apex is clearly incompatible with today’s performances” (1998, 34). According to Alan Read, “In order to poach on the unwritten theatre criticism needs to address the ‘aura’ of theatre, its unrepeatability, its resistance to mechanical reproduction” (1993, 15). In many ways, Irish theater criticism is as locked into the literary as Irish theater was twenty years ago, and an effective method of discussing and analyzing Irish performance has not yet been developed. In ways, I am echoing Elinor Fuchs’s goal in The Death of Character, where she described herself as “a theater critic in search of language in which to describe new forms” (1996, 1).

Many Irish theater companies adopted a collaborative method which, combined with devised theater and a centering of the text, mirrored the disintegration of Ireland as a shared place or communally recognizable society. In addition, this theater took issue with the traditional way of life and began to look for alternatives. A “new” society, one focused on urban
centers rather than rural traditions, interested and immersed in the instant gratification that globalization brings, and at the same time bewildered by the fractures in traditional society, needed a new art form, and theater artists stepped in to try to fill the void, or perhaps to reflect their own experiences through a communal art form. In place of a so-called single society was a bustling, growing, adaptive society—and the ephemerality of theater, theater that cannot even be written down properly, with no chance of endless restaging or replication, resonated with artists’ and audiences’ lives.

Until the period of time covered by this book, studies of dramatic literature concerned themselves largely with “what writers write” (Schechner 1988, 85); this is still true of studies of Irish drama. This book, however, is more concerned with “what audiences see” or even “what actors act” onstage. That is, I am emphasizing the performance text, rather than the written text—which, I argue, is what independent theater companies in Ireland did in the 1990s. Richard Schechner defines the “performance text” as “everything that happens during a performance both onstage and off, including audience participation” (1985, 22). This definition holds franchise here, but I generally do not discuss what happens offstage unless that, too, is visible to the audience. “Performance,” another fraught term, is generally used here as an adjective: “performance techniques.” Richard Bauman defines performance as “an aesthetically marked and heightened mode of communication, framed in a special way and put on display for an audience” (1992, 41). While I certainly agree with that definition, I am using “performance techniques” to refer to the unspoken communicative devices used onstage by a performer to convey meaning. In the theater community, “performance” generally refers to performance art, stand-up comedy, American-style “happenings,” and other nontexual events that occur in front of an audience. I am certainly borrowing from this definition, but as the theater artists I discuss argue implicitly for a dissolution of the strict boundaries between theater and performance, I acknowledge that in my own argument and definitions.

In its move away from the literary text, some Irish theater skewed so far in the other direction that it had no written text at all. Again, this is ground Schechner has already covered, but not in an Irish context:

In theater that comes from workshop, there is no preexistent script—or there are too many scripts (“materials” or “sources”). The words do not determine everything else but are knitted into a performance text consisting of many braided strands: lighting, costumes, scenography (the arrangement of the performers in the space), theatre architecture, music, and so on. (1985, 20)

This kind of theater is perceived as ephemeral, but often the scripts do exist and they are even in some cases archived.

While the Irish move toward performance arose out of a particular moment in terms of funding, it also grew from a premise that words alone were no longer sufficient to express the rapidly changing Irish society and the confusing emotional state brought about by the passing of tradition and the establishment of a new, multicultural Irish society. One of the most significant moves of Irish theater is the move away from nostalgia. Playwright Declan Hughes voiced a sentiment shared by many contemporary Irish theatergoers: “I could live a long and happy life without seeing another play set in a Connemara kitchen, or a country pub” (2000, 13). He calls nostalgia an affliction of the Irish theater. Similarly, theater critic Helen Meany is reputed to have said that she had seen so many plays about the father-son relationship that she had started to feel as though she’d had one herself. At the time new types of Irish theater gained momentum, Irish society was changing very quickly, and nostalgia as a mood no longer obtained. The theater community responded by devising new plays that emphasized the visual, finding that words alone could not express the inchoate emotions brought on by globalization and cultural shifts.

Referring to the flowering of Irish cultural life following independence, Declan Kiberd quotes Deleuze and Guattari: “Expression must break forms, encourage ruptures and new sproutings . . . . When a form is broken, one must reconstruct the context that will necessarily be a part of the rupture in the order of things” (Deleuze and Guattari 1986, 28; quoted in Kiberd 1995, 117). While Kiberd uses this frame to describe the establishment of the Irish national literature, it is entirely possible that artists viewed the stagnation of Irish theatrical forms in the same way, seeing a need for a new tradition to articulate what had not been previously expressed onstage. These ruptures came through experimentation with soundscapes, with movement and gesture, with animating the set as a character—all attempts to communicate outside the form of spoken language, and all techniques tried first by Beckett, whose impact will be discussed more fully in the next chapter.
New Ways of Making Theater

This dramatic transformation of Irish theater was not merely a surge or prolific moment, but a radical change in who could do theater and what it looked like. Irish Arts Council funding in the 1990s helped dozens of new theater companies get started. Many of them are gone now, but the confluence of energy fueled on Ireland’s emerging European identity, as many of these young theater practitioners looked toward Europe for inspiration and innovative performance forms. At the same time, Irish theater and music gained nearly unprecedented international popularity, from 1995’s Riverdance to The Beauty Queen of Leenane’s Tony Award sweep in 1998. This convergence of money and popularity helped revitalize Irish theater, and a group of theater artists experimenting with what theater could do and what it might look like coalesced into a movement that has contributed to what Brian Singleton and Anna McMullan refer to an “identity crisis” in Irish drama. In this crisis, “new theatre practices are reshaping definitions of Irish theatre and performance,” while the “parameters of authorship . . . and the very label ‘Irish’ are being renegotiated” (2003, 3).

A profound change in Irish drama, expressed as an attempt to redefine what a play is, what an audience is—regardless of the theme of the work—allowed for a replication of the societal change experienced in the country since the 1980s. Theater practitioners working in collaboration to bring physicality to the Irish stage sought to explore, express, and reflect a part of society that they felt could not be represented naturally. The reliance on text lost its relevance. They rejected nostalgia and repetition, and indeed often mocked it.

Some principal markers of this type of theater are:

- It is nonnaturalistic, privileging form over content or theme;
- It de-privileges text, emphasizing performance and gesture;
- Likewise, it de-privileges the “author-god,” privileging the performer;
- It incorporates elements of folklore and ritual.

Most importantly, it is meta-theatrical and reflects upon the nature and function of theater itself. Theater artists experimenting with performance want to determine anew what can be considered theater, a script, even an audience. They are not content to be a continuation of a century-long tradition, but want to break the boundaries of theatrical experience and create a new theatrical language. These elements remain fairly constant in the dramatic performances of the 1990s, and their precursors are found in the plays of the 1970s and 1980s, which created a foundation for further experimentation.

The elevation of form over content and theme was, in many ways, a rejection of mainstream Irish theater. A concern with the formal aspects of theater began to raise questions about the very nature of a dramatic text. Was language required for a “play”? Must the spectators enter the theater first? What if we destroy not only the fourth wall but all the walls? If Irish theater has always been a reflection of Irish society—or at least an idealized view of it—then what made this new theater necessary for a radically changing society? This type of theater sought to answer questions first posed by Peter Brook: “What is a theatre? What is a play? What is an actor? What is a spectator? What is the relation between them all? What conditions serve this best?” (Brook’s program note to The Tempest, Center for International Theatre Research, 1968, quoted in Innes 1993, 3). I refer to this theater as performance based because, in attempting to respond to Brook’s challenge, these theater artists turned to answers more commonly found in “performance” and began to question the form of Irish theater. To be sure, some of this work was more performance—or even dance—than theater (see chapter 6 for more on dance), but the most innovative and engaging artists and productions strove to find ways of combining the traditional notions of performance with theater. The theater companies under discussion here quite consciously seek new answers to these questions, by demanding more (or sometimes less) of their actors as well as their spectators, and by embarking on an endeavor to change Irish theatre by re-creating it on a technical level.

In trying to determine why this change at this time, Declan Kiberd suggested that we look back to one origin of this literary theatrical tradition: the “explosion of brilliant writing in English at the end of the 19th century was, among other things, a myth of compensation. A people who had hobbled themselves by going dumb in their native language now sought to console themselves by proving that they could write the new language more eloquently than its official owners.” Thus it makes sense that, on the verge of a new century, audiences and scholars would see an “attempt by the current generation of artists to reconnect our theatre of the word with those experiences buried deep in our bodies,” a condition Kiberd refers to as “one of the glories of our current culture” (2006, xiv).

Indeed, the (re)introduction of bodies to the Irish theater was greeted with a certain amount of relief by many observers, but what made the time right for this change was a particular set of conditions and cultural circumstances that left the word—previously so trustworthy—under
suspicion as an adequate mode of representation. Writer and director Gina Moxley suggested that “parameters are broadened because people travel more and see more. . . . People [in the 1990s] began to realize that the body is capable of such lyricism that you can’t just rely on the verbals completely” (Mulrooney 2006, 196). Choreographer David Bolger noted that the “verbals,” or rhythms, of the plays always had a movement counterpart: “When you open up some of the lyricism and movement in the plays there is an extraordinary amount of movement. . . . There are huge rhythms in these plays. . . . [and] movement is not disconnected from speech” (151). In his choreography, Bolger builds on the natural rhythm of speech, specifically Irish speech, to create an Irish idiom of movement.

Bernadette Divilly believes that “Irish bodies have been carrying a ‘sense of poverty, shame and hunger’” and that they tend to “contract. . . . and feel unsafe about expressing” (13). Thus the shift toward performance resonated strongly in the 1990s and continues to today in part because the fragmented, nonverbal form attempts to express the unvoiced concern that Irish society no longer has a set of values in common (if indeed it ever did) and that the cultural referents come from a globalized polis rather than a rural village. O’Toole states that there is no longer a unified Irish experience celebrated in the “vision of traditional Ireland. . . . What we have instead are fragments, isolated pieces of a whole story that no one knows,” which is why a text that appears fragmentary and a performance that mistrusts the word reflects conditions today (2000, 54). At the same time, it is a loss. Audiences in the early part of the twentieth century saw the “Irish peasant as a symbol of their lost identity” (Katz Clark, quoted in Richards 2004, 5). Conventional wisdom held that, because the national theater was so popular, the audience shared this definition of Irish identity, regardless of their own oppositional experience.

Although these referents may never have been shared, the widespread perception is that they were, and that the late twentieth century and its faster-paced lifestyle (bringing with it an increase in quality of life, jobs, and immigration) have erased them. This change cannot be expressed in a kitchen or a pub, because that is not where it took place, and these settings no longer make sense in an Irish context. According to Elin Diamond,

Because the “materials” of a collective past are no longer accessible they have to be read out of the detritus of what remains; the faint auratic glow of the wish image in the discarded commodity needs to be fanned in order to renew our political energies, to deepen our experiences of/in the present. The performance artist. . . . interrelates both these elements: first, a recovery of the contradictory energies of popular culture. . . . as a strategy for reflection, resistance, and comedy; second, an embodied troping on temporality through which we grasp what is innovative and politically resonant in these practices: a subtle refunctioning of experience. (1997, 150)

In the Irish case, it was not performance art so much as the methodology of performance that attempted the “subtle refunctioning of experience.” At the same time, Irish theatre itself underwent a less subtle refunctioning, that broadened the scope of what Irish theatre could say and how it could be expressed. The small ruptures in the 1970s came to a nexus in the late 1990s through early 2000 and 2001.

The Rejection of Realism

A rejection of realism permitted theater artists to explore new forms of representation, including dance, puppetry, mime, clowning, and commedia dell’arte. This shift started at least as early as 1969, when the Project Arts Centre became a venue for plays, especially the work of Peter and Jim Sheridan. Even earlier, Beckett rejected both realism and naturalism as insufficient modes of representation.

Other theatrical traditions have found it necessary to renounce realism in order to find new methodologies and to reflect a contemporary reality. For example, American feminist performance theorists “asked if realism was too prescriptive for new understandings of gender, race, and sexual relations [in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries]. How might postmodern forms, with less coherent and insistently linear narratives, more fluid, fragmented plots and characters, and less fixed determinations of location and space, allow spectators to see gender in more expansive, progressive ways?” (Dolan 2005, 64). The same techniques regarding plot, character, location, and space helped Irish theater artists and audiences alike see identity and the very concept of Irishness in “more expansive, progressive ways.”

Diamond goes further in explaining the effect and necessity of rejecting realism in a theater that wishes to understand the past:

The spectator and performer find themselves looking not at each other (or not only), nor at an object of desire, but at a dialectical image. And here the sign-referent gap of “classical” mimesis is overwritten. . . . In a moment of mimetic apprehension, the commoditized images embodied and destroyed by [feminist performance artists] sudden illuminate the crises of the present. Old habits of thinking/judging/performing are temporarily set aside. (1997, 180)
passion for language “ (1997, 224). Irish dramatists have been concerned with these essential ideas, ‘all such questions emanate from a where we are now, and where we are headed.’ While most drama is Murray states that ‘Irish drama is a long, energetic dispute with a could be. 31). The direction of Irish theater away from the word was another democratizing change in methodology that shifted the idea of what a play might be. McMullan expresses a hope that ‘refocusing on performance may offer a new way of looking at the texts of the Irish theatre tradition, and how this tradition may be opened up, regenerated and made more inclusive’ (1996, 31). The direction of Irish theater away from the word was another democratizing change in methodology that shifted the idea of what a play could be.

De-privileging Text in Favor of Performance

Perhaps the most profound experimentation occurred with the decision to de-privilege text and use it as only part of a soundscape. Anna McMullan expresses a hope that “refocusing on performance may offer a new way of looking at the texts of the Irish theatre tradition, and how this tradition may be opened up, regenerated and made more inclusive” (1996, 31). The direction of Irish theater away from the word was another democratizing change in methodology that shifted the idea of what a play could be.

In Twentieth-Century Irish Drama: Mirror Up to Nation, Christopher Murray states that “Irish drama is a long, energetic dispute with a changing audience over the same basic issues: where we come from, where we are now, and where we are headed.” While most drama is concerned with these essential ideas, “all such questions emanate from a passion for language” (1997, 224). Irish dramatists have been experimenting without language at least since Yeats (who nonetheless asserted the primacy of the word on the Irish stage). Nonetheless, in order to be revolutionary in Irish terms, a play must at the very least take issue with the word. Dramatists and theater practitioners in the late 1990s found that the word could not be trusted as a signifier. Furthermore, the language in the Irish theater of the 1980s and early 1990s led audiences into nostalgia for an Irish society that prevailed before globalization and urbanization; the only recourse left to theater artists, then, was to undermine the supremacy of language on the stage.

Privileging the Performer over an “Author-God”

One hallmark of this new theater style is the rejection of the “author-god” and the de-emphasizing of the role of the playwright. Much independent, experimental Irish theater is “devised,” or created without a preexisting script. The text of the play emerges through a period of time, during which a group of performers and perhaps a writer get together and work through ideas, symbols, narrative, and meanings to create a piece of theater. The resultant performance text often remains unpublished, seemingly incomplete, and less accessible to scholars, which helps to explain why so little scholarship has followed this movement. The Théâtre du Soleil in France follows a similar creation pattern, eschewing a single author and placing a group of actors together in a room to see what will develop. Ariane Mnouchkine described the impetus for the Théâtre du Soleil as coming from a desire to create something different from what was available in French theater in the 1960s. Her ideal working environment, she said, is one in which each of its members would be able to find nourishment; which we would all manage; whose course we would be able to influence—in which we were trained in all the different disciplines involved in the enterprise—if we succeeded in this, would it be a communal enterprise phalansterism, or, in more banal terms, a vibrant theatre company? (Williams 1999, 23)

Mnouchkine’s vision seems to reflect an ideal that a segment of the independent Irish theater sector strove for in the 1990s. The collaborative model took hold and resulted in a sprouting of independent theater companies across the country experimenting with new ways of doing theater.
The rejection of the author-god carries significant ramifications regarding methodology. As in the American avant-grade movement (discussed below), “the emphasis shifted from questions of meaning to a focus on process. As new structures, strategies, and patterns were established, new understandings became possible and new forms emerged” (Aronson 2000, 8). The companies that comprise this movement have generally adopted collaborative styles; in their devising, the company of actors often (but not always) helps create the performance text. This collaborative approach underscores the decentralized position of the text: the author no longer has the last word on the playtext. Once companies let go of the author-god, they changed the way theater could be made. They could adopt a less hierarchical methodology, which led to different types of performances (although not all companies did, and this is not necessarily a prerequisite). The director might replace the author as the voice of authority, but in many companies, the director changes from production to production so that authority and power are not centralized in one person but stay within the collective. This methodology lends itself to a renewed perspective on text. In a devised text, the final product often does not look like a traditional script with which scholars and actors are accustomed to working. The text might come from a group of people in a room playing and replaying (in Jacques Leecoq’s terminology) to create theater. Naturally, movement began to fill the space left by the literary text, and it began to hold as important a place in the production methodology and performance as did the text.

Irish Folklore and Ritual

Through the rejection of realism, theater can incorporate elements of primitivism and ritual, relying heavily on known texts from Irish folklore while utilizing these texts in a new and challenging way. Irish theater companies seeking to destabilize the form of theater often first do so through a performance that relies on a narrative known to the audience, such as the Táin Bó Cuailgne, the Homeric epics, or something from Irish folklore. The familiarity of these texts creates a space for the theater artists to experiment with how to tell the story and results in a creative new performance form. It is important to note that very few Irish theater companies reject the text altogether; rather, they see it as one element in a performance. They also do not jettison narrative, which remains a central component of many independent Irish performances. Instead, practitioners simply present the (familiar) narrative through a form alien—and sometimes alienating—to the audience.

Many companies discovered ritual and myth to be integral in their efforts to create a new type of Irish theater. One example: early Macnas indoor theater relied on stories drawn from the Táin Bó Cuailgne, the Cattle Raid of Cooley. The story functioned as communicative shorthand because the company could be certain that the audience could follow the plot without the help of words. At the same time, the company reinterpreted these cultural markers for a contemporary context. Thus, 1994’s Buile Shuibhne/Sweeney (by Páraic Breathnach) becomes not only the story of the mad bird-king, but an attempt to hold onto Irish tradition in the midst of radical social and economic change. This strong current of Irish folklore might contradict the expectations of a vanguard theater, but in the Irish context these traditional subjects serve to reassure the audience and provide an avenue into the performance while the companies try to forge a new way of presenting the stories, a way that makes them relevant in an age of globalization. Tom MacIntyre, a playwright known for incorporating dance and movement into his plays, declares that Irish folklore is his oxygen: “And what an extraordinary oxygen to have available: Irish folklore, Irish mythology, Irish history, the contemporary scene.” MacIntyre fashioned an idiom for his plays, relying on an “incantatory verbal score, dance, movement, a degree of mime, the images stick” (2001, 311). From this idiom he created the stage version of Kavanaugh’s The Great Hunger, discussed later as an early incarnation of the Irish move toward performance.

Owing perhaps to the unique historical position of the Irish nation—a 2,000-year-old culture within a nation less than 100 years old—markers of Irishness often take on overtly political valences, while Irish symbols have for decades been appropriated for political purposes, most notably in Northern Ireland. Ever since Padraig Pearse likened himself to Cúchulain in the General Post Office in 1916, Irish folklore has been used to fulfill a partisan end. In opposition to this (and perhaps out of sheer fatigue), many performance-oriented theater artists eschew the overtly political and seek to reclaim these Irish symbols for all Irish people, not just those of a particular political persuasion. In a way, the theater companies are utilizing these stories to “create the future out of the past,” a future that subverts most expectations of traditional practices (Glassie 1995, 395). The decision to present a traditional, known text serves as a way to eclipse audience anxiety and let them experience the new form freely.
Metatheatricality and the Nature of Theater

The most significant aspect of this type of theater is that it sought to redefine the very nature of theater, to question the assumptions that theater must follow a set of strict prescriptive rules. Undermining these prescriptions (theater must be indoors, with clearly delineated actors and performances, based on written text, and usually performed in the dark) freed the creators of theater to experiment. Some of the impetus was democratic in nature. Moving theater outside and into the streets ensured that anyone could see it, not just those with disposable income. Opening up roles to the community and including children or the disabled undermined the idea that only a select group of people who had a particular training could be performers—or even actors.

Other plays questioned the role of the audience: must an audience sit politely in the dark, waiting for the action to begin? What if the audience moved along with the action? This is more than environmental theater because it involves the audience bodily in the experience: the audience no longer remains passive. If we can make the audience move, is there a limit to what we can declare a theater? Obviously street theater rejects the necessity of a purpose-built theater, but perhaps this ingenuity was born from necessity: until recently, Ireland suffered from a lack of theatrical venues. The Project, emerging as both an exhibition space and, later, a performance space lent itself to experimental theater, to the sort of event that would not be comfortable on the Abbey mainstage, but that more accurately reflected the Irish experience of the early 1970s.

Certainly, the questions of “what is a theater,” “what is a play” are not new, but the answers Irish theater found in the 1990s were. In Northern Ireland, Brian Friel, in what could be viewed as a lack of judgment, “dismissed the relevance to the Irish situation of Artaud, Peter Brook, Roger Planchon, Brecht, theater of the absurd, happenings, theatre of fact, etc.,” saying instead that “matter ... is our concern, not form” (Friel 1999, 55-56). This was less than two months after Bloody Sunday stunned the Irish population and inflamed emotions. Friel effectively cut off any other modes of expression through which people might have come to terms with this horrifying event and the continuing civil rights movement other than Irish population and inflamed emotions. Friel dismissed these kinds of forms as irrelevant and unnecessary. Formal experimentation can enable expression of emotions and events that otherwise elude representation, including the sense that society is changing faster than culture can cope.

Yet a case can be made that Friel’s own Faith Healer, though not experimental or performance based, serves as a precursor to these. First presented in Dublin in 1980 at the Abbey (it premiered in New York in 1979), the play relies on a shifting nonlinear narrative composed entirely of monologues, thus breaking from the naturalistic method without deviating from the literary tradition. Friel has such mastery of the language (explored most eloquently in Translations) that in his plays, “language becomes plot.” He trades on the past, or, more specifically, the corrupted memory of the past, as in Dancing at Lughnasa. Christina Mahony suggests that his use of language is often “intended to provoke ... a nostalgic reaction,” but his language is the strongest when it “surpasses or checks the nostalgic impulse to question perceptions of reality past or present” (Mahony 1998, 126). The Faith Healer undermines the comforting idea of memory “as something shared and communal,” while confirming it “as something which has collapsed as a public phenomenon into a private fiction” (O’Toole 2000, 53). Each version of the past carries its own truth; thus the concept of truth and the reliability of the narrator (and, by implication, narrative itself) hold no meaning. If narrative can no longer be trusted, can character? Can any element of the play as we know it? The play, then, acts as “a metaphor for theatre itself, where truth exists only at the present moment” (Morash 2002, 251), and thus Friel created a kind of metatheater that resurfaced again in Dancing at Lughnasa, a quintessentially text-bound play. Even Friel’s early work in Philadelphia, Here I Come! (1964) pursues both the modernist enterprise, of exploring the internal motivations and psychological insights of a character, and a more formalistic break with tradition, by embodying these insights in a character, Private Gar. Friel is possibly the most textually accomplished of all contemporary Irish playwrights, yet even he has experimented with the grammar of narrative. Interestingly, in the wake of the kinds of plays under discussion here, Friel has returned to very traditional linear narrative plays in Molly Sweeney (1994), Afterplay (2002), and Performances (2003).

Introducing multiple modes of representation makes possible a reflection of the complexity of Irish society, what Declan Kiberd refers to as “authenticity,” within which a nation “has a plurality of identities, constantly remaking themselves in perpetual renewals” (1995, 298). Kiberd argues that classic Irish texts “split the man” into competing dualities: Stephen/Bloom, Joxer/Boyle, Didi/Gogo (299). Extra-linguistic
performance texts fracture the self, not into dichotomies or opposites, but into many pieces, many layers, until the self—and Irish culture—is fragmented and the audience must work to create a whole. Fuchs argues that “one of the meanings of the ‘postmodern’—its psychological formation—... was a dispersed idea of self, and... this dispersal was represented in many different ways in the contemporary alternative theater” (1996, 9). In Brecht’s Lehrstück (learning play), Die Massnahme, “the autonomous self is not merely a bourgeois illusion, but has the moral weight of a crime. The analytical separation of actor and character is itself part of the fiction, as the Four Agitators impassively take turns playing their ‘disappeared’ fifth comrade” (32). This tendency contrasts sharply with theater that requires or provides a unified interpretation. In fact, much feminist performance that Fuchs and Diamond write about abandon unified performance, a trajectory we also see in Irish theater. This impulse, however, is certainly not new, as Brecht’s exploration demonstrates, nor is it alien to the Irish stage. Susan Cannon-Harris (2002) includes a chapter on Yeats’s The Herne Egg that ably demonstrates how the Yeats play undermines a unified interpretation and can be apprehended only by an interpretation that holds two conflicting impulses simultaneously.

**The “Comeback” of Performance**

In a 1996 essay, Anna McMullan recalls the performance tradition in Irish theater, present even in the heady days of the early Abbey. Yeats, O’Casey, and Beckett all explored aspects of the theater that involved different modes of communication and that challenged the way we understand and define theater. McMullan cites numerous examples of contemporary companies that are also stretching the boundaries of what comprises theater in Ireland today, many of which will be discussed later. She asserts that “performance is making a comeback” and believes that the “lack of performance in its own right, and the limited possibilities of performance training and development in Ireland until recently... [have] meant that performance traditions in the main theatres have tended to support the dominance of the writer’s text” (29). The recentering that McMullan identified coincided with the surge in theater companies and the rise of an increased international audience for Irish productions. In fact, this refocusing—and increased grants by the Irish Arts Council—did open up the playing field for more independent, small, and often transitory theater companies to bring their version of Irish society to the stage or the street.

Although many of these companies no longer exist, they succeeded in nudging Irish theater toward the acknowledgment of the actor’s body in the communicative methods employed onstage. The summer 2007 issue of Irish Theatre Magazine dedicated a section of its performance reviews to “Irish theatre companies [that] are increasingly using new techniques, making plays that are about how theatre itself is being made” (108). This is a direct outcome of the refocusing that emphasizing performance brought to the development of Irish theater.

Theater scholar Christina Mahony argued in 1998 that “some of the most exciting theatre in Ireland today... operates outside the parameters of a set text and confounds the hierarchical concept of a single author.” These texts, Mahony argued, “must be seen not read”; she found that trying to read dialogue from these texts was a “thoroughly frustrating experience for the reader unable to see a production” (17). Although trying to read these texts “cold” or with no previous experience in the genre would in fact be incredibly frustrating, nonetheless they can—and must—be read differently from more “traditional” text-bound plays. The physical language present in the texts relies on specific kinds of movements and objects that can be learned and “read into” the texts. Thus, with practice, and with the experience of having seen some of these kinds of performances, one can read and understand what seems like an unfinished text. Mahony’s assertion that this is the “most exciting” type of theater in Ireland only reinforces the need for a critical examination of the form. To ignore it is to keep Irish theater locked in a literary past and to create a skewed history of late twentieth-century Irish theater, especially as the physicality and reintroduction of “performance” profoundly influenced Irish theater across the board. Furthermore, we can call on the production companies to assist us in our attempt to read it; as scholars, we can work with them to develop a new way of “seeing” the productions in our mind’s eye. In fact, practitioners have started this process by contributing to volumes aimed at least in part toward an academic audience. Books such as Theatre Talk (Chambers et al. 2001) and Irish Moves (Mulrooney 2006) both provide a practitioner’s perspective, as does Raymond Keane’s contribution to The Power of Laughter: Comedy and Contemporary Irish Theatre, edited by Eric Weitz (2004).

Elin Diamond, writing of feminist performance theory, uses the example of Alan’s Wife, a late nineteenth-century American play, to explore the possibility of “reading” silences and the actor’s body’s ability to translate stage directions. In the final scene of the play, written by Elizabeth Robins and Florence Bell (although published anonymously with an introduction by William Archer), Jean Creyke appears before the
court for smothering her crippled child (a crime of which she is guilty).
The text provides both stage directions and prose sentences for Jean, but she is silent throughout the scene. Diamond explains: "In the stage performance of Alan's Wife, Jean is silent under questioning, but in the text, these silences are translated into prose sentences, the accuracy of which would be impossible to represent" (1997, 36). She explains the lasting impact of this authorial decision:

By wedging a space between the body and the text of the body [the playwrights] displace the imaginary wholeness of the actor in realism, making her truth provisional, contingent. Alan's Wife... does not abandon narrative, but it refuses the closure of positivist inquiry. It does not dismantle the text as a unique source of meaning, but it destabilizes the relation between text and performance, each contaminating the other. (37)

We continually see this same "contamination" in the 1990s. The fluidity of borders between text and performance comes at a time when other borders, markers, and definitions are called into question or are undermined by social relations. In the late nineteenth century, gender relations were in flux. The inclusion of (or insistence upon) performance "dismantles textual authority, illusionism [in the Brechtian sense], and the canonical actor in favor of the 'polymorphous thinking body' of the performer, a sexual, permeable, tactile body, a 'semiotic bundle of drives' that scours audience narrativity" (Diamond 1997, 84). Diamond's description seems to refer very directly to the work of Operating Theatre, in which the body of the performer (often Olwen Fouéré) emphasizes its sexuality, its frailty, and its permeability without the assistance of a text.

There are examples of plays that are less textually bound but still have been the subject of a wealth of scholarship. Perhaps the most relevant to this discussion is Ubu and the Truth Commission by Jane Taylor William Kentridge, and the Handspring Puppet Company. The play, set in South Africa during the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) hearings, adapts the surrealist 1896 Alfred Jarry play, Ubu Roi, to a South African context, incorporating actual TRC testimony. The play uses puppets, cross-racial and multiple casting, animation and film projections, and the real words of victims in several different languages to communicate the inner chaos of Pere Ubu and his and the country's need to bear witness to the past to create a future, although the outcome of the play is not optimistic about the power of the TRC. This powerful play does not read well on the page, as the projections are missing, along with the puppets, which dominate the performance. Yet the political impact of the play was so great that scholars have treated and analyzed it as part of an ongoing conversation about post-apartheid South African literature. This play is perceived as important, so people have found a way to talk about it. Irish theater that incorporates elements of "performance" is also important in an Irish context and to ignore it is to ignore a substantial current in contemporary Irish drama. Understanding it will help us to comprehend the directions in which Irish theater is moving and why.

Parallels in the American Theater

Considering the history of cultural and economic exchange between Ireland and the United States, it is not surprising that there are strong parallels between the Irish move toward performance and the American avant-garde theater movement; a brief overview of the American avant-garde theatrical history, then, will be instructive for the Irish case. I must state first that I am not calling the move to performance an Irish avant-garde. Theorists and practitioners alike reject this label as both indicating a high level of political content (generally missing from the Irish theater under discussion here) and as having mostly spent its usefulness. I therefore avoid this label, although I find the comparison with the American avant-garde and Off-Off-Broadway movements instructive. In the 1960s, America was undergoing enormous social change through integration, the women's movement, and the change in American work and play habits. At the same time, American theater changed as theater practitioners challenged the existing definitions of space and the concept of storytelling through the Off-Off Broadway movement: "These groups defied conventional uses of space and text, with the result that the rigidity of theatrical practice broke down, performance values gained ascendancy over dialogue, and the visual image began to supplant language in the hierarchy of theatrical elements" (Marranca 1977, 114). This quote neatly describes what happened in Irish theater in the 1990s, particularly regarding the breakdown of the hierarchy of director/actor and the rise of devised theater, as well as dialogue becoming only one part of the theatrical event. But while the American avant-garde went on to eschew dialogue completely at times and at others to include shocking and graphic performance art, the Irish theater remained at least partially subsidized by the government and therefore more accessible to a wider audience.

In the American context, theater artists such as Richard Foreman, the members of the Open Theater, Robert Wilson, and Richard Schechner's Performance Group explicitly sought to create a new theater, rejecting Broadway and even Off-Broadway as too commercialized. Once emphasis and value were placed on performance, "the new theatre never became a
literate theatre, but one dominated by images—visual and aural” (Marranca 1977, ix). In the American case, artists distrusted words “because of the end to which they were used by politicians and advertising. It was also recognized that some experiential concepts cannot be expressed by words” (Shank 2002, 4). Both of these ideas hold true in Ireland. The corrupt nature of Irish politics came to the forefront—and front page—consistently in the late 1980s and early 1990s, its earliest manifestation in the Beef Tribunals. 

Although Ireland was long a country that relied upon the word and that produced a rather remarkable number of gifted writers, Irish artists chose to develop a new vocabulary of performance, which, as I have argued above, requires a new vocabulary of criticism. Perhaps the small size of the theater community explains why the Irish move toward performance never fully rejected dialogue, preferring instead to find it insufficient to always express an emotion or concept, particularly in a society changing as much and as quickly as Ireland in the 1990s, much like America in the 1960s. In her book The Theatre of Images, Bonnie Marranca discusses a theater that abandoned literary techniques such as plot, character, setting, language, and movement to focus on images exclusively, but these literary elements never fully left the Irish context. In Ireland, theater practitioners held to literary techniques even as they—somewhat contradictorily—eschewed literary texts. The tradition of storytelling remains so ingrained in Irish culture that even the most nonliterary texts retain elements of the storytelling process. While the written word was viewed as static, ideas of character and plot became more fluid, so that many actors might play a single character or vice versa.

Members of the American avant-garde undermined the nature of character by emphasizing the idea and body of the performer, a method that many Irish companies eventually adopted. Joseph Chaikin, director of the Open Theatre, created “non-illusionistic actor training exercises . . . designed to intensify what he called the ‘presence’ of the actor as distinct from the character” (Shank 2002, 4). This methodology contrasts sharply with the Stanislavsky method, which encourages actors to fully embody and mentally become their characters, so that there are no seams between actor and character. The Open Theatre rejected realism and sought to explore the “unique possibilities of live theatre as distinct from television and cinema” (6). In its first production, Viet Rock, the continuity of the performance is held together by the persistence of the performers rather than specific characters.

American and Irish theatrical histories also share a focus on process and a strong desire to make the process more democratic and less linear.

Taking a cue from Brecht, the American Theatre of Images focused so much on process that they allowed the theatrical “seams” to show. Marranca states that this was “an attempt to make the audience more conscious of events in the theatre than they are accustomed to. It is the idea of being there in the theatre that is the impulse” (1977, xii). As discussed earlier, Irish performance-based productions explored metatheatricality, from converting the foyer into part of the set to eliminating the set altogether and relying on the audience’s imagination to fill in the gaps. Once the seams start showing, however, and the production eschews dialogue in whole or part, the audience must work harder to decode the production. Theodore Shank summarizes it by saying that these alternative theater groups are not primarily concerned with entertainment as a product to be sold. Instead, they are eager to improve the quality of life for themselves and their audiences . . . . The alternative theater tends to reflect the commitment of the group. . . . However, the most important changes are the development of an autonomous creative method, a shift from the dominance of words to a visual emphasis, and an aesthetic that keeps spectators conscious of the real world rather than focusing them exclusively on a fictional illusion. (2002, 3)

Perhaps chief among these companies is the Bread and Puppet Theatre, founded by Peter Schumann in 1961. Schumann began to “introduce large sculpted bodies into dance performances” as early as 1956; one hallmark of his performances is that they are accessible to everyone: “You don’t make your point unless a five-year-old girl can understand it. If she gets it, the grownups will too” (Brown and Seitz 1968, 66). Schumann’s influence on the Irish theatrical parades discussed in chapter 3 is immediately evident to spectators familiar with Bread and Puppet’s work. Indeed, Bread and Puppet books are frequently found in the Macnas workshop in Fisheries Field in Galway. Also like Irish theatrical parades, “Bread and Puppet productions are intended to include the spectator in a community made up of performer and other spectators” (Shank 2002, 112). This is a key component to the social function of a big Macnas parade.

American avant-garde theater, according to Arnold Aronson, looked outside the “so-called ‘real’ world” for reference points, to “other forms of art, the creative power of the artist, and the theatrical experience itself.” American avant-garde theater, like its Irish counterpart, “was not fundamentally linear, illusionistic, thematic or psychological . . . it was a non-literary theater—meaning not that it lacked language but that it could not be read in the way a work of literature could be” (2000, 5). Thus one
of the greatest similarities between these two strands of twentieth-century theater is the rejection of the literary. Although not necessarily overtly political, Irish experimental theater nonetheless had political implications as—like its American counterpart—it strove "toward a radical restructuring of the way in which an audience views and experiences the very act of theatre, which in turn must transform the way in which the spectators view themselves and the world" (7). Once theater engages with questions regarding what theater is and seeks to redefine the role of the spectator, it becomes implicitly political. Especially taken alongside the revered place of theater in Irish society—schoolchildren in Ireland learn about the Abbey Theatre and the role of W. B. Yeats in Irish literary and political history—an attempt to restructure the theatrical event must be political.

At the same time, these Irish artists sought to change the nature of the theater audience. With theater audiences declining, and theater of course competing with cinema, concerts, and raves, independent and experimental theater reached out to younger audiences in an attempt to change the face of the average theatergoer. Some of the younger theater companies have been successful at this.

According to a survey conducted by the Cultural Policy and the Arts wing of the National Data Archive, approximately 12.3 percent of adult Americans attended a nonmusical play in 2002. Slightly more attended a musical play, 17.1 percent; both of these figures exclude performances in elementary, middle, or high schools (CPANDA). In the United Kingdom, the figure rises to 24 percent of the population that had attended a play in 2001–2 (Office of National Statistics). In Ireland, however, according to a survey conducted in 1994 (before the major economic reforms were fully implemented and had affected the average person), 36 percent of the Irish population had attended a play in the past year (Clancy et al. 1994, 36)! An art form that commands more than a third of the population's attention and leisure spending is not to be taken lightly. More than anything, this statistic indicates the extent to which theater holds an important place in the Irish imagination.9

Most modern observers consider the American avant-garde theater of the 1960s now officially dead, as it has been subsumed into mainstream American theater, and practitioners such as Anne Bogart now teach at prestigious universities and their work is studied in undergraduate courses around the country.10 Yet, as the American avant-garde was declared dead—as early as 1981 by Richard Schechner—so, too, this particular moment of Irish theater has passed. Schechner stated that “performance once more is ephemeral, the work of crazies, bourgeois-manqués, bohemians: ‘artists.’ I regard the period, the people, the groups, the work in receding perspective: a parade passed, and still distantly heard piping” (1981, 51). Schechner's obituary, however, may well have arisen out of his being ousted by the Wooster Group, which he founded.

In contrast, Shank rejoices in what he calls an “autonomous method of creating,” namely, a process in which the same people are involved in the entire process, from “initial conception to finished performance.” Shank finds that the American development of this process “was a reaction against the psychic fragmentation the artists experienced in the technocratic society which believed that human needs could be satisfied” by technology, particularly that which “require[es] a high degree of specialization” (2002, 3). The Irish reaction to a fragmenting society rejected tradition—seen as a positive change—and attempted to maintain community, to ensure that the community's values and experiences were reflected onstage. A theater company need not stray too far from the devices and appearance of mainstream theater to do this: Belfast’s Charabanc is perhaps the best example of a theater company working hard to reflect its community.

Another contributing factor in the decline of the American avant-garde is the “explosive growth of technology” (Aronson 2000, 201). Theater, conventional wisdom claims, cannot keep up with the technological advances nor the budgets of media such as rock concerts. Big Broadway productions starting in the 1980s certainly tried, with such spectacles as Miss Saigon, which set the standard for expensive, flashy productions. In 1984, a Broadway musical cost around $3 million to produce; in 2003, Wicked cost its producers $14 million. In addition, the World Wide Web changed the way we perceive and receive information. As we begin to organize the world in hyperlinks, theatrical attempts to reflect this, such as Richard Foreman's ubiquitous strings, which drew connections between seemingly disparate objects, seem almost as quaint as nineteenth-century expository monologues” (202). The incorporation of media into performances by select Irish companies is widely viewed as the next step, not as something experimental or avant-garde.

What is interesting about the parallels between the American avant-garde of the 1960s and the Irish theater scene of the 1990s is not that the American case might have been instructive if we had looked at it in, say, 1995, but that Irish theater was influenced so little by it. The similarity of the two trajectories suggests that any theatrical movement seeking to break with tradition might follow the same path rather than that the American case laid the groundwork for Ireland. This is not to argue, however, that there was no influence from America on the Irish theatre of movement.
Robert Wilson's 1985 appearance at the Dublin Theatre Festival certainly had an impact on what might be possible theatrically in Ireland, which has been the focus of this shift.

**Conclusion**

O'Toole acknowledged in 2000 that Ireland is no longer a shared place, or "one Ireland," and thus "we can no longer have a naturalistic theatre of recognition in which a world is signaled to us through objects and we tacitly agree to recognize it as our own. We must instead have a theatre of evocation in which strange worlds, not our own, are in Yeats' phrase 'called to the eye of the mind'" (O'Toole 2000, 57). Thus it only makes sense that more than one method of creating and presenting drama was called for; a method in which the literary is privileged could no longer be the only method. As Irish society rejected the fiction of a united society and the hope of a united Ireland—Eamon de Valera's vision of Ireland—Irish culture was no longer satisfied with only one kind of theater. The performance emphasis reflects societal change and works more effectively as a "theatre of evocation." As Ireland became more cosmopolitan, a member of the European and global communities, so too did its theater practice.

Playwright Declan Hughes asks, "Why does contemporary Irish literature ignore contemporary Ireland?" (2000, 8). He criticizes plays set in pubs and kitchens, declaring that the insistence on these settings "is a form of perverse nostalgia: nostalgia for the time when we thought we were Irish, when we had an identity." He classifies this nostalgia as "the Irish disease." The reliance on tradition that underpins these contemporary texts (even while they reject it) Hughes finds as a form of cannibalism, and he calls on Irish drama to "show more guts: the guts to stop flaunting its ancestry" (11). Hughes calls upon Irish theater to "embrace the profound change that has occurred" in the past thirty years: "that we are barely a country any more, never have been and never will be that most nineteenth century of dreams, a nation once again" (13). Much of the theater discussed in this book accepts Hughes's challenge, but because of its alienating form and the lack of a text that theater scholars could easily identify and analyze, went unremarked upon and largely uncritiqued.

Although often dismissed as fringe or ephemeral, the move toward performance makes possible new ways of understanding Irish theater and society. Releasing Irish theater from the confines of the text allows for freedom of interpretations and methods. Diana Taylor notes that "performance as a genre allows for alternative mappings, providing a set of strategies and conventions that allow scholars to see practices that narrative, poetry, or even drama as a scripted genre might occlude" (2007, 1417). This wave of Irish performance appeared as a reaction to a fast-changing Irish society, and the performers relied on new techniques to help them in the ongoing quest to consolidate Irish identity, a concept suddenly in dispute as the pace and nature of Irish culture shifted with the expanding Tiger economy and the demands of globalization. The naturalistic theater so familiar to audiences at the Abbey and Gate Theatres remains locked in a particular stance on Ireland, namely, that the most "pure" or sustainable component of Irish society is rural, uneducated, and longing to leave Ireland for a more "modern" place, generally England or America. Performance-based theater embraces the urban and global influences through its very form, and these formal qualities make possible a breaking away from the past and an engagement with contemporary issues. Irish theater artists try to reflect European (and increasingly African and Asian) influences on Irish society through a syncretic method of creating and re-presenting theater, for which extra-linguistic theatrical elements provide a stronger expressive platform. As scholars, we ignore this change in theater at our peril, as it has already begun to be incorporated into the mainstream and, in the early years of the twenty-first century, these performance techniques show no signs of dissipation. We need, then, to develop a language of criticism that will allow for a nontraditional performance text (in the Schechnerian sense) that appears less fixed (but is in reality no less precise than any established playwright's script might be) and uses words as only one landscape of performance.

**Notes**

2. Barabbas's official name is Barabbas ... the company, to distinguish itself from, say, Barabbas ... the festival or any other event it chooses to produce. For simplicity's sake, I will simply use "Barabbas" to refer to the company. Further, Murfi left Barabbas in 2001, and has been pursuing individual projects, including very successful directing.
3. In 1998, the Druid Theatre's production of Martin McDonagh's *Beauty Queen of Leenane* won Best Actor in a Drama and Best Actress in a Drama, and made Garry Hynes the first woman to win Best Director.
4. Brook acknowledged Grotowski in his explanation of these questions.
On Sunday, 30 January 1972, the British army fired shots on a disturbance that arose after a civil rights demonstration. A total of fourteen people died and the public was outraged. It is widely believed that the crowd was unarmed.


For more information on Ubu and the Truth Commission, see Graham 2003; Kippen 2002; and Marlin-Curiel 2001.

Widespread fraud and malpractice was discovered in Ireland’s beef industry in the early 1990s. No allegations could be proved, however, and no politician or industrialist was ever charged, although an official inquiry, known as the Beef Tribunal, was established. For more on the Beef Tribunal, see Fintan O’Toole’s insightful Meanwhile, Back at the Ranch: The Politics of Irish Beef (1994).

There is anecdotal evidence, however, that general attendance and ticket sales are considerably down since the downturn in the Irish economy in 2001.

Bogart teaches at Columbia and maintains strong ties to the Irish theater sector, as many young theater practitioners have trained in her Viewpoints method. Most recently, she was the keynote speaker at the 14th Annual Irish Theatre Institute Conference and Networking Event, held to coincide with the Dublin Theatre Festival in 2007.