

FORUM KRITIKA: RADICAL THEATRE AND IRELAND (PART 1)

“NOT ALWAYS, BUT OFTEN”:¹

INTRODUCTION TO A SPECIAL ISSUE ON RADICAL THEATRE AND IRELAND

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ABOUT THE SPECIAL ISSUE

Victor Merriman convened “Radical Theatre and Ireland: A Colloquium” on February 6-7, 2009 at Liverpool Hope University. The project to publish the proceedings of the colloquium in *Kritika Kultura* is suggested by David Lloyd, Visiting Professor at Hope and member of the *Kritika Kultura* International Advisory Board. The articles for this project will be published in installments, in consecutive issues of *Kritika Kultura*. This issue features Victor Merriman’s introduction and two articles from the colloquium.

Abstract

This article sketches Irish history and how Irish nationalism deployed cultural production – including radical theatre – as a means of asserting itself as a political and moral force. “Radical Theatre” prompts questions around what both Baz Kershaw and Herbert Blau refer to as “efficacy,” insofar as it implies engagements with content, form, and audiences outside of those which characterise accepted, dominant or commercial manifestations of theatre practice. And yet, scholars and practitioners of radical theatre confront the slipperiness of the concept of radical theatre: it shifts emphasis between theatre as cultural intervention for social progress (a critical, subversive, ethical vocation), and theatre as aesthetic invention (privileging formal experimentation). Also, the radical gesture itself is always at risk of compromise and co-option to that which it seeks to critique. To be efficacious, radical cultural work must inevitably confront the state, and will have to come to terms with, and produce, a narrative of the past. All of these characteristics problematise the practice and understanding of radical theatre in Ireland.

About the editor

Victor Merriman is Associate Professor in Drama and Theatre Studies at Liverpool Hope University, where he will chair the Centre for Performance as Cultural Intervention, from March 2010. He publishes regularly on contemporary Irish theatre, postcolonial theory, drama pedagogy and public policy. He was a member of An Chomhairle Ealaíon/ The Arts Council of Ireland (1993-1998), and chaired the Council’s Review of Theatre in Ireland (1995-1996). His monograph “*Because We Are Poor: Ireland’s Dramas in the Long 1990s*” will be published by Carysfort Press in 2010. He worked as dramaturg on Ricardo Abad’s workshop production of David Lloyd’s *The Press* at the Ateneo de Manila University (July 2008).

Keywords

1916 Rising, Irish theatre, nationalism, radical

“‘He Calls His Dada Still’: Nineteenth-century English Radicalism and the Drama of Pádraic Pearse” by Jim Moran, and “Socialist Shenanigans and Emerald Epiphanies:

The Case of Margaretta D'Arcy and John Arden" by Tim Prentki first appeared as papers presented at *Radical Theatre and Ireland*, a colloquium convened at Liverpool Hope University's Cornerstone building, on 6 and 7 February 2009. The occasion of the colloquium was an invitation to me from Dr. Luisa F. Torres Reyes, editor-in-chief of *Kritika Kultura*, to guest-edit a special issue of the journal on the theme of the colloquium. The event was attended by an invited group of leading scholars of Irish theatre and radical criticism, and set out to map the possible contours of debate around perceived attractions or repulsions between radical theatre practices and ideas of Ireland. Contributors were enticed to the table by means of the provocation that for many scholars and theatre professionals, the coincidence of the words "radical," "Irish" and "theatre" in one sentence is somewhat unusual. The essays published here, and those to follow in the next issue of *Kritika Kultura*, capture the spirit and flavour of an event made possible by the happy constellation of the editors of the journal, and the Department of Drama, Dance and Performance Studies at Liverpool Hope. It has been a pleasure and a privilege to work with all concerned to bring these debates to a wider public.

Raymond Williams (252) dates to the late eighteenth century the "extension to political matters" of the word "radical," and mutations in its use testify to movements, and convulsions, in public life and politics ever since. It can be conscripted as a synonym or disguise for "subversive," "political," "ideologically-driven," "communitarian," "vanguard," "avant garde," "self-indulgent," "narcissistic," and for both "elite" and "popular." "Radical Theatre" prompts questions around what both Baz Kershaw and Herbert Blau refer to as "efficacy," insofar as it implies engagements with content, form, and audiences outside of those which characterise accepted, dominant or commercial manifestations of theatre practice. Even where the radical theatrical emerges as an affront to the latter, it always exists in relation to its forms. This is all too apparent to Kershaw, who sees "alternative" theatre in Britain permanently negotiating "the dialectic between successful opposition and debilitating incorporation" (8).

I want to reflect on accounts of two moments in which the shape of a version of the radical theatrical crystallised. Concluding his survey of the state of radical theatre in mid-1970s New York, Arthur Sainer characterises radical theatre as follows:

Our theatre, the theatre that challenges the supposedly fixed relationships of spectator and performer, the theatre that turns the body of the performer into a musical and psychic instrument, into a living organism rather than a static mouthpiece for dialogue, the theatre that plunges itself into the world

of myth, ritual, politics, that dares to ransack the treasures of the unconscious, that dares to be *alive*. (364)

Sainer's *The Radical Theater Notebook* chronicles intense contests over the nature and purpose of theatre among a collection of extraordinarily productive individuals in an unquiet city at a time of cultural convulsion. His passionate insistence on the radical theatre as, primarily, a project of arts workers, a programme of aesthetic renovation and formal renaissance, is somewhat at odds with Joseph Chaikin's admonition, in the volume's "Introductory Dialogue":

It seems to me absolutely essential that people not only ask themselves, "How can I work from myself in a true way?" but also, "And in what way does this connect to my community or to my whatever – you know, whatever group that I would also perform for?" You can't do it alone any more. (3)

And therein lay the rub. Sainer's exhortation concludes his "Open Letter to the Radical Theatre Community," which includes an account of the cut-and-thrust of "an extraordinary meeting [that] took place at the Performing Garage on Wooster Street, New York," in May 1972. I quote the passage in full because of its dramatisation of the seeming impossibility among avowed scholars and practitioners of radical theatre of reconciling art as individually-inspired aesthetic invention with art as collective, revolutionary, action:

All of us wanted to be useful, but what did that mean? (Richard) Schechner wanted an exchange of ideas. "There are theatrical techniques we can teach each other," he proposed. But the Becks (founders of the Living Theatre) wanted revolution. Judith and Julian pleaded for others to join them in the cause they had been espousing since their return from a Brazilian prison the previous autumn. "We must go out to the workers, to the poorest of the poor, and teach them our techniques so that they can make their own theatre." To help the workers, and those for whom there is no work, liberate the imagination – ultimately in the cause of the revolution.

But how, Alec Rubin and others wanted to know, can we liberate the workers when we haven't yet liberated ourselves? Our own psyches need working on (presumably through theatrical encounter situations). Schechner agreed;

he pointed out that he himself (recently returned from India) had work to do on his own soul. Again he suggested a kind of workshop for the different ensembles, in which there would be an exchange of ideas. But Judith (Beck) had no patience with that. "Richard," she said, "we don't need to call two hundred people together to exchange techniques. We can do that with one phone call."

Steve Israel returned to the theme of going to the workers, but his colleague, Jim Anderson, cried out at him from across the room, "The workers? Man, what do you know about the workers? Go out and get a job if you want to know about the workers!"

Julian (Beck), not to be discouraged by resistance or apathy, nor by Erica Munk's charge of overheated rhetoric, persisted. "For five thousand years the ruling classes have ripped off the imaginations of the workers." And then, to all of us, exhorting, pleading, challenging: "When are you all going to stop being the lackeys of the ruling class?" (361-62)

These debates foreground the slipperiness of the idea of radical theatre; the concept itself shifts between two broad emphases: theatre as cultural intervention for social progress – a critical, subversive, ethical vocation – or theatre as aesthetic invention, privileging formal experimentation, innovation in aesthetic practices, specific to times, places and circumstances, while claiming "universal" appeal. The seeming impossibility of reconciling art as individually-inspired aesthetic invention with art as collective revolutionary action rehearses arguments around bourgeois and proletarian positions which frame discussions of radical theatre, all through the twentieth-century. Herbert Blau might have had such arguments in mind when he wrote, "I shall refuse to take for granted that this form of theatre or that is ever conclusively either the repressive or the liberating thing it appears to be" (34).

In evaluating alternative theatre in Britain from the 1960s, Baz Kershaw locates the movement as an important contributor to socially progressive developments:

the possibility that [alternative theatre] did contribute significantly to the promotion of egalitarian, libertarian and emancipatory ideologies, and thus

to some of the more progressive socio-political developments of the last three decades, cannot be justifiably dismissed. (18)

For both Blau and Kershaw, the touchstone for progressive, purposeful theatre is Bertolt Brecht's lifelong struggle with an aesthetics of engagement. Blau argues that "it was Brecht who virtually initiated the discourse on ideology and performance" (28). Kershaw's influential work is framed by an epigraph from Brecht:

We need a type of theatre which not only releases the feelings, insights and impulses possible within the particular historical field of human relations in which the action takes place, but employs and encourages those thoughts and feelings which help transform the field itself.

Kershaw's work benefits from another tradition in British radicalism that organised around the remarkable work of Raymond Williams. From Williams, he takes a processual model of cultural change which simultaneously enables his argument and drives it toward a particular limit, to which I would like to draw attention. Kershaw's application of Williams's dominant-residual-emergent model to his account of a typical trajectory for oppositional theatre crystallises the problem. Modelled along these lines, oppositional theatre begins as a set of emergent counter-cultural practices – aspects of a movement composed of "a range of cultural alternatives" (7) – and, in time, becomes the dominant culture of a succeeding period. This rather fatalistic view of the generation, purpose and potential of oppositional cultural forms is critiqued by Lloyd and Thomas (1998) and by Lloyd (2008).

Lloyd and Thomas (1998) argue that Williams's foundational opposition, Culture and Society, is less enabling than their teasing out of the problematic, Culture and the State. To apply this to Sainer's debate, Schechner's "soul" might be located in a construct of "society," and Beck's "workers," in an account of the state. Schechner's concerns speak of identity politics; Beck's of revolutionary politics. Allow me to speculate that, as important as identity politics may be to the location of groups and individuals within society, they are neither a guarantee of, nor a substitute for, the exercise of power in the state. For Renato Constantino, radical action must be oppositional to state power, not aesthetic convention: it is "counter-consciousness which alone could restore to identity its dynamic content and which would necessarily oppose ... [the colonial state]" (66). Kershaw's summary of Theodore Roszak's description of the ideological foundation of the counter-culture chimes

well with this: “an opposition to hegemony by a utopianist idealism which promoted an egalitarian ethic through the advocacy of participative democracy on a localised level” (40). Radical efficacy, then, is not a function of social or personal change, but of political transformation, of fundamental change in the state itself.

There is another risk attendant on the application of Williams’s processual figuration, and that is the controlling potential of an assumption that as an emergent becomes a dominant, then a gradual generational legitimation of a “structure of feeling” takes place. Lloyd’s (2008) recent work on the figure of the ruin is instructive in disturbing the neatness of this conceptual trope. At any given moment, truly radical formations – including remnants of earlier emergents which never achieved dominant status – remain available as models for cultural resistance to the state, even if their vestiges are abject ruins. When Blau suggests, “in a new historical phase, a new relative weight may be given to dispossessed or discredited elements of older ideological formations” (37), he is alert to a phenomenon more thoroughly, more radically, explored by Lloyd (2008, 1-9). Radical cultural practices, then, may be seen as oppositional to and not sanctioned by the state. They advocate and perform non-formal models of collective living, and their underpinnings include constructs of public(s) and political engagement, marginal – and threatening – to the homogenising fantasies of the state. Vestiges of the past are readable, and appropriable, both as blasted remnants and enduring options for ethical living. From these reflections, then, radical theatre emerges as a site of struggle between progressive innovation and further consolidation of an oppressive social model. The radical gesture is always at risk of compromise and co-option to that which it seeks to critique. To be efficacious, radical cultural work must inevitably confront the state, and will have to come to terms with, and produce a narrative of the past. All of these characteristics problematise the practice and understanding of radical theatre in Ireland.

Ireland is a small island to the west of its colonizer, Britain, and north-west of the European landmass. It underwent radical transformations from the 1840s to the 1990s. In the space of a century and a half or so, it experienced the Great Famine (1845-1847), two failed revolutions (1848, 1867), a cultural revival in the service of a nationalist project (1880-1916), the emergence of militant, organised labour (1911-1913), an armed insurrection and war of independence against the British Empire (1916-1922), partition of the country, with operational independence for twenty-six of thirty-two counties (1922), a civil war (1922-23),

the hardening of the independent Free State (1922-1949) and Northern Ireland (1922-date) into political entities irreconcilably divided on ethnic and religious grounds, a bitter war in Northern Ireland (1969-1996) which had profound consequences for both jurisdictions, and an unexpectedly successful internationally-brokered peace process. Although many of its citizens served in the British armed forces during World War II, the southern Irish Free State remained neutral in that conflict, and declared itself a republic in 1949, unilaterally repudiating its dominion status within the British Commonwealth.

Despite such frenetic changes in its constitution, I see the independent state as a neo-colonial entity, which has never decolonised (Merriman). Independent Ireland has struggled economically since 1922 and has been blighted by emigration, particularly during the 1950s, the 1980s and again since 2008. Under British colonial rule, Ireland was a convenient laboratory for modernity and free market capitalism. In the neo-colonial successor state, indigenous elites have conducted a full-blown neo-liberal economic experiment in Ireland, notably since 1997 (see Kirby 1997 and 2002) with catastrophic consequences for its peoples. Since 2002, an aggressive “competition state” (Kirby and Murphy) has mobilised an undemocratic coalition of print and broadcast media (especially the national broadcaster, which has become a coercive organ of the state), rapacious indigenous “business” interests, and a familiar raft of apologists for the adventurism of globalised capital. As the first decade of the twenty-first century draws to a close, the full extent of the instance and cover-up of organised child sexual abuse on the part of the dominant Catholic Church and the state has been exposed. Its enormity is such as to warrant the re-writing of Irish history since independence, and, along with economic collapse which can be credited to an equally unholy allegiance between financial administrators, business and politicians, grounds emerging calls for the constitution of a “second republic.”

As it developed from the 1840s on, Irish nationalism deployed cultural production as a means of asserting itself as a political and moral force. 1898 saw mass mobilisation in Ireland in commemoration of the centenary of the revolution of 1798. Both urban and rural landscapes were liberally provisioned with heroic memorials of armed peasants resisting superior forces in example after example of noble self-sacrifice. The commemorative narrative has them falling in pursuit of an ideal of liberty for an ancient Ireland, figured in pitiable female forms such as Kathleen Ní Houlihan, the *Seanbhean Bhocht* (the Poor Old Woman) and the Hag of Beare. Those centennial memorials, and the poems and ballads produced contemporaneously, single out for especial honour heroic Catholic priests, such as Father Murphy of Boolavogue. In this, they testify to the extraordinary

success of Cardinal Cullen's "devotional revolution" (Lee 42-49) begun some twenty years earlier, in overlaying on anti-colonial consciousness a specifically Catholic tone.² Cultural organisations, such as the Gaelic Athletic Association (1884) and Conradh na Gaeilge (1893), were busy codifying Irishness in sport, language and music. And whatever else Irishness might be, it was above all that which was not English.

In the anti-colonial period, cultural production—including political, artistic, religious and social activities—was directed at the realisation of a nation in open subversion of the colonial province. Many of the characteristics of radical performativity are visible in the work of nationalist organisations. Increasingly, nationalism – the republican, or revolutionary version – commandeered the ground available for the articulation of radical consciousness, and, as events moved toward revolution, radical gestures external to the formations controlled or approved by nationalism began to find themselves excluded from what Cairns and Richards refer to as "the people-nation." It is instructive that one of the first public events at which the Catholic nature of this construct was articulated was the riotous objection to JM Synge's play, *The Playboy of the Western World*, widely cited as indecent and blasphemous. It illustrates that interests outside the narrow understanding of republicanism resulted in a refusal of "the price of inclusion in the people-nation ... [and insisted instead on an] acceptance in one form or another, of the supremacy of Catholicism" (113). O'Mahony and Delanty point to the enduring significance for Irish people of the condemnation of Synge's work: "Within the core of a true national identity for all a conservative social vision had been forged that would dominate the twentieth century" (127).

The opportunity for radical social change that the founding of the Free State may have offered was lost in post-1916 Ireland. "David Fitzpatrick has suggested that "if revolutions are what happen to wheels, then Ireland underwent a revolution between 1916 and 1922 ... social and political institutions were turned upside down, only to revert to full circle upon the establishment of the Irish Free State" (qtd. in Cairns and Richards 114). As neo-colonialism was imposed on the people of the Free State, all aspects of Irish life and experience were expected to take their tone from a particular national narrative, centrally concerned with "scripting national memory" (Whelan 145), and which indigenous cultural production was expected to legitimate. Central to this project were the events and the persons of the anti-imperial insurrection of 1916, until very recently the historical and cultural touchstone of the successor state. Both James Connolly and Pádraig Pearse wrote and staged plays in the period leading up to the Easter Rising (see Moran). The objective of their works was to persuade people either by argument (Connolly) or inspiration

(Pearse) of the necessity of armed resistance to Imperial Britain. To the extent that their goals were radical, their appropriation of theatre as a platform constitutes an example of radical theatre in Ireland. Of more abiding significance is the theatricality with which their mythicised personae play out in the script of the national memory in Independent Ireland. Connolly is described “by some considerable distance the most remarkable man of his generation in Irish politics” (Lee 150)—and his explicitly radical politics were subordinated to a national drama of “As You Were.” Pearse became the centrepiece in a project of “prevalent nation-building myths [which] obscured the real problems of post-independence Ireland” (Fanning 4). This saw his person co-opted to a cold travesty of the self-critical intellectual described by Joseph Lee: “Whereas in 1907 he disapproved of Synge’s *Playboy* almost as intently as he despised the mob who howled it down, by 1913 he reproached his earlier self: ‘when a man like Synge, a man in whose sad heart there glowed a true love of Ireland, one of the two or three men who have in our time made Ireland considerable in the eyes of the world, uses strange symbols which we do not understand, we cry out that he has blasphemed and we proceed to crucify him’” (146-47).

The essays that follow here, and inaugurate this first special issue of *Kritika Kultura* (“He Calls His Dada Still” by James Moran, and “Socialist Shenanigans and Emerald Epiphanies” by Tim Prentki), critique official nationalism’s positioning of Connolly and Pearse in the self-dramatisations of the successor state. The suppression of the impact on Pearse’s personality of his father’s secular political radicalism is challenged by Moran, and the veneration of a version of Connolly abstracted from the man incarnate in an ostentatiously radical theatrical gesture is critiqued by Prentki. Taken together, the two essays raise profound questions concerning practices of historiography, processes of canon formation – both cultural and political – and of critical interpretation and valorisation of artefacts and ideas in a national state. I have no doubt of the necessity of raising such questions, and not just for theatre scholarship or Irish Studies. Cultural practices which define how images and narratives of “founding and forging” (Lloyd 1993, 60) a nation come both to constitute a national narrative and demarcate the limits of national consciousness, inspire intense debate especially within countries in which colonial pasts continue to delimit present and future ambitions. Both Moran and Prentki take us into the heart of official nationalist mythmaking (see Hayward), with significant consequences for how we understand the provenance and purpose of iconic figurations, such as “revolutionary socialist” and “romantic nationalist.” That they do so by means of critical engagement with plays points to the political *radix* of what are all too often marginalised as effete arguments over aesthetics. Specifically, they respond to Gerry Smyth’s insight that

“Irish culture cannot express, reflect, embody – or any of the other favoured metaphors – the decolonising nation until it is so constituted by an enabling metadiscourse: criticism” (52). If the drama of Irish history has yet to be radicalized on stage, it can be similarly argued that Ireland itself remains to be radically reformed.

NOTES

¹ Morash 29.

² See Norman Porter’s reference to “Catholicism’s Attempted Hijacking of All Things Irish” 109.

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