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## Disability Theatre in Ireland: A Development

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### *Abstract:*

The aim of this paper is to trace recent developments in Irish disability theatre, primarily in the light of the theoretical debate that envisions disability theatre at the interdisciplinary crossroads of disability studies and performance studies. I will describe how disability theatre in Ireland was portrayed in *Face On: Disability Arts in Ireland and Beyond* (2007) edited by Kaite O'Reilly. In particular, many contributors lament the backwardness of disability theatre in Ireland. In 2012, however, the Irish Arts Council revised and formalised its previous policy, which had been ineffective in supporting artists and audiences with disabilities. In conjunction with Arts and Disability Ireland, their strategic plans brought forth significant changes in Irish disability theatre.

*Keywords:* disability theatre, early disability theatre in Ireland, minority model, new policies and contemporary disability theatre, social constructed model

I want to tell you about my body. I like my body now, I really do.  
Sometimes I think I'm too fat, but I really like living in this body.  
I like because I know who I look like...  
Rosaleen McDonagh, *Babydoll* (2007)

### *1. Introduction: Disability Theatre*

Disability theatre belongs to the field of Disability Arts and is part of a long and articulated debate that has engaged scholars from different disciplinary perspectives. Ruth Bailey, in discussing *The Beautiful Octopus Club* (1995), one of the latest productions of Heart'n'Soul, an English musical theatre company of people with learning disabilities, briefly describes what disability theatre is. According to her, Disability Theatre happens because of disability, not in spite of it. It wants to introduce theatregoers to contemporary club music and club goes to the world of performance. This new experience, which has not just developed for the sake of being innovative, gives control to people with learning disabilities. This means that every stage of the artistic process is shaped and informed by the culture

and experience of people with learning disabilities. The performers on stage all have learning disability, as do those taking money at the door. So too do many of those moving on the dance floor, doing whatever their own thing is. There is no pressure to conform here. The ambience, access and performances somehow manage to put everyone at their ease.

Disability theatre is therefore about ensuring disabled people are at the centre of the creative process and allowing disability to influence that process. More precisely, it can be defined as theatre “which involves a majority of disabled people, explores a disability aesthetic and mirrors in some way the lives of disabled people” (Morrison 1992). With the maturing of a new aesthetic of disability theatre, the power of placing disabled performers in any narrative, not just one that has a positive disability theme, can be exploited. Moreover, the form and aesthetics of a play is also influenced by disability, while audio description and sign language have ensured that works are accessible to deaf and visually impaired audience goers.

Carrie Sandahl and Philip Auslander inscribe disability theatre in a more radical and broad view of disability, that is the result of an interdisciplinary approach between disabilities studies and performance studies. In particular, they describe disability as performance in everyday life, as a metaphor of dramatic literature and as the work of disabled performing artists. In everyday life, people with visible impairment “cause a commotion in public space” (2005, 2), surprise and pose questions to others on such a startling physical difference. Disability therefore inaugurates, in our Western rhetorical, literary and visual tradition, “the act of interpretation” (Mitchell, Snyder 2000, 6), which prompts the act of meaning making. Disability as a dramaturgical metaphor instead has to do with identity construction. Drawing on Erving Goffman’s “performance of everyday” (1978, 10) and Judith Butler’s “performativity” (1993, 12), disability is seen as being performed (like gender, sex, sexuality, race and ethnicity) and indeed many disabled artists talk about performing their identities in explicitly self-conscious and theatrical terms. Thus, many disabled artists have turned disability stereotypes and narratives to their own ends. They have transformed a potentially stigmatizing experience into an act of empowerment, but they can run the risk of falling into the trap of another performance, that of able-bodiedness. The manipulation and transformation of stereotypes are important tactics, as the available ‘scripts’ of disability are limited and embedded in cultural imagination. Physical and cognitive impairment serve a narrative as “material metaphor” (Sandhal, Auslander 2005, 3) and give textual abstraction to tangible bodies. These impaired individuals are usually metaphors of social and individual collapse. Among them, to mention but a few, there are: “the obsessive avengers”, who seek revenge against those he considers responsible for his disablement; the “sweet innocent” (otherwise known as “Tiny Tim”), who act as a moral barometer of the nondisabled; “the inspirational overcomer”, “the extraordinary individual” who excels despite her impairment; the “freak”, the ultimate outsider; and the “monster”, whose disfigurements arouse fear and horror<sup>1</sup>.

The work of disabled performing artists in theatre, however, has recently drawn inspiration from their own experience, thus rejecting the scripts listed above and challenging trite narrative conventions and aesthetic practices. Disability performance scholar and artist Petra Kuppers testifies that “physically impaired performer has [...] to negotiate two areas of cultural meaning invisibility as an active member in the public sphere, and hypervisibility and instant categorisation” (2001, 25). The audience assume that the “disabled body is naturally about disability”

<sup>1</sup> For a complete list of disabled characters as metaphors of social and individual collapse see “Representation and its Discontent: the Uneasy Home of Disability in Literature and Films” in Mitchell, Snyder (2000b, 15-46).

(6), as if cultural narratives of disability prevent the artist from trying to communicate anything else. Alternatives to Koppers's binary invisibility/hypervisibility opposition are those that see disability as a social-construction model and as a minority model. Developed especially in the USA during the Civil Rights movement by its activists, the social-construction model "is not situated within pathological individuals in need of medical care and cure (the medical model) but is a fundamentally a social phenomenon" (Sandhal, Auslander 2005, 7-8), locating disability within a society built for nondisabled people. Disability becomes "a disjuncture between the body and the environment. It is the stairway in front of the wheelchair user, or written text in front of the blind person" (8)<sup>2</sup>. Interestingly, those scholars who have worked with the social construction model have shown that the discourse of disability changes according to cultural political, architectural, attitudinal and economic factors. The minority model extends the social construction model premise that disability is a mutable category and the disabled "becomes a distinct minority community that has been excluded from full participation in society because of discrimination in education, employment and architectural access. This community is defined by shared experiences of discrimination and by its vital subculture, including the arts" (*ibidem*). Under these premises, disability theatre becomes a complex object of study and what becomes relevant is how disabled artists perform their identity both in everyday life and in the theatre, how disabled bodies define space differently from able bodies and how disabled people choose to represent themselves in art and social action.

## 2. *Early Disability Theatre in the Irish Context*

The debate mentioned in the introduction, which spans from the 1980s to the present day, took place mainly in the United States and the United Kingdom. In Ireland, a thorough reflection started later than in these countries. *Face On: Disability Arts in Ireland and Beyond* (2007), which hosted a diverse range of contributions from opinionists, performers and creative artists, represented a first step towards issues of arts and disability in Ireland and it was intended to help broaden the audience and employment opportunities for the work of disabled arts practitioners from Ireland. In the words of Pádraig Naughton, Director of Arts and Disability Ireland, "In initiating this fresh debate on Disability Arts and Culture in an Irish context through this publication, my aim was not to suggest or arrive at a single conclusion, but present a diverse range of contributions" (see Naughton 2007, 7). As he underlined, it should not be "another conference, consultation process or policy document in the first instance, but the unique art making and subject matter that is disability arts itself" (*ibidem*). In particular, a number of essays invited consideration of disability theatre from various perspectives.

Steve Daunt has been involved in Arts and Disability policy and practice since the 1990s. A graduate of Trinity College, he works on a freelance basis and writes theatrical scripts. He has also completed the new Arts and Disability Handbook/Website for both Arts Councils, Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. (Daunt 2007, 39)

In "The Dance of Power" he delves into issues of arts and disability from a public policy perspective. He outlines, for example, the delivery of a report entitled *To Enable – A Report on Access to the Arts in Ireland for People with Disabilities* delivered by the Arts Council in 1988, the

<sup>2</sup> Petra Koppers makes the same remark more recently in her *Theatre and Disability*, 7-8.

establishment of the Forum of People with Disabilities in 1990 and the set-up of the Commission on the Status of People with Disabilities in 1993. However, he also sees how the notion of Social Partnership that ruled the Irish body politic in the late 1980s was detrimental to disabled people:

Government, employers, unions and other sectors of society agree common goals to be achieved in a timeframe. No need for strikes or any other types of agitation. This wider partnership has been reflected in the disability sector where we all seen 'stakeholders' whose job it is to make the difference. From the outside, it gives the impression that everything can be fixed through a lovely corporate strategy [...]. (37)

First, disabled artists were considered either as disabled members of local groups or, if they were skilled, they "became normalised within a greater whole" (38). Second, unlike in Britain, where the disability movement grew hand in hand with the disability arts movements and the art produced reflected this struggle, "the term 'disabled people' in Ireland came to include parents and carers, while the idea of stakeholder threw service providers into the mix. This inevitably led to the strongest rising to the top, or to be more precise, these with the biggest links or power" (*ibidem*).

While Daunt admits that he still had "to keep fighting" (39), he nonetheless acknowledges that the Commission on the Status of People with Disabilities was aware that disabled people had cultural rights. A milestone of the new policy of the Commission was one major event: the participation of CandoCo at the Dublin Theatre Festival in 1993. CandoCo is a British contemporary physically integrated dance company founded in 1991, which recognises and celebrates the first-person experience of disability according to the minority model. Daunt enthusiastically recalls their performance and the possibility to dance that was granted to him:

'Oh fuck...these guys are dancer' [...] It was the first time that I had seen dance that meant something to me. Forget Darcey Bussell or Nurayev... These were bodies like mine undertaking a full frontal assault on an artform that prided itself on perfect body form. Yupp! I was hooked. I signed up for their workshop and for five days lived the life of a dancer [...] I even purloined the image of a dying swan and made it my own. Counterbalance [the group that grew out of CandoCo] is still there and I'm grateful it *gave me the experience of knowing I could use my body as an instrument, quietly subverting normality*. (36; emphasis added)

Yvonne Lynch, who moved from England to Ireland and had her first encounter with disability when she joined Graeae Theatre Company's theatre-in-education as a performer in 1986, is highly critical of the situation of disability theatre in Ireland (see Lynch in O'Reilly 2007, 40): "now, in 2006, I do not note that there is some dramatic activity in Ireland by disabled people" (2007, 44). She conceded, however, that there are some marginal realities, like Shadowbox, "the first theatre company in Ireland" (*Shadowbox Theatre Company*) that made some stimulating work with actors with intellectual disability, or like Forum Theatre. At that time Forum Theatre "was being used by small groups of disabled artists across the state to demonstrate the discrimination they face that keeps them on the margins of Irish society" (Lynch 2007,44). For her, aspiring disabled artists are marginalised in dramatic production due to the lack of quality training and access to a variety of roles, as they will be always confronted by better trained and more experienced actors 'cripping-up' to get the role. For this reason, many disabled Irish actors are forced to emigrate to the United States or England. Lynch bleakly and sarcastically concludes: "the turbulent history Ireland has had with 'perfidious Albion' shows us that in many ways the devil you know can often be your most essential asset" (46).

The essays by Nabil Shaban and Jenny Sealey, based on their work with the London-based Graeae Theatre Company, show how disability theatre is a political and artistic subversive act

and defies notions of what theatre should be. Nabil Shaban, writer, performer, actor, dramaturg and co-founder of the English Graeae Company with Richard Tomlison, recounts the early history of this company. The company was inaugurated in 1972 and, from the outset, its “shows focused entirely on disability issues, our experience of disability and our perceptions of the non-disabled world’s attitudes towards disability” (Shaban 2007, 66). One of its most successful play, *Ready Salted Crisps* (1974) was a series of “sketches on disabled people’s perception and experience of education [...], the medical profession [...], family, parents, employment and the lack of employment” (*ibidem*). Although retaining the pathos, melodrama and tragedy of these experiences, the show was also light-hearted and humorous and became so popular that it was taken on tour. Shaban recalls that the success the play enjoyed convinced them that they might have contributed “to society in terms of telling their stories in their own words and in terms of their own entertainment values and ability” (*ibidem*) which were not, most importantly, the ‘Perfect’ and the ‘Beauty’, the ‘body Fascist ideals and stereotypes’. Shaban also sees various morals behind the Ancient Greek myth of the Graeae, from which the company takes its name. The Graeae were “three sisters who shared one eye and one tooth between them” (68). In the story of the Graeae, Perseus, unable to force them to tell him the location of three magical objects needed to kill Medusa, steals their eye to blackmail them (see *ibidem*). According to Shaban, the action of Perseus would not have harmed the Graeae “if they had not allowed the negative aspects of their impairment rule their lives and learned to cope as blind or partially sighted people rather than depending on the one eye” (*ibidem*). On the other hand, it is worth noting, as Shaban reminds us, that the three sisters also suggested how disabled people needed to work together and unite to advance in their common cause (see *ibidem*).

This common cause, according to Jenny Sealey, who became Artistic Director of Graeae Theatre Company in 1997, was not an easy journey as it is “fraught with the politics of challenging the representation of disabled people in theatre, the politics of basic access and the politics of theatre as a predominately white middle-class non-disabled male dominated playing field” (Sealey 2007, 71). Thus, both new plays and existing plays by well-known authors addressing disability issues dismantled discrimination and traditionalism. “*Peeling* by Kaite O’Reilly was a new commission exposing the still taboo issues of sex and pregnancy through the stories of three disabled women” (74). Not only did this play “enable the audience to reduce the gap between the disabled/non-disabled experience” from a feminist perspective, but it also explored a new artistic aesthetics (*ibidem*). The play used audio description as a spoken narrative and spoken words were projected on a screen, thereby becoming an interactive source for deaf people (see *ibidem*). If a character was shouting, the words on screen would be large and capitalised or if the actor were speaking as a Greek chorus, the words would be small and lower case (see *ibidem*). Martin Sherman’s *Bent*, whose cast was composed of one character using voice and another using British Sign Language (BLS). They both spoke/signed Sherman’s stage directions to tell the story of the play, which becomes a reminder for the audience that black, gay and disabled people died in the Holocaust (see Sealey 2007, 75).

The play *Babydoll*, a one-woman show performed in 2003 by Rosaleen McDonagh, represents a successful Irish answer to many of the issues raised by Graeae Theatre Company on disability theatre<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> Rosaleen McDonagh is a Dublin-based Traveller with a disability who is a playwright, activist and performer. [She] has an Honours degree in Biblical and Theological Studies and a MPhil in Ethnic and Racial Studies from Trinity College Dublin. Her one-woman show, *The Baby Doll Project*, was performed at the Project Arts Centre and other locations and received a Metro Eireann Multi-Cultural Award (MAMA) award. (McDonagh 2007, 87).

The protagonist of *Babydoll*, both a disabled woman and a Traveller, insists on how the educational and religious institutions represented by the Teacher and the Nun (see 78-84), create only 'normalised' space from which her body was excluded. For this reason, McDonagh decided to set her show in a bathroom: "on the one hand as a Traveller woman, having access to a bathroom just wasn't [...] possible; while on the other hand, as a disabled woman, sharing a bathroom in an institutional setting leaves a sense of confusion and fear about what might happen there" (85-86). The bathroom therefore not only becomes the elective space where McDonagh performed her identity as disabled and Traveller in everyday life and the theatre, but also a metaphor of the claim for political and civil rights.

The claim for social engagement within Irish theatre was also made by Shadowbox Theatre Company, which initiated its activities in 1998 and, like Rosaleen McDonagh's activism, represented another answer to British disability theatre. The founders of Shadowbox wanted to make the true voices of Irish lives heard, in particular those who were marginalised and excluded from the Irish stage (see *Shadow Theatre Company*). They wanted to celebrate their disabled neighbours' experiences "– the comedy no less than the tragedy – and creating in the process theatre that was [...] enjoyable and meaningful, both for audience and those involved" (*ibidem*). As their site reports

In 2001 Shadowbox was the first theatre company in Ireland to establish a professional ensemble for Actors with Intellectual Disabilities. Since that time, our ensemble has toured throughout Ireland, encouraging the most diverse audiences to the recognition that artistry is not an intellectual function, but a faculty of our shared humanity. (*Ibidem*)

### 3. A New Policy for Arts and Disability in Ireland

In 2012, the Arts Council of Ireland reviewed and formalised "its policy and strategy in the area of disability, to reflect developments in provisions and practices and to take account of the requirement of developments in disability and equality legislation" (2012, 7). Although the Arts Council had addressed Arts and Disability over the last twenty-five years, its policy had not been "effective in translating successful interventions into mainstreamed systems for supporting artists and audiences with disabilities" (*ibidem*). In 2005 a short paper was published on the facing strengths and challenges of the Arts Council and its subsequent strategy, *Partnership for the Arts (2006-2010)*, envisaged the recruitment of an Arts and Disability Advisor. However, the initiative was not particularly successful. Following an unsuccessful procurement process in 2007, the Arts Council decided to change strategy. Arts and Disability Ireland (ADI) was identified as a strategic partner that might develop into an effective resource organisation at the national level and that might support the Arts Council in aspects of its thinking and practice. Since then, the Arts Council has worked closely with ADI and other organisations in the sector, has made progress in the area of provision and practice, testing ways to integrate the access agenda both internally and externally, in line with its commitment to public access, participation and engagement in the Arts. Changes in the legislation also favoured developments of a new Arts and Disability policy. These started with the publication of the Report of the Commission on the Status of People with Disabilities, entitled *A Strategy for Equality* (1996), which was followed by the *Equality Act* (2004)<sup>4</sup> and the *Disability Act* (2005).

<sup>4</sup> *The Equality Act* (2004) amended the *Employment Equality Act* (1998) and the *Equal Status Act* (2000). The *Employment Equality Act* and the *Equal Status Act* outlaw discrimination in employment, vocational training, advertising, collective agreements, the provision of goods and services and other opportunities to which the public generally have access on nine distinct grounds. These are: gender, civil status, family status, age, disability, race, sexual

A comparison of *Arts and Disability (2012-2016): Arts Council Policy and Strategy* and *Becoming a National Resource: ADI's Policy and Strategic Direction 2011-2016* shows how common terminology is used, especially for the definition of Arts and Disability and People with Disability. The first

is an umbrella term for the connection between the arts and people with disabilities. 'Arts and Disability' embraces a wide range of contexts such as disability arts, Deaf arts, disability-led practice, collaborative practice, artists with disabilities, audiences with disabilities, arts workers with disabilities, access services and advocacy [...]<sup>5</sup>. Consequently, the term 'arts and disability sector' covers 'how people with disabilities participate in the arts as well as the ways in which the mainstream arts sector gives consideration to how people with disabilities engage with their programmes or services'. The term 'Arts and Disability' is inclusive of all artforms, and all genres within any artform [...] (3)

such as (visual arts, theatre, literature, music, dance, opera, film, circus and architecture). People with disabilities instead "include those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which, in interaction with various barriers, may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with other. Many disabilities, such as dyslexia, are hidden or not obvious" (*ibidem*)<sup>6</sup>. The Arts Council, however, makes clear that it draws clear distinctions between Arts and Disability and other practices: "the following distinctions are offered in the knowledge that understandings about practice constantly shift and evolve in the arts sector and that the Arts Council's current understandings are not definitive". For this reason, "in making distinctions between different practices, the Arts Council focuses on the nature of the practice itself and avoids making assumptions based on the people who are involved"<sup>7</sup> (4).

orientation, religious belief, and membership of the Traveller Community. Discrimination is described in the Act as the treatment of a person in a less favourable way than another person is, has been or would be treated on any of the above grounds. See Arts Council (2012, 6-9) and Arts & Disability Ireland (2011, 12-14).

<sup>5</sup> Terminology is important in this context, and for this reason I have decided to give the definition for precision. 'Disability arts' means the personal or collective creative response of people with disabilities to the experience of disability. 'Deaf arts' refers to the creative expression of Deaf culture through sign language. This artform is currently under-developed in Ireland as, unlike in Great Britain, Northern Ireland and elsewhere, Irish legislation does not currently recognise sign language users as a separate linguistic grouping. Consequently, deafness is widely understood to be a disability/impairment. 'Disability-led' refers to the situation in which people with disabilities take leadership roles in all aspects of their arts practice and management, including governance, management, producing, directing, choreographing, conducting, designing and performing. 'Collaborative practice' means that artists with disabilities and their non-disabled peers have equal involvement in the creative process from inception to completion. Artists with disabilities are emerging and professional artists who have impairments, whether or not they choose to address the issue of disability in their work, deliberately decide not to mention their disability or make it part of the marketing of their work. Some believe that knowledge of their disability will influence the interpretation of their work, leading to condescension, and possibly even exclusion from, or discrimination against, their participation in mainstream arts. Access services and advocacy: As well as supporting artists with disabilities, Arts Council's and ADI's involvement with arts and disability issues also includes access services and advocacy, through the provision of information, training, assisted performances (live audio description, captioning and sign language interpretation), and equipment hire to the arts sector to make their programmes and services more accessible to people with disabilities. Arts workers include arts managers, administrators, employees, board members and leaders. See Arts & Disability Ireland (2011, 12-14).

<sup>6</sup> 'People with disabilities' is here used as in the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2008) and in the Equal Status Acts 2000-2008.

<sup>7</sup> The Arts Council gives the following example: if the involvement of people with disabilities may be one essential feature of Arts and Disability, it does not define or determine the practice. People with disabilities may choose to engage in different arts practices at different times and in different contexts. They may choose to locate themselves within the practice of Arts and Disability at one time, in Arts and Health or Arts and Older People at

It must be added that in the disability sector, services are in most cases voluntary. If we analyse the historical development of welfare in Ireland, the approach was the traditional portrayal of carers as ‘woman in their place’ that “has led to a deeply contextual landscape of care in which national, local and embodied scales are closely-interconnected” (Power 2010, 219).

*Becoming a National Resource: ADI's Policy and Strategic Direction 2011-2016* (2011) represents a turning point in arts and disability policy. This ambitious strategic plan is very clear in identifying the key challenges to fulfil a vision of an Ireland where people with disabilities can fully experience and contribute to Irish artistic and cultural life and be an integral part of it. Among these challenges there are those related to the disability context: the need to build a critical mass of artists; advocates and leaders with disabilities from across the arts sector and the disability sector; to remove environmental, attitudinal and physical barriers; to make financial progress, despite funding cuts and recession; to bring arts policy to those disability organisations that provide arts activities but have no clear policy positions on the arts; to engage with and learn from social entrepreneurs in order to overcome the disconnection from activism and social changes. Other key challenges are those related to creating connections between the arts sectors and the disability sector: to ensure continuity in policy direction related to involving and including people with disabilities in the arts and to better understand the important legislative developments. In fact, if properly used, equality legislation can be a powerful tool for the inclusion of people with disabilities in the arts. For this reason, ADI's challenge is to encourage a more cohesive and holistic approach to artistic and cultural policy: “In the past, arts and cultural policy leaned towards a narrow view of arts and disability initiatives, seeing them in terms of civic participation and programming, and oscillating in emphasis between prioritising artists and audiences” (2011, 20). ADI as an organisation therefore has to meet the challenges “to develop its own organisational infrastructure”, its funding base, its commitment “to working with Government and local authorities to implement their arts and disability policy agendas”. In order to achieve these aims, “ADI will adopt a multiplicity of roles, supporting artists and audiences with disabilities and their connections with the arts sector” (21).

ADI illustrates the achieved aims of inclusion, access and opportunities for artists and audiences in a second document, *Leading Changes in Arts and Culture. Strategic Plan 2017-2021* (2017). Artists can profit from the funding scheme managed on behalf of the Arts Council, Arts and Disability Connect, a strategic partnership with Fire Station Artists' Studios, which has resulted in four residencies, six mentoring opportunities and four commissions for visual artists with disabilities, as well as a co-curated exhibition, *A Different Republic*. In addition, there was the presentation of internationally acclaimed arts and disability works in Ireland, such as Graeae's *Signs of a Diva*, Robert Softley's *If These Spasms Could Speak* and Jess Thom's *Backstage in Biscuit Land*. Visually impaired audiences were supported by audio description and captioning for eight national performing arts and visual arts tours, audio descriptions of exhibition and the launch of a regular monthly programme of audio described and open captioned cultural cinema. Important partnerships started in the field of the arts. Among these, the Arts and Disability Networking partnership between the Arts Council and local authority arts offices, which has had the aim of embedding arts and disability practice outside Dublin, and Ignite, another partnership between the Arts Council and local authorities in Mayo, Galway and Cork, which made to three new commissions worth €60,000 each, led by internationally

another or they may choose to locate themselves in an arts practice that contains no reference to any area of Arts Participation. It must be noticed, however, that the lingering legacy of the medical model continues to be detrimental to equality of opportunity for people with disabilities. See Arts Council (2012, 5).



recognised artists with disabilities. However, in its statement of intent *Leading Changes in Arts and Culture. Strategic Plan 2017-2021*, goes a step further in underlining what place people with disabilities must occupy, not as a separate community but in the wider community. On the one hand, ADI has to respond to an “increasingly fragmented population of people with disabilities” (22), on the other, it envisages that “the clear delineation” (*ibidem*) that existed in the past and described people’s identity and impairment, is constantly changing. “The distinction between different artforms [...] are merging and their contours “will become more blurred” (*ibidem*) in the future. Therefore, “ADI’s work will need to stretch from providing individually tailored solutions to positioning the arts sector to embrace approaches that are universally designed and anticipatory. We want to create an Irish arts and cultural environment that is at its core inclusive and responsive” (23). Significantly, to follow this path means to bring forth “seamless equality” (*ibidem*).

#### 4. Disability Theatre in Ireland in the Light of the New Policy on Arts and Disability

Recent disability theatre in Ireland is in part the result of the new policy promoted by ADI’s strategic plans in the attempt to construct a minority model of disability, which has tried to bridge the gap between society and artists and audience with disability. Even if something has been achieved, much remains to be done to achieve a fully accomplished minority model that extends the social-construction model. The priority of the new policy was to overcome what Koppers sees as the invisibility of the disabled person as a member of the public sphere or his hypervisibility, his instant categorisation as a disabled person, as seen above. The blurring of clear-cut distinctions between the artforms has also opened up new possibilities to inclusion, helping actors and audience members with disabilities to share a sense of belonging to the same community and making them feel part of the same cultural environment.

Without any intention of being exhaustive, I will analyse some of the works from the 2007 onwards that, in my view, have better responded to the new challenges envisaged by ADI. The Will Fredd Theatre’s production of *Follow* by Shane O’Reilly, in 2011 was among those works highly acclaimed at the Absolute Fringe Festival in Dublin and praised by many theatre critics. Shane O’Reilly, who is the son of deaf parents, performs a one-man show and provides a deep insight into the lives of deaf people from their point of view (see *Irish Mail on Sunday* 2013). “This play uses a combination of ordinary language and Irish Sign Language (ISL) that makes it possible to appreciate for the first time a show without the need for an interpreter: O’Reilly performs alone, using words, gestures, and signs have become a whole dictionary of creating movement” (*ibidem*). There is also plenty of humour, but the play neither attempts to soften the problem of deafness, nor tries to patronise or sentimentalise it. There are stories within O’Reilly’s story that witness the experience of deafness and the strife to communicate (see *ibidem*). For example, there is the comic story of the difficulties of a group of little deaf children in a deaf-school dormitory that have gotten upset stomachs after eating their own cookery, with the result that the bathroom facilities proved inadequate. Their story has a sad twist when these children are brought to Lourdes and their families later realise that the longed-for ‘miracle’ did not happen (see O’Kelly 2013). “There’s the desperate young father following a garda and trying to explain that he can’t understand when the garda calls to the house and asks if he has two children, only to lead him to a local hospital where nobody understands his anguished incoherence” (*ibidem*). *Follow* is, however, an innovative play that makes use of all the available technology – sound, light and LED captioning – to create a new space for the non-abled body of the actor that can also be

experienced by the whole of the audience at the same time. It allows a hearing audience to experience what is like for the deaf to watch a show through light and vibration (there are speakers beneath the seats) and allows a deaf audience to view a show that has been curated for them from the beginning of the development process. (Kane 2013)

Another important step towards inclusion was the revival of Sebastian Barry's play *The Pride of Parnell Street* in 2011. One innovative aspect of this Fishamble touring production was that, for the first time in Ireland, there was one audio-described and captioned performance in each venue of the tour. Fishamble Theatre Company was also part of the initiative entitled *Turning Point*. At the beginning of 2010, Irish writers with disability were invited to submit short pieces of theatre to Fishamble as part of new writing. The four plays that were selected were *Ellipsis* by John Austen Connelly, *How Very Normal* by Steve Daunt, *Should Have We Gone to Lourdes* by Stephen Kennedy and *Rings!* by Rosaleen McDonagh. Change for deeper inclusion is the common core of these plays. Connelly's *Ellipsis* is written in a Beckettian style and it is a performance of the unsaid. The play portrays a couple "that tries to come to terms with the suicide of their son, whose mental health problems have disabled him from full participation in life" (Keating 2010). Daunt's *How Very Normal* is a conversational two-hander and sets two estranged friends against each other. "[One is] a narcissistic wheelchair-user and [the other is] his taciturn peer who is unable to directly address his former friend's disability or his new aggression" (*ibidem*). "*Should Have We Gone to Lourdes* by Kennedy is a hilarious dialogue between two brothers, one a wheelchair-user, in a brothel in Amsterdam. The exploration of physical intimacy is made more poignant by the physical disability of the central character"<sup>8</sup> (*ibidem*). *Rings!* by McDonagh breaks the naturalist frame of the previous plays. "The premise of father-daughter misunderstanding narratively anticipates Nora's disability. [Nora is, in fact,] deaf and mute "[and] her thoughts are communicated to the audience by voiceover, [...] caption and signing, mediating the experience of alienation for audience members who have" or have not a disability (*ibidem*).

Another attempt to shorten the distance between the disabled body and the non-disabled body was made by Girl Jonah's *She Was a Knife Thrower's Assistant*, premiered at the Dublin Dance Festival in 2010. Girl Jonah are Caroline Bowditch and Fiona Wright. Individually they have differences, one is Australian, the other is British, one is disabled, the other is non-disabled, but one is the stage double of the other. They dance at the same time. They sing different songs at the same time. This suggestive and provocative work is set in a back-stage dressing room, where through dance, song and spoken word the two performers reflect on a universal theme that is common to people with and without disabilities: the risks we all take and where danger is most likely to come from. In 2017, *The M House*, by the Kilkenny-based Equinox Theatre Company was also the launch event of *Leading Changes in Arts and Culture*, which toured to national acclaim. *The M House* is a dynamic work that celebrates inclusivity and explores the global trend of categorising and labelling people, politically and socially, and then trying to put them under broad headings, 'man', 'woman', 'Irish', right at the time when those categories are becoming increasingly blurred (see *Totally Dublin*). As *Totally Dublin* reports, *The M House* is

<sup>8</sup> An interesting essay explores the theme of sexuality presented by a professional disabled troupe in Christian O'Reilly's *Sanctuary* by the Blue Teapot Company. Katarzyna Ojrzynska maintains that the play, which showed the disabled body and all its needs, "stirred up a debate on the Irish laws that regulate [the] sexuality [of disabled people]" "Populating the Irish Stage with (Dis)abled Bodies: Sanctuary by Christian O'Reilly and the Blue Teapot Company" (Etienne, Dubost 2017, 234).

a play for anyone who has ever been put in a box / [*The M House* is] an adventure story / It's a satirical look at the legacy of institutional Ireland / It's a scramble to make sense of our one-size-fits-all culture / It's a parable of our times about the treatment of our vulnerable. (2018)

In fact, *The M House* tells the absurd story of seven humans put in a box, which they themselves support, and categorised by the first letter of their name. They are kept there to watch television all day by the APEP, an elusive organisation that offers services for boxing and categorising humans. Its representative is Middleman, who ironically represents the 'ordinary man' and is in charge of the running of the M House. The Ms, however, do not want to watch television all day and manage to be creative and to use their imaginations in that confined space. One night, Middleman orders them out of the box due to a roof leak and he is unmoved that the box will collapse without them to hold them up. As a result, *The M House* is redesigned as a series of self-contained pyramids by APEP that sells this idea as the innovation for the future, an utopian ideal for independent life, but the Ms are not isolated and after a while they manage to escape.

### 5. Conclusion

Although the works I have mentioned represent a good example that 'the disabled body is not naturally about disability', to paraphrase Petra Kupper's words (2001, 26), the process of access and inclusion is far from being complete. Disability theatre in Ireland has still to move from 'being part of the wider community' to 'being part of the wider community as equal', to become a fully accomplished minority model of disability. When the artists participating in *Turning Point* were asked to discuss their work in relation to their disability, each of them expressed, with different nuances, the desire to be part of a more inclusive society where artists and artists with disabilities were on an equal footing (see Keating, 2010). Steve Daunt is aware of the potential risk to be seen as the new Christy Brown and as just coming from 'a happy, clappy community arts perspective' but, he argues, being defined as a disabled artist is not a bad thing. However, he wants to be judged for his writing, because disability can become an issue only if his work is not good enough. John Austin Connolly's remark is also a plea for equality when he says "all writers are disabled" (*ibidem*) – there are those who are sick, those who are pompous, those who are successful and those who are envious – and therefore every writer is disabled in different ways at different times (see *ibidem*). Stephen Kennedy maintains that the challenges that artists with disability must face are those all artists must face in the contemporary climate of theatre-making in Ireland, such as lack of funding and lack of good theatre facilities (see *ibidem*). Rosaleen McDonagh echoes Kennedy's words and denounces the limited capacity for wheelchair-users in nearly all theatres in Dublin, such as the Gaiety and the Peacock, with the notable exception of the Project Arts Centre that also has accessible dressing rooms and a control room for artists with disabilities. However, for her the big question of disabled artists is still cultural because disabled artists and practitioners want to be heard and respected in their own terms and want to be defined as disabled artists. As she proudly proclaims, "My personal choice is to celebrate my disabled aesthetic. I understand it to be beautiful and perfect as it is. It works as a creative and political tool. It informs my life. My disability spills into my writing" (*ibidem*).

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