The sanctuary of Belfast’s Fitzroy Presbyterian Church buzzed with activity. Friends and neighbours chatted among the dark wooden pews, the columns of the pipe organ soaring high above their heads. The congenial atmosphere felt like the minutes before the start of a church service, save for the Beatles tunes playing softly in the background.

HALFWAY HOUSE

At precisely 7:30, the music stopped, and those assembled fell silent as the lights dimmed and a spotlight focused on the platform in the middle of the sanctuary, turning it into a minimalist theatre stage. A white-haired man walked onto the stage. He introduced himself to us as Philip Orr, the author of Halfway House, the play we had all come to see. He explained that the play is set in 1966, in a snowed-in pub in the Sperrin Mountains. As he described the particular historical setting of the mid-1960s – a time of significant social change in the Western world, and in Northern Ireland the years directly preceding the conflict known as ‘the Troubles’ – the Beach Boys’ ‘Good Vibrations’ began to play softly, and two women joined him on stage, entering from opposite doors on either side of the platform.

In the course of the next hour, we watched as the two women, Bronagh and Valerie, weathered the snowstorm – of which we were occasionally reminded by an audio clip of a howling winter wind – in conversation with one another, a conversation that ranged from congenial and sympathetic to tense and, at times, openly hostile. We soon learned that one woman is Protestant, the other Catholic; one’s father a veteran of the Easter Rising, the other’s father a veteran of the Battle of the Somme.

PARALLELS AND CONTEMPORARY POLITICS

The essence of the play rests in these parallels: both women grew up in Downpatrick, County Down, but due to the divided nature of
Both are equally proud of their respective parents’ brief military service in 1916, and both tell stories of national and familial hurts occasioned by the other ‘side’.

Halfway House[1] capitalized on an important historic concurrence: the close proximity of the Easter Rising (24-29 April 1916) and the Battle of the Somme (1 July-18 November 1916). The Easter Rising is commemorated each year as an important event in the formation of an independent Irish state, and relatedly with the Partition of Ireland. It is associated with an Irish identity, and thus with Catholicism, nationalism, and republicanism. The Battle of the Somme serves as a sort of opposite: it is commemorated as an important event in British history, and is thus associated with British-ness, Protestantism, unionism, and loyalism (see Grayson and McGarry 2016)[ii].

Commemorations serve the present: they harness the past and shape it in ways that suit the commemorators’ present-day needs. As anthropologist Dominic Bryan puts it, ‘The marking of a centenary is an act of contemporary politics… the commemorative practices are constructed in the present, for the present’ (in Bryan et al. 2013: 66).

FEMALE VOICES AND CROSS-COMMUNITY DIALOGUE

As part of my Ph.D. research, I look at one particular approach to commemoration, in which artists, particularly those working in community arts, engaged with the dual centenary of the Somme and the Easter Rising in their work. Halfway House is one of my case studies.

I would like to draw out two key projects that such artistic endeavours attempt to accomplish, using Halfway House as an example. First, the play mirrors a wider move toward more inclusive commemorations in Northern Ireland in the twenty-first century. Commemorations that recognize both the Battle of the Somme and the Easter Rising, and the roles of both Catholics and Protestants in each, have become increasingly common (Daly and O’Callaghan 2007: 4; McCarthy 2012: 430-439; Grayson and McGarry 2016: 2-3).

Likewise, Orr’s choice to write women characters reflects a growing desire to include women’s voices in the narratives told during and around commemorations (see Mullally 2016).

While the stories that Valerie and Bronagh tell are still in many ways men’s stories – the stories of their fathers’ involvement in armed conflict, and of their fathers’, brothers’, and uncles’ pride in the respective commemorations – they also speak of the fabric of their everyday lives as women in the Northern Ireland of the 1960s: leaving the workforce after having children, moving to the ‘big city’ of Belfast versus staying at ‘home’ in Downpatrick, caring for elderly relatives, and so forth.

Second, Halfway House represents a desire for increased dialogue, both between individuals and, more widely, between the two main ‘communities’ in Northern Ireland. The two women model ‘good’ dialogue for their audiences: while they may disagree on certain points, they never raise their voices or interrupt each other, and each actively listens and attempts to empathize with her counterpart. They are ultimately respectful of one another, and willing and able to reflect on their own biases. Neither do they shy away from difficult or painful discussions. For example, midway through the play, Bronagh, the Catholic woman, tells Valerie that the Ulster Special Constabulary, known as the “B” Specials, regularly visit her family’s home to search their barns and house. She reveals a great amount of hurt at this felt invasion of her family’s property and privacy. Shortly after, Valerie hesitantly reveals that her father and uncle both joined the ‘B’ Specials after the war, and we can see her struggling to reconcile her own pride in their service with Bronagh’s experiences of hurt. The following exchange takes place at the end of this telling:

Valerie: But what you also have to realise, Bronagh, was the fear, back then. Uncle Joe still says you could have cut it with a knife.

Bronagh: The town was miles away from the riots in Belfast and it was miles from the border.

Valerie: But we were afraid.

Bronagh: Afraid of whom?

Valerie: Afraid of you. (Orr 2016:22)

Tellingly to the play’s project, the two characters have an equal number of spoken lines, so that neither dominates the dramatic action or dialogue. One reviewer commented on this phenomenon of ‘good’ dialogue, and the way in which it encouraged the audience to participate in similar conversations, writing that ‘the quality of listening on stage was echoed in the venue’s café
A MAJOR SHIFT: RE-IMAGINING THE ‘OTHER’

This approach to cross-community dialogue in theatre evidences an important shift in the past thirty or so years. Take, for example, Frank McGuinness’s (1986) play Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme, which dramatizes the journey of eight (fictional) Protestant, Northern Ireland-born World War I soldiers to the Battle of the Somme.[iii]. McGuinness, born in County Donegal and hailing from an Irish Catholic background, famously drew his inspiration for this play from living for the first time in a majority Protestant community, while teaching at the (then) New University of Ulster in Coleraine. Grene (1999: 242-245) considers Observe the Sons an exercise in ‘imagining the other’ and encouraging audiences to do the same, as ‘[f]or southern Catholic nationalists Ulster Protestant Unionism is as other as you can get … The play represents therefore a new sort of imaginative reaching out in Irish drama’. Lojek (2004: 77-79) similarly notes that in both the play’s premiere and each of its subsequent stage revivals, Observe the Sons has been heralded as ‘an icon of cross-cultural understanding’, and ‘an indication of increased understanding by Irish Catholics that Irish Protestantism is also part of the island’s culture and heritage’.

What is particularly interesting is the major shift that can be seen between the type of imagining undertaken in Observe the Sons and that found in Halfway House. In the former, the playwright imagines the community that is ‘other’ to him, probing its trauma and writing from a place of empathy. It is indeed a type of dialogue, but much of the work of dialogue is implicit, having already taken place in the experiences of the playwright, though of course as spectators or readers we can choose to dialogue with the play’s material ourselves. In Halfway House, however, the dialogue is physically presented on stage. While we can, of course, choose not to engage with the material in an inner dialogue of our own, we cannot sidestep the fact of the dialogue itself, as it forms the very substance of the play. This great shift, then, is one from ‘imagining the other’ to imagining ways in which oneself – or someone very like oneself – might encounter the other in an everyday situation such as a snowbound pub.

[i] Halfway House and its companion play, Stormont House Rules!, were commissioned by evangelical Christian organization Contemporary Christianity as part of a project entitled ‘1916, a Hundred Years On’ (see Contemporary Christianity n.d.).

[ii] Of course, individual identities do not fall so neatly into these two categories, and plenty of residents of Northern Ireland, including its growing migrant population, do not consider themselves part of either the Protestant community or the Catholic community.

[iii] Dublin’s Abbey Theatre staged Observe the Sons of Ulster as part of its 2016 centenary commemoration programme. This production was staged at Belfast’s Lyric Theatre in early July 2016, around the time of the local commemorations of the Battle of the Somme (1 July) and the Battle of the Boyne (12 July) (see Coyle 2016, Hardy 2016).

References


**“BE YOURSELF. WE WON’T TELL:” SOME THOUGHTS ON HBO’S WESTWORLD AND THE CURIOSITIES OF TOURISM TO MEXICO**

*March 9, 2017  Leave a comment*

By: Julia Hieske

I recently watched the first season of HBO’s new blockbuster series *Westworld* and, I admit, it had me hooked right from episode one.[1] *Westworld* is about a Western-themed amusement park where rich visitors can do pretty much anything they want. Those visitors do not pay thousands of dollars just to go horse riding and drink whiskey in a makeshift saloon. No, while they certainly do not mind the whiskey, they are after the ‘real deal.’ Westworld, the park, is inhabited by androids so lifelike they scream and cry when you abuse them, bleed when you hurt them, and die when you kill them. Designed to cater to the customers’ every need, the show suggests those androids, women, men, and children, are not so far from human beings, after all. Without wanting to give away too much, then, it is safe to say that this show is about negotiating what it means to be human. It gives much food for thought about morality, the power of narrative, and, yes, about feminism. Yet, while I would love to talk to you about all those things over a pint or two, this article will look at another aspect of the show because, for me, *Westworld* is all about tourism.

While the corporation behind *Westworld* insists on calling them ‘guests,’
the visitors to the theme park are essentially tourists. These guests are offered a real cruise-ship-like package deal which includes their transport, equipment, and accommodation in the park as they are brought into Westworld by means of a steam-powered train which they board all suited up and armed for their personal cowboy adventure. Having seen it all, the affluent visitors are looking to experience something new. The novelty, for them, is connected to two things: authenticity, on the one hand, and nostalgia, on the other.

Tourism studies have long since agreed on the fact that the quest for authenticity is crucial to the tourism industry. It has been extremely difficult, though, to pinpoint how authenticity should be defined exactly. To be marketed as ‘authentic’ to prospective tourists, locations must strike a balance between the familiar and the unfamiliar. If the first prevailed, the place would be perceived as boring or mainstream. If the latter dominated, though, the destination would seem overwhelmingly foreign and travelling there too stressful to call it a vacation. Think of it as the difference between an all-inclusive resort vacation in Cancún and a zoological expedition in the jungle. While during the first, sheltered in a hotel district, you might even forget where you are – after all, beach resorts all over the world are not that different from each other – bug collecting in the rain forest will possibly not be something many people associate with a vacation. The solution to the dilemma, so to say, is to bring some jungle into the resort. Bits and pieces of nature – palm trees, cacti, exotic flowers, et cetera – or artefacts from indigenous cultures decorate the otherwise modern and often sterile environments of the tourist centres.

Another strategy to provide tourists with the thrill of authenticity are performances of native or native-looking dancers and actors who are brought in to stage traditional dances and rituals. In the case of the Mexican Riviera, there are even theme parks that contain within their premises the whole package of what Mexico’s culture, history, and natural beauty have to offer, or so it seems. From cenotes (natural sinkholes or wells) and Mangroves to “Mayan walls,” a “Mexican cemetery” and “Prehispanic performances,” parks such as Xcaret and Xel-Há, sell a taste of Mexico to the tourists too cautious or lazy to venture out of both the tourist and their comfort zones. In many of the touristic centres which are exemplified by such “Disneyfied ecoparks,” – the Lonely Planet’s words, not mine – cultural heritage, as well as wild nature, become spectacles contained in restricted areas and adjusted to the current trends in the industry.\textsuperscript{2} The same is true, dare I say, for the native inhabitants of those areas who become props positioned there to accommodate tourist imaginaries.

Sound familiar? In Westworld, the series, the corporation’s biggest selling point in the promotion of the park is the authenticity of experience. Of course, here, the concept is taken up a notch. After all, we are talking about the tourist who has seen it all. Resembling in its basic thought, perhaps, the ‘authentic experience’ of a trip to a township or the thrill of a bungee jump in the wilderness, Westworld, the park, promises a ride that is even more exciting. The ticket to this artificial world is supposed to have bought its holder the adventure of a lifetime. The trip promises to reconnect the guests with their primal instincts and the park offers plenty of adrenaline in its so-called narratives. The thrill of chasing bandits, playing cowboy, and paying the brothel a visit (‘what happens in Westworld stays in Westworld’) is balanced, though, by the fact that as guests, and in contrast to the humans used as props in the park, they cannot be harmed. On the one hand, this lets them go through a cathartic experience of sorts, on the other, however, some of them become unhinged by their powers of superiority.
For me, it was hard not to be reminded of colonial or imperial travellers in the nineteenth or early twentieth centuries, here. Not only did many of them travel to those countries with an Orientalist perspective of assumed superiority over the natives, the excitement associated with a firsthand experience of the real or imagined dangers there, oftentimes, seemed like a welcome adventure. Take, for example, Fanny Calderón de la Barca, the Scottish wife of a Spanish diplomat, who moved to Mexico in the late 1830s. The vivid accounts of her travels deserve an entire article dedicated to nothing else but them but, for now, I want to highlight only one of her many anecdotes. A recurring theme in her letters spanning two years, as well as in plenty of travelogues from the same period, is her fear of bandits. Again and again, Fanny mentions rumours about robberies and several times she even expects to finally run into a bandit with such certainty, she is sure to have only escaped one by a hair’s breadth. Funnily enough, though, she would eventually leave Mexico without having ever had an encounter with a bandit whatsoever. Nevertheless, the topic seemed to have excited her so much, her writing makes the impression she must really have enjoyed telling her (almost) dangerous anecdotes.

Banditry, then, became some sort of a staple topic in Anglo-Saxon travel writing about Mexico. So much so, that it has become part of the imaginaries tourists have had about the country ever since. Regardless of the actual risk, what rather interests me here is the excitement of mystery and supposed danger, that could be enjoyed as long as one was safe. Their guaranteed safety, therefore, allows the guests in Westworld to live the ultimate tourist experience: all the adrenaline, the anecdotes, the souvenirs – in episode one, we see a couple getting their photo taken which also features the man’s first killed bandit – and none of the risk.

However, there is yet another factor that links the experience of the guests in the series’ theme park to that of tourists now and then. Nostalgia, as we will see, plays a huge role in both Westworld and tourist fantasies from the nineteenth century to the present. In the show, one of the biggest selling points of the park is that it allows for its guests to step into a world that belongs to the past. Evoking the spirit of the American frontier, Westworld provides narratives of exploration and fights to the death which provoke exhilaration that, to such an extent, is hard to be found in their everyday lives. Fundamentally, however, the theme park offers a ride to a simpler existence, where good and evil are easily distinguished and primitive impulses are not constrained by a complex set of laws. When, in episode one, for example, a guest shoots two robbers, we can see how the expression on his and his wife’s faces changes from initial shock to elation and pride. And, while the series quickly develops an intricate web of storylines featuring guests who do not seem to stick to any moral code, the first episode makes an effort to show us Westworld, its opportunities for – erm – ‘character development,’ and the results of a trip to the imagined past from the perspective of ordinary, seemingly decent people like the couple I just mentioned.

Doing what I do, that is, working your way through a ton of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century travelogues and tourist guidebooks to Mexico, you cannot help but notice the similarities. Take Charles Macomb Flandrau, for example, a writer and temporary plantation owner who marvels about the supposed lawlessness of the Mexicans and notes that he has “grown to regard battle, murder and sudden death as conventional forms of relaxation.”[3] After the Mexican-American War (1846-48), the former Mexican states and new U.S. territories were seen by many of the U.S. settlers who moved there as some sort of new frontier. The same was true when U.S. Americans began to flock even further south during the government of President Porfirio Díaz. For many,
The renewed spirit of exploration was inextricably linked to a sense of Manifest Destiny and the disregard of the indigenous population. Nevertheless, they were not only lured there by the promise of making a fortune in the mining, coffee, and rubber businesses or the railway companies, they were also smitten with the picturesqueness of the rural villages and their inhabitants. While early travellers and, later, entire tourist groups visited these places and raved about their simplicity and beauty in letters and travelogues, their admiration was generally restricted to the visual, almost voyeuristic pleasure of observation. Their wonderment at the otherness of the indigenous people, their culture, and dwellings, thus, did not keep them from appreciating their modern homes upon their return. On the contrary, and this is true for the contemporary tourist, too, visiting poorer areas, indigenous cultures, and rural communities often seems a welcome change from the busy lives of members of modern societies, who, then, return feeling something on the spectrum between appreciation of their privilege and confirmation of their entitlement.

The yearning for a simpler existence that is connected to the past drives tourist fantasies to this day and it is the motor behind all kinds of advertised experiences, from ‘digital detox’ and ‘back to nature’ retreats to voluntourism and tours to the hinterlands. Let’s not forget, though, that tourist destinations are always projections to some extent. Just like the fictional Westworld, Xel-Há, Xcaret, and the likes thereof are the culmination of an industry that represents concepts of authenticity, culture, and the past which accommodate often nostalgic and romanticised tourist imaginaries. It is through the commodification of such concepts, then, that tourism can offer both Westworld’s guests and real tourists the opportunity to grasp the intangible.

The series has a point when it provocatively suggests that the right amount of money can buy its owner virtually anything – even a free pass to act out one’s darkest fantasies – because it reminds us of the fact that tourism is always a matter of privilege. It also shows us that much of what we secretly might look for in visiting a place is linked to a yearning for authentic experience and nostalgia for a simpler life. Nevertheless, other than the bleak picture painted in HBO’s Westworld, I think travelling or tourism in real life still gives room for hope. Travel, in my opinion, has the potential to broaden our horizons and put things into perspective. It can be transformative, in a good way, if we let it. But let’s see what the second season of Westworld will have to say about all that when it comes out next year. I will be watching on the edge of my seat.

[1] Westworld. HBO. 2016. To avoid confusion, reference to the show will be made in italics, while references to the park itself will appear in standard font.


FROM THE TAMING OF THE SHREW TO 10 THINGS I HATE ABOUT YOU: TAMING WILD WOMEN IN EUROPEAN CULTURE
This scene stems from the beginning of the 1999 teen film *Ten Things I Hate About You*, featuring future Hollywood actors Julia Stiles and Heath Ledger in the leading roles. The film, however, is an adaptation of William Shakespeare's late sixteenth-century comedy *The Taming of the Shrew* in which a recalcitrant young woman, Katherine, is getting married off to a robust character, Petruchio, who starves her high spirits into wifely obedience. But Shakespeare's piece is itself a spin-off of previous versions of the well-known theme of shrew-taming across diverse cultures, languages, and times. Scholars propose at least 400 of such stories in European literature alone, including oral versions, proverbs and story collections. Shakespeare's play is among others inspired by an anonymous ballad called ‘A merry jest of a shrewd and cursed wife, lapped in Morrelles skin, for her good behaviour’ in which the husband cowards his wife by beating and wrapping her in his horse’ skin.

Modern audiences struggle with the physical and emotional violence of the tale, particularly in the case of Shakespeare whose celebration as moral paragon sits awkwardly with the seeming misogyny, racism, and anti-semitism of some of his plays such as *The Shrew*, *Othello*, and *The Merchant of Venice*. Critics either denounce or attempt to salvage the playwright from such charges, arguing he writes within the traditions and genre conventions of his time, indeed wringing subtlety from them by pushing and pulling their limits. *The Shrew*, it is said, is a satire on domineering male behaviour, emerging from a social trend towards the romantic companionable rather than arranged marriage. That the inequalities suggested were unpalatable even to early modern sensitivities is, perhaps, shown by a play written as sequel to Shakespeare's, *The Tamer Tamed* by John Fletcher: Petruchio has bullied Katherine into the grave, re-marrying a supposedly mild young girl who turns out to be a wilder wife than the first. As in Shakespeare's play, the couple eventually makes peace after many hilarious tricks played upon each other. As in Shakespeare's play too, we're left not entirely sure what to think, but that may just be the point.
The Taming of the Shrew complicates the difficult business of “are we to take the misogyny seriously?” by setting it apart as play within the play. The piece doesn’t actually start with the shrew story but with a framing device: a drunkard is duped into believing he is a lord for whose amusement the story about wife-taming is being staged. It is introduced as farce, and we are supposed to laugh at what it so obviously proclaims.

In production as in interpretation, much depends on Katherine’s final speech in which she berates disobedient wives, advertising the complete submission of women to men in marriage.

Such duty as the subject owes the prince,
Even such a woman oweth to her husband;
And when she is froward, peevish, sullen, sour,
And not obedient to his honest will,
What is she but a foul contending rebel
And graceless traitor to her loving lord?
I am ashamed that women are so simple
To offer war where they should kneel for peace;
Or seek for rule, supremacy, and sway,
When they are bound to serve, love, and obey. (Act 5, scene 2)

What sounds at first as almost intolerably cruel – the speech ends with Katherine’s offer to place her hand under her husband’s foot – may be a beautifully effective piece of subversion when staged: the 1967 Zeffirelli film with Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton has Katherine storm out of the hall after her earnest speech, leaving Petruchio to run after her, severely casting doubt over just how tamed she is.
A fascinating response to this particular ambiguity of Shakespeare’s play is a seventeenth-century German version called *The Art of all Arts: How to Make an Evil Wife Good*. Between the 1590s and 1620s, English acting companies travelled across the continent, carrying with them numerous texts by Shakespeare and contemporaries. Some years later, these texts start to appear in, amongst others, Danish, Dutch, and German, sometimes closely attached to the originals, sometimes adapting them according to the theatrical traditions of the different cultures. There is, for example, the clown-figure called Pickleherring with whom seventeenth-century Germans would have been familiar with, dropping into the tragic *Romeo and Juliet* adaptation.

It is a mystery how these versions came into being: did the English actors learn German? Did they work with translators, or did they marry German women who helped them translate, or with whom they had children who spoke both languages? What is clear, however, is that these plays are an untapped source for insights into the Renaissance landscape of European theatre, attesting to a much more wide-spread exchange than we are aware of. They also bring us tantalizingly close to performance practices of Shakespeare’s own time, considering their date of printing a mere handful of years after the playwright’s death.

I am part of a team at the University of Geneva that seeks to make early modern German plays available to an anglophone readership, and am re-translating *The Art of All Arts* into English. Differing attitudes to gender between the German and the English play are particularly striking: although *The Art of All Arts* does firmly anchor itself in the shrew-taming tradition (Socrates offers the prologue, lamenting his cursing wife Xanthippe), Katherine is accompanied by a robustly practical maid servant with whom she holds conversations that reveal her thoughts about the situation, a privileged access to her situation lacking in Shakespeare. Her final speech also receives radical treatment in shrinking from some 46 lines expatiating on female obedience to a bare two:

This I want to tell us briefly:

You men, love your wives. And you women, obey your husbands (Act 5).

This ‘lesson’, though ambiguous and performance-dependent it is, shifts the poetic weight onto both men and women in the audience through its memorable parallelism. The translator’s decision to cut a speech that crowns the play, particularly considering the sometimes close verbal echoes to the original, is a stunning circumstance which encourages a revision of charges of misogyny with which we encounter early modern ideas of gender.

Today, it seems, we still have not quite outgrown a taste in shrew-taming: films and musicals, notably Cole Porter’s *Kiss me Kate*, evidence a sustained interest in the subject, if only, perhaps, because it puts under pressure what we think we know about gender relationships. Little known *Shrew* versions like *The Art of All Arts* will contribute to complicating and nuancing our notions of marriage in the Renaissance, as well as today.
I've spent a lot of the past year sitting in the dark – literally. For people who work in theatre, this may come as no surprise. In the eight years I spent working full-time as a lighting assistant/production electrician, I could quite easily go for three or four days in a row without seeing any sunlight. I've often thought it odd that the people who “create” light for live performance, people who use light as their primary creative medium, spend so much time in the dark. If you’re unfamiliar with the theatre production process, here's a (very brief and very simplified!) rundown:

In most regional and London producing theatres, work on a production begins about four to six months prior to the first preview. This can be significantly longer on larger shows, particularly those in the West End. About a week before the first preview, the cast, director, and design team move into the theatre space itself to start technical rehearsals. By this stage, the set has been built, costumes made, lights and speakers rigged, etc. The technical rehearsal is the start of what is called the production week (also known as “hell week” in some American theatres on account of the long days). Technical rehearsals are the only time the entire company is together in the performance space, and they are – as the name suggests – focused primarily on the technical and design elements of a production. Technical rehearsals are often very “stop and start” as cues, scene changes, costume changes, etc. are run multiple times until all parties are comfortable. Once the whole production is worked through in this manner, this is followed by a dress rehearsal (often two or three, plus notes sessions) before the first public performance.

**THE LIGHTING DESIGNER**

For a lighting designer, the first day of technical rehearsals is often the most difficult. All of the lighting designer’s pre-production research, the conversations they have had with the designer, director and theatre’s head of lighting, and the plans they have drawn and had implemented by the theatre's lighting department converge on this day, and there is enormous pressure on the lighting designer to “get it right” – funding situations in most UK theatres are such that time, money and resources are at a premium and at this point there is not enough of any of those to start over or make significant changes. This pressure is compounded by the fact that lighting is the sole visual design element that can only be created in the performance space. During the pre-production period, set designers produce a scale modelbox, alongside technical drawings, sketches and storyboards, and costume designers may use artistic drawings in conjunction with fabric swatches, for example, to help articulate their process and creative ideas. For both set and costume design, the actual product is built over several weeks and can be seen as a work-in-progress during this time. Moreover, the materials of set and costume design are tangible and the work can be observed, commented on, tweaked and refined outside and, crucially, before entering the actual performance space. Similar comparisons and tools do not exist for lighting designers. Computer visualisation software may be used; however, these programs rarely provide the detail needed to fully explain,
describe or develop the potential of light outside a performance space.

In addition, these days tend to involve the most negotiation and adjustment as creative teams (especially the lighting designer) learn to navigate the “language” and “grammar” of a production, while also refining the spoken language and grammar they use to articulate it. It is this process that my research focuses on. How do lighting designers use language to articulate ideas about light and lighting, a material and a process that is largely intangible? How do they additionally use language to exercise agency and exert influence in situations of creative collaboration?

**MY RESEARCH**

To answer these questions, I sit in the dark, behind the lighting designer, armed with two recording devices. One of these records the ambient conversation, usually between the director or designer and the lighting designer. The other records the conversation on “cans” (UK theatre slang for the headsets worn by all members of the design and technical teams to facilitate conversation without having to resort to shouting backstage!).

The darkness provides an ideal environment for conducting my fieldwork. Even though I am acting as an “overt insider” (Merton, 1972; Greene, 2014), the darkness makes it possible for me to fade into the background and remain largely unnoticed by the people I am observing – which is simultaneously useful and disconcerting. There is something anonymising about the dark, but it can also be quite liberating. There’s plenty of interesting research on audience behaviour and fascinating studies on people’s behaviour generally in the dark — but for now, I’ll just say what an illuminating (see what I did there?) experience sitting in the dark has been!

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**“FROM LONDON TO AFGHANISTAN IN A BEAT UP MINIVAN”: HOW TRAVEL GUIDEBOOKS MANAGE TO GAIN OUR TRUST**

*December 5, 2016  Leave a comment*

By: Julia Hieske

Whenever someone plans a trip nowadays there is a good chance they get a guidebook first. The Lonely Planet’s travel books, to name one of the genre’s most famous publishers, have guided generations of tourists across the world from destinations as well-travelled as Rome and Paris, to plenty of fairly remote places like Cape York in the North of Australia.

Guidebooks fulfill a number of functions: they prepare the soon-to-be travellers for their trip, giving valuable advice on when to go (for Cape York it is June to October as you will want to avoid the Wet), what to pack and how to dress. They help travellers to plan their trip and make decisions about the inclusion or exclusion of places from their itinerary. Other than that, they also function as culture brokers. Just like a personal guide on the spot, the editors of guidebooks have to know their audience’s culture as well as the culture of the destination. They have to “speak both fluently,” so to say, in order to translate and interpret the signs of a place to its visitors; think hand gestures, conventions of dress, haggling, the (in)famous *siesta*, to only name but a few.

So, without guidebooks – and their modern little siblings, travel blogs on the internet – we would basically all be lost, literally, in translation.
We would stumble about blindly in a foreign place not knowing we have just missed out on our probably only chance to see Mallorca’s best hidden beach or get a taste of Napoli’s best Pizza Margarita, by turning right instead of left. Without a guidebook in our pocket, we might not even realise we are guilty of a foolish faux pas in France or be peeved to find out we are the first, by far, to show up at a birthday bash in Mexico City. But in order to be guided by them, first, we have to trust them.

CLICHÉS ARE NEVER FAR AWAY

It is a tricky business, this culture broking. As guides and guidebook writers look for ways to make a foreign culture intelligible to visitors, cultural stereotypes and clichés are never far away. Some of them are so sticky, they are repeated over and over again, all the while shaping the fantasies people have about a certain country or region and its people. After a while, though, these stereotypes are hardly questioned anymore but taken for facts or common knowledge. In Orientalism, Edward Said reminds us that the attempt of describing a culture in often heavily simplified terms from an outsider’s perspective is always a matter of power.

And so is travelling. That is why, just like in journalism, description and reporting in travel guides can never be entirely objective. It is interesting, then, that the prefaces or “about us” sections of guidebooks, from the very first examples to the present day, insist on telling things as they are. Yet, take one destination, see how it is described in a variety of guidebooks published in different countries and languages, and you will end up with stereotypes as different as chalk and cheese.

“AT LONELY PLANET WE TELL IT LIKE IT IS”

Now, on the textual level, guidebooks count with a very specific narrative situation, which is most visible in the pioneering nineteenth-century ones published by John Murray or Karl Baedeker.

On the one hand, guidebook writers are keen to exude authority. The handbooks should appear to the readers as a mimetic description of the real world and so their authors vow to stick to the truth. Murray et al. saw themselves as mere “transcribers of facts,” who reported on every detail there was. So, contrary to personal travel accounts, their tone was supposed to sound scientific and objective.

Today we would say that there is no such thing as an objective representation. Yet, take a phrase like this one: “At Lonely Planet we tell it like it is.” It is taken from their website only a couple of days ago. As we can see, the nineteenth-century claim of objectivity is still around. Curiously, despite their all-encompassing pseudo-scientific style, guidebook writers needed – and still need – to achieve credibility. Whereas a guide hired on the spot could create trust using personal skills like empathy, individual explanations or nonverbal communication, guidebooks can do none of those things. Instead, they have to count on other strategies in order to make up for this deficiency.
There, the writers support their truth claim using a number of recurring techniques. For now, I call the first the \textit{been-there-done-that factor}. The writers or publishers are presented as travellers, thus, creating a bond of shared experience between themselves and the readers. While the personal touch is deliberately missing from the main text, the paratextual means, that is the preface or self-describing information on a website, compensate for it by making the writers relatable human beings and the product of their journey an authentic one.

\textit{In the same vein, almost all guidebooks flaunt some sort of founding myth.}

It has become a default move to describe the origin of the books in almost heroic terms, telling the story of a traveller who, facing the odds of his journey, was struck by the genius and benevolent idea of creating a guidebook. Compare, for example, the story of how Lonely Planet founders Tony and Maureen Wheeler, and I quote from the website, “drove from London to Afghanistan in a beat up minivan.” This way, an emotional bond with a fellow traveller is fostered. In case that was not enough, though, publishers use yet another strategy that is supposed to convince the reader of the authenticity of the information at hand.

\textbf{A NECESSARY EVIL}

Back then, as well as today, guidebooks had to be true to the latest developments. Say, if a hotel suddenly changed its owner and its standard went from first-class to mediocre, a responsible publisher would not want his readers to get disappointed and, then, blame the guidebook. So, naturally, the \textit{been-there-done-that factor} is complemented by some sort of \textit{up-to-date factor}.

\textit{Because in order to “tell things as they are” one not only has to have been there but to return frequently so as to check whether “things” still are as they were a year ago.}

Regular revisions are a necessary evil if publishers want to keep their audience’s trust. The preface, then, is also the place where readers are assured the book in their hands is as up-to-date as possible. Publishers know, however, that complete accuracy of information is impossible to achieve. Therefore, deliberately stating their duty to revisions, they kill two birds with one – rhetorical – stone. Firstly, they admit to possible shortcomings, thus, anticipating criticism and mitigating the readers’ reaction to it. And secondly, they invite readers to participate by sending in comments and corrections, thereby strengthening the author-reader relationship of – supposedly – mutual trust. Whether these suggestions have ever been taken into account remains unclear but the publishers’ apparent openness to criticism certainly serves to enhance their credibility.

\textbf{NOT FOR TOURISTS}

Last but not least, guidebooks frequently mention an issue that has been a staple of the tourism industry for a long time and which, for the sake of continuity, I will call the \textit{us-versus-them factor}. To see what I mean, have a look at this photo I have taken myself on a vacation on the island of Mallorca. It shows a bus displaying the logo of a tourist agency that takes large groups of tourists to touristic spots in order to carry out touristic activities. Yet, their advertising slogan begs to differ. Or take the case of a series of guidebooks which is aptly called \textit{Not for Tourists}. The whole concept of alternative tourism, or backpacking, and its bible, the Lonely Planet, is based on the idea of its distinction from regular, or mass tourism. But the philosophy of travelling off the beaten track was not only born in the seventies with Tony and Maureen Wheeler. In fact, it was the \textit{us-versus-them factor} that was responsible for the coming into being of commercial guidebooks altogether. In the mid-nineteenth century, Thomas Cook’s commercial tours had gained momentum and given more people access to travelling than ever before. Cook sold pre-planned and guided group trips that would take tourists to popular destinations all over the globe. The concept was such a success that Cook’s tours were soon associated with mass tourism that left little space for individuality. Guidebooks offered their readers a radically different travel experience. One to which only they could give them access. Equipped with a handbook, travellers were now able to explore places by themselves and independently from large groups and personal guides. Publishers like to highlight this distinguishing feature because, then and now,
Implicitly, though, the authors and publishers of guidebooks bought into a distinction whose development might as well be traced back to the relatively new phenomenon of mass tourism and the reactions to it: the traveller versus tourist binary, which is still present in popular discourse. If it was not, there would not be so many publications in print and online dedicated to real travel as opposed to practicing tourism. Yet, as James Buzard so accurately observes, it is hardly possible to escape tourism altogether. Or how would you explain that all too often alternative routes or ways of travel soon become well-trodden paths and common practice?

Paradoxically, thus, those who do not want to be ‘tourists’, contribute to the formation of new areas developed for tourism, a phenomenon Buzard calls “anti-tourism.”

It is “anti-tourism,” then, that describes best the Lonely Planet’s ideology and their advice, for example, to visit the aforementioned Cape York, which, supposedly, is still unspoilt by tourists and one of the most remote places in Australia.

“GUIDE-BOOKS AND THEIR UBIQUITOUS POSSESSORS”

Back in the nineteenth century, in a wonderfully ironic turn, Murray’s and Baedeker’s handbooks had become such a global success, that they, too, were seen as a symbol of mass tourism. This “anti-tourist” and travel writer, for example, was anything but enthused by the users of such guidebooks:

“When the journeying cyclist or motorist quits the tourist-infected route on which Singapore is the East Indian rest-house, and sails across the equator towards the rarely visited island of the Dutch Archipelago, new pleasures unadulterated by crimson-colored guide-books and their ubiquitous possessors await him at every turn.”

The quote is taken from an article about Java and was published in 1903. It was written by a U.S. American who, only five years later, went on to write and publish a “crimson-colored guidebook” – not to Southeast Asia, that came later, but – to Mexico. His name was T. P. Terry, he was a traveller, a businessman, as well as a writer, and he is the subject of my current research. Fascinating stuff, but I will leave that for another time.


Let’s begin with *Henry V*. It’s the scene where Captains Gower and Fluellen meet with their Irish and Scottish counterparts, Macmorris and Jamy, to discuss the siege of Harfleur. Macmorris and Fluellen have a particularly agitated conversation:

*Fluellen.* Captain Macmorris, I think, look you, under your correction, there is not many of your nation.

*Macmorris.* Of my nation? What ish my nation? Ish a villain and a bastard and a knave and a rascal? What ish my nation? Who talks of my nation? (3.3.61-65)

Even though he is a relatively minor character, Macmorris’ response there – ‘what ish my nation?’ – has been taken up as the starting-point for approaching issues of national identity in Irish literature and drama, and also as the linchpin for Shakespeare and Ireland studies as well. Of course, Macmorris’ predominance in such criticism does not come without its problems: Stephen O’Neill has drawn attention to how ‘[s]uch privileging [of Macmorris] has as much to do with Shakespeare’s centrality to the canon – stage Irish characters in other plays from the period have not been analysed to the same extent – as it does with the centrality of MacMorris’s questions to a play about conquest, cultural difference and national identity.’[1]

O’Neill is right to advise caution here, but I think that ‘what ish my nation?’ still carries meaning in Shakespeare and Ireland studies, and in 21st century Ireland too. I don’t have far to look: I look at my country’s treatment of its women.

*Druid Theatre Company’s ‘DruidShakespeare’*

**Women and Ireland**

This year alone, I think of the unveiling and removal of the Maser Art mural at the Project Arts Centre. The establishment of the Repeal Project clothing company. #TwoWomenTravel, unflinching in its depiction of what Irish pregnant people are put through should they want to make choices for their own bodies. Brianna Parkins talking about wanting to see the Eighth Amendment repealed on the Rose of Tralee, an unlikely (but nevertheless, welcome) topic to be discussed on everyone’s favourite Lovely Girl competition. *‘We Face This Land’*, a two-minute visualisation of Sarah Maria Griffin’s poem that dared to assert ‘The laws of the church have no place on your flesh […] Witches or women – these are our bodies which shall not be given up’. [2] However, Enda Kenny’s words still ring in my ears: ‘The T-shirts may be black and white writing on them but this is about people and people have different views.’ ‘This is about people’: but am I not a person? Are the twelve people who travel to the UK every single day not people as well? If my country does not recognise me as a person, then what ish my nation? (It’s also worth pointing out that his year also marks twenty years since the closure of the last Magdalene laundry in Ireland. I could go on about this country’s treatment of its women over decades.)

This is also a nation where its own national theatre omits – bar one playwright – women from its 1916 commemorative programme: leading to the birth of the #WakingTheFeminists movement, which, over the last year, has tirelessly worked to create change, equality, and equity in Irish theatre. Its work is far from over, but it is incredible to see how it has invigorated the theatrical landscape both in terms of scholarship and practice. (It’s certainly been a huge influence on my own research, as well as leading to the creation
production's Irish Catholic context was brought to the fore: during her wedding, Katherina (Aoife DuEin) sat on top of two staircases. During the ceremony, the musicians played their jigs and reels on the bodhrán, tin whistle, fiddle, and guitar for the crowd's pleasure. The production was inspired by #WakingTheFeminists' efforts – was part of a reconstructed Elizabethan theatre on the Bankside in London. Caroline Byrne's production of The Taming of the Shrew was announced as part of Emma Rice's first season as artistic director of Shakespeare's Globe earlier this year. Aisling O'Sullivan's performance as Henry V was announced as part of Emma Rice's first season as artistic director of the Gate Theatre. Selina Cartmell, by the way: King Lear in 2013.) I understand that Shakespeare may not be an immediate choice for Irish theatre practitioners: yet, as Mark Thornton Burnett cautions, '[a]lthough Shakespeare's work can be seen as an imperial export, it also belongs to a broader dialogue – a system of negotiations, manipulations and imaginative reinscriptions.'[3] Shakespeare performance in an Irish context, then, can be a fascinating site for exploring issues of national identity. I also believe that it can be a fascinating site for exploring gender – for writing women back into the narrative.

**Women & Shakespeare**

As an intersectional feminist, I find myself grappling with the fact that I work on the most famous dead white man in all of Western literature. Shakespeare's plays are not inherently feminist. But, the performance of his plays can be feminist. As Kim Solga writes, ‘feminist resistance to the gaze is both visual and structural; it’s a matter of both what is presented on stage, lifted up to audience view, and how that material is presented, the narrative that shapes its presentation.’[4] I also emphasise Sarah Werner's idea that 'all performances of Shakespeare engage in localized production of meaning'[5]: which has implications not only for the creative team’s approach to the play, but also audience members’ reception of the production: what I took away from it may not be the same as someone else in the audience that night. Margaret Jane Kidnie suggests that ‘a play, for all that it carries the rhetorical and ideological force of enduring stability, is not an object at all, but rather a dynamic process that evolves over time in response to the needs and sensibilities of its users.’[6] In line with Kidnie’s argument, I’d contend that any given Shakespeare production is one out of many products of an evolving process, that being the chosen play as it has been shaped by shifting cultural attitudes over time. So, in light of that, what I want to offer in this short piece are some examples of Irish Shakespeare performance that explore gender and feminism in interesting ways.

Druid Theatre Company's DruidShakespeare premiered in May 2015. This was a seven-hour adaptation of the first Henriad into one continuous narrative, and in the three principle roles of Richard II, Henry IV, and Henry V, the Henrys were played by women. Particularly in the case of Aisling O’Sullivan’s performance as Henry V, DruidShakespeare used the performance of gender to subvert conventional ideas and patterns in Shakespeare performance – quite pertinent given the cultural signifiers that Henry V as a character and as an icon of English patriotism produces. O’Sullivan spoke with a guttural County Kerry accent, not only recalling her previous roles for Druid but also throwing into sharp contrast the ghosts of previous Henrys, the majority of these male and having performed at British theatrical institutions that Worthen would describe as 'institutionalized Shakespeare': examples such as Hassell at the Royal Shakespeare Company, Kenneth Branagh at the same theatre and on film, Jude Law for the Michael Grandage Company, Adrian Lester for the National Theatre, and Jamie Parker for Shakespeare's Globe.[7]

Many of the theatres housing these performances are associated with institutionalised ideas of verse-speaking: indeed, some of them 'have been extremely influential in the establishment of principles of Shakespearean verse speaking on the modern British stage.'[8] Not only that, O’Sullivan's physical presence cut a distinctive presence. Considering the likes of Hassell, Branagh, Parker, Law, and Lester – all of whom played athletic, muscular, conventionally masculine Henrys – upon her first entrance, O’Sullivan’s Hal was lithe, wiry, and prone to posturing and slouching. Her chief uniform, too, was a large black leather jacket and jeans: contrasting with the royal livery with which we commonly associate Henry: not only a crown and a suit of armour, but the colours of red and blue, the three lions, and the fleur-de-lis (Hassell, Branagh, Law, and Parker all sported variations on this, harking back to Laurence Olivier’s take on the role). O’Sullivan is not the only female Henry in the current theatrical landscape: Lazarus Theatre Company produced an all-female version last year, and Michelle Terry played the role this year for Open Air Theatre.[9] Genderblind Shakespeare may not be innovative, but it is clear that O’Sullivan's performance in itself is a response to conventions, traditions, and iconographies in Irish and Shakespeare performance practice – conventions that are predominantly quite male.

**A feminist approach to Shakespeare**

If we return to 2016, the most unexpected place to find an alternative response to this 1916 centenary year – a response which was certainly inspired by #WakingTheFeminists’ efforts – was in a reconstructed Elizabethan theatre on the Banksie in London. Caroline Byrne’s production of The Taming of the Shrew was announced as part of Emma Rice’s first season as artistic director of Shakespeare’s Globe earlier this year. In a press release announcing its final casting, the production was billed as marking ‘the centenary of the Easter Rising by revisiting 1916 Ireland and remembering the role of women in the fight for independence.’[10]

To be sure (perhaps because of where it was performed), this Shrew deals in commoditised Irishness – on the night I saw the production, the musicians played their jigs and reels on the bodhrán, tin whistle, fiddle, and guitar for the crowd's pleasure. The production’s Irish Catholic context was brought to the fore: during her wedding, Katherina (Aoife Duffin) sat on top of two staircases...
that folded together to display a neon-light cross, whereas Petruchio’s (Edward Mac Liam) admission to Gremio (Raymond Keane) that ‘me father dead’ was met with numerous members of the cast blessing themselves with the sign of the cross. The text, too, was edited to add elements of Hiberno-English and Irish, such as ‘Jaysus’, ‘mo chara’, and ‘go raibh mile maith agaibh’.

But more pertinent in relation to the production’s feminist approach was the inclusion of additional songs, with lyrics written by the production’s dramaturg Morna Regan. A most notable example is the song ‘Numbered in the Song’ which, in Byrne’s words, ‘[remembers] all the women unsung by Irish history’, and was ‘in part inspired’ by Yeats’ poem Easter 1916, ‘where only the men are “numbered in the song”:’[11] This song, sung by Aoife Duffin as Katherina in a thick Dublin brogue, acted as an ongoing theme throughout the production: as Byrne simply states in an interview, ‘[i]t is a motif in the production, to be numbered in the song.’[12] The production also dispensed with Christopher Sly and the Induction in favour of Duffin performing the song after the musicians had left at the beginning, and Katherina’s singing closed the first half and also concluded the show. Again, this is part of this Shrew placing women – more specifically Katherina and her story – at its heart, and it is interesting that it did so through an appropriation of a male Irish writer’s words. With lyrics such as ‘The nation promised equality’, the song also threw into sharp relief the ongoing struggle for women’s rights in Ireland over the last hundred years.

From the get-go, the production was sympathetic to Katherina’s plight, and suggested that her taming by Petruchio was unnecessary and cruel. From Katherina’s spoken-word songs, to her newspaper being ripped out of her hand by her own father, to the production refusing to shy away from the psychological and emotional abuse Petruchio subjected her to (she spent the second half in her torn wedding dress, sleeping on a bed with only Petruchio’s cowskin cape as a duvet) – this Shrew emphasised the implications of a patriarchal Irish Catholic society on the lives of women. In doing so, it did not provide easy answers: Katherina delivered her final speech in resignation, anger, and frustration at the world she was forced to inhabit, and her relationship with a troubled-looking Petruchio was left up in the air.

Additionally, it emphasises these women’s voices: instead of Petruchio, Katherina was given the production’s final words through song, telling Petruchio that ‘I will not go to war with thee | Dulce et decorum est’ – the melody following the traditional tune ‘The Parting Glass’. [13] In addition, Amy Conroy’s Widow had an expanded role to play in this production: hovering in the background, quietly horrified at the misogyny unfolding on stage, providing quiet counsel to Katherina throughout. This relationship between the Widow and Katherina was built to the point where the final scene appears to be a battle between the former and Petruchio for the latter’s soul. (A Pyrrhic victory for Petruchio is implied here.) As Byrne comments, ‘[i]t’s not a play about the Easter Rising, but it attempts to chime with the experience of Irish women. The promises made in the [1916] Proclamation were not kept in the decades that followed and Irish women are still seeking equality to this day – much in the same way that Katherina is in Shrew’. [14] However, I am not sure if all of this was in the mind of Globe audiences throughout the production’s run. This is judging by the ‘Kiss! Kiss! Kiss!’ chant Petruchio encouraged the crowd to partake in very early on in the evening, as well as the cheering and whooping that greeted a later kiss between the two. Both times, Duffin’s Katherina was uncomfortable and unwilling to participate. This is perhaps illustrative of Werner’s idea of ‘a performance of Shakespeare that reflects the individual viewer’s perceptions and desires as much as it does those of Shakespeare or the director’[15]: indeed, performance reception is always a composite of individual and collective responses.

Writing last year for the Irish Times and reflecting on the very first #WakingTheFeminists public meeting, Lian Bell commented that ‘[d]uring the past weeks, through the voices of a multitude of women and men speaking up as feminists, this word came to life for me. I realise how important exposure to a spectrum of stories is – next year more than ever.’[16] Bell’s idea of ‘exposure to a spectrum of stories’ is crucial here: not only in our commemoration of 1916, but also in the year of commemorating Shakespeare’s death and the constant reinforcing of his dominance in world culture. (I’d also argue that it’s crucial in the context of recent world events, as well.) Feminist Shakespeare performance should not be the only intervention to make, but at least it should be one of many: specifically in the case of Irish women as we attempt to rewrite what is our nation indeed.


Women: Ruling Hallowe'en Since Forever

October 28, 2016  4 Comments

Where our witches at? Women Are Boring is donning its Hallowe'en hat for the weekend and getting SPOOKY. This piece, by Dr. Lucy Ryder, is the first in our two-part Hallowe'en series (the second is coming on Monday). Read on and learn all about where Hallowe'en originated, and how women have always been central to the festival.
WHERE DOES HALLOWE’EN COME FROM?

Hallowe’en is one of the most secular of religious festivals, and possibly the most misunderstood. Deriving from the considerably more ancient Samhain (first recorded in the Irish tale *Tochmarc Emire* meaning “When the summer goes to rest”) the current fright night we now experience is a long way from its very ancient, but decidedly muddled, origins.

From an archaeological viewpoint, the period around Samhain (stretching from 31st October to, in some traditions, November 2nd) is difficult but not impossible to trace for the landscape historian. The communities and settlements where these rites are played out become the stage for interconnecting stories, beliefs, and tradition.

Add folklore and oral history to what Tolkien called the “soup pot of history” (or should that be witches brew?!) and we begin to see a potent narrative where women are well and truly in the heart of the Samhain festivities – both in terms of driving the activities and also the balance of power.

The Hallowe’en traditions of ‘trick or treating’ and dressing up in scary clothing for sweets is the latest in a tradition to mark the end of autumn. There are many ideas as to the origin of Hallowe’en, and in some respects which is nearest to the truth has become less of an issue. However, what is consistent is that women are central to the theme.

CAILLEACH: THE OLD CRONE

The Gaelic goddess Cailleach (or Old Crone) presents a strong image of the woman and landscape intertwined to end the autumn and bountiful seasons. It is suggested (Mac Curtain, 1980: 27) that the name ‘cailleach’ had a double meaning in primitive Irish; the word ‘caille’ meant a veil, and no later than the fifth century AD ‘cailleach’ is recorded to mean both a nun and, almost simultaneously, becomes in secular mythology the word for ‘an old hag’.

Said to be closely associated with the dead and hostile to the living, Cailleach Bhéarra marks the end of autumn and the start of winter in the most vigorous of fashions by crossing the Irish landscape with a hammer pounding the fertile ground to solid rock. Cailleach was said to dwell at cave sites and prehistoric standing stones and megalithic tombs across Ireland, (Champion and Cooney, 1999: 200; Dowd, 2015: 251-2) and was thought to be such a malignant force that her suspected presence in Badhbh’s Hole in County Waterford causes local communities to be uneasy about archaeological investigations of the site (Dowd ibid.). Her presence at these locations brought spirits to her. (*Editor’s note: Badhbh is pronounced ‘bibe’. This is another word for ‘banshee’, and the word is still in use in Waterford today: generally used to describe a contrary or nasty person – usually a woman!*
Interestingly, many hillforts and megaliths in England and Scotland are associated with fairies that are supposed to roam freely on Hallowe’en. Clay Hill, near Warminster, is a hot bed of little folk, and folklore tells of large fires and strange-talking people revelling in the darkness of the 31st October. Maybole in Ayrshire is also known for fairy activity within the archaeological remains.

**SPOOKY SITES IN IRELAND**

The archaeological importance of the change in the seasons can be found particularly in Ireland, and the folklore echoes the evidence. The Mound of the Hostages (Duma na nGiall), a passage tomb in the Tara-Skryne Valley in County Meath, is thought to be illuminated by the ‘Samhain sunrise’ in early November, and reinforces the tie (in a narrative at least) between Cailleach the Crone and the ancient communities that constructed the tomb between 4,500 to 5,000 years ago (between 2500 and 3000 BC).

Many of the symbols we now associate with Hallowe’en seem to derive from Cailleach; the Crone’s Cauldron, said to collect the souls of the dead, was also thought to represent the earth mother’s womb ready for reincarnation. Her association with the dead certainly seems to be the link between the festivals, marking the end of the autumn and the long winter to come, and the spookier Hallowe’en that we celebrate now.

In many neo-pagan and Wiccan accounts, Cailleach is thought to be the goddess of Samhain, but she has competition from another powerful Gaelic woman – in this case, the daughter of the druid and sun god Mog Ruith. The fort is at Tlachtga, also in County Meath (currently under archaeological investigation, which can be found at [https://www.facebook.com/ExcavationsatTlachtga/](https://www.facebook.com/ExcavationsatTlachtga/)) is said to be named after Tlachtga, a druidess who was also the daughter of Mog Ruith and the original site of Samhain festivities. Presiding over her temple, all fires in the kingdom were extinguished and were relit from the sacred flame at Tlachtga on the eve of Samhain (Evans, 2014). The Anglo-Saxon tradition for Samhain refers to ‘need-fire’, where fires held magical properties – this was carried on into later traditions, as we’ll see below.
HOW DID MODERN HALLOWE’EN BEGIN?

The ancient traditions and Catholicism collided when Pope Saint Boniface’s festivity to honour dead saints was moved from May to coincide with the Samhain celebrations on November 1st (generally thought to be sometime after Pope Gregory the III, around the end of the eighth century (Roy, 2005: 95)), when communication with the deceased was thought to be the most convivial.

The Abbot of Cluny Saint Odilo was attributed to bringing All Souls Day remembrance to the party sometime between 962 and 1049 AD, and therefore, the blurring of practices laid the road to the Hallowe’en we know today. Within this new order, outside of the religious practices of the Catholic Church, women, already so pivotal in the origin of Samhain/Hallowe’en, once again became fundamental in its next phase.

WOMEN AND HALLOWE’EN

Women were central to the home and its protection, and during the days leading up to All Souls Day on the 2nd of November, a number of protective methods were implemented to keep those within the home safe from anyone, or anything, wandering about in the darkness. Fundamental to this was protecting the boundaries, and additional care to bring plants. Women were primarily charged with ensuring the living and the dead were kept at a safe distance from each other, and this included putting bent nails in doors and salt in keyholes (which also worked the rest of the year), and bringing in plants from the natural world. Elderberry branches above lintels were thought to protect homes from malevolent spirits and witches, and crosses made of rowan twigs were carried for protection. Food needed to be prepared and left on the doorstep to appease witches. Strands of hazelnuts (either worn or kept in the home) also brought protection to the home, and were used and carried by young women to ensure fertility for the coming year.

This is crucial to our narrative of women in Hallowe’en, as this period was also seen by women as a time to harness the spirits around and put them to good use – in the form of both divination (seeking knowledge of the future or the unknown by supernatural means) and catopromancy (divination with mirrors). Hallowe’en was the time to predict and safeguard the future; Apples, echoing back to Pomona, were used for divination for future and the longevity of life, and were included in cakes made with coins (wealth), rings (marriage), or marbles (single/childless). inside, whatever you ended up with was your future (Editor’s note: a similar practice continues in Ireland today with the barmbrack [‘báirín braic’ in Irish], a sweet fruit loaf which contains a number of different objects, including a ring, and which is traditionally eaten around Hallowe’en. Learn how to make your own barmbrack here.). The protecting hazelnuts were placed into fires with single girls reciting love spells such as “if you love me pop and fly, if you hate me, burn and die” in order to establish future suitors.

The practice of catopromancy (divination with mirrors) is most associated with Hallowe’en, and used by women to predict their future, be it wealth, health, or partners. In particular, this tradition was popular during the Victorian period where women would call to the mirror to show their future husband over their shoulder! Catopromancy also assisted communication with the dead, which undoubtedly lead to the game of calling “Bloody Mary”, who would be summoned with the threat that she would curse someone to die before the year was out.
As children born on Hallowe’en were thought to have the gift of communication with both the dead and fairies (or other fey like creatures) the act of women undertaking communication with the spirit world shows another blurring of traditions surrounding the festival.

Throughout the history of Samhain/Hallowe’en, women have had a pivotal role to play. From changing the seasons, and changing the earth, to calling the spirits, relighting the fires and protecting the home, to helping communities through the winter, their role is imprinted on the natural and archaeological landscape around, and accessible through folklore and material culture. And all this without once mentioning riding on a broomstick….

**READ PART 2, ON WOMEN IN IRISH GHOST STORIES, HERE.**

**References:**


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**DEATH AND ME**

September 22, 2016 1 Comment

By: Dr. Ruth Penfold-Mounce, Lecturer in Criminology, University of York, UK.

During my criminology PhD research into the relationship between celebrity and crime at the University of Leeds some 10 years ago I came across an interesting story. It entailed the relocation of the mummified arm of murderer, George Carpenter. Dr Charles Kindersley had retained the arm after dissection in 1813 and kept it in his home as a souvenir until it was donated in 1938 to the police museum in Marlborough before being passed on to the National Funeral Museum, London in 2005. I was fascinated by this macabre tourist-like act conducted by a doctor and on returning home to my husband that night (and much to his bemusement) burst out with: `Darling, there’s a mummified arm in Wiltshire!’

This marked the beginning of my scholarly love affair with death and culture.

**DEATH AND CULTURE**

Being a cultural criminologist based in a sociology department with a research interest in crime, popular culture and celebrity, and
death is an unusual combination. It has its advantages, such as being able to draw on my combined research interests and film with the BBC’s Hairy Bikers. I talked them through the murder of George Cornell by the Kray Twins in the Blind Beggar Pub in the East End of London in 2015 (as pictured below).

I also discovered just how hard it is to walk, talk and hold crime scene photos at the same time. It turns out that filming for television is more difficult than I anticipated.

However, as an interdisciplinary scholar I face some unique challenges. I have to constantly work at making sure I do not disappear between the boundaries of disciplines. I battle with not being criminological enough for criminology journals, and yet too crime-based for sociology journals, and too popular culture rooted for death studies journals. Thank goodness for journals such as Mortality that welcomes engagement with death from a variety of disciplinary approaches.

Dr. Penfold-Mounce featured with the BBC’s Hairy Bikers

I have had to work hard to establish a death and culture scholarly community by drawing likeminded scholars together through various events including running day symposiums like Negotiating Morbid Spaces (2014) and Marginal Death Research: Doing Edgework (2015). I even ran a three day international conference Death and Culture (2016) where 90 scholars came together from over 15 different disciplines to talk about death from a cultural perspective. The result has been that I no longer feel so isolated, and a strong death network has been formed, it is growing, and it has connected researchers across the globe.

GAZING ON DEATH AND THE DEAD

A driving force of my work in death and culture is my passion to stop people thinking that death is taboo.

Death is actually ever present, ranging from Disney movies (pretty much every Disney character has dead parents think Bambi, Frozen, The Lion King etc.) to executions being filmed in Syria and placed on Youtube. We see more graphic death than ever before. The big barrier that seems to make people think death is taboo is that much of what we see is mediated. In other words, seeing death on television or in film (ie mediated death) gives us a softening lens through which to engage with death. It means that popular culture makes seeing death more palatable and even normal. As such it would seem that it is ok to watch death and see inside the violated human body (CSI autopsies are a great illustration of this) but we are less comfortable chatting about it in personal terms in general conversation. As you can imagine, I do not share this restraint. Instead I work hard at being open about death and making the dead visible. I want to attract people’s attention and get them thinking and talking about death and the dead.

Conveniently for me, death has been particularly evident in 2016. In fact 2016 has been a very productive year for my research. We have witnessed an unanticipated boom in terms of deaths amongst the famous, including:

- singer David Bowie
- actor Alan Rickman
- radio and television presenter Terry Wogan
- magician Paul Daniels
- comedians Victoria Wood and Ronnie Corbett
- musician Prince
entertainer and ventriloquist Keith Harris
boxer Muhammed Ali
actor Gene Wilder

Whilst a common response has been grief or amazement or just general outcry – my response is ‘That’s perfect for my research’.

This peak in celebrity deaths led me to become interested in the posthumous careers of the famous dead and I’ve written about how lucrative being dead can be by using a case study of Marilyn Monroe for Death and the Maiden blog. It would seem that being dead can be a successful career move for many celebrities. My enthusiasm for the famous dead, particularly recent deaths, has provoked responses of concern at my apparent glee at the death of another human.

Please do not interpret my enthusiasm for this topic as macabre or dismissive of the loss of these individuals or dismissive of those suffering a loss. Instead, my enthusiasm is rooted in exploring death within our culture and how the famous dead helps a wide audience engage with mortality.

Since researching celebrity and death it has become clear that the famous dead can have value, not just in economic terms, but also as a cultural symbol to explore fears about life ending. The celebrity dead demonstrate that an individual can have a life in death and not just a life after death. In my book ‘Death, The Dead and Popular Culture’ (with Palgrave Macmillan due out in 2017) I examine not only the value of the famous dead but also the entertainment that the dead in popular culture can contribute to society through the Undead (zombies and vampires) and also authentic corpses (models or live actors who play the dead in a non-fantasy setting). Consuming the dead and death is commonplace and everywhere and provides a safe arena in which to explore cultural fears about mortality.

SO WHAT IS NEXT FOR ME AND DEATH?

Well so far in 2016 I have hung out by Dick Turpin’s grave for The York Press to discuss the famous dead and tourism, and desperately tried not to smile for the camera or rattle the beer cans which were around my ankles. I have also been interviewed about violence against the female dead in television drama with Radio 4.

Dr. Penfold-Mounce at Dick Turpin’s grave.

I have run a workshop on the famous dead at the Before I Die Festival in York and made plans to run an interactive session for the public on ‘Spectacular Justice’ at the York Festival of Ideas in June 2017. I have also taken on more fabulous doctoral students many of whom are focusing on death in relation to popular culture or crime. So I think I will just go and finish writing about ‘A Corpse for Christmas’, a lecture I am giving at St Barts Pathology Museum this Christmas and then get working on my new book with Palgrave Macmillan on ‘Death, the Dead and Popular Culture’. After all, I can rest when I am dead.
SOCIETY & THE FEMALE VOICE: SHAKESPEARE’S SINGING MADWOMEN

September 15, 2016

‘Enter Ophelia distracted’: Shakespeare’s Singing Madwomen

by Florence Hazrat

She is noisy and uncontrollable, a nightmare at polite dinner evenings. She annoys everyone with her stories, it’s only always about doom and gloom! She is the embarrassing sister, the unmarried daughter, the taker, the trickster. She is the woman who withheld sex, she is Cassandra.

Cassandra, a princess of Troy, who predicts the city’s fall, but no-one believes her. Cassandra, favourite of Apollo, given the gift of prophecy in exchange for her body. Cassandra who accepts the one, but refuses the other. Cassandra the seer, punished by Apollo with the curse of disbelief — you may speak the truth, but if no-one trusts you, it sounds like babbling, like nonsense. It sounds like madness.

This classical myth of the prophetess who was never believed is described by Homer in his famous poem on the war of Troy, and it puts its finger on a knot of issues pervading culture then, as much as in the Renaissance, and perhaps even today: there’s something about women who speak — sing even — that makes people nervous, that slips through barriers of (male) control, and that has a privileged access to truths, and uncomfortable ones, too. Shakespeare taps into these perceived connections when he stages Cassandra in his play on the Troy story. It’s something he returns to throughout his dramatic career, exploring singing women on the
SOCIETY AND THE FEMALE VOICE

Apart from Cassandra there were other female prophets among the Greeks, notably the Sybils and the Pythia at the Delphian oracle, infamous for the puzzling nature of her pronouncements which the askers needed to interpret, and did, though catastrophically wrong most of the time. Being an oracle, etymologically, means to speak. How can one speak, though, in societies that prize silence and reservation as female virtue? From Socrates to Shakespeare, a voice ‘soft/ Gentle and low’ was seen as ‘an excellent thing in woman’ (King Lear, 5.3). My research investigates the link between female singing on (and off) stage, as well as women’s use of song to fashion and assert their identities in the sixteenth century. I’m excited about the implications of this for what we think about women speaking in public and private today, from me and you to Lady Gaga and Hillary Clinton. Might our own concepts of talkative or loud or simply outspoken women be coloured by the past more than we might be aware of, and like to admit?

Much like us, Renaissance playwrights inherited a mixed bag of attitudes towards, and explorations of, gender. Women who did not conform to a role subservient to men needed to be controlled, which meant imposing silence, a restricting and disciplining of speech by husbands, brothers, fathers. This process is documented in Shakespeare’s play The Taming of the Shrew which sets our teeth on edge today (and perhaps also those of some Elizabethan Londoners? Who knows.) It seems women had little chance of expressing themselves in more than prescribed and pre-scripted ways, but there appears to be one way, albeit a risky and tragic one, to claim independence of words, and that was madness. Not any kind of mad behaviour, but one whose symptom (or cause?) is music, a wild eruption into song, violent, disturbing, and disruptive.

OPHELIA: SHAKESPEARE’S FIRST SINGING MADWOMAN

Shakespeare’s first singing madwoman, perhaps even initiating a trend for such types and their representation in the theatre, is Ophelia, a young gentlewoman at the Danish court, and Hamlet’s sometime lover. Owing to his unaccountable rejection of her, as well as (more grievously) his murder of her father, she loses her mind, bursting onto the scene ‘distracted’, the stage directions tell us. More precisely, as one of the text versions from 1603 specifies, she is ‘playing on a Lute, and her haire downe singing.’ Public performance of music, even just within the story’s own court setting, was an inconceivably forward attention-seeking gesture for a gentlelady, clearly labelling Ophelia as out of her wits. She then launches into a cascade of fragments from songs popular at the time, some bawdy, some mournful, and sacred even, and it is precisely this mixed nature of her songs, which is problematic for the Renaissance playgoer: Ophelia’s songs are broken up into snippets, and randomly stitched together, a seemingly disconnected medley whose meaning we can only guess at — but therein lies exactly her powerful threat against the authorities. Interpretation. Ophelia’s songs make us interpret, and consciously so, as suggested by a nervous courtier who prepares the audience for her first entry in another version of the play text a year later:

Gentleman. She speaks much of her father, says she hears

There’s tricks in the world, and hems, and beats her heart, 

Spurns enviously at straws, speaks things in doubt

That carry but half sense, her speech is nothing,

Yet the unshaped use of it doth move

The hearers to collection, they yawn at it,

And botch the words up fit to their own thoughts,

Which as her winks, and nods, and gestures yield them,

Indeed would make one think there might be thought

Though nothing sure, yet much unhappily.

Horatio. It were good she were spoken with, for she may strew

Dangerous conjectures in ill breeding minds. (Hamlet, 4.5).
‘Her speech is nothing’...Yet it is something enough to engage her listeners, to encourage them to figure out less which songs she is pasting together but why. Primed by the courtier to read deeper meaning into her supposedly random associations, we become complicit in Ophelia’s possibly political public music. Is she suggesting her father’s killing was murder? Does she mean there’s something rotten in the state of Denmark? Are we, perhaps, those ‘ill breeding minds’ in the end…?

**MUSIC: AT THE HEART OF THE ISSUE**

By claiming the right to speak, Ophelia transgresses limits of aural female presence, more even, by lifting her speech into song, she offends twice, but it is precisely music which both enables and attenuates charges against her crime of song: are these truly her words, or are they just lyrics belonging to everyone? Or no-one? We have all sung these songs at one time or another; does that make us culpable of inciting rebellion against the king and queen? Does Ophelia, perhaps, become the avenger that Hamlet ought to be whose father was also murdered? And does music mean anything anyway? It’s just sound after all! Music, it seems, is both a screen and at the heart of the issue of the female voice, ambiguously “there” and self-effacing at the same time.

More singing madwomen were to follow Ophelia and Cassandra, such as the Jailor’s Daughter in Shakespeare’s late play *Two Noble Kinsmen*, but also in works by other playwrights. The Renaissance stage was a network of players and writers who knew each other intimately, and cooperated more often than not, circulating and recycling ideas from each other. In the pieces of these dramatists, madwomen use pre-existing words to speak about their own situations, like oracles to speak truths which their environment tries to suppress as well as interpret. Being forbidden a voice of their own, they make the voice of everyone theirs, turning collective into individual identity. Music, almost beyond good and evil, offers women a means to carve out an independent, a noisy self. In a tragedy, that outspoken (outsung?) self often perishes, either by her own or at others’ hands, and yet: the claim to presence and acknowledgement of female personhood has been made. The silence has been broken, and phenomenally so, when Cassandra, rocked by a vision, bursts out like a vocal volcano:

*Cry, Trojans, cry!* practise your eyes with tears!

*Troy must not be, nor goodly Ilion stand;*

*Our firebrand brother, Paris, burns us all.*

*Cry, Trojans, cry!*

She is greeted by her brothers as ‘our mad sister’, but… every single one of these brothers will be dead soon, as much as the fortress city will have crumbled into dust and ashes. Then we will mingle our voice with Cassandra’s, having nothing else to do but mourn and cry.

*Cassandra, by Frederick Sandys.*
This month, we've decided to dedicate a feature to women in theatre, and what better way to do that than by talking about #WakingTheFeminists? Many of you in Ireland will likely be familiar with the movement already, but for those of you abroad, here's a short explainer from the movement itself: Waking The Feminists is 'a grassroots movement calling for equality for women across the Irish theatre sector.' It started in response to the fact that, when Ireland’s national theatre, the Abbey theatre, launched its programme to mark the centenary of the 1916 Rising, only one of the ten plays programmed was written by a woman, and only three were directed by women. In May 2016, the movement became the first organisation or person outside the U.S. to be presented with a Lilly Award, and has garnered support from people like Meryl Streep.

This feature brings together the voices of three women working in different aspects of theatre in Ireland – Áine Ní Laoghaire, an actor; Dr. Brenda Donohue, a researcher and dramaturg; and director Maeve Stone, who coined #WakingTheFeminists. We also have a video by young dramaturg Katie Poushpom on her ten favourite female theatre-makers from Ireland and abroad. Enjoy, be inspired, and do some waking of your own.

'THIS CAMPAIGN MAKES REVOLUTIONARIES OF US ALL'

by Áine Ní Laoghaire.

Factory Girls, Frank McGuinness’s debut play, was inspired by the strong, difficult women he was raised by. Women who were capable. Women who could shift from aggressive to jovial, to heartbreakingly vulnerable in nothing more than an intake of breath. Revolutionary women, who refused to be walked on when the system worked against them.

In the year following the beginning of Waking The Feminists, a year of both centenary celebrations and calls to repeal the 8th amendment, it was a gift as an actor to represent women like this. In response to the #WakingTheFeminists campaign, Artistic Director of the Everyman Theatre, Julie Kelleher, had programmed a rehearsed reading series featuring only female (and Cork related) playwrights. The decision to stage Factory Girls was a conscious continuation of that response.

A single play by a male playwright, outside of a Dublin-centric theatre world might not appear to have the potential to have any real impact. But the 11 women (5 actors, 2 stage managers, a director, a producer, a costume designer, and a hair and make up artist)
hired for Factory Girls, and the predominantly female audience of the show might beg to differ. Despite female actors being in the majority of theatre graduates, only 38% of those women are working professionally at any given time. Theatre going audiences are made up of 60-70% women.

This audience was filled with groups of women. They cheered every night, without fail, at one characters defiant “Fuck off yourself” to a bullying husband. They shared their recollections of factory life with us afterwards in the bar. And without fail, every night, someone would comment on how “mad it is to see women like us up there.” Before Waking The Feminists I was as unfamiliar with my own stories and with my own voice.

In the Abbey, on the 12th of November 2015, I was struck by the articulacy and conviction with which other people spoke. But I remained silent. I was in the habit of doing so. I’d gotten so used to fighting for my voice to be heard that I’d stopped bothering to raise it in the first place. I’d so often been the only girl (as I was always referred to in the rehearsal room) that in order to join the boys club, I’d had to let all sorts of comments slide. But on hearing my own experiences echoed back to me from that stage on that day, something shifted, imperceptibly.

I began to feel uneasy certain comments were going unchallenged, and then when I wasn’t the person who challenged them. I started asking for apologies when I was spoken to disrespectfully inside or outside of the rehearsal room. I refused to audition for roles that were unnecessarily sexualised.

Those actions were my own way of responding to the Waking The Feminists campaign. They are minor in comparison to the Trojan work of those at the very heart of the campaign. But when we choose to commit to the ethos of Waking The Feminists, personally and professionally, this campaign make revolutionaries of us all.

#WTF: TRANSLATING LIVED EXPERIENCE INTO NUMBERS

by Dr. Brenda Donohue

#WakingTheFeminists is a grassroots movement that came about in reaction to a programme commemorating 1916 that did not include women in a significant way. In November 2015, after the Abbey Theatre announced a commemoration line-up that featured only one woman writer and three female directors, reaction on social media was swift and impassioned. Spurred on by Lian Bell’s Facebook post, a new feminist movement was born. This organisation, #WakingTheFeminists, now actively campaigns for gender equality in theatre in Ireland. Since November, the movement has grown, first in the virtual space of social media, and then in the real world through a series of large, public meetings, and informal get-togethers. #WakingTheFeminists has inspired women in diverse sectors, not just theatre, to recount their experiences and to search out ways to address gender imbalance.

As part of the #WakingTheFeminists movement, I, along with a team of volunteer researchers, am conducting a study that examines gender balance in the Irish theatre industry over the last 10 years. The study examines key creative and technical roles in theatre in the top ten Arts Council-funded organisations that produce or present theatre in Ireland. The project is receiving institutional support from the Irish Theatre Institute, the Centre for Drama, Theatre and Performance at NUI Galway, and from the Arts Council.

The impetus for this research came from a notable lack of statistical information on the issue in an Irish context. While the Irish Theatre Institute and Theatre Forum have recently published valuable studies on aspects of the Irish theatre industry, a comprehensive study of gender in Irish theatre has yet to be published. This was a particular challenge while researching and writing my doctoral thesis on contemporary female playwrights; although it was plain to see that there was a dearth of productions by women on the main Irish stages, there was no statistical evidence to back up anecdotal accounts.

In the context of such an informational vacuum, the real extent of the problem is currently not known. While we suspect that women playwrights and directors are underrepresented on the Irish stages, we simply can’t say for certain if this is true. A host of questions remain unanswered- Are women well represented in the roles of set and lighting designer? Are there more women in costume design than men? Is the situation for women improving, or is it static?

If we do not understand the nature of the problem and its different facets, then it will be a challenge to find effective solutions to address the imbalance. Strategies and policies need to be written and implemented from a strong evidence base. This #WakingTheFeminists study, therefore, has two aims; firstly it will describe the problem of gender imbalance in Irish theatre in a nuanced way, and secondly it will create a baseline against which the effectiveness of proposed solutions can be measured.

The report emanating from this research will be published in November 2016. Until then, the team of volunteer researchers will be
working at improbable hours to fill the identified informational gap!

‘#WAKINGTHEFEMINISTS HAS CHARGED THE AIR WITH NEW LANGUAGE’

by Maeve Stone.

My first response to the Abbey’s 2016 “Waking the Nation” programme launch last November was a tongue-in-cheek tweet: “Waking The Feminists”. Lian Bell began using it as a hashtag to centralise a wide conversation that had gathered unstoppable momentum online. And that, I guess, is how I accidentally named #WakingTheFeminists. Thing is, it’s pretty obvious and I know someone else would have thought of it if I hadn’t. I’m unendingly proud of my connection to this origin story for such a key moment in recent Irish theatre, but ultimately it feels like it was just looking for a mouth to come out of.

And I think that’s probably the single biggest asset of this whole movement. Nobody owns it, it belongs to us all. Asides from sounding incredibly idealist I think this perception has defined a few key qualities of the movement since its inception almost a year ago. People have taken ownership, using it as a platform to form networks and communities. This movement came into being because there was no public forum for discussion of feminist theatre in Ireland, or of the gender inequalities in policy and pay. In the months preceding it I had had several furtive chats – one even in the Abbey lobby – about the work of women in Ireland, bemoaning the absence of the word feminism in our cultural lexicon. It has also created a core #WTF team who have worked quietly and consistently with a set agenda.

Two things are coming (apart from Winter); The anniversary of the November meeting that will mark the end of that team’s year long commitment, and new artistic directors at The Abbey and The Gate. It’s inevitable that people will begin a review of what has been achieved in the past year, and some will claim that a noisy beginning faded too quickly. But I’ve seen behind the curtain – so to speak – and would challenge that opinion. There’s a sense when you sit in a room with the #WTF team that very little ego is in play. What they have sought, and are winning, is policy change. It’s not glamorous or dramatic. Foundational negotiations that will affect everything herein, but lack the narrative appeal of a big explosive, short lived event. For example, if The Abbey had changed its programme this would have appeared to many as the ultimate victory. But “Waking The Nation” was never the problem, it was a symptom of the problem. Having the skills and patience to figure out the way to begin to fix the source of a very structural issue is an entirely different beast. People like Lian, Sarah Durcan, Dairne O’Sullivan, Anne Clarke, Lisa Tierney Keogh, Maria Flemming, Lynne Parker, Caroline Williams, Aisling O’Brien, Niamh Ní Chonchubhair and Kate Ferris have maintained a quiet and relentless grip on the wheel. They had long-lasting policy change in mind and they’re getting it done. Sarah Durcan is even now an Abbey board member!

As for the new boys in the big houses… They walked into a new scene. One that’s humming with women’s voices. I’m hopeful that we, who have found each other, who have acted in solidarity, can continue to work on the foundational shifts. I think #WakingTheFeminists has charged the air with new language. It has opened up the space for feminist thinking in a town where the big houses (The Gate and The Abbey) could sometimes feel heavy with the sound of old, rasping, Herculean masculinity. And it’s important that we have this because the movement will continue in the hands of us all, this network, this community. When Lian and the team step away, the change won’t stop.

(Side note: I suspect we’re going to need strong feminist networks working together for change in the next couple of years… #RepealThe8th)

FOLLOW THE #WAKINGTHEFEMINISTS MOVEMENT ON TWITTER AT @WTFEMINISTS, AND VISIT THEIR SITE HERE.

Want to know about more women in theatre from all over the world? Katie has got you covered! Have a look at her video and learn about her ten favourite female theatre-makers, including Lady Augusta Gregory, co-founder of the Abbey Theatre, the National Theatre of Ireland; Lorraine Hansberry, the first African-American woman to write a play performed on Broadway; Teresa Deevy, an Irish dramatist and Cumann na mBan member from Waterford; and Pulitzer prize winner Suzan Lori-Parks.
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Culture is a social infrastructure for a collection of people that often provides communal identity, social connections, rules and ethics, common governmental and educational structures, etc. for the members of the group.