

Staging the Border: Interview with Oisín Kearney

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SH: *In recent years you have collaborated with Michael Patrick on several projects directly addressing issues related to the Irish border: a radio drama about the 1925 boundary commission, which set out to determine the position of the border (The 100 Year Old Backstop BBC 4); a radio comedy (This One Time on the Border, BBC Radio Ulster); sketches for the television mockumentary about a fictional border agency Soft Border Patrol (BBC NI); and also the two theatre plays that this interview will focus on: The Alternative and The Border Game. In addition, there is your short film documentary Borderlands, which voices concerns about the future of the Irish border. Do you think the Irish Border would have played any major role in your work if it had not been for Brexit?*

OK: The border would always have played some role in my work as it has left an indelible mark on me as a person. Growing up on the edge, you feel neglected by and sceptical of the centre (London/Belfast/Dublin). However, Brexit thrust the border into global consciousness and I think it made it impossible for me not to address it somehow.

SH: *For obvious reasons, most of the descriptions of your border projects (by yourself as well as by others) point out that you are from Warrenpoint, the town which marks the eastern end of the Irish land border. Could you tell us a bit about what role growing up within sight of the border plays in your work?*

OK: The border has played a major role in forming me as a person – I grew up right beside it. I lived in Warrenpoint during my childhood, a small coastal town that faces the Republic. At the narrowest point of the bay – called Narrow Water – there is a Norman Keep. This place has, for a long time, been a contested space, a passing land. A picture of that Narrow Water Keep was on my school uniform as a child. It symbolises pride in my town. But it also tells of a past of invasion and conflict. It is the site of one of the bloodiest massacres of the Troubles, where eighteen British soldiers were blown up by the IRA in 1979. It is where the border creeps out of the sea and cuts into the land opposite the Keep, separating North from South. It is where the border begins. It is a site of pain and anger and hurt, and yet, it is strangely beautiful, lush and serene. Growing up beside such a place had a huge impact on me. I would travel to school along the border every day. I would go across to Carlingford on trips. I would pick stones on the beach and throw them into the sea, trying to skim across the invisible border. I care about this place – it is my home. I care about the people – they are my people. And therefore I feel anger when those in power disregard the experiences of these people in

bids for power, money, and political game-playing. The hard work of the 1998 Good Friday Agreement brought about a substantial decrease in violence and instituted some form of respect, that meant I could grow up in peace. Brexit threatened to undo this. The majority of people in Northern Ireland voted against Brexit, but it still happened without the will of the Irish people.

SH: *Although the Irish border has a specific geography, it is still in many ways an intangible entity with many complex political implications and a contested meaning. What are the specific challenges of approaching such a topic in theatre? Does the medium have, in your eyes, a particular potential? Is theatre in any way better suited to deal with issues such as the Irish border?*

OK: Theatre is powerful. It has the power to bring people together – literally and figuratively. People gather to watch a story, to be entertained, to see themselves represented. Theatre is fiction and it allows us to say things and do things in a safe space. It can show ‘real’ characters caught in a conflict we can identify with. We can swear and shout and expose ourselves for the cause of art and afterwards, we can all have a drink and go home. Theatre offers catharsis. It is a space for ideas. For disagreement. For protest. When approaching such a contested and complex subject as the border, it is a useful medium for reflection on one hundred years of partition, division, hardship and hurt. A play about the border does not have to celebrate it, but it can help to mark it, commemorate it, and reflect people’s lived experience on stage and say: ‘This happened. This matters. Now, what are we going to do about it?’

SH: *Plays are often commissioned. This was also the case for The Alternative and The Border Game. To what extent did this fact impact your choice of topic or your take on the topic of the Irish border?*

OK: Myself and Michael were very lucky to have these two plays commissioned – that is, we were paid to write them. They would have been much more difficult to write without such support, as political plays are generally a harder sell. To have *The Border Game* commissioned and produced meant we knew that it was going to be performed in front of an audience, and we therefore had a duty to take the most care with it and ensure that it would offer something to audiences who made the effort to go see it. It would have characters that we could identify with and care for. It would have the lightness and laughter of the border people. But it would also not shudder from the weight of the last one hundred years, and the darkness of the Troubles.

SH: *Both plays negotiate serious issues, but they are also highly entertaining comedies. Did you find it difficult to balance or reconcile the different modes and moods?*

OK: Life has laughter and tears. When attacking a topic with such complexity as the border, we knew it was important that we reflected the border experience in its entirety. The border made things difficult for people and it caused a lot of hurt and physical, economic, psychological and spiritual trauma... but it also offered opportunities for rule-breaking, subversion, and humorous episodes. By having characters that use comedy as defence mechanisms, we could always ensure that everything was experienced as a joke – this is how Irish people generally see life. However, there is a point in the play where the weight of the past becomes too much and it becomes too serious. The difficulty was in making sure we went to the depths of the darkness and were able to resurface by the end in a way that felt like there was some hope.

SH: *Does the medium of theatre still play a role in informing public debate? Is there a noticeable difference in this respect between Dublin and Belfast or elsewhere in the South or the North?*

OK: I believe theatre still plays a role in informing public debate, as it offers an arena for the exchange of ideas. However, I feel like theatre's reach is limited by the state of Arts funding across the island, but specifically in the North. Theatre is still viewed by many as elitist, a middle-class hobby, something that can be expensive and boring. Due to the limited funding and the high price of tickets, theatres need to recoup the production costs and therefore they are less likely to take risks in their programming. Shows must cater for the broadest general audience, which means they should be less challenging of the status quo. To keep costs low, theatres only offer rehearsal periods of three or four weeks, leaving less time for discovery and experimentation. With such constraints, it is a success if a theatre show makes it on stage at all, and its primary focus is to entertain and get 'bums on seats'. The aim of informing public debate is relegated, and it can only do this with the commitment of artists and theatres and audiences alike.

SH: *For its thirtieth anniversary in 2018 Fishamble 'set out to find one, big, ambitious play, that bursts with humanity and that captures the zeitgeist of the country'. Your play was at the end of a two-year process chosen as Fishamble's 'Play for Ireland'. First performed at the Everyman Theatre in Cork, The Alternative was also shown as part of the Dublin Theatre Festival in the same year.*

The Alternative predates your intensified engagement specifically with the border, but it also anticipates it: The play is very much a response to the Scottish independence referendum in 2014 and the Brexit referendum in 2016, which the play looks at from an Irish perspective. It does so by presenting us with an alternative reality, in which Home Rule was given to Ireland in 1912, so that the Easter Rising of 1916 was only a minor event and no Anglo-Irish treaty ever had to be negotiated. In the fictional present of the play, an undivided Ireland is still in a

union with Great Britain. Much of the humour of the play stems from fleshing out the details of this alternative world, in which Ireland has become an integral part of the UK.

Yet this union of ‘Great Britain and Ireland’ is now in danger of breaking: The entire action takes place on the eve of a referendum about Ireland’s union with Britain, in a television studio, where the British Prime Minister – who happens to be an Irishwoman – is trying to appeal to the people of Ireland to vote ‘remain’.

The political satire is packed with allusions to the last one hundred years of Irish history and to Brexit. But I would like to focus on the border: In a Sunday Times article on The Alternative, the decision to ‘write a play in which the border never existed’ is identified as your main strategy to reflect on Irishness. Clearly, the non-existence of an Irish border in the play’s alternative universe invites reflections about a united Ireland both as a possibility currently brought up by proponents of a ‘border poll’ and as a utopian version of what might have been (the idea that Irishmen could kill each other over politics is, to the play’s Irish characters, an absurdity). Could you elaborate on the role that the absence of a border plays in The Alternative?

OK: *The Alternative* was written at quite a volatile time in British constitutional politics. The United Kingdom had begun the process of breaking up. The Irish border was talked about in every news outlet as the main issue to resolving Brexit. In the North of Ireland, we were intertwined in the complexities of the Scottish Independence referendum and how Brexit played out – both of which would have major implications for our daily lives. However, in the South of Ireland, I sensed a distance from the subject as foreign, as if it didn’t really matter or impact the entire political and economic setup. There were news packages on British television which showed that lots of English people had no idea where the Irish border was on the island; but there were also news packages that showed many people in Dublin had no idea where the border was! Unfortunately some southerners think that the North subsumes Donegal, Cavan and sometimes as far south as Meath! Michael and I thought a satirical play that posited that there was no border, that Home Rule had been achieved in 1912, would allow us to build an alternative reality from where we could poke fun at our own world. Many Irish people think that Scotland should be independent from the UK, but if Ireland was still part of the UK, what would it decide today? Is Ireland really as independent as it likes to think, or is it now more British than it has ever been? If the British government had not underestimated the rise of Sinn Féin at the beginning of the twentieth century, could the course of history have been changed and would we as Irish people have different hopes, fears and dreams? If the border was not there, who would we be?

SH: *Would you say that the thought experiment you conduct in the play challenges the public narrative of the border?*

OK: I think it offers an entertaining way to challenge the narrative of the border based in our reality. What if we changed the reality – would the border matter so much? If faced with the question of a possible united Ireland, how would we vote? Many Irish people had never seriously considered that question until a few years ago. We need to prepare our answers, because the question is coming over the next twenty years.

SH: *The printed version of The Alternative contains nearly one hundred footnotes, which seek to lay bare levels of meaning that might otherwise pass unnoticed (mainly references to Irish political and cultural history). While these footnotes help the reader, the sheer wealth of information contained in them is lost in any performance of the play. I was wondering what this says about the play's target audience: Can we understand the phrase 'a play for Ireland' quite literally? Is it a play that is only for Irish viewers? And: Is this in some sense symptomatic of the limited understanding of the Irish situation from the perspective outside of Ireland?*

OK: The play was commissioned as a Play for Ireland. It previewed in Cork City and premiered in Dublin City, followed by a national tour of Ireland, North and South. We wrote the play as huge in-joke for Irish audiences, with several easter eggs for students of Irish history. I argue that the information in the footnotes is not lost in any performance of the play, as most Irish people are pretty good on their Irish history. The play challenges our fixation on historical facts and what we think we may know and pokes fun by showing an Ireland that is completely different, if only one step removed. What if Michael Collins was a great British war general who used guerrilla tactics against the Nazis to shorten the war? What if De Valera was vilified as an anti-British Nazi sympathiser? What if all the British memorials and statues had not been removed and blown up and it was normal for an Irish person to have a bust of Oliver Cromwell in their office? The audiences across Ireland understood the nuances in the play and were able to enjoy the humour. The footnotes are for those who might be less familiar with our Irish history – those readers outside Ireland – specifically, Brexit voters in England.

SH: *Your most recent play, The Border Game, was commissioned by the Belfast-based production company Prime Cut to mark Northern Ireland's centenary in 2021. The play then premiered October 2021 at the Lyric Theatre as the opening event of the Belfast International Festival. The Border Game stages a private encounter between two people, which takes place on a field on the Irish border. The two characters are clearly representatives of the island's cultural divide: there is, on the one hand, Catholic Sinéad from the Republic and a nationalist background, while, on the other, Protestant Henry hails from Northern Ireland and a unionist family. Sinéad and Henry are ex-lovers, and, in the course of the play, they try to come to terms with their personal and cultural history while – somewhat ironically – literally repairing the fence that separates their respective lives and countries.*

The topic of the broken love relationship and the 'love across the divide'-motif makes the play very relatable. Yet, at the same time, the lovers' story is intimately bound up with the very

particular place of the Irish border, not least of all because the two characters represent antagonistic communities, which invites an allegorical reading of the play as a statement on the current political situation. How dominant was this idea of creating some kind of allegory when you were working on the play?

OK: We did not set out to create an allegory, but it became the clearest way of condensing one hundred years of history into a personal encounter. Everything in the play had to be charged with the past – both personal and historical. A broken fence on the border obviously represents a contested physical border, a border between jurisdictions, between personal experiences, between past, present and future. And the two characters hold within them a personal story, but also the stories of the one hundred people we spoke to along the border. They are vessels for the lived experiences of border people. The difficulty was trying to balance the political and personal, ensuring that the allegory and the living and breathing characters could sit side by side.

SH: The characters in The Border Game are in their mid-thirties. At the beginning of the play, it seems like the Troubles are ancient history for them; but in the course of the play we observe that both of them are still in their own way trying to come to terms with a traumatic experience, and their feelings still prove raw. Would you say that this is representative of an attitude at large among people?

OK: On the surface, no. But under the surface, I would argue that it is. For many border people, there is still a rawness and pain that stems from the Troubles. Every family has been affected in some profound way. Everyone knows someone who killed or was killed. The conflict may have ended over thirty years ago now, but for a person in their mid-thirties, their first memories are from a time of war. They grew up in the aftermath of it, trying to comprehend what had just happened at a time when no one wanted to revisit it. Under this age, from people aged thirty and below, the Troubles is less relevant and the border is a different thing in their minds because they never saw the fortifications and don't remember the British soldiers with their guns and tanks and bombs (they may not have even heard 'Zombie' by The Cranberries). There is a school of thought that we have moved on from the Troubles, and that by talking about it again and again, we are caught in a cycle of re-traumatisation. It is 'ancient history'. It is not relevant now. I understand this viewpoint, and I get the fatigue with Troubles narratives. We are so much more than that. It should not define us. However, I do think it is so recent and so deep that we cannot extricate ourselves from it. We cannot just forget it, or move on. That is the point of this play. We must carry the ghosts of the past with us, wherever we go. We must be Janus-faced, looking back and forward simultaneously. As the play was commissioned to mark one hundred years of partition, we felt it was exactly the right time to reflect on the last one hundred years. It happened. But now we have a choice to do something else.

SH: *In the course of working on the play you spent the summer of 2020 touring the border, speaking to about one hundred individuals of diverse ages, backgrounds and experiences. In how far did this trip change your perception of the border?*

OK: This trip thoroughly changed my perception of the border. To me, it had always been a small area – from Warrenpoint to Crossmaglen, and maybe a couple of roads into Donegal. To travel the border, the whole line, to take it in in all its rurality and quietness and neglect was eye-opening. I saw how volatile and irreverent and harsh the border is. I learned things about how the border affected people in unique ways – all roads were closed between Leitrim and Fermanagh for years, meaning people had to travel miles and miles to get to the next field, something not only frustrating but also the cause of a social isolation that led directly to one of the highest levels of suicides in Europe. People in the centres – London, Belfast, Dublin – might think they know the border, but I'm from the edge and I learned things I didn't know before. The experience really instilled in me a respect for border people and how hard things have been for them, yet they are the ones that get on with it – they are the ones with the solution.

SH: *At the core of both characters' experience lie tragic events connected to the existence of the border (Henry's father was shot by the IRA, a friend of Sinéad's committed suicide); yet for all that there also remains some sort of border nostalgia. What kind of stories did people mostly share with you on your trip?*

OK: The border, to most people, is a thing that allows for transgression of authority. The stories we heard were mostly tales of smuggling, about the illegal movement of cattle, pigs, cigarettes, alcohol or field gates to make money and for entertainment. To get one over the customs men became a sport and it was something that the people loved to do. The border also became an obstacle to cross in acts of love. Driving a girl home when she was from another side of the border meant you needed a triptych or a way of 'hopping the border' through an illegal route. Border people love tales of wit and wile – anything rebellious really. There is no nostalgia for a hard border, but there is for yarns of evading the border to get a bit of money or for a goodnight kiss.

SH: *How would you describe the relationship between the stories you collected (several of which found their way into the play) and the larger political narrative of the border?*

OK: Many of the stories we collected are already part of the larger narrative of the border, but there are many stories that I heard for the first time. The key difference is while the larger political narrative is simplified – still green and orange, them and us... – the stories we collected are about daily life along the border, lived experiences that do not fit easily into any one ideology. They are real and they are from the experiences of people on both sides of the

border, from both communities, from various genders, sexualities, ages, professions and economic backgrounds.

SH: *The play contains several embedded scenes in which the two actors slip into other roles, assuming different personae and enacting stories connected to living with the border. What was the motivating idea behind using this device?*

OK: The scenes are the 'games' that Henry and Sinéad play with each other. They are the basis for how they communicate with each other in their relationship and their love of story-telling. But these scenes also serve a function of enabling the audience to be in one time and place with the central characters, yet travel across time to experience the stories from the border over the last century. The characters engage in these 'games' in order to reconnect, but the scenes also allow us to journey through the border history to understand the characters more fully. However, playing games have rules and consequences – and they are sucked into the bog and complex histories. Instead of being voluntary joyful reminiscing, the 'games' become involuntary, something that must be waded through for survival.

SH: *Could you reveal to us why you chose the expression 'border game' for the title?*

OK: Because living along the border is like being caught in a game. When decisions are made against your will that affect how you live your life (like partition or Brexit), it can make you feel like a pawn in a terrible game of chess. The play seeks to show how the people of the border are not pawns – they are real, living, breathing people. Henry and Sinéad's lives have been completely changed by the border and the conflict that comes with it. They have lost family and friends and even their sense of self. The border brought them together and it also pulled them apart – whether they wanted it to or not. There is a famous song called the Patriot Game, which laments how young Irish people keep getting sucked into the desire to fight oppression and make patriots of themselves. The Border Game is one that feels like it might be fun and not too serious, but it can be exhausting and deadly. Why does living where you are from have to be a political act? If you are from the Irish border, it just is.

SH: *Are you currently engaged in other border projects, or would you rather leave the border alone for a while?*

OK: You will have to wait and see. However, Michael and I are currently writing a play for Edinburgh's Traverse theatre that explores what it might be like to form a union of craic between Ireland and Scotland. That will certainly bring up another raft of questions about borders.

SH: *Thank you so much for sharing your thoughts and experiences with us!*