

CHAPTER 37

IRISH THEATRE IN BRITAIN

JAMES MORAN

THE SHAUGHRAUN

IN 2004, during a troubled centenary year, the Abbey Theatre experienced a number of well-publicized box office failures. However, one ray of light came from a production of *The Shaughraun*, a 128-year-old melodrama by Dion Boucicault. In contrast with the rest of the centenary programme, *The Shaughraun* exceeded all marketing projections and, during a long initial run of almost seventy performances between 27 May and 31 July, played at 67 per cent of capacity.¹ Unsurprisingly, four months later the Abbey revived the production for another long run, clocking up almost another 100 performances between 23 November 2004 and 26 February 2005. By September 2004 the director of *The Shaughraun*, John McColgan, anticipated that the production would soon tour the US, boasting: 'We're looking at Broadway, and Broadway is looking at us.' Newspapers reported that the William Morris Agency had already received an enthusiastic response from North American venues about the prospect of hosting the play, with the tour expected to begin at the Guthrie Theater in Minnesota, and then to proceed to Chicago, Toronto, Boston, and the Kennedy Center in Washington, DC.²

Unfortunately for the Abbey, this North American tour never materialized. The reason was that, rather than going straight from Dublin to Minnesota, the production first travelled from Dublin to London's West End. As John McColgan declared: 'We had an opportunity to do an American tour in the early part of next year, but we decided for planning reasons to go to the West End instead. Of course the fact that it will be in a West End theatre for eighteen weeks will make it even more attractive to American promoters.'³ Here

¹ For more detail see Ben Barnes, *Plays and Controversies: Abbey Theatre Diaries 2000–2005* (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2008), 346.

² John Burns, 'Abbey's Shaughraun takes the Riverdance Route to America', *Sunday Times*, 12 Sept. 2004: http://www.thesundaytimes.co.uk/sto/news/world_news/article238046.ece. Accessed 15 Apr. 2014.

³ Jerome Reilly, 'Shaughraun Coup Confounds Luvvies', *Irish Independent*, 27 Feb. 2005: <http://www.independent.ie/opinion/analysis/shaughraun-coup-confounds-luvvies-26205265.html>. Accessed 15 Apr. 2014.

McColgan attempted to emulate what he had done when he directed the *Riverdance* show in the previous decade, when the show had been staged strategically at locations in Dublin and the British capital (notably for Prince Charles at London's Coliseum, and for the Queen at the Royal College of Music). By the time the show reached the USA, the *New York Times* therefore hailed the arrival of *Riverdance* with a review that made no mention of the work's Eurovision origins but instead began by describing the production as having enjoyed 'phenomenal success in Dublin and London over the last two years'.⁴ In this way, London had provided a shop-window to attract other global consumers, particularly those of New York, to the realm of Irish performance.

The example of *The Shaughraun*, however, showed that London could also provide a 'reverse Midas' effect. For the last two weeks of that show's Dublin run, crowds had queued outside the Abbey for cancellations.⁵ By contrast, at London's Albery (now the Noël Coward) Theatre, audiences for *The Shaughraun* were rarely to be found. Before performances, the dispirited actors trod the pavements outside the theatre, trying to coax spectators inside. The London run opened on 8 June, and had been booked to continue until 24 September, but attendances proved so poor—particularly after the 7/7 bombings of London's public transport network—that the show closed two months early on 30 July. Even the dog playing the part of Patch started to look homesick and needed to be sent home to Dublin after two weeks in the British capital.⁶

Before the London opening, the Abbey's production of *The Shaughraun* had often been discussed in terms of box office success, US tours, and—in one enthusiastic review—of creating a theatrical 'revolution' that would revive the Abbey.⁷ Yet, after its first appearance in the British capital, the production was more frequently described as artistically bankrupt, inauthentic, and damaging to the Abbey Theatre at a particularly vulnerable time.⁸ When Ben Barnes later edited his diaries for publication, he made the notable claim that, long before the London opening, he had been worried about exposing the play which 'worked well with home audiences' to 'sophisticated theatre markets' where it would be 'crucified', and he went on to describe the London reaction as 'the expected critical drubbing'.⁹

This chapter will consider the determining role played by London in much recent Irish drama. I want to point to the ways in which, although—as shown above—the city can pose certain problems for the products of the Irish stage, the British capital is also a key centre for the mounting, developing, and showcasing of Irish work. In addition, although the chapter will give a set of localized readings from the last fifteen years rather than attempting a comprehensive overview, I want to look beyond the capital city to think about the

⁴ Anna Kisselgoff, 'Irish Steps and their Kin', *New York Times*, 15 Mar. 1996, C5.

⁵ Reilly, 'Shaughraun Coup Confounds Luvvies'.

⁶ Eugene Moloney, 'Life's Too Doggone Ruff for Patch in West End', *Irish Independent*, 8 June 2005: <http://www.independent.ie/irish-news/lifes-too-doggone-ruff-for-patch-in-west-end-25979384.html>. Accessed 15 Apr. 2014.

⁷ Gwen Halley, 'We Want Less Theatre and Some More Plays', *Irish Independent*, 1 Aug. 2004: <http://www.independent.ie/entertainment/books-arts/we-want-less-theatre-and-some-more-plays-26223055.html>. Accessed 15 Apr. 2014.

⁸ See e.g. Angelique Chrisafis, 'How a Backstage Farce Nearly Ruined the Abbey Theatre', *Guardian*, 22 July 2005.

⁹ Barnes, *Plays and Controversies*, 416–17.

possibilities offered by Irish theatre elsewhere in Britain. London is key to the theatrical culture of these islands—it does, after all, contain over a quarter of the professional theatres in the UK.¹⁰ But the Irish have migrated in significant numbers to British locations outside London, and so it is important when considering Irish performance in Britain to avoid what Claire Cochrane calls the theatre historian's 'unexamined prejudice' of assuming 'that everything important in British theatre happened in London'.¹¹ In thinking about Ireland's theatre in Britain, then, this chapter will move on to show what theatrical performances in other locations have revealed about the anxieties and affiliations of those Irish communities outside the capital. Although the geographical spread of those communities is wider than can be discussed and described in this short chapter (a full study would naturally require detailed examination of Scotland, Wales, and many other parts of England), my work here will include indicative examples of the way that Irish shows in two British cities outside London—Liverpool and Birmingham—have been able to engage with the particularities of Irish experience in these locations, and have articulated a distinct set of local concerns.

LONDON CALLING

To state the obvious, London is one of the world's major theatre centres. Part of this is explained by the size and profile of the city: almost double the number of people live in the area over which the mayor of London and London Assembly have jurisdiction than live in the whole of the Republic of Ireland, and the city uses its playhouses to attract a significant number of visitors. More than twenty million tourists visited London in 1994, and a survey during the same decade found that more than one in ten overseas tourists visited the city solely to see its theatres.¹² In 2009, the Society of London Theatre reported that London's playhouses attracted audiences in excess of fourteen million, earning revenue of £504 million. The society estimated that this activity kept 41,000 people in employment and generated almost £2 billion for the UK's economy.¹³ Furthermore, London currently receives a disproportionate amount of the UK's arts subsidies. The independent report 'Rebalancing Our Cultural Capital' (2013) showed that, although Londoners' levels of engagement with the arts broadly matches the national average, in 2012–13 the UK taxpayer provided each Londoner with a cultural benefit of £68.99 per head, compared to £4.58 per head in the rest

¹⁰ Howard L. Hughes, 'Theatre in London and the Inter-relationship with Tourism', *Tourism Management* 19, no. 5 (1998), 447.

¹¹ Claire Cochrane, *Twentieth-Century British Theatre: Industry, Art and Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 2–3.

¹² At the time of the 2011 census, 8.17 million lived in London: (<http://www.londoncouncils.gov.uk/londonfacts/default.htm?category=2>). Accessed 15 Apr. 2014. The census in the Republic during the same year described a population of 4.6 million: (http://www.cso.ie/Quicktables/GetQuickTables.aspx?FileName=CNA13.asp&TableName=Population+1901+-+2011&StatisticalProduct=DB_CN). Accessed 15 Apr. 2014. The tourist survey is described by Hughes, 'Theatre in London', 447–8.

¹³ Nica Burns, 'Foreword', *Solt Annual Report 2009* (London: Solt, 2009), 1: <http://www.solt.co.uk/downloads/pdfs/reports/2009-annual-report.pdf>. Accessed 15 Apr. 2014.

of England.¹⁴ That ratio is fifteen to one in favour of London, and the disparity would grow wider if private-sector arts funding were taken into account, as 82 per cent of the £660 million awarded by the private sector in 2011–12 also went to London.¹⁵

Ireland has long felt the centripetal pull of Britain's well-resourced capital city, with Irish dramatists producing work in London since at least the Restoration, and there has hardly been a major Irish playwright, actor, or director who has not at some point been involved in a London production. In our own day, the city provides rich opportunities to find audiences, publicity, and skilled theatre-makers, in a way rivalled by few other locations across the world. As the Cork-born and RADA-trained actor Fiona Shaw declared, shortly before she played the title role in *Richard II* at London's National Theatre in 1995, 'I love London and there are people and places where this kind of experimentation that I am doing can be served.'¹⁶ In the following decade she declared, 'The effect of London on Dublin has been enormous. It's the jumping-off ground isn't it? It's the Ellis Island of Irish culture.'¹⁷

In the important volume *Irish Theatre in England*, Richard Cave and Ben Levitas explain:

The situation has a long history that is as true of James Shirley and George Farquhar in the seventeenth century as it is of Peg Woffington in the eighteenth or Tyrone Power in the nineteenth; Yeats and Lady Gregory were not content with the establishing of their proto-national theatre until the troupe had found acclaim in London and Oxbridge; and even today there are dramatists who prefer to première their works on English stages and actors who choose to harness their talents to London performers' agencies till Hollywood calls and cinematic success brings an income allowing a triumphant return to the homeland.¹⁸

As we have seen with the example of *The Shaughraun*, some visiting companies do slip when using London's playhouses as a stepping stone between Dublin and the USA; yet the British capital has nonetheless continually attracted Irish performers. In addition to hosting productions developed in Ireland, London has seen many of its own producing houses mounting Irish plays as a significant part of their repertory, and these theatres have influenced the history of modern Irish drama by premièring important works. During the past fifteen years, such playhouses have included the following five key venues:

1. The Tricycle Theatre: premièred Frank McGuinness's *Greta Garbo Came to Donegal* (2010) and Richard Norton-Taylor's verbatim piece *Bloody Sunday: Scenes from the Saville Enquiry* (2011), as well as producing revivals of work by contemporary writers such as Billy Roche.

¹⁴ 63% of Londoners said they engaged three times or more annually with the arts, which was the same as the national average. Peter Stark, Christopher Gordon, and David Powell, *Rebalancing Our Cultural Capital: A Contribution to the Debate on National Policy for the Arts and Culture in England* (2013): http://www.therocreport.co.uk/downloads/Rebalancing_FINAL_3mb.pdf, 13–14 (8). Accessed 15 Apr. 2014.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹⁶ Georgina Brown, 'And She's Not Bad at Tennis, Either', *Independent*, 26 May 1995.

¹⁷ Fiona Shaw, in Richard Eyre (ed.), *Talking Theatre: Interviews with Theatre People* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2009), 78.

¹⁸ Richard Cave and Ben Levitas, 'Introduction: Irish Theatre in England', in Richard Cave and Ben Levitas (eds), *Irish Theatre in England* (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2007), 1.

2. The Bush Theatre: premièred Mark O’Rowe’s *Howie the Rookie* (1999), which followed the earlier première of Conor McPherson’s *St Nicholas* (1997) and the English première of Enda Walsh’s *Disco Pigs* (1997).
3. The Donmar Warehouse: premièred Frank McGuinness’s interpretation of *Phaedra* (2006); Conor McPherson’s version of *The Dance of Death* at Trafalgar Studios (2012); and McPherson’s *The Night Alive* (2013).
4. The Royal National Theatre: premièred Colin Teevan’s *The Walls* (2001); Owen McCafferty’s *Closing Time* (2002) and his *Scenes from the Big Picture* (2003); Martin McDonagh’s *The Pillowman* (2003); Frank McGuinness’s *Oedipus* (2008); and Conor McPherson’s plays *The Seafarer* (2006) and *The Veil* (2011).
5. The Royal Court Theatre: premièred Conor McPherson’s *The Weir* (1997) and famously collaborated with Druid in 1996–7 to bring Martin McDonagh’s work to the stage, before giving the first productions of McPherson’s plays *Dublin Carol* (2000) and *Shining City* (2004); Gary Mitchell’s trio of work, *Trust* (1999), *The Force of Change* (2000), and *Loyal Women* (2003); as well as Tom Murphy’s *Alice Trilogy* (2005), Stella Feehily’s *O Go My Man* (2006), and Marina Carr’s *Woman and Scarecrow* (2006).

The list of premières at these theatres is a reasonably diverse one. Admittedly, the list is male-dominated—with writers like O’Rowe, Walsh, and McPherson often favouring the monologue—but there is no fixed template for the Irish play in London. Such work might well discuss the politics of Northern Ireland or contemporary Irish social problems, but might also consist of surreal fairy tales or vampire stories.

The resourcing for such new works has also varied, although it might be noted that the average cast for the London premières listed above consisted of eight actors, a size that many regional theatres in the UK would be incapable of matching when producing new work. In addition, the list does not name any particular revivals or remountings of Irish drama in London. Yet such work has been consistently and often lavishly produced. In 2014, for example, the version of Seán O’Casey’s *The Silver Tassie* at the Royal National Theatre’s Lyttleton space included a cast of twenty-five, and solved the script’s awkward transition between first and second acts by featuring a tenement set that exploded in a moment of auditory and pyrotechnic overload.

When the Lyttleton remounted Enda Walsh’s *Misterman* in 2011, Jamie Vartan’s stage design provided a breathtakingly vast and technically accomplished set for a play that was essentially a one-man monologue, with the Royal National Theatre gaining special permission from Lambeth Council to open up the up-stage scene dock area (usually closed off, because of fire regulations) in order to deepen the space: hence, in contrast with the play’s earlier stagings in Galway and New York, the London production included a second mezzanine structure and collapsible ceiling, and as Vartan puts, it ‘The NT was totally committed to providing the necessary back up and technical support to make it all work.’¹⁹ And in 2008 the Old Vic theatre staged Brian Friel’s *Dancing at Lughnasa* (with Andrea Corr, Niamh Cusack, and Michelle Fairley) and achieved a brilliant sense of domestic intimacy

¹⁹ I am grateful to Jamie Vartan for permission to reproduce these comments from private correspondence.

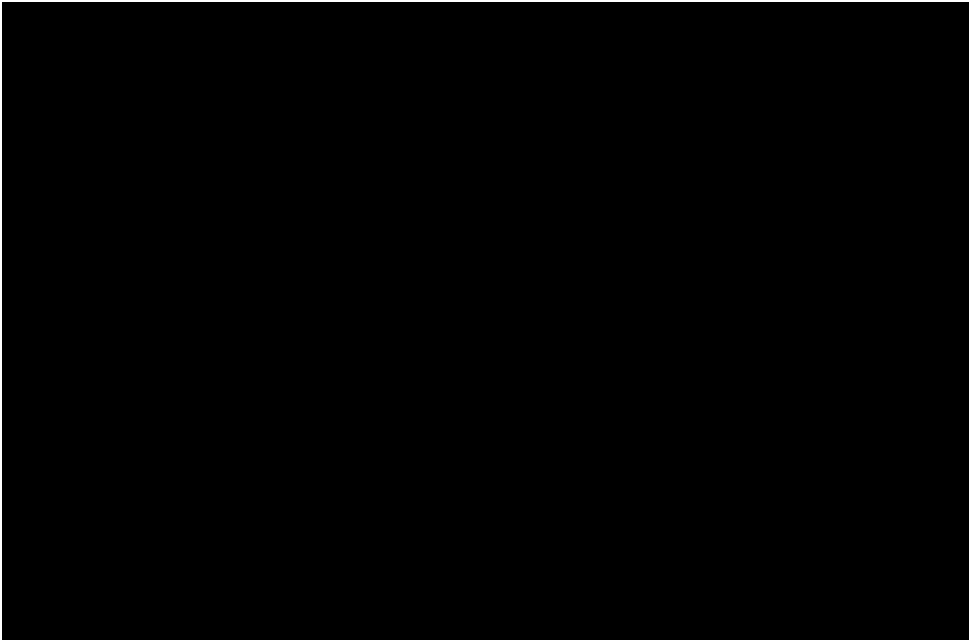


FIG. 37.1 Jamie Vartan, model set design, *Misterman* by Enda Walsh (18 April 2012, Lyttleton Theatre).

Courtesy of the set and costume designer Jamie Vartan.

by staging the play in the round—something facilitated by the sponsorship of an asset management company that paid for the proscenium arch auditorium to be entirely reconfigured for the season.

Furthermore, the cultural and economic cachet of London—and its proximity to film and television makers—means that revivals of Irish plays in London are often able to draw upon some of the best, and best-known, actors on the planet. Hence London audiences have watched Holly Hunter in Marina Carr's *By the Bog of Cats* (Wyndham's Theatre, 2004), Simon Russell Beale in Boucicault's *London Assurance* (Royal National Theatre, 2010), and Daniel Radcliffe in Martin McDonagh's *The Cripple of Inishmaan* (Noel Coward Theatre, 2013). Such actorly and material resources evidently allow Irish playwrights to explore creative avenues that would be available in few other cities: Frank McGuinness, for example, premièred a 2008 version of *Oedipus Rex* with a cast of twenty-eight, including Ralph Fiennes, at the Royal National Theatre, before going on to create a full operatic version of Sophocles' work for English National Opera in 2014.

The role of the London theatrical agent is also central to the success of Irish drama on the British stage. In particular, Nick Marston (of A. P. Watt, and later Curtis Brown) has played a crucial, if underexplored, part in the recent flourishing of new Irish work. Marston began attending the Dublin Theatre Festival during the 1980s, at a time when writers expressed surprise at seeing a London agent at the event. He saw Declan Hughes' *Digging for Fire* there in 1992, and contacted Dominic Dromgoole (then artistic director of London's Bush Theatre) to arrange a transfer to the Bush. As well as hosting the transfer, the Bush

subsequently premièred Hughes' *New Morning* in 1993. Next, in 1995, Marston watched Conor McPherson's *This Lime Tree Bower* at Dublin's Crypt Theatre, and arranged a 1996 transfer to the Bush, which then commissioned McPherson's 1997 play *St Nicholas*. (At almost exactly the same time as Marston's discovery of McPherson, the talents of Martin McDonagh were first being uncovered by Marston's friend and colleague at A. P. Watt, Rod Hall). Marston felt similarly impressed by Enda Walsh's *Disco Pigs* at Dublin's Da Club in 1996, and arranged for the work to appear at the Bush in 1997; and when he read Mark O'Rowe's *Howie the Rookie* Marston again organized the première at the Bush, which happened in 1999.

Marston describes his role in nurturing such talent:

These are wonderful writers. So my job is mostly about providing encouragement and support. For example, after initially bringing McPherson's work to London, I introduced him to Ian Rickson [the artistic director of the Royal Court from 1998 to 2006], and Rickson commissioned *The Weir*, and also took *Dublin Carol*, which was the play that opened the new Royal Court in 2000. And more recently, McPherson wrote *The Night Alive*, which I arranged for production at the Donmar Warehouse. I think it's always been important for the Irish writers I've championed to have their stage and film work seen outside Dublin: they are also international writers, and it's important for the work to be accessed by different audiences.²⁰

London's theatre managers have also sought to stage work that explores some of the nuances of Irish identity in the city itself. One venue, the Tricycle Theatre—according to its artistic director from 1984 to 2012, Nicholas Kent—specifically set about 'doing Irish work at a time when this area was known as County Kilburn'.²¹ The theatre served its diverse community by equally promoting black theatre, and some of its most notable work considered the interaction between black and Irish cultures (famously Mustapha Mutura's *The Playboy of the West Indies* in 1984). With such a history, in more recent years the Tricycle has continued to explore the way that Irishness might be malleable and prone to invention: most notably in Marie Jones's *Stones in His Pockets* (1999, 2000, 2011); Shaw's *John Bull's Other Island* (2003); and Jimmy Murphy's *The Kings of the Kilburn High Road* (2001).

At other times and places in London, similar questions about Irish affiliation have also been raised, both with the staging of work set in the city (such as McPherson's *St Nicholas* or Murphy's *The Kings of the Kilburn High Road*) and with the production of scripts by Irish writers who were born in, or who are long-term residents of, London. Martin McDonagh and Enda Walsh, for instance, have shown a repeated concern about the authenticity and societal effect of different kinds of Irish identity. Indeed, one of the most critically and commercially successful Irish plays on the London stage in recent years has been Enda Walsh's *The Walworth Farce* (Royal National Theatre, 2008), which presents the story of a family who are long-term residents of England but remain holed up in a flat in London's Walworth Road, continually acting out fictionalized scenes from their old life in Cork and deeply wary of any engagement with the city in which they actually live.

²⁰ I am grateful to Nick Marston for his permission to reproduce these comments from our discussions of 22 May 2014.

²¹ Quoted by Terry Stoller, *Tales of the Tricycle Theatre* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 95.

PITFALLS

There are, of course, a number of problematic aspects to be identified in London's prominent position in the Irish theatrical world. For one thing, the battles of the Irish revolution in the early twentieth century were fought—in large part—in order to wrest political control of the country away from London, and Cave and Levitas point to a nationalist suspicion that Irish theatre practitioners working in London constitute 'a long roll-call of renegade talent'.²² Victor Merriman has argued that post-1922 Ireland might in many respects be considered a 'successor state' to the previous colonial one, and the fact that Irish theatre-makers have continued to seek London as a goal may emphasize just how pre-existing notions of cultural prestige have proved difficult to overhaul.²³ Indeed, in the years since Irish political independence, London-based critics have demonstrated a longstanding condescension towards the Irish. In 1948 T. S. Eliot, in *Notes towards the Definition of Culture*, described Ireland, Scotland, and Wales as 'satellite cultures' dependent on England as a gravitational centre, a centre that benefits in turn from their peripheral influences.²⁴ Eight years later, Kenneth Tynan famously rearticulated this viewpoint, when he commented that 'it is Ireland's sacred duty to send over, every few years, a playwright to save the English theatre from inarticulate glumness'.²⁵ When the Abbey Theatre's version of *The Shaughraun* tanked in 2005, a similar sense of condescension could be found in some high-profile reviews: the *Observer's* Susannah Clapp, for example, lapsed into her own cod-Irish when she complained that the show 'must have lost edge in its transfer from Dublin, where it went down a storaum' [*sic*].²⁶ As Stuart Hall notes, such a perspective tends to read the particularities of the most economically prosperous and politically dominant part of Britain as providing the apparently timeless standards by which the rest of the world might be judged, whilst doing little to uncover or challenge the historical peculiarities of those hegemonic formations.²⁷

In addition, with London exerting such an influence, there is a risk of Irish theatre playing it safe by emulating past successes, and so avoiding the avant-garde or experimental. London's theatre industry is fundamentally connected to the city's broader tourist industry, and this has an effect upon what is performed there, as Howard Hughes argues: 'In order to satisfy consumer demand and enable effective signification to the consumer, both the tourist and arts industries have standardized their products. They are made "safe: and predictable through packaging and they require limited consumer involvement."²⁸ Despite the diversity we have identified in Irish plays at a number of London venues, the attitude that Hughes

²² Cave and Levitas, *Irish Theatre in England*, 1.

²³ Victor Merriman, *Because We Are Poor: Irish Theatre in the 1990s* (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2011), 26.

²⁴ T. S. Eliot, *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* (London: Faber & Faber, 1948), 54–5.

²⁵ Kenneth Tynan, 'The End of the Noose', *Observer*, 27 May 1956.

²⁶ Susannah Clapp, 'Forest's Grump', *Observer*, 12 June 2005.

²⁷ Stuart Hall, 'Political Belonging in a World of Multiple Identities', in Steven Vertovec and Robin Cohen (eds), *Conceiving Cosmopolitanism: Theory, Context, and Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 28–9.

²⁸ Hughes, 'Theatre in London', 446.

identifies can affect the content of shows produced by Irish theatre-makers in London—for example, when a musical version of Roddy Doyle's *The Commitments* opened at the Palace Theatre in 2014, the material was quickly adjusted after negative spectator response (one cast member observed that 'The swear words have been toned down a bit').²⁹ Such worries may also affect the overall packaging and perception of work that arrives in the city after being developed elsewhere: for instance, when *The Shaughraun* came to London in 2005, its connection to McColgan's previous show, *Riverdance*, was prominently emphasized in the opening pages of the Albery's theatre programme, even though the almost-identical programme sold at the Abbey's most recent run of the same show had made no mention of *Riverdance*.³⁰

The broader creative effect of such tendencies towards standardization were observed by Nicholas Grene and Patrick Lonergan, who hosted a meeting of the Irish Theatrical Diaspora network at Galway in 2009, and subsequently wrote:

It is often assumed that the success of an Irish play on Broadway or in London's West End must be of benefit for theatre within Ireland itself, we had noted—and to a great extent we found that assumption borne out by the evidence. Yet we also discovered some evidence of an impoverishment of theatre in parts of Ireland: a homogenization of the kinds of plays being produced, a reduction in the number of new works by leading authors being premièred in Ireland, and a gradual decline or disappearance of companies with strong links to their localities.³¹

An Irish playwright or touring company seeking to confront audiences with surprising and counterintuitive themes may indeed be hindered by a marketing strategy aimed at London and New York. For, as John P. Harrington has pointed out, when Irish theatre-makers arrive in New York, their attempts to move outside a 'nitch' risks 'the "Coals-to-Newcastle" complaint: if the Irish National Theatre comes to New York with work inspired by Grotowski or Peter Brook instead of Synge or Friel, they are viewed as strangers from afar bearing nothing but what America already had.'³² Concerns about this 'nitch' may become increasingly urgent as London's tourist industry pivots away from the Anglosphere and towards the Far East, bringing the question of whether the spoken-word dramas at which the Irish have excelled will retain their cultural pre-eminence.

MADE IN LIVERPOOL

London remains the best-known and best-resourced theatrical destination in Britain, but, as we shall now see, during the last decade and a half, the new plays staged in the country's

²⁹ Mark Hennessy, 'A Strong Commitment: Deco Wins Over the West End', *Irish Times*, 28 Jan. 2013: <http://www.irishtimes.com/life-and-style/people/a-strong-commitment-deco-wins-over-the-west-end-1.1669723>. Accessed 15 Apr. 2014.

³⁰ Abbey Theatre, *The Shaughraun*, programme of 23 Nov. 2004; Albery Theatre, *The Shaughraun*, programme of 8 June 2005.

³¹ Nicholas Grene and Patrick Lonergan, 'Introduction', in Nicholas Grene and Patrick Lonergan (eds), *Irish Drama: Local and Global Perspectives* (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2012), 1.

³² John Harrington, 'Introduction', in John Harrington (ed.), *Irish Theater in America: Essays on Irish Theatrical Diaspora* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2009), p. xv.

other cities have repeatedly investigated forms of Irish identity that involve specific local attachments, associations, and affiliations.

From 2003, the Everyman and Playhouse theatres in Liverpool premièred at least twenty-three new scripts by local writers in the play series 'Made in Liverpool'. This series presented work that originated in Liverpool, was produced by the Liverpool Everyman and Playhouse, and had been specifically written for those spaces by dramatists from or in the region. Audiences watched new work by Laurence Wilson, Esther Wilson, and Jonathan Harvey, but one of the striking features of this series was the Irish content of some of its most prominent productions. According to the current literary associate of the Everyman and Playhouse, Lindsay Rodden (herself from Donegal), there was no explicit intention to make 'Made in Liverpool' address Irish themes, but the idea of Ireland emerged as something that is 'naturally there, knitted into the fabric of the city for many writers'.³³ After all, Liverpool has long been home to an extraordinarily large Irish population: the first modern census of the country, in 1841, records 49,639 Irish-born people in Liverpool, or 17.3 per cent of the city's population.³⁴ Thus, as the former dramaturge and literary manager at the Liverpool Everyman and Playhouse, Suzanne Bell, puts it, although ideas of nationality and cultural identity were not 'discussed as a starting point' for any of the 'Made in Liverpool' plays:

The history of the Irish communities in Liverpool and the associated notion of storytelling, community, drama and an oral tradition is something that was certainly discussed within wider groups of playwrights, including the playwrights that you mention [those involved in 'Made in Liverpool'], and there is perhaps something about the energy, atmosphere and tone of Liverpool that I would suggest is very particular to the identity of the city and its artists that one could perhaps suggest derived from the Irish ancestry of the city.³⁵

One such play from the 'Made in Liverpool' series is the 2006 piece by Chloë Moss, *The Way Home*, which is set in and around an Irish Travellers' site in the city. Moss's plot works within a specific local context: not only are there numerous expressions and phrases that locate the play in Liverpool ('It would've been boss, that'; 'Go 'ead then') but the Travellers' site depicted on stage is a recognizable version of the real-life Tara Park, a location set up for Irish Travellers by Liverpool City Council in the 1970s, and which had been brought to regional prominence shortly before the production by the council's decision to modernize the site at a cost of £800,000.³⁶ The play therefore describes how Irish Travellers might provoke ire but also affection from others, and ultimately shows that both the Travellers and those in the wider community might feel equally uprooted and unsettled at different times. In making this point, Moss's script pulls apart any easy binary assumptions about national identity. At one moment, for example, the English character of Bobby and the

³³ I am grateful to Lindsay Rodden for these email comments. I am also indebted to Vic Merriman for his invaluable advice about Irish theatre in Liverpool.

³⁴ John Belchem, *Irish, Catholic and Scouse: The History of the Liverpool Irish 1800–1939* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2007), 7.

³⁵ I am grateful to Suzanne Bell for permission to reproduce these comments from private correspondence.

³⁶ Chloë Moss, *The Way Home* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2006), 15, 32; 'All Mod Cons at Travellers' Camp', *Liverpool Echo*, 14 Aug. 2003: <http://www.liverpoolecho.co.uk/news/liverpool-news/mod-cons-travellers-camp-3552334>. Accessed 15 Apr. 2014.

Irish Traveller character of Daniel talk to one another, with Bobby making a surprising discovery:

- BOBBY. Where yer from?
 DANIEL. Here.
 BOBBY. Liverpool?
 DANIEL. Here.
 BOBBY. Yer speak . . . Irish, isn't it? Yer accent like.
 DANIEL. I was born here.³⁷

Thus, Moss complicates any simplistic notions about belonging, by pointing out that, in parts of Liverpool at least, people may speak with an apparently Irish voice in spite of having been born and raised in the English city. Such an emphasis draws attention to what Mary Hickman suggests is the dominant 'myth of homogeneity' in Britain, which has 'assumed that all people who were white smoothly assimilated into the "British way of life"', and which has presented particular problems for those suggesting alternative forms of allegiance.³⁸

A similar point was made in 2007 when 'Made in Liverpool' premièred Stephen Sharkey's play *The May Queen*. Sharkey's work is set during the Liverpool Blitz of 1941, and tells the story of how Frank Donohue has been murdered by his wife's lover, with her two children subsequently seeking revenge. The play avoids revealing the place of birth or precise nationality of its protagonists, but—in addition to the fact that the play is suffused with a Marian piety—the characters have Irish names (Vinnie Phelan, Eileen McGrath, Father Quiggan, and so forth); the matriarch of the piece describes how her incontinent son 'could shit for Ireland, that one'; and at one point the characters sing 'a sentimental Irish song'.³⁹ Yet these characters are all shown inhabiting specific parts of Liverpool, and make little mention of Irish places or personalities. How, then, should such people be described? Are they English or Irish, or something else entirely? Can you really be 'diasporic' if you have little notion of yourself as having a homeland to which you wish to return? Notably, the play's only character to talk specifically about going to Ireland is the only on-stage character who comes from outside this Liverpool community altogether, the German Jewish Liliane, who describes how her dead brother wanted 'to go to Ireland. He was very romantic about it. He read too many poems about dark-eyed girls, and death, and the hungry sea.'⁴⁰

Thus, in *The May Queen*, the idea of journeying to Ireland comes only from an inappropriate cooption of Jewish experience, with the Donohues and Collinses of Liverpool having little connection to such narratives of diasporic exile. At one of the most telling points in the play, Sharkey illuminates these questions of belonging with a biblical example:

- THERESA. Jesus was a Jew.
 ANGELA. How d'yer work that one out?
 THERESA. On the cross, wasn't it. King of the Jews.

³⁷ Moss, *The Way Home*, 22.

³⁸ Mary J. Hickman, 'Reconstructing Deconstructing "Race": British Political Discourses about the Irish in Britain', *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 21, no. 2 (1998), 305.

³⁹ Stephen Sharkey, *The May Queen* (London: Methuen, 2007), 68, 67.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 65.

- PHELAN. Aye, yeah, that's what the Romans called him, like—
 THERESA. He was born a Jew. His mother was Jewish.
 ANGELA. Go 'way. Our Lady?⁴¹

Amongst other things, this passage raises the question of what kind of cultural identity children might inherit from their parents. After all, the play's murdered husband apparently spent his time trying to persuade his son and his son's friend to 'join the IRA', but has done so in vain, with both boys ending up in the British army.⁴² Despite that failure, a whole set of other cultural behaviours has been inherited from Ireland by these Liverpool-based characters, and Sharkey underscores this point at a formal level, in the fact that this part of the play is a rewriting of one of the best-known moments from the most canonical work of Irish literature. Sharkey's script echoes the point in the 'Cyclops' episode of Joyce's *Ulysses* when Bloom angrily declares that 'the Saviour was a Jew and his father was a Jew'.⁴³ Through this emulation of Joyce, Sharkey develops the play's recurring question about the morality of Irish wartime neutrality in the face of the Holocaust, but also emphasizes how the behaviour of those in Liverpool might rely on a deep engagement with Irish precedents.

In 2007, 'Made in Liverpool' premièred Lizzie Nunnery's *Intemperance*, a play that again revolves around the examination of a particular kind of Irish identity in the city. This drama, set in 1854, describes the family of Fergal Monahan, who once lived in Omeath, Co. Louth, but who subsequently moved to Dublin, where his daughter Millie lived as a toddler. This duo then moved to Liverpool, where Millie's child Ruari was born and raised. Yet, although the Liverpoolian Ruari boasts that 'I was born here', he still realizes that he has an outsiderly status, knowing that he is seen as 'a Mick'; failing to recall the name of the English patron saint ('What is it? English guy. Dragon-killer'); and realizing that his sister is perceived as an 'Irish whore'.⁴⁴ Just as in Stephen Sharkey's *The May Queen*, Nunnery's play asks how an Irish cultural identity might be manifested in those who do not live in Ireland. In theme, the play explores how Ruari might be 'The bleedin' ghost of yer bleedin' Da'; whilst at a formal level Nunnery's play broadly echoes the storyline of Seán O'Casey's *Juno and the Paycock*, with members of an impoverished family living in the slums, surrounded by child death, but behaving as though they are about to transcend their current circumstances because of the false expectation of future wealth.⁴⁵

Of course, these plays by Stephen Sharkey, Chloë Moss, and Lizzie Nunnery cannot straightforwardly be labelled 'Irish drama'. The scripts are each set in England, and are written by playwrights who were all born and raised in and around Liverpool. Yet each of these works seeks to analyse and disturb such straightforward notions of categorization, asking: how do we describe an individual's national identity if that identity is profoundly shaped by Ireland, not as a result of living in Ireland, but by having that culture passed down through family members and other acquaintances in the city of Liverpool? As Lizzie Nunnery puts it:

I am of Irish descent but a far way back. My great grandparents on both sides were Irish and in exploring Irish immigration through *Intemperance* I couldn't help but reflect on what

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 25. ⁴² *Ibid.*, 7. ⁴³ James Joyce, *Ulysses* (1922) (London: Penguin, 1992), 445.

⁴⁴ Lizzie Nunnery, *Intemperance* (London: Faber & Faber, 2007), 37, 83, 36, 86.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 50.

their experience might have been. I was very interested in the idea of Liverpool as a cultural melting pot [. . .]. The characters in *Intemperance* identify themselves as Irish even though members of the younger generation have spent the vast majority of their lives in Liverpool. I think Liverpool today retains some of that sense of otherness—its inhabitants are often hesitant to call themselves English, and I tried to show the roots of this in my play.⁴⁶

Stephen Sharkey has similarly commented, ‘judging by the Irishness of my surname I do believe my family on my father’s father’s side is descended from Irish stock’, and, ‘In setting out to write *The May Queen* I wanted to reflect some of the murk and ambiguity of Liverpool’s position in the War—a major strategic port (and therefore a target for German bombing), but also steeped in Irish culture, and therefore face to face with Irish neutrality and all its complexities.’⁴⁷

BIRMINGHAM

At the same time as the Liverpool Everyman and Playhouse theatres explored the nuances of local Irish identity in ‘Made in Liverpool’, the Birmingham Repertory Theatre set about something similar. In 1998 the Birmingham playhouse opened a new studio space, ‘The Door’, which was intended to focus on new work that addressed contemporary concerns. As Robert Leach puts it, ‘The policy here was to present work by new writers, many of them radical and from minority groups [. . .]. It was a space for new ideas and different approaches.’⁴⁸ Within its first six years, ‘The Door’ had premièred new work by more than fifteen different writers (including, most famously, Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti’s *Behzti*),⁴⁹ and these premières included drama that gave a provocative interrogation of Irish identity.

Like Liverpool, Birmingham had long been a focus for Irish migration to the UK, with many people in the Midlands city boasting an Irish heritage. Indeed, in the mid-1960s, 16.5 per cent of people born in Birmingham had at least one Irish-born parent.⁵⁰ Since the late 1990s, the city has hosted what is claimed as the third-largest St Patrick’s Day parade in the world. But, in addition, Birmingham was also the site of the most lethal bombing planned by the IRA during the Troubles, when in 1974 bombs detonated in two city-centre pubs, injuring 162 and killing twenty-one (four of the dead being Irish citizens). The expression of Irish identity in Birmingham therefore became, during the late twentieth century, something problematic and controversial.⁵¹ And at the dawn of the twenty-first century, it was the complex nature of this local Irish identity that was probed by new work at ‘The Door’.

⁴⁶ I am grateful to Lizzie Nunnery for her permission to reproduce this quotation from private correspondence.

⁴⁷ I am grateful to Stephen Sharkey for his permission to reproduce this quotation from private correspondence.

⁴⁸ Robert Leach, *Theatre Studies: The Basics*, 2nd edn (London: Routledge, 2013), 99.

⁴⁹ The 2004 production of *Behzti* (Punjabi, ‘Dishonour’) had to be cancelled by the Birmingham Repertory Theatre, following protests by the local Sikh community.

⁵⁰ Corporate Statistician, Library of Birmingham, ‘The Nationality of Children Born in 1964, Table 11’ and ‘Trends, the Nationality of Children Born in 1965’, in *Ethnic Origins of Birmingham Children 1966–81*, Birmingham Central Statistical Office, LF 40–41.

⁵¹ For a full discussion, see James Moran, *Irish Birmingham: A History* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2010), 185–210.

In February 1999 ‘The Door’ premièred a play by a 36-year-old Dubliner, Declan Croghan, called *Paddy Irishman, Paddy Englishman and Paddy*. ? Croghan intended the script to focus particularly on the experience of the Irish outside Ireland, as he put it: ‘this is written from the perspective of an Irish person in Britain.’⁵² He evoked wanting to describe how ‘There was a great freedom about coming to England—it was a place to grow. But each time there was a bombing on the mainland the community would withdraw into itself. Even intelligent middle-class English people, they wouldn’t say anything, but you felt it.’⁵³ Croghan therefore constructed a play that broadly echoes the plot of Seán O’Casey’s *The Shadow of a Gunman*, but updated the action so that a hardline IRA man who objects to the Good Friday Agreement leaves a bomb with two unknowing Irish immigrants in a London bedsit. The play includes descriptions of death and killing that had a particular resonance when delivered so close to the site of the 1974 attacks in Birmingham. At one point in *Paddy Irishman*, for example, one of the flatmates realizes, ‘There has been a big shoot out down in the pub’, describing how one of their acquaintances has committed mass murder in a bar, where ‘He storms in and wipes out the whole lot of them.’⁵⁴ Such descriptions of an IRA pub massacre conjured up disturbing memories for members of an audience in Birmingham, particularly when, a few moments later, the same flatmate realizes that he has been left with a bomb and sarcastically contemplates whether to ‘plant the bomb and then we will phone up and give them a warning’.⁵⁵

Croghan thus presented the audience with a kind of warped and distorted version of the 1974 attack; he was not the only new writer in Birmingham’s playhouse to do so. The subject of Irish terrorism appeared in another première at ‘The Door’ in 2005, when the theatre staged Billy Cowan’s *Smilin’ Through*. Cowan came from a working-class family in Newtownards in Co. Down, but had trained part-time as an actor at the Birmingham School of Speech and Drama, and for about a year was a member of the Birmingham Rep Youth Theatre, performing in Berkoff’s *Agamemnon*. Cowan’s own tongue-in-cheek play depicts a terrorist from the ‘Irish Queer Liberation Army’:

TERRORIST. [. . .] We’re a newly formed organisation of men and women dedicated to the cause—complete liberation of all queers in Ireland. We use whatever means are necessary to secure our rights to self determination.

KYLE. You’re serious?

TERRORIST. Of course I’m bloody serious. Don’t you think it’s about time the people in this country were forced to recognise the rights of us Queers? [. . .] The armalite is the only language the people of this island recognise.⁵⁶

As with the earlier work at ‘The Door’, Cowan’s work set about refiguring the familiar imagery associated with the Irish bomber. Here, the terrorist is a figure who does ‘kill people’, but who is also accused of wearing ‘combats as a fashion statement’. When premièred at ‘The Door’, these plays by Croghan and Cowan issued a challenge to local spectators: might

⁵² Quoted by Terry Grimley, ‘Gunpowder and Glamour’, *Birmingham Post*, 3 Feb. 1999, 15.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ Declan Croghan, *Paddy Irishman, Paddy Englishman, and Paddy*. ? (London: Faber & Faber, 1999), 55.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 60.

⁵⁶ I am grateful to Billy Cowan for permission to quote from the performance script of *Smilin’ Through*.

it now be time to reconsider, and even to laugh at, a comedy involving, the area's most bitter ideas about Irishness?

The year after staging Croghan's work, the Birmingham Repertory Theatre premièred a drama that addressed the legacy of the pub bombings still more directly. The play *Belonging* was written by Kaite O'Reilly, who had been born and grew up in Birmingham, and who had been 10 years old at the time of the terrorist attacks of 1974. O'Reilly has described how, although she had lived in Birmingham, she viewed her parents' home in Dublin as where she really belonged: 'In my family we always talked about going home for the summer and meant Ireland. I never really saw Birmingham as my home.'⁵⁷ As a writer, she began to wonder, 'Can you feel homesick for a place you've never lived?' and decided

to write about the complex relationship between the English West Midlands and its Irish community. Growing up Irish in Birmingham in the 1970s was a formative and defining experience. I'm sure like many immigrants from other parts of the world I was constantly aware of my duality—English in Ireland and Irish in England—yet this identity was further complicated by the effects of the 1974 IRA bombing campaign, when a war was carried out—literally—on our doorstep.⁵⁸

In *Belonging*, O'Reilly therefore tells the story of an elderly Irish-born woman, who by the 1990s has lived for many years in Birmingham but who longs to return home, in large part because of what happened during the Troubles. This character angrily tells her daughter:

I'll tell you about the heart being blown out of the city we helped build. I'll tell you what it was like to be spat at in the street, having names hurled after you if you so much as opened your mouth and they heard the accent. Made guilty by association.⁵⁹

The daughter has a very different sense of identity, although her allegiances are no less vexed. She was born in Birmingham rather than Ireland, and despite the fact that she desperately strives to be Irish, she constantly fails to achieve the authenticity she craves. She therefore describes the disorienting feeling of being a second-generation Irishwoman: 'I have the parentage, citizenship—bank account. I know my history, culture—I'm even learning the bloody language—but I'm still Plastic Paddy, hand-crafted in Digbeth.'⁶⁰ Here the play comes close to articulating the problem described by Aidan Arrowsmith, who observes that the second-generation Irish in Britain may feel particularly saddled by the remit of '[e]xclusive nationalisms', framed as 'doubly inauthentic: not quite English, neither are they "truly" Irish'.⁶¹

CONCLUSION

Of course, the Irish shows of 'The Door' and 'Made in Liverpool' have not gained widespread name recognition. But what they do indicate, along with the better-known work first

⁵⁷ Alison Jones, 'A Touch of the Irish at Home or Away', *Birmingham Post*, 4 Dec. 2000.

⁵⁸ Kaite O'Reilly, Author's Note, programme for *Belonging* (Birmingham Repertory Theatre, 2000).

⁵⁹ Kaite O'Reilly, *Belonging* (London: Faber & Faber, 2000), 76.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 88.

⁶¹ Aidan Arrowsmith, 'Plastic Paddy: Negotiating Identity in Second-Generation "Irish-English" Writing', *Irish Studies Review* 8, no. 1 (2000), 35.

staged at London venues including the Royal Court, Royal National Theatre, and Tricycle, is that the British theatre, when staging work on Irish themes, is willing to go beyond familiar stereotypes and explore provocative new theatrical realms—including those of the Irish Traveller, the gay Irish terrorist, or the disorientated second-generation Irishwoman. Impressively, much new work premièred in London, Liverpool, and Birmingham has avoided simplistic conceptions of Irishness by employing national paradigms but consistently highlighting the way that various rifts and differences might traverse such conceptions of nation. And although it has been beyond the scope of this chapter to survey Irish theatre in Wales and Scotland (including the important Edinburgh Traverse), the fact that the distinctive Irish identity of locations such as Kilburn, Digbeth, or Tara Park has been articulated onstage offers a promising sign that, in an era of increased devolution, the theatre has the potential to continue speaking of the particularities of Irish experience in diverse places across these islands.

When London hosted the Olympic Games in 2012, the event began with a theatrical ceremony that was labelled internationally as ‘Very British’, and yet depended upon the participation of those with significant Irish connections.⁶² The contribution of theatre-makers including director Danny Boyle, writer Frank Cottrell Boyce, and actor Kenneth Branagh indicated just how much the British stage has been enriched by Irish migration to the country, and demonstrated that Irish theatre is by no means confined to the island of Ireland. But it is not only in such a lavishly funded theatrical jamboree, aimed largely at international viewers, that such an Irish dynamic can be seen. In small-scale London venues such as the Bush and the Tricycle, and in regional theatres such as those of Liverpool and Birmingham, the playhouse stage has been facilitating a dynamic process of interchange between cultures, and allowing surprising new perspectives to emerge. There are dangers, to be sure, in the prominent part played by Britain on the Irish theatrical scene—not least the risk of Irish productions being homogenized by commercial pressures and of being judged according to (the sometimes outmoded or inaccurate) perceptions and prejudices that prevail in the old imperial centre—but there is also much to be gained for an Irish theatre that utilizes connections with the diversity of modern Britain in order to find new audiences, new collaborative possibilities, and new ways of engaging with the world.

⁶² For details, see Paul Edmondson, Paul Prescott, and Erin Sullivan (eds), *A Year of Shakespeare: Re-living the World Shakespeare Festival* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013). For the perceived ‘Britishness’ of the Olympic opening, see Evan Osnos, ‘The Ceremony and the Swimmer: China Watches the Olympics’, *New Yorker*, 31 July 2012: <http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/evanosnos/2012/07/china-opening-ceremonies-and-swimmer-ye-shiwen.html>. Accessed 14 Apr. 2014.