

Research Space

Journal article

“Roughening up of the utterance” or “It’s not all mountains and sheep and Emily Dickinson.”: How contemporary practitioners test boundaries of verse drama?

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The “roughening up of the utterance” or “It’s not all mountains and sheep and Emily Dickinson”: How Contemporary Practitioners Test Boundaries of Verse Drama

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Theatre in its early days existed in a strong relationship with verse, and this bond bore much fruit in the form of verse dramas – the plays in which most of the dialogue is written in verse. This cultural tie between verse and theatre survived for hundreds of years until, as pointed out by Dennis Donoghue, the eighteenth-century “rationalists” started weakening it by prioritizing the flexibility, freedom, and naturalness of prose (Donoghue 1959: 11). With the Romantic poets isolating their “closet drama” or “dramatic poems” from the theatre while the stylistic offspring of technological development, realism and naturalism, banned verse as the “language of the Gods” (Ibsen 1905: 269) from the stage, the nineteenth century strained the tie between verse and theatre further. Many of the twentieth century’s theatre practitioners seemed to adhere to Ibsen’s idea that “verse has been most injurious to the art of drama” (Ibsen 1905: 374) and a theatre artist “should be unwilling to take a verse into his [sic] mouth” (Ibsen 1905: 367). For many English-language stages, verse drama became “an anomaly” (Morra 2016: 1) or even a dead language for theatre (Donoghue 1959: 13-14).

However, the start of a new millennium has brought about a resumed interest in verse as a theatrical language through which to engage with contemporary audiences. This essay discusses how a new generation of theatre practitioners uses verse and hybrid forms in a wide selection of dramatic texts and theatrical performances that test the boundaries of verse drama and its traditions in English-language theatre. My focus is on works created between 2009 and 2019, presented predominantly in Ireland and the UK, to show the density of innovation. This new theatre uses verse and verse-like forms, mixing them with crude language, slam-

poetry, hip-hop, rap, and opera to create a platform for individual, generational, and class stories as well as responses to local and global politics. These works, often written by the same person who performs them, embrace the vernacular through formal language, bringing about various cultural tensions carried by English as a global language. Verse also appeals to artists engaged in transmedia and intermedia practices that exceed the boundaries of theatre. The works presented in the current essay make an exciting case for abandoning the exclusivity of verse drama, and looking at verse drama in the broader context of the revived interest of contemporary theatre in verse and in verse and its hybrid forms.

The two quotes in the title come from Seamus Heaney and Stefanie Preissner, respectively. Heaney needs no introduction. The context of his comment is the criticism he encountered for his playing with iambic patterns in *Death of Naturalist* and *Door into the Dark* (Morrison 1982: 18-19; Mathias 2001: 19) in order to explore tensions between the metrical and rhetoric stress (Hall 2009: 48-54) and, as Heaney himself described it, the “roughening up of the utterance” (Heaney 2008: 40). Preissner is an Irish writer and performer known for representing Corkonian millennial female experiences of post-Celtic Tiger Ireland in her hip-hop and rap-derived verse-plays and acclaimed TV series *Can't Cope, Won't Cope*. Her statement (Preissner 2015: 163) is about the damaging association of verse and poetry with high culture. Together these quotes highlight a need to challenge ideas on verse drama in English-language theatre that, for a long time, was dominated by Anglo-English traditions and by interlinks between verse and poetry. The next two paragraphs, perhaps not unproblematically, bring together different cultural, historical, and discipline-specific issues that verse drama connotes and that the practices discussed in the current essay challenge.

There has been a lot of confusion and tension concerning the terminology used to describe plays written in verse. Such categorizing terms include: poetic drama, dramatic

poetry, dramatic verse, and so on. The tensions keep reappearing in critical works on verse drama in English (Donoghue 1959: 3; Hinchliffe 1977: 192; Leeming 1989: 19-22; Morra 2016: 1-6). Arguably, they partly arise from the complex relationship between verse and poetry itself and from the conflicted formalist and essentialist perspectives on verse, prose, and poetry underlain by the question “whether all verse is poetry or all poetry is in verse” (Brogan, 1993: 1346-1347). Verse drama’s “identity problem” causes it to be often perceived as something “slowly woven from pastel shades of twee” (Haydon 2011) and as distinct from contemporary practices and experiences (Morra 2016: 5-6).

Another issue with verse drama’s identity in English-language theatre is the historical domination of Anglo-English traditions and their consequences. In this case, they include William Shakespeare and Elizabethan blank verse as a frame through which verse dramas are interpreted and experienced (Morra 2016: 6; Thacker 2007: 18; Boyle and Johnston 2007: 12). This link with the iambic metre – “the most pervasive” of the metres in English literature (Adams 1997: 37) – is presented as the most natural rhythm for English language or even human speech (e.g. Gibson 2016: 4; Berry 1993: 53; Aughterson 2003: 1; Maxwell 2005). However, even if one considers only the English language, its global status and the diversity of accents that thereby exist within it, it is very difficult to uphold such a claim. It is equally difficult not to link it with certain ethnolinguistic perspectives that the standard British-English (in particular) or American-English are norms from which other Englishes derive or which they abuse (Kachru and Nelson 2001: 14-20).

A first example of a theatre artist testing the context explained above can be found in the afore-mentioned Preissner who structures her verse plays like a hip-hop or rap song. Her *Our Father* (2011) and *Solpadeine is My Boyfriend* (2012) focus on millennial responses to socio-political and personal changes: the economic crisis, emigration, and death. In performances of *Our Father*, the beat of drums by Josephine Linehan highlights and

intensifies the rhythm of rap-verse and performs the heartbeats of the characters (Preissner 2015: 164). In both plays, rhymes perform the complex relationship between the past and present: they are “a sign of escapism (into drugs, denial, emigration), but also a result of this escapism” facilitating “the performance of the pain that goes beyond any form of verbal expression” (Lech 2015: 161). Preissner performed in both plays. In *Our Father*, she adopts the role of Ellie who struggles to start the story of her mother’s death because, apparently, it is difficult to rhyme “purple”: “If I had dyed them [socks] blue or green or red, I could say true or seen or dead but I didn’t. I fucking dyed them purple!” (Preissner 2011a). In *Solpadeine*, the unnamed character says that “happiness never rhymes” (Preissner 2012a) and, as the story unravels, the audience catches on that the rhyming structures link to addiction and to painkillers and, in both plays, shield from the pain.

The mixture of formal structures and crude language as a platform on which to perform painful stories also characterizes the slam-poetry inspired works by the Irish Neil Watkins and the English Kate Tempest. In his semi-autobiographical *The Year of Magical Wanking* (2011), Watkins, paraphrasing both René Descartes and Hamlet, confesses: “I wank, therefore I slam” (Watkins 2012: 293). This frames what starts as a performative confession and becomes an interrogation of his identity in the context of abuse, sexuality, porn addiction, HIV, and the Catholic Church:

Great Spirit and Great Mystery hear my prayer.

Bless all the beings gathered in this room.

I bid your tastebuds welcome to my womb.

This is my truth. I bare my fruit. Let’s share (Watkins 2012: 293).

(...)

You're not supposed to touch a kid down there.

I trusted him and I looked up to him.

I liked him touching me. Now that's the sin.

I liked it. And I wanted more. So there (Watkins 2012: 310)

In the first section, verse highlights the convention of the prayer and, the womb-room rhyme, queers one's perception of Watkins as the reference to his womb contrasts his looks that connote patriarchal masculinity. Watkins wears a beard and is dressed in a suit; he has two warrior streaks on his cheeks. In the second quote, the inaccurate rhyming pattern links "sin" with "him" – an unnamed oppressor - and repeats there, highlighting the inability to name both the perpetrator and male sex organs that the first "there" signifies. This is particularly striking in a piece that, on other occasions, embraces blasphemy and bluntness of vulgar vocabulary, which highlights here the sense of shame that the victim of sexual violence carries.

Tempest, one of the Poetry Book Society's Next Generation Poets 2014, mixes Greek tragedy conventions of Chorus and unity of time in *Wasted* (2011) with hip-hop rhythms and several "fuck it" exclamations to express the fear of decision making and pain of wasted dreams of three South-Londoners in their twenties. The final Chorus confronts the audience with the its call: "Life wants you – it beckons – makes itself immense – / Respect it – take it in your arms, / Connect and face it" (Tempest 2013: 56); in the show the lines are directed at the spectators. In performances of *Wasted*, the presence of microphones emphasises that text and its rhythms are the main carriers of meaning; the scenography is minimal: cardboard boxes and projections. The microphones and minimal scenography also appear in Tempest's more recent play *Hopelessly Devoted* (2013). Here verse-poetry is performed to beat music as a platform for voices of young female prisoners who have "nothing / But locked doors"

(Tempest 2015: 3). In *Hopelessly Devoted*, a young female prisoner signs up for a singing and song writing course and through it finds her way towards personal freedom.

Unknown, I live with you by The Airport Society (2018) presents parallel stories of journeys through writing towards empowerment. This mix-media installation directed by Krystian Lada is based on poems in verse by Afghan female writers: Freshta, Fattemah AH, Meena Z., and Roya. The poets created these works during clandestine (under the regime of the Taliban) creative writing workshops organized by the Afghan Women's Writing Project; the participants of the workshop translated them from Dari into English. Lada decided to leave the "linguistic awkwardness" (Lada 2019) of these translations that bring a foreignizing effect to the production. In *Unknown*, the verse-poems are spoken and sung – to music by Katarzyna Głowicka – by opera singers including international star Małgorzata Walewska and transgender singer Lucia Lucas. They also physically perform acts of violence. For example, Lucas, while singing, performs a series of movements that suggest she is raping a female body lying on a table. The unnamed body later gains a voice of a victim of a landmine explosion as Raehann Bryce-Davis – standing next to the table – speaks Freshta's poem:

In the hospital I asked my mom:

Is it possible

That my legs and my hands will grow again (Freshta 2018)?

The political activism of *Unknown* emerges in the stories of oppression and resistance that the poems and voices carry, begging: "Before I'm forced to/ Bury my work. / Let me write my last poem" (Roya 2018). It also arises from *Unknown's* comment on the present through, as Agata Araszkievicz reflects, "(c)onfronting a typically Western 'high-art' music form with the power of resistance to the fundamentalist, religious retrotopia – which literally realizes the fundamental patriarchal idea of inferiority and serfdom of women" (Araszkievicz 2019).

A similar tension arises from the verse form, associated with high art, and the “linguistic awkwardness” of the poems’ Englishes, to quote Lada. In doing so, *Unknown* significantly contributes to the works that, as Lisa Fitzpatrick puts it, dismantle “a set of culturally embedded beliefs about women, men, and sexuality” shifting our understanding of oppression against women (Fitzpatrick 2018: 253).

Connecting verse with different media and juxtaposing verse forms with global Englishes is a significant trend in contemporary verse works for theatre. I will first focus on the latter. In 2007, Irish theatre company Gúna Nua worked with actors based in Ireland but originating from Nigeria, Slovakia, India, Moldova, France, and Ireland itself. The aim was to devise the verse drama *Urban Poems* by giving voice to “the new generation of immigrants who have decided to make Ireland their home” (Parnell 2007: 48). In 2011, Polish Theatre Ireland, formed to intertwine Polish and Irish theatre traditions, devised *Cheslaugh Mewash* composed of Czesław Miłosz’s verse poetry in Polish, English, Lithuanian, French, Irish, and Slovak. Miłosz’s verse was a platform to explore transnational identities in relation to globalisation and social networks.

Another example of verse expressing identities that escape simple geographical or cultural boundaries is Inua Ellams’s *The 14th Tale* directed by Thierry Lawson and first presented at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in 2009 and in 2010 at the UK’s National Theatre. The one-man show performed by Ellams is written in free verse and tells about Ellams’s growing up in Nigeria, UK, and Ireland but also links Ellams to his ancestors:

I’m from a long line of trouble makers,

of ash skinned Africans, born with clenched fists

and a natural thirst for battle, only quenched by

breast milk. They’d suckle as if the white silk sliding

between gums were liquid peace treaties written
from mums. Their small thumbs would dimple
soft mounds of brown flesh, goose-pimpling chests
till the ceasefire of sleep would creep into eyes; (Ellams 2015: 7)

The same lines open Ellams's later performance *An Evening with an Immigrant*, that premiered in July 2016 at the Soho Theatre in London. This production – made from poetry in verse accompanied by Ellams's transnational memories connected to each poem – was performed just after the Brexit referendum. In it, Ellams challenges the dichotomy of native versus foreign and broadens the geopolitical and cultural boundaries of the UK (Lech 2019).

It is not only new verse works that explore issues of transnationalism but also innovative adaptations of classical texts. *The Other Solos*, directed and produced by Spanish-British actor Paula Rodriguez and presented on YouTube in 2017, is a case in point. And it also highlights the appeal verse has for transmedia and intermedia practices. The project was developed “in response to recent world events and the increasing sentiment against migration in the media and Western society” (*The Other Solos* 2017). While the artists do not place their work in a specific country, performers are all UK-based and the project premiered in June 2017, the first anniversary of the Brexit referendum. Therefore, it is difficult not to read this as its immediate context. *The Other Solos* consists of six Shakespearean monologues from *The Tempest*, *Henry VIII* (play in collaboration with John Fletcher), *Coriolanus*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *Sir Thomas More* (a play believed to have been written by Anthony Munday and Henry Chettle and revised by Shakespeare),¹ delivered by actors born in Spain, France, Israel, Denmark, Greece, and Argentina. All monologues are in iambic pentameter, raise the issues of migration and power, and speak to contemporary politics. Many are public speeches, for example, *Coriolanus*'s and *Thomas More*'s addresses the citizens of Rome (Act

III, Scene III) and the Londoners (Act II, Scene IV) respectively, or Katherine of Aragon's speech (Act II, Scene IV). The actors do not neutralise their accents but stick to the iambic pattern and, in general, to the verse line divisions. By doing so, they highlight different linguistic and political layers and tensions by performing "the most pervasive" (Adams 1997: 37) rhythm of the English language with foreign accents, including the immediate political context of the project. This is particularly striking in the case of Katherine's monologue by Rodriguez.

Katherine in the play insists on speaking English (Act III, Scene I) rather than Latin as a "good foreigner" who fulfilled its "primary civic responsibility" and learned English (Pennycook 2001: 82). When performed by a native English-speaker, her foreignness disappears even further, and her learning of English becomes a tool for "naturalizing" her in the process fuelled by assumptions that native cultures have nothing to learn from foreign cultures (Pennycook 2001: 82). In contrast, Rodriguez's performance highlights the foreignness of Katherine and global quality of English-language, shifting contexts of Katherine's agency. Katherine, as Hero Chalmers argues, champions open politics and is central to *Henry VIII* revealing the manipulation of facts that serves the private gain over the law and the country (Chalmers 2011: 264-265). Rodriguez's Katherine by marking tensions between foreign and native brings these issues closer to the Brexit debate on foreignness and Western debate on migrants in general. To paraphrase Peter Stallybrass and Allon White (5), the immigrants' voices have been "peripheral" in the Brexit referendum and discourses surrounding it, however their foreignness was "symbolically central" (see also Lech 2019). Rodriguez's Katherine is an example of how in *The Other Solos* performers use verse to claim their right to speak about migration on the public stage, their agency over shaping the culture of the UK, and their co-ownership of English language and its traditions. This is enhanced by verse rhythm marking the public quality of the speech (Attridge 1995: 12),

further emphasized here by the medium of social networks. Almost two years after its premiere, *The Other Solos* has reached over 17,000 viewers.

Australian Omar Musa and Irish Emmet Kirwan are other artists who work in verse across a variety of media. Their work is also connected through their exploration of young masculinities. Musa's *Since Ali Died*, in hip-hop and rap verse, looks at his growing up as a boy with Malaysian and Muslim heritage in Queanbeyan, challenging Australia's image as a welcoming, equal society: "all need not apply/ if you're black, brown, Muslim, woman, queer, smart, proud". The one-man-show was adapted in 2018 from his 2017 music album under the same title. Kirwan's *Heartbreak*, recipient of the Irish Film and Television Academy's Best Short Film Award of 2017, tells the story of a teenage mother. Kirwan wrote it and performed it exclusively in verse. *Heartbreak* started as a theatrical project, and when it was released on YouTube, it attracted almost a million views in the first two days (McNeice 2017). Kirwan writes in slang in rap and spoken-word form, and arranges this into verse lines; as he says, the format of lines is to "help the actor or reader, reproduce the prosody and performance style of the play's spoken-word and rap elements" (Kirwan 2016b: 4). His 2014 *Dublin Oldschool* is a two-hander play focused on Jason and Daniel: two brothers from Tallaght, an area commonly associated with the working class and home to one of the highest crime rates in Dublin. It premiered at the Dublin Fringe Festival, in 2017 was invited to the National Theatre in London, and in 2018 released as a movie that largely adopted its verse form.

In *Dublin Oldschool*, verse rhythm is a platform for underrepresented experiences of Dublin's working-class, their city, its stories and soundscape. The rhythm changes, as I argued elsewhere (Lech 2018: 604-606), when Jason's experience become more heightened, mostly through drugs; and in doing so verse highlights Jason's drug-fuelled escape from reality and seeing himself as just one of the "fucking ejits" with "nothing going for [them]"

(Kirwan 2016a: 61). In the performance by Emmet Kirwan and Ian Lloyd Anderson, verse also evokes spaces and soundscape of Dublin. Kirwan and Anderson's from the start make a reference to Dublin street rappers through the rhythm, the actors' accents, and their movements and manner of "rapping". At the beginning of the performance standing on a black stage with two microphones and torches directed at the audience, they say they must first "check the vernacular" (instead of sound-check) and their "Dublin diction", testing the audience's ability to understand and tuning them into Dublin accent and slang.

Escapism links Kirwan's work to Preissner, but its use of verse as an urban rhythm and the voice of young working-class males brings it close to Hull's Niall Ransome. Ransome developed *FCUK'D* (2017) from a monologue he wrote for his drama school performance where he trained as an actor (Ransome 2017c). It tells the story of two brothers in the care system running away from their council estate. Ransome's verse not only carries their story but also creates the soundscape of Hull:

These are the streets of young mams,

Pushing prams.

Fourteen's the dream for the new wave pregnancy plan.

Tight tracksuits and tops we nick from shops.

Zip ups and Reeboks.

Can you lend us 20p?

You looking at me for?

Cans of Stella and bags of Quavers litter the floor from misbehaviors [sic].

Lend us a cig,

Be a mate.

Flags remind us why Britain's so Great (Ransome 2017b: 11).

Ransome directed the production in a performance in which Will Mytum (later replaced by George Edwards) delivers this speeding up with every line, creating an overwhelming effect of a busy street and its noise. The rhyming scheme, connecting words and senses, is the main point of orientation for the audience, especially given that the play is performed on a bare stage. The tendency to use minimal scenography in new verse works (Ransome, Kirwan, Tempest, Preissner, Watkins, Ellams, *The Other Solos*) on the one hand reveals the power of verse to create a soundscape that fills the space. On the other hand, it strengthens the links between verse and underprivileged voices as it is an aesthetic tool for the artists working in precarious contexts of low-funded projects.

The majority of the works discussed so far, to different degrees, explore the connection between music and verse challenging Western traditions of “jealousies and rivalries” between the two genres (Black, 1977: 10). This is of course not a new phenomenon. The singing and dancing Choruses of Attic tragedy, the theatre of W.B. Yeats or, inspired by Yeats, the theatre of Ted Hughes (Leeming 197-198) are probably the most obvious examples. However, the new verse works interact with music through multiple and diverse cultural references that they play on, juxtapose, and confront. Rap and hip-hop as tools for exploring Irish identity in Preissner’s and Kirwan’s works is one example. Another is the 2018 collaboration between artists Lady Sanity and Stanza Divan and UK-based academics Noah Birksted-Breen and Rajinder Dudrah aimed at developing a hip-hop theatre version of Ivan Viripaev’s *Oxygen*, translated from Russian by Sasha Dugdale. *Ancient Rain*, on the other hand, is the 2016 collaboration between Australian artist Paul Kelly and Irish singer-actress Camille O’Sullivan that mixes rhythms of Irish poetry in verse (from W.B. Yeats and

Seamus Heaney to Enda Wyley) with their Irish and Australian accents, and music to perform multiple characters and search for “new music theatre work” (Dublin Theatre Festival 9).

In these new works, rather than being a phenomenon tied to past experiences (Morra 2016: 6; Aston and Savona 2005: 26), verse offers opportunities to revisit distant and recent history to challenge its discourses. Verse musicals excel in that, showcasing their political potential for which Warren Hoffman argues (Hoffman 2014: 12-13). The most obvious example here is Lin-Manuel Miranda’s 2015 *Hamilton* (another actor that for whom verse became a platform towards playwrighting). While Miranda’s aim to tell “a story about America then, told by America now” (Miranda 2015b) does not achieve its full potential due to his stereotypical portrayal of females (Wolf 2018: 167), it does manage to deconstruct the WASP-ness of the mainstream discourses of the United States’ history. To do that, Miranda uses the audiences’ familiarity with “racially biased history” and challenges it through a radical choice to re-tell it in hip-hop verse and with a cross-racial cast (Styrt, 2018: 14).

In Ireland, Arthur Riordan’s works are another example of musicals in verse and their political application. Riordan’s works facilitate the dialogue between the past and present. From 2004, *Improbable Frequency* explores the complexities of Irish neutrality during World War II and its relations and attitudes towards both the UK and Germany. *The Train* – that premiered in September 2015 just a few months after the Marriage Equality Referendum – looked at Ireland’s journey to equality. It told the story of the 1971 protest by forty-seven women who embarked on a journey from Dublin to Belfast to buy contraceptives, not fully legal in Ireland until 1993 (Ranelagh 2012: 296).

This essay discussed how contemporary theatre practitioners apply verse and its hybrid forms to new theatrical works that test the boundaries of verse drama and its traditions in English-language theatre. The works presented here drew from opportunities that had

arisen from English as a global language in the context of its histories, increased mobility of people, tensions between local and global, digital media, and various cultural traditions. The latter underlay their search for closer creative links between verse drama and music drama through hip-hop, rap, opera, and musical theatre. Many works discussed were written and performed by the same person. They might be actors turning to playwrighting to take control over their creative destiny, explore their own complex identity, or give voice to a larger – and often underrepresented – community. However, the performers might also be music artists or poets reaching through hip-hop or rap to theatre as a new platform for their artistic voice. Arising from it is the fact that the verse works performed in theatre are adapted from or into other media or even exist across different platforms (like *Dublin Oldschool*), reaching broader audiences. In this sense, the practitioners that the article discussed test boundaries not only of verse drama but also of theatre and, at the same time, make a compelling case for the potential of both.

¹ It is Thomas More's monologue from ACT II, SCENE IV attributed to Shakespeare.

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