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Drama, Authenticity and Globalization: Contemporary Irish Drama

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In 2003, the Irish writer and critic, Fintan O'Toole, travelled to a conference about Irish writing, which was being held in São Paulo, Brazil. In that country, he wrote, "Irish writers and scholars were listened to with great respect by people from around the world and by sympathetic, astonishingly well informed locals."¹ The event impressed O'Toole, but he found himself uneasy when he realised that if a similar conference about Brazilian literature were held in Ireland, it certainly would not have been as well attended. Ireland, he concluded, is delighted to send its literature abroad, but it shows relatively little interest in the literatures of other countries. It therefore operates what he calls a "huge cultural trade surplus" (ibid).

O'Toole's remarks are telling, in a number of ways. When he made them, the Irish economy was booming. The country was, according to *Foreign Policy Magazine*, the "most globalized ... in the world,"² and its actual trade surplus was enormous, running at €32.2 billion at that time.³ To put that figure in context, in that same year (2003), France's trade surplus was €19.3 billion. France's population is approximately 65 million; Ireland's is approximately four million, so the surplus was by any standards astonishingly high.

By making a direct parallel between Ireland's culture and its economy, O'Toole was suggesting that the status of one can affect the status of the other. He was suggesting, that is, that a society's ethics – the values that it uses to organise itself –

are evident not only in the ways in which it conducts business, but also in the choices its people make about culture: whose books are read, whose films are watched, whose music is listened to, whose theatre productions are hosted.

It is notable, furthermore, that the collapse of Ireland's economy in 2008 has led many Irish commentators to suggest that the nation can be rescued from bankruptcy by culture. This is not just because the arts have ethical or aesthetic value, they state, but because culture can create jobs, can attract tourists, and can build "reputational capital," which will in turn attract multinational investment.⁴ While the state's reputation has floundered, Irish culture has thus taken on a quasi-diplomatic role, being used as one of the key tools in the Irish government's attempts to restore Ireland's international reputation. For example, the state has established a venture called "Imagine Ireland," a year-long series of readings, performances and conferences in the USA—the overall aim of which is to use Irish art to promote the nation generally. Explaining the need for this project, the organisers state that it is:

part of a process that placed a new strategic priority on culture as a unique long-term strength for Ireland, a vital door-opener for Irish business, and the most effective means of strengthening links with the global Irish community.⁵

Imagine Ireland is an exercise in nation-branding: it is founded not on any sense of the artistic or aesthetic worth of any Irish artists' work, but instead on the need to market Ireland's uniquely creative status in a manner that will be of benefit to businesses.

As the two examples above suggest, since the early 1990s, Ireland has gone from a recession to a property boom and back to recession again, but one constant has been that the country has continually used the language of economics to speak about culture—and has continued to believe that cultural success can translate into economic reward. One impact of globalization in Ireland is that culture is seen not as something to be exchanged by way of intercultural dialogue—but instead as a tradable commodity, which can be exported in return for cash.

I do not wish to analyse those developments in detail here.⁶ Instead, I want to present Ireland as a kind of test case—as an extreme, but certainly not unique, example of the impact of globalization on national culture and international exchange. In particular, following on from O’Toole, I want to point out that Ireland’s status as the “most globalised country in the world” did not prevent it from being one of the most insular countries in the world at the same time. Globalization may create opportunities for countries to “export” their cultural products, but it has in many ways inhibited genuine intercultural dialogue. So to address the theme of this volume, what I hope to show is that a “global approach” to cultural exchange must involve an awareness that globalization allows for the movement of culture as a commodity—but it also impedes and inhibits cultural dialogue and intercultural understanding. I make this case by referring mainly to Irish dramas, but would hope that the points I make can be applied to other forms of writing, to other national traditions, and indeed to other disciplines too.

Globalization and Drama: Some Definitions

The term “globalization” is used in many different contexts, and it appears to mean different things to different people. The most useful definition of the term for my purposes is that offered by the sociologist Roland Robertson, who defines globalization as “A concept that refers to the compression of the world and the intensification of consciousness of the world as a whole.”⁷ This two-part definition is useful, in that it suggests that globalization is not a process but a *concept*: it is not just something that happens to us, but also something that we imagine and create for ourselves. On the one hand, Robertson suggests that the world is becoming compressed—that is, that the distance between spaces appears to be shrinking. And this shrinking in turn has an impact on our understanding of time. This feeling of time-space compression results in what we could call a “global consciousness.” It is not that the world is literally getting smaller, but that we have a sense that the world *seems* smaller: that it is, as Robertson writes, a “whole” entity—singular and self-contained.

That sense of global consciousness can be evident in many ways, both positive and negative. We might think of the world as “one place” when we watch a live broadcast of the Olympics or the World Cup—even though we cheer for national teams and have the action mediated by local commentators. And for many people the global character of such events will seem worthy of celebration. Yet we also think of the world as “one place” when we encounter cultural homogenisation: those global spaces such as airports, shopping malls, and business-class hotels that are indistinguishable from one place to another. For Robertson, globalization is neither positive nor negative in itself; it is instead a phenomenon that affects all people, and to which all people must react.

That dual definition of globalization is also useful when we come to think about how globalization has affected drama. On the one hand, the shrinking of distance means that it is now possible for plays to travel internationally to a far greater extent than hitherto—so global touring of plays has been boosted to an extent that we have not seen since the late nineteenth century. As a result, dramatists and theatre producers are adopting new strategies that will allow their work to travel across national and linguistic boundaries.

Then, on the other hand, the creation of a global consciousness has changed the way in which audiences see the world. And this in turn means that the way in which they perceive other forms of space (including the space of the theatrical stage) has changed too. So we are also seeing new approaches to space and time in dramatic writing. Some of these changes are worth considering briefly.

The first major impact of globalization on Anglophone drama has been a reduction in the importance of the spoken word, in favour of the visual image. It is true that many playwrights still produce densely constructed and highly poetic scripts, but we are seeing a greater use of dance, movement, music, and visual design—especially in those plays that are produced to tour internationally. In 2010, this development was described (without exaggeration) as having created “a revolution in Irish theatre” by Loughlin Deegan, then the director of the Dublin Theatre Festival.⁸ Deegan drew attention to what he sees as the way in which “the great literary tradition [has been] challenged by an enterprising new generation of

theatre-makers emerging from the universities, who have helped redefine the nature of the theatrical experience.”

One of the strongest examples of the impact of this “revolution” is the work of Fabulous Beast Dance theatre, and in particular their 2005 production of *The Bull*. The play uses dance and music to retell the old Irish legend of the Tain Bo Chuailgne (the Cattle Raid of Cooley), a myth that has inspired many great Irish writers, from W.B. Yeats and Lady Gregory, to Thomas Kinsella and Louis le Brocquy. Although the production does feature dialogue, it is overwhelmingly dependent on dance, music, and ambient noise for the construction of its meaning.

The first thing the audience will notice upon their arrival at the theatre is the harshness of the sound and environment. The stage is covered in soil, which creates a sense of roughness and dirt—but which also conveys a sense of authenticity. As I discuss in more detail below, one of the ways theatre-makers emphasise the authenticity of their work is to feature images of something elemental: rock, fire, water—and, in this case, earth. As the play begins, the story is literally uprooted from the ground, pulled in book-form from a grave, where it has been perfectly preserved. And as the action progresses the spoken word gradually becomes less important, until it is replaced altogether by sound and movement.

The sense that the play is being produced in an unadorned fashion is intensified by its use of music, which is mainly percussive. The rhythm is harsh and metallic-sounding; the beat is made not just from musical instruments but from found objects like bin-lids, shovel-handles, and axes—and it is intensified by the sound of shouting and non-verbal yells.

Of course, there has been a move towards the visual in many different media, especially during the last twenty years. We have seen in advertising, and particularly in branding, that a well constructed image can convey meaning across cultural and linguistic borders. We have also seen how music videos have been used to promote Anglophone pop music internationally. And during the same period, Hollywood’s biggest successes have tended to be those films that prioritise special effects over plot, characterisation, and dialogue. Such plays as *The Bull* may be reflecting this move towards the visual: it is possible that they place more emphasis on the image

than the word because they wish to reflect upon a development in our culture. Or it may be that they are not just reflecting but imitating this development: copying from advertising and the Hollywood blockbuster the idea that there is a greater chance of international success when translation is not necessary. Either way, Fabulous Beast has now become one of the most successful Irish theatre companies internationally. Their work has been produced in most of the major Anglophone countries: the UK, USA, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. But it is also been very well received in Poland, Germany and in other countries where English is not spoken as the first language.

If globalization changes the way in which we see the world, it also changes the way we view other things—and, in particular, the way we view the stage space. There has been a notable shift in dramatists' approach to space and time in Anglophone drama internationally—and that shift has been dominated by compression. We tend to be given more information in shorter periods of time: scenes that last only five to ten minutes, but which convey huge chunks of information that audiences must quickly process. And the representation of geographical space has changed too, perhaps most famously in Sarah Kane's play *Blasted* (1995), in which the two spaces of England and Bosnia merge catastrophically into one—as if geographical distance has been eradicated.

One simple example of this development is the growing use of split scenes—the sense of several different things happening simultaneously within one overarching space. This can be illustrated by the set design for a 2009 Irish production of a play by the Quebecois Michel Tremblay, *Solemn Mass for A Full Moon in Summer*. What we see here is not one performance space, but six of them—with each apartment featuring a self-contained drama which overlaps and contrasts with all of the other dramas that are occurring simultaneously.



Figure 1: *Solemn Mass for A Full Moon in Summer* (Photograph by Colm Hogan)
Produced by Rough Magic Theatre company

It would be wrong, I think, to see this design as a metaphor for the “global village.” If anything, it is more like a Microsoft Windows operating system—and indeed I think an area that merits scholarly attention is the way in which our conception of space has been affected both by globalization and by the internet: if the novel was the cultural form that allowed us to create the “imagined community” of the nation, then surely the internet allows us to create the imagined community of the global village. But what particularly interests me here is the need for audiences to

be able to follow six different stories more or less simultaneously. This, I think, provides evidence of an increased ability to multitask cognitively.

Also notable is the existence of a global lexicon or a library-bank of images, tropes, and figures that will be clearly understood across national boundaries. One example of such icons is the use of the figure of a woman who has experienced a physical or sexual assault: a motif that operates as a metaphor for the relationship between Islam and the West or for Middle Eastern politics generally. This figure appears throughout Anglophone drama. It is present in the Canadian writer Judith Thompson's play about Iraq, *Palace of the End* (published in 2009), which features an Iraqi woman who is subjected to horrendous abuses by Sadaam Hussein's secret police – but who tells us that, as terrible as those abuses were, the Americans did things that were far worse. It is present in Eve Ensler's *The Vagina Monologues* (published 2001), which features a lengthy monologue by a victim of one of the Bosnian rape camps – a passage that aims to give substance and gravity to a play that is otherwise rather superficial. It features in the English play *My Name is Rachel Corrie* (2005), Katharine Viner and Alan Rickman's edited version of the diary entries and emails of the real American peace activist who was crushed to death by an Israeli bulldozer in Gaza in 2003. In these and many other examples, the body of the woman – in almost every case, a Muslim woman – is stripped of personality and specificity to become instead an emblem of suffering. Audiences are not asked to understand an argument about politics, or about the relationship between the West and Islam, but instead are encouraged to react emotionally: to feel pity, compassion, or horror about the status of a woman.

In all such cases, what we are seeing is the use of techniques that will allow plays to travel easily between cultures. As a result of the use of images that are understood across borders, the world's most prominent theatre-makers – people such as Peter Brook and Robert Lepage – can have their work seen by hundreds of thousands of people annually.

The problem, however, is that when plays become “mass produced” in this way, there is always a risk that they will seem manufactured, artificial, or inauthentic. Dan Rebellato articulates the problem well when he draws a comparison

between the Cameron Mackintosh musical *Cats* and the manufacturing and marketing strategies of McDonalds and Coca-Cola:

A founding principle of McDonald's was that every Big Mac, wherever you were in the world, would taste the same. Cameron Mackintosh similarly—and commendably—insisted that his shows should not become any less professional and polished the further in time or space they were from the first press night. However, as the production process becomes more and more automated, what begins as a guarantee of quality ends as a guarantee of predictability. As his biographers write, intending, I think, to be flattering, "*Cats* was effectively and expensively reproduced around the world as exactly as any can of Coca-Cola and wherever you saw it, the sensation was the same."⁹

For Rebellato, some globalized drama would best be described as "McTheatre": the dramatic equivalent of a fast food franchise.

Theatre-makers seem aware of the need to avoid creating the impression that their work is like fast-food or Coca-Cola. To do so, they must persuade audiences that what they are seeing is in some ways *authentic*. This concept of dramatic authenticity is key for understanding how drama travels, so I want to consider it in some detail.

Global Drama and the Authentic

The starting point in all discussions of authenticity and culture is of course the work of Rousseau. It is, he writes:

no longer a light undertaking to distinguish properly between what is original and what is artificial in the actual nature of man, or to form a true idea of a state which no longer exists, perhaps never did exist, and probably never will exist; and of which it is, nevertheless, necessary to have true ideas.¹⁰

This definition reminds us that authenticity is not always something that exists objectively; instead, it is a concept that we subjectively believe to be true. So “authenticity” does not exist, but we need to be able to talk about it anyway. An authentic play is not one that is genuinely authentic—since an authentic work of fiction is a contradiction in terms. Rather, a play is seen as authentic when its audience subjectively considers it to *be* authentic. Authenticity in theatre, then, is in the eye of the beholder; it is not an objectively verifiable characteristic, as is true for the visual arts or for historical documents.

Like the word “globalization,” “authenticity” similarly can mean everything and nothing. In the present context, I think the definition by Lionel Trilling is probably most useful:

Authenticity involves a “more strenuous moral experience than ‘sincerity’” does, a more exigent conception of the self and of what being true to it consists in, a wider reference to the universe and man’s place in it, and a less acceptant view of the social circumstances of life... much that was once thought to make up the very fabric of culture has come to seem of little account, mere fantasy or ritual, or downright falsification... Conversely, much that culture traditionally condemned and sought to exclude is accorded a considerable moral authority by reason of the authenticity claimed for it, for example, disorder, violence, unreason.¹¹

To create the illusion of authenticity, a play can use any of the strategies that Trilling identifies. It can create a vision of life that is separate from social convention, and which seems different from mass produced culture. And, as I have already discussed in relation to *The Bull*, a play can also seem authentic if it seems to forego rationalism—through disorder, violence or unreason, as Trilling puts it.

In order to explore this idea in more detail, I want to consider two common strategies that are used to promote the idea that a play is authentic. The first is to focus on the figure of the author; the second is to focus on the regional or national origins of a work.

One way of producing the illusion of authenticity is to emphasise the figure of the author, the *auteur* director, or the celebrity actor. This is because, as Charles Taylor reminds us, one way to produce the illusion of authenticity is to highlight the role of the artist.

Artistic creation becomes the paradigm mode in which people can come to self-definition. The artist becomes in some way the paradigm of the human being, an agent of original self-definition. Since about 1800, there has been a tendency to heroize the artist, to see in his or her life the essence of the human condition, and to venerate him or her as a seer, the creator of cultural value.¹²

So if we cannot connect authentically to the work of art, we can connect authentically to the artist himself or herself—and by doing so, we define ourselves in some way: the things we recognise in the author as valuable represent the things we value in ourselves.

The most obvious example of this phenomenon in Ireland is Samuel Beckett. There have been four different Beckett Festivals since 1990, the most recent of which took place in 2006 for the centenary of what he called “that catastrophe”—that is, his birth. In all of those Festivals, the marketing was dedicated not to helping people to understand Beckett’s work, but instead to encouraging audiences to identify with Beckett the man himself. This involved the display of portraits of Beckett on every lamppost in Dublin for several weeks.

What was immediately notable about those portraits was their austerity. Beckett’s portraits are almost always presented in black and white rather than colour. They rarely present him in any kind of social situation; instead, they tend to present him as a head floating in space, like a secular Saint Oliver Plunkett. As Trilling states, one marker of authenticity is “a less acceptant view of the social circumstances of life”—and the presentation of Beckett as asocial and disembodied will certainly create such an impression.

Images of other Irish writers tend to function similarly. One of the most famous portraits of Brian Friel (displayed on the cover of Richard Pine’s *The Diviner*) shows

the writer staring directly at the viewer, but from an aspect that suggests that he occupies a higher plane of vision.

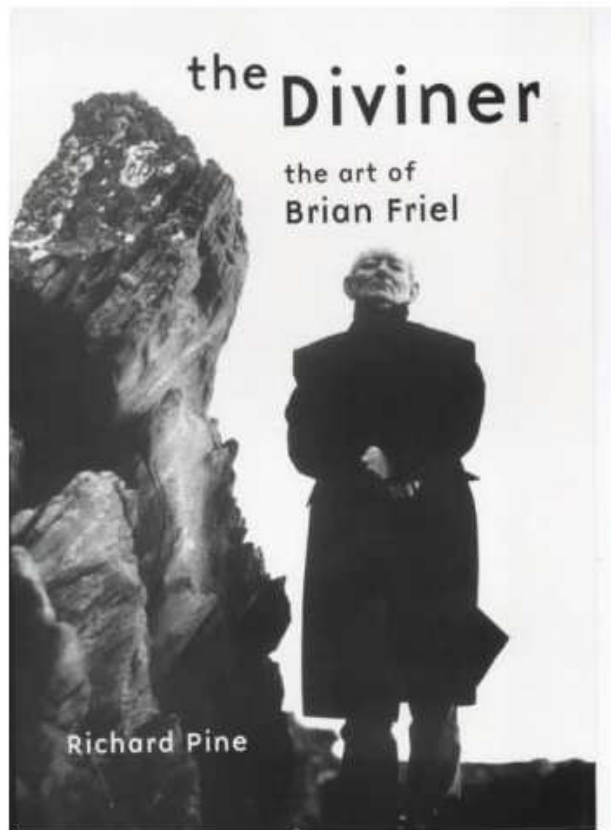


Figure 2: Front cover of Richard Pine's *The Diviner* (1999)
Reproduced with kind permission of UCD Press

That vision of the artist as seer is enhanced by Friel's clothing, which is almost ceremonial: robe-like and black like a priest's. Again, he is presented outside of society, perched amidst rocks—as if he has access to the elemental, the original. His stance and coloration present him as part of the landscape, again suggesting that he has access to something that we who live in cities and towns do not.

The second method for producing the illusion of authenticity is to present a play as embodying authentic truths about a nation or region. In this context, a play that is seen as authentically "Irish" is not necessarily going to be a play that is actually *from* Ireland. Instead, the word "Irish" will refer to other things: a state of mind, an attitude, perhaps a feeling. Irishness, that is, has become a *brand*: a commodified abstraction. When you purchase an "Irish" branded work, you are not

buying something from Ireland; you are instead choosing to identify yourself with the values that you think Irishness represents.

The use of the word “Irish” to refer to plays can be illustrated in many ways, but it might be useful to explore several examples from one source: the work of Michael Billington, an English critic who writes for *The Guardian* newspaper, and who has been a sympathetic observer of Irish drama for several decades. What I want to point out is that when Billington uses the word “Irish,” he is not referring to geographical origin, but to other traits.

One of the things that Billington does is to suggest that Irish plays reveal truths about the Irish character and society. So, reviewing Martin McDonagh in 2010, he suggests that his plays offer a “suave assault on the Irish faith in the sanctity of family.”¹³ Patrick McCabe, he writes, offers the schoolroom as a symbol of the “decay of the twin Irish gods of nationalism and religion.”¹⁴ Enda Walsh’s “real target” in his plays is the “Irish propensity to hide disquieting truths behind fanciful myths.”¹⁵ So he is making three assertions in these quotations about Ireland, as if they are true not just for Irish plays but for Irish society too.

That might not seem too objectionable, until we consider his comments about what he terms the Irish character. Frank McGuinness’s play *There Came a Gypsy Riding* offers us a “fascinating portrait of the damaged Irish psyche,” he says.¹⁶ Sean O’Casey attacks the “fake piety and infantile dependence of the typical Irish male.”¹⁷ Brian Friel offers us “a humane analysis of the flawed Irish temper.”¹⁸ Marina Carr, whose plays feature ghosts, murder, incest, and infanticide has a “real gift” for “scathingly accurate observation of Irish life.”¹⁹ Even in the non-Irish play *The Duchess of Malfi*, the character of Bosola “seems to have no clear place in this world, despite the Irish fervour of [Irish actor] Lorcan Cranitch’s performance.”²⁰

So the word “Irish” here can be used to refer to an emotional state: one that is irrational, uncontrolled, damaged and infantile. We will note Billington’s use of the definite article: he writes of *the* Irish psyche, *the* Irish temper—and he presupposes that there is a truth about Irish life that writers like Marina Carr have access to. So thinking again about Trilling, who stated that the authentic is often seen as that which is irrational and unreasonable—and to those scholars who took from

Rousseau the notion that childhood is a more authentic state than adulthood—it is interesting to note that Billington tends to conceive of Irishness as unreasonable and childlike.

Billington's understanding of Ireland and the Irish may best be illustrated in his review of Tom Murphy's play *Alice Trilogy*, which premiered at London's Royal Court in 2005. Billington liked the play, and particularly enjoyed its second part. "As played by Juliet Stevenson and Stanley Townsend," he writes, "this scene beautifully brings out both the wan despair of middle-age and some baffled affliction within the Irish temper." He felt, however, that the overall effect of the three plays was to produce a confused response. "Although its final meaning is elusive, in Ian Rickson's expertly judged production it admits us to the despair within the Irish soul."²¹

Implicit in Billington's descriptions is the idea that Irish identity is stable and homogenous—and that it is possible to speak of something called "the Irish soul," "the" flawed Irish temper, and the "damaged" Irish psyche. The word "Irish" seems to act as an adjective that means more than just "from Ireland" when it is joined with words like "fervour" and "passion". The twin gods of Irish society are nationalism and religion; the typical Irish male is full of fake piety. And the Irish love of storytelling, while admirable, seems to indicate an unwillingness to face reality. Irishness here is not a process—it is an essence: unchanging, universally applicable, widely understood.

None of these descriptions applies easily to the Ireland that I live in, but I can see how they apply to the Irish plays that Billington is reviewing. Of course, these are just the words of one person—but he deploys them in such a way as to suggest that his readers will understand them in the same way that he does.

Probably the best example of an "authentically" Irish play is Friel's *Dancing at Lughnasa* (1990). It is set in one of the most isolated parts of Ireland (rural Donegal), and focuses on five women who live on the outskirts of their community. So the play's attention is on people who are living on the margins of a marginalised town in a marginalised county in a marginalised country—they are, in other words, at several removes from "society" as the audience understands it. Their actions are politely transgressive, but not revolutionary: they smoke, they make risqué jokes, their

sexuality is unruly but not uncontainable. The play's focus is on pagan ritual rather than Catholicism—again, attempting to convey something that is literally pre-historic and extra-social. And most notably there is the play's dance scene, in which speech is abandoned for the expression of feeling.

What is especially notable about Friel's dance scene is that he intended it to represent anger, frustration, tragedy and disorder. His stage directions are very clear on that account. But as the play toured internationally, the dance scene was widely misunderstood: it was instead seen as representing euphoric release, spirit, and the Irish propensity to sing and dance in the face of looming disaster—which would be evident later in the 1990s in *Riverdance* and the film *Titanic*. In other words, the feature of the play that was considered "authentic" was only seen in that way because audiences misunderstood it.²²

And this is the problem with authenticity. As I mentioned previously, authenticity exists in the eye of the beholder. If I go to a play and consider it "authentic," what I am saying is that it conforms to the expectations that I had before I came to the theatre: that the play did not tell me something I didn't already know. The point of authenticity is not that I enter into a dialogue with a culture that is not my own—but that I recognise something of myself. That "recognition" can be based on a false premise or a misunderstanding, as happened with *Lughnasa*. But if such recognition occurs easily, a play can be very successful.

There are a number of consequences of this. One is that, in Ireland, plays that are about the so-called "real" Ireland tend not to be produced—or if they are produced, they tend not to do very well, critically or commercially. In 2003, for instance, Declan Hughes wrote a very fine play called *Shiver*, in which he correctly predicted that the Celtic Tiger boom was going to end in disaster, and harshly criticised the branding of Irish identity for international consumption. This was most memorably achieved when one of his characters drunkenly attacks the tired old images of Irishness that dominate the nation's reputation internationally. "Well you see," she drawled, drunkenly, "we've had enough of dead mummies and peeling potatoes and farms and bogs and fucking... all that old tweedy fucking..." And she trailed off, searching for the right words. "Seamus Heaney is made of tweed," she

concluded.²³ Hughes's intention here is firstly to be funny—but more importantly to attack homogenised and branded versions of Irish identity. The irony is that by doing so, he made his play relevant only in Ireland.

Another important play from the same year was Hilary Fannin's *Doldrum Bay*, which had at its centre the moral dilemma faced by two men working in advertising when they are asked to devise a recruitment campaign for the Christian Brothers. Fannin's satire was an early attempt to come to terms with the problem of clerical abuse in a rapidly secularising Ireland. And it anticipated by several years some of the problems that the country is only now attempting to come to terms with: how can one forgive the unforgiveable, how does one distinguish between the actions of individual priests and the institution itself, how much culpability do ordinary Irish people have for abuses carried out in their communities, and so on.

In both cases, these plays were produced for less than a month, and they have rarely been heard or spoken of again. And in both cases, that is because what they have to say is relevant mainly in Ireland. But because they do not attempt to conform to international audiences' expectations about Irishness—because, in the case of Hughes, they actively flout those expectations – they did not succeed commercially. As a result, both writers have effectively abandoned professional playwriting (for now). Hughes has started writing detective fiction, and Fannin is an *Irish Times* television critic.

Conclusions

One result of globalization has been to encourage homogenisation within Irish drama. And this has some interesting consequences. Since 2000, one-quarter of the new Irish plays that have been produced appeared not in Dublin or Belfast but in London, Edinburgh, New York, or Munich.²⁴ What strikes me as particularly interesting about Billington's words above is that most of the plays he refers to were produced not in Ireland, but in London. Indeed, most of the successful Irish plays since 1990 originated not in Dublin or Belfast but in London or Edinburgh. There is an intriguing paradox at the heart of contemporary Irish drama, which is that the plays that are more successful are often those that are seen as most authentically

Irish—yet those “authentically” Irish plays are usually produced by British theatres. This has clear consequences for our understanding of cultural sovereignty, about who owns our dramatic tradition—about what the meaning of “Irish” drama is when it can be manufactured anywhere.

And because the global success of Irish drama requires Irish theatre companies to continue to match expectations—or, to put it slightly differently, to do what they have always done before. In such a situation, it is difficult for companies to risk commissioning plays by writers who don’t seem “authentically” Irish. As a result, since 2000, only three out of every ten Irish plays were written by a woman (as shown by the Irish Playography). Only a tiny handful of plays have been produced by the so-called “new Irish”: by the almost one million immigrants who have come to the country from abroad since 1990. The plays that succeed internationally tend to be written by men; they tend to be set in rural Ireland and to embody the branded versions of Irish identity that I referred to. Returning to Rousseau’s words again, they tend to present an Ireland “which no longer exists, perhaps never did exist, and probably never will exist; and of which it is, nevertheless, necessary to have true ideas.”

So for all of these reasons, O’Toole’s description of Ireland operating a “cultural trade surplus” is very useful. A country that manufactures products for export is thinking not of the needs of its own citizens but instead of the expectations of a global marketplace. In such a situation, the aim is not to communicate something new or even something *real*—but instead to give people what they want. The impact of this development on localities is obvious: starved of resources and denied the opportunity to make their own meanings, local areas will eventually become alienated. This alienation may lead to new kinds of agency—but it may also lead to despondency, disenfranchisement and apathy.

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- ⁴ For an example of these ideas in practice, see the National Campaign for the Arts website, www.ncfa.ie/
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- ²¹ Michael Billington, "Reviews: Theatre: Echoes of Ibsen in a study of Irish angst: *Alice Trilogy*", *The Guardian*, 18 November 2005.
- ²² See Patrick Lonergan, *Theatre and Globalization*, chapter 2.
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- ²⁴ Precise figures are available on <www.irishplayography.com>, which lists Irish plays by year of production.