

THEATRE AND EVERYDAY SPACE:
The Case of Tom Murphy

Moonyoung Hong

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Declaration

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Moonyoung Hong

Summary

The thesis investigates the relationship between modern theatre and everyday space, taking contemporary Irish playwright Tom Murphy (1935-2018) as a case study. Dramatising everyday life has been the focus of many playwrights, theatre-makers and practitioners, but the elusive and evanescent category of the “everyday” has resulted in critical neglect of the concept as a frame of analysis. The everyday as a theatrical setting extends back to naturalism, which sought to represent it with scientific precision; as Una Chaudhuri argues, the idea of “home” has preoccupied modern playwrights since Henrik Ibsen and Anton Chekhov. This bourgeois domestic space created a new politics of the interior, where wider social issues of class, gender and family could be expressed on stage. Nevertheless, the foregrounding of home does not consider the multitude of other non-domestic everyday spaces that pervade the theatre. Murphy’s works, which are deeply anchored in the spatiality of everyday locales—a dancehall, a grocery store, a pub, a hotel, an office, a church, gasworks and airport—offer a diverse range of other (“third”) spaces to be examined. These spaces are at once social, liminal and heterotopic.

The thesis maps out Murphy’s plays thematically and in loose chronological order. Chapter 1 (“Social Spaces”) focuses on the social landscape that Murphy inhabited and the theatrical scene his plays were situated in. Chapter 2 (“Tragic Spaces”) is geared towards the emotional and existential. Murphy’s plays often involve a desperate need to break through the constraints of social forces, which he saw as the tragedy and cruelty of life; in his plays, violence erupts where language fails. In one case, he situates this version of tragedy in the most traumatic event in Irish history, the Great Famine (1845-49). Chapter 3 (“Liminal Spaces”) explores Murphy’s techniques for locating emotion and psychological depth in everyday conversations and interactions, such as those that take place in the pub. Chapter 4 (“Sacred Spaces”) examines the role of religion and faith in daily life, through a re-evaluation of the existing means and spaces—church and therapy—in which humans seek to encounter their existential condition. Chapter 5 (“Women’s Spaces”) is dedicated to women’s everyday spaces that are coded feminine, where previously sidelined characters are at the centre of Murphy’s dramatic

world. The spaces in each chapter are not antithetical to the everyday, and the everyday is not “what is left over” from more specialised activities. Instead, these five types of space constitute the intersection, the meeting place and the common ground in Murphy’s theatre of everyday space.

The dissertation uses various methodologies—including textual analysis, Irish socio-cultural and historical analysis, performance analysis, theories on space and everyday life (Henri Lefebvre, Michel De Certeau and Rita Felski), and genetic criticism (54 boxes of manuscripts preserved in Trinity College Dublin)—to describe Murphy’s process of “recreating feelings on stage,” an ethos that he emphasises in numerous interviews. His theatre not only revisits old questions of “Irishness,” postcolonial relations with Britain, and national identity, but also forges new ones that still speak profoundly to our contemporary moment. Murphy’s art suggests the possibility of faith not in the grand narratives of religion and nationhood, but in the lived everyday encounters of connection and community. His plays thoroughly deconstruct structures and conventions, taking the characters and audience on a painful journey of disillusionment and awareness, only to emerge with the realisation of new meaning and hope. Examining the case of Tom Murphy, an understudied yet pivotal figure in Irish studies, points to ways in which the geography of modern drama itself can be remapped.

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Abbreviations

Published works by Tom Murphy

- Alice* – “*Alice Trilogy.*” *Plays: 5.* London: Methuen, 2006. 295-362.
- Bailegangaire* – “*Bailegangaire.*” *Plays: 2.* London: Methuen, 1997. 89-170.
- Macushla* – “*The Blue Macushla.*” *Plays: 1.* London: Methuen, 2004. 151-228.
- Conversations* – “*Conversations on a Homecoming.*” *Plays: 2.* London: Methuen, 1997. 1-88.
- Crucial* – “*A Crucial Week in the Life of a Grocer’s Assistant.*” *Plays: 4.* London: Methuen, 1997. 89-164.
- Famine* – “*Famine.*” *Plays: 1.* London: Methuen, 2004. 1-90.
- House* – “*The House.*” *Plays: 5.* London: Methuen, 2006. 181-294.
- Gigli* – “*The Gigli Concert.*” *Plays: 3.* London: Methuen, 1997. 161-240.
- Optimism* – “*The Morning After Optimism.*” *Plays: 3.* London: Methuen, 1997. 1-96.
- Mommo* – *The Mommo Plays: Brigit, Bailegangaire, A Thief of a Christmas.* London: Bloomsbury, 2014.
- Outside* – “*On the Outside.*” *Plays: 4.* London: Methuen, 1997. 165-192.
- Inside* – “*On the Inside.*” *Plays: 4.* London: Methuen, 1997. 193-222.
- Sanctuary* – “*The Sanctuary Lamp.*” *Plays: 3.* London: Methuen, 1997. 97-160.
- Seduction* – *The Seduction of Morality.* London: Little Brown, 1994.
- Thief* – “*A Thief of Christmas.*” *Plays: 2.* London: Methuen, 1997. 171-234.
- Logic* – “*Too Late for Logic.*” *Plays: 5.* London: Methuen, 2006. 1-74.
- Wake* – “*The Wake.*” *Plays: 5.* London: Methuen, 2006. 75-180.
- Whistle* – “*A Whistle in the Dark.*” *Plays: 4.* London: Methuen, 1997. 1-88.

Manuscripts and Archives

- TCD – Trinity College Dublin, Ireland
- ATDA – Abbey Theatre Digital Archive
- DTCA – Druid Theatre Company Archive
- JHL – James Hardiman Library
- NUIG – National University of Ireland, Galway,

Notes on Text

Full title of the play and date of first production (in brackets) will be indicated when first mentioned; abbreviations will be used thereafter.

Transcription

~~Deletions~~ are marked using strikethrough. [Ins. Handwritten insertions] in a typescript draft will be indicated with “Ins.” in square brackets. [? Uncertain readings] are enclosed in square brackets and preceded by a question mark

Introduction

Murphy's Theatre of Ding-a-dong

In Tom Murphy's *Too Late for Logic* (1989), Christopher, a philosophy professor in Trinity College Dublin, is preparing a lecture on Schopenhauer:

So, enter Arthur Schopenhauer to take to his rooms and have a think about it all. [...] The brevity of life which we so lament may be its greatest virtue, he said. Man is a thing that ought not to be, he said. Worse, he said: Man is a flaw containing a bigger flaw within himself, which is the will to reproduce, blind will, the thing-in-itself, the ding-a-dong. (*There is something again that isn't right; an aside to himself:*) Ding-a-dong? (*No, it's fine:*) Ding-a-dong. (*Logic*, 56)

The original German term for "thing-in-itself" is *Ding an sich*, where the object, event or force exists independently of and unmediated through human perception. As it cannot be perceived through the human senses, the *Ding an sich* is unknowable. Building on Kant's philosophy, Schopenhauer claims that the "thing-in-itself" is the "will-to-live." During the speech, Christopher "holds a fascinated horror of himself; he has to pretend that what he's saying makes sense; and he cannot stop himself. Terror makes him smile" (*Logic*, 54-55). He has a twisted sense of fascination with the philosophy he is trying to get a grasp of. Nevertheless, Christopher, who explains this Schopenhauerian will in the state of self-absorption, has been neglecting his family, and is faced with real life problems: the death of his sister-in-law and his brother's grief-stricken suicide threat. The absurd error of "ding-a-dong," a rhythmical non-sense word, undermines Christopher's philosophical ponderings and makes him appear ridiculous. *Logic* is one of Murphy's more autobiographical plays; like Christopher, Murphy

always felt guilty about being engrossed in his writing, leading him to neglect his family.¹ Christopher wants to be left alone, “[i]n order, in isolation, to achieve that other state, the terror of memories and guilt mocking the impotence and failure of a jumble of words” (*Logic*, 58)—a self-destructive desire that exposes the hopelessness of his flight from everyday family commitments. Seen in this light, the “ding-a-dong” encapsulates a double anxiety of impotence: a fear of failure in the territory of philosophy and art, along with a nagging sense that these pursuits themselves lead nowhere. It poses an existential question about theatre: what is theatre, that is, theatre-in-itself, and if not an absurd entity, what is its ding-a-dong?

In *Theatre and Everyday Life: An Ethics of Performance*, Alan Read asks “[c]an theatre have value divorced from everyday life?”² He writes that “[t]heatre, by definition, is not this daily domain but an extra-daily dimension, beyond the everyday but ironically dependent on the everyday realm. It is the continual negotiation between theatre and its ground, performance and the quotidian, that critical theory has considerable problems in evaluating, if not explaining.”³ Throughout our everyday lives we constantly negotiate space, positioning ourselves physically, socially, morally, politically and metaphorically in relation to others. Read cites Peter Brook’s interview regarding *The Empty Space*, in which Brook opposes the rigid division of theatre spaces:

In the theatre of illusion, the curtain goes up and supposedly there is the world of imagination, and then the curtain goes down and we are all back in the everyday world, as though the everyday world has no imagination and the imaginary world has no everyday. This is both untrue and unhealthy, and must be rejected. The healthy relationship is the co-existing one.⁴

¹ See José Laners’s “New Mind Over Old Matter: The Evolution of *Too Late for Logic*,” in *Alive in Time: The Enduring Drama of Tom Murphy: New Essays*, ed. Christopher Murray (Dublin: Carysfort, 2010), 165-188. According to Laners, in devising the play, Murphy grappled with his own real-life problems, and *Logic* portrays the tension between the necessary selfishness (for art’s sake) and the love for family.

² Alan Read, *Theatre and Everyday Life: An Ethics of Performance* (London: Routledge, 1993), 1.

³ *Ibid.*, ix.

⁴ Peter Brook, *The Empty Space* (New York: Touchstone, [1968] 1996), 14.

Theatre is inseparable from other daily activities and always shares certain relations with everyday life. The co-existing relationship between theatre and the everyday has often been the focus of many playwrights, theatre-makers and practitioners, but is not often articulated in these critical terms, as the nature of the “everyday” itself is difficult to grasp. Its “taken-for-granted-ness” and “all-around-us-ness” makes it elusive to pin down.⁵ However, the habitual world of the everyday should not simply be understood as a lived daily experience, but should be “elevated to the status of a critical concept” that derives from everyday practices, not only to describe the experience but also to bring about change.⁶ Henri Lefebvre argues that the “everyday” should be the object of philosophy precisely because it is non-philosophical:

Everyday life, in a sense residual, defined by ‘what is left over’ after all distinct, superior, specialized, structured activities have been singled out by analysis, must be defined as a totality. [...] Everyday life is profoundly related to *all* activities, and encompasses them with all their differences and their conflicts; it is their meeting place, their bond, their common ground. And it is in everyday life that the sum total of relations which make the human – and every human being – a whole takes its shape and its form.⁷

The “specialised activities” of philosophy and art are not compensatory to the dreariness of the everyday; instead, the everyday lies both outside and across the different fields of knowledge. Lefebvre’s observation that philosophising the everyday is not against philosophy, that it is necessary precisely because of its non-philosophical nature, applies to theatre as well: the dramatisation of the everyday, which seems paradoxical and antithetical, requires further critical attention precisely for its non-dramatic nature. Eric Bentley compares Freud’s *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (1901), which unravels meaning beneath the surface trivialities of human speech, to “*the drama of everyday*

⁵ Gill Valentine, “Imagined Geographies: Geographical Knowledges of Self and Other in Everyday Life,” in *Human Geography Today*, eds. Doreen Massey et al. (Cambridge: Polity, 1999), 47.

⁶ Read, *Theatre*, 116.

⁷ Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life*, vol. 1, trans. John Moore (London: Verso, [1947] 2014), 119.

life” whereby strong emotional conflicts lurk everywhere, even where drama seems totally lacking. He asserts that “[e]ven our constant complaint that life is boring testifies chiefly to our refusal to be bored. [...] Even the rejection of life—as human beings reject it—is drama.”⁸ It is in the (un)dramatic nature of the everyday and humans’ constant appetite for drama, and the dramatisation of this relationship between drama and non-drama that Murphy’s drama of the everyday can be located. Tom Murphy’s theatre of ding-a-dong brings light to the symbiotic relationship between theatre and the everyday.

Murphy’s plays are deeply anchored in the spatiality of everyday locales, for the most part identifiably Irish: a grocery store, a dancehall, a church, a club, a pub, a kitchen, an office, a hotel and an airport. This specificity of the plays’ social context and rootedness in the everyday may on the surface look rather conventional and provincial; it has led some to regard Murphy’s works as distinctively “Irish,” an antonym to the “universal.” It has long been a conundrum that Murphy’s work did not get the same international acclaim or critical attention as that of his contemporary, Brian Friel (1929-2015). Admittedly, in 2001 the Abbey Theatre presented six plays by Murphy to celebrate his long collaboration with the Abbey, and during his life Murphy was awarded the title of “Saoi,” Aosdána’s highest honour, in recognition of his remarkable achievement and contribution to Irish literature. And yet, even though there exists a substantial body of journal articles and a couple of essay collections in book form—*Talking About Tom Murphy* (2002) and *‘Alive in Time’: The Enduring Drama of Tom Murphy* (2010), there are only three single-authored books written about Murphy: Fintan O’Toole’s *The Politics of Magic* (1987), updated and revised in 1994; Alexandra Poulain’s *Homo Famelicus: Le Théâtre de Tom Murphy* (2008); and Nicholas Grene’s *The Theatre of Tom Murphy: Playwright Adventurer* (2017). O’Toole’s book, although a fine achievement, needs to be updated, as the range of its coverage of Murphy’s plays is inevitably limited, with his later works such as *The Wake* (1997) and *Alice Trilogy* (2005) excluded. Indeed, having devoted a full book to Murphy, Grene still believes that Murphy’s plays are still “relatively understudied and undervalued.”⁹

⁸ Eric Bentley, *The Life of the Drama* (New York: Atheneum [1964] 1979), 6.

⁹ Nicholas Grene, *The Theatre of Tom Murphy: Playwright Adventurer* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), xiv.

Murphy's death in May 2018 brought theatre communities together to pay tribute and express their indebtedness to Murphy. *The Palgrave Handbook of Irish Theatre and Performance* (2018), edited by Eamonn Jordan and Eric Weiss, is dedicated to Murphy. Here, there is an implicit sense that his career as an Irish playwright, working primarily with Druid and the Abbey from the late 1950s to the early 2000s, reflects an entire history of Irish theatre. Likewise, in *Irish Drama and Theatre Since 1950* (2019), Patrick Lonergan situates Murphy's *The Sanctuary Lamp* (1975) as "the moment that most decisively marks the transformation of the relationship between theatre, the state and the Catholic Church in Ireland,"¹⁰ whereby "Irish theatre was free to express its views on Catholicism without fear of censorship, state-led or otherwise."¹¹ In Lonergan's view, Murphy's *A Whistle in the Dark* (1961), is a prime example of Irish theatre's early dialogue with international theatre,¹² while *Famine* (1968) is an example of Irish theatre's turn towards Brecht, as demonstrated by Tomás Mac Anna's commitment to opening up Irish theatre to continental European influences and bringing in new generations of playwrights.¹³ Going back earlier, Murphy and O'Donoghue's *On the Outside* ([1959], 1974) was a product of the amateur drama movement and the All Ireland Drama Festival of the 1950s and thereafter.

In this respect, Murphy has indeed played a key role in shaping the narrative of Irish theatre history and there is little doubt but that he has influenced later playwrights such as Conor McPherson—whose *Seafarer* (2006) and *Shining City* (2004) draw on themes in *The Gigli Concert* (1983) and whose *The Weir* (1997) is informed by *Conversations on a Homecoming* (1985)—and Enda Walsh, whose *The Walworth Farce* (2006) is often compared to Murphy's *A Whistle in the Dark*. In some respects, Mommoo in *Bailegangaire* has set the trope of the bedbound woman, talking continuously, recognisable in Martin McDonagh's *Beauty Queen of Leenane* (1996), Walsh's *bedbound* (2000) and in Marina Carr's *Woman and Scarecrow* (2006). His influence can also be observed in Dermot Bolger, Peter Sheridan, Paul Mercier and Declan Hughes, who have all in their

¹⁰ Patrick Lonergan, *Irish Drama and Theatre Since 1950* (London: Methuen, 2019), 57.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 61.

¹² *Ibid.*, 82-84.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 86-92.

own ways addressed issues of emigration. Philip McMahon's *Come on Home* (2018) is another prime example. Murphy's engagement with the deep-rooted issues in Ireland make his work a still-living testament, as well as an archive, of how Irish theatre has evolved since the 1950s. As such, it is timely to re-evaluate and do justice to Murphy's legacy by providing an overarching study of his drama.

Anthony Roche divides Murphy's plays into two types, according to their use of space: some are "overtly symbolic locations [...] removed from everyday reality," while those set in the public houses and rural towns near Galway are "recognizably realistic settings."¹⁴ While Roche sees each play as (roughly) belonging in one category of space, Fintan O'Toole points out the multiple spaces that constantly shift within a play. He notes that, "[t]here are always two worlds on stage in a Murphy play—a social landscape and a psychological dreamscape—and the dramatic thrill is in the daring, breathtaking, impossible leap from one to the other."¹⁵ Indeed, Murphy's spatial imagination not only differs from one play to the next, but it varies greatly within each play. Mark Lane argues that Murphy's plays move from the distinguishable "national place" to a "theatrical space"; in other words, Murphy creates a theatrical "home" of his own and "reclaims his homeplace in the West of Ireland as a haven for the pursuit of the possible, or [...] the impossible."¹⁶ Nevertheless, between the symbolic/realistic, social/psychological, and national/theatrical categorisation of spaces, lie the vapours of the everyday. Murphy realises on stage the "throwntogetherness" of place, a concept developed by Doreen Massey. These places are what have been gathered and interwoven, a collection of stories, including the history, language, experiences and "the wider power-geometries of space" as well as "the non-meetings-up, the disconnections and the relations not established, the exclusions. All this contributes to the specificity of place."¹⁷

An important strand of this "specificity of place" for Murphy is his hometown. Born in Tuam, County Galway in 1935, Murphy regards Tuam as his "microcosm—all the types and characters in

¹⁴ Anthony Roche, "Murphy's Drama: Tragedy and After," in *Contemporary Irish Drama*, 2nd ed. (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2009), 85-86.

¹⁵ Fintan O'Toole, "Programme Note" for *The Gigli Concert* by Tom Murphy, Dublin: Gate Theatre, May 26, 2015.

¹⁶ Mark Lane, "Theatrical Space and National Place in Four Plays by Thomas Murphy," *Irish University Review* 21, no. 2 (1991): 228.

¹⁷ Doreen Massey, *Space, Place and Gender* (Cambridge: Polity, 1994), 130.

my work have been filtered through people I knew in Tuam.”¹⁸ Murphy not only uses the raw language and private dialect of his place but also draws on his own childhood experiences: from growing up as the youngest of ten, feeling the absence of his father who worked in England, the violent education of the Christian Brothers, going to a Technical School and working as fitter-welder in the sugar factory, through to his involvement with the Tuam Theatre Guild. In *Sing On Forever* (2003), a documentary directed by Alan Gilsean, Murphy explains how his life was very much involved with the emigration of his family and their return. Waiting for his family at the railway station of Tuam made his childhood lonely. For Murphy, the railway station was a place of both happiness and sadness.¹⁹ In other interviews, he remarked: “I think the most important feature of my growing up was the emigration from the family. Somebody always seemed to be arriving or going away. A lot of emotion centred around the little railway station in my hometown of Tuam.”²⁰ *A Whistle in the Dark*, a play set in Coventry, England, begins with the train arriving, while *A Crucial Week in the Life of a Grocer’s Assistant* (1969) begins with the sound of the train “whistling impatiently” (91). The sound and imagery of the train evoke emotions associated with emigration. Emigration is one of the central experiences and subject matter for Irish history and literature alike, one that profoundly affected the everyday lives of the Irish population. Murphy’s everyday space is a culmination of the social changes filtered through an ordinary man’s (Murphy’s) personal experiences. Moreover, his use of folklore, oral history and research materials that are shown in the manuscripts reveal his deep consideration for the every(wo)man, as he tries to capture and express their often-neglected stories in the grand narrative of Irish history.

Another strand that emerges from this specificity of Murphy’s own sense of place is the emotional and existential universality of space. A lot of “emotion” is centred around Murphy’s spatial imagination, and Murphy admired Tennessee Williams’s plays for their sheer emotional impact.²¹ In

¹⁸ John Boland, “Back to Broad Strokes,” *Hibernia*, March 6, 1980, *Macushla*, March 6, 1980 [Press Cuttings], ATDA at NUIG, 0780_PC_0001, p. 9.

¹⁹ *Sing on Forever*, DVD, directed by Alan Gilsean (Galway: Parzival, 2003), 00:11:03-00:12:30.

²⁰ Des Hickey and Gus Smith, *A Paler Shade of Green* (London: Leslie Frewin, 1972), 225, quoted in Clair Wills, *The Best are Leaving: Emigration and Post-War Irish Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2015), 4.

²¹ See his interview with Michael Billington, “Tom Murphy: In Conversation with Michael Billington,” in *Talking About Tom Murphy*, ed. Nicholas Grene (Dublin: Carysfort, 2002). It is well-known that Murphy

an interview with Colm Tóibín, Murphy mentioned that he aspired “to create the feeling of life, or to re-create it; and if it’s feeling, it frequently isn’t linear or logical or reasonable.”²² Murphy uses writing to embark on a journey without any fixed destination; he writes to explore and to give shape to an idea, mood or emotion. To Michael Billington, Murphy explained: “my work starts from emotions and moods, emotions and moods that may be difficult to comment on or to write about.”²³ Murphy does not simply represent place but sees place as being the locus of emotional response.

Yet, to label his theatre as simply “emotional” misses the existential depth—the alienation and absurdity—and the extent to which Murphy grappled with philosophical ideas, particularly those of Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, and Heidegger. As the Irish philosopher Richard Kearney puts it,

In a Murphy drama, the border that truncates and polarizes is *within*: it marks a metaphysical rupture between self and self rather than a geographical historical partition between one community and another (northern/southern, Irish/British etc.). The metaphor of the ‘wall’ which recurs throughout Murphy’s works invariably signals a confinement to our solitary, divided selves.²⁴

Comparing Brian Friel and Field Day Company’s particularly “northern” movement of response to Irish historical and cultural issues, Kearney argues that Murphy’s drama focuses on the “*existential* malady” and the “metaphysical experience of the dark abyss of self-division,” remarking that “most of Murphy’s plays take place at night.”²⁵ Indeed, the nocturnal journey of travelling into the dark spheres of the human psyche in the form of self-imposed exile runs through Murphy’s oeuvre. In his introduction to his adapted plays, Murphy explained why he refused Abbey Theatre’s request to do a version of *Antigone* set in Belfast, despite the potential of its relation to the contemporary situation in

admired Tennessee Williams: “the energy of Williams and what I thought was his naturalism which is of course lyricism – was a great punctuation mark in my life” (95).

²² Colm Tóibín, “Tom Murphy by Colm Tóibín,” *Bomb Magazine*, July 1, 2012.

²³ Billington, “In Conversation,” 102.

²⁴ Richard Kearney, “Theatre: Tom Murphy’s Long Night’s Journey into Night,” *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review* 72, no. 288 (1983): 328.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

Northern Ireland:

I discovered that the word ‘contemporary’, or indeed ‘ancient’, did not come into the matter of how I read, recognised, was excited by, loved and was deeply affected by Greek drama; and Greek drama couldn’t be local to anywhere – not even to Greece! It was about humankind, alright, in action and at war, looking for order; but I couldn’t get away from the abstract: that it was more to do with self-conscious mankind in holy, pure, eternal, existential quest of itself.²⁶

Even in his first play *On the Outside*, co-written by Noel O’Donoghue, the seemingly banal situation of Frank and Joe failing to enter a dancehall by not having the admission fee becomes at once an economic and existential cause of suffering: Frank curses “[t]his damn place, this damn hall, people, those lousy women! I could – I could – *He rushes over to the poster and hits it hard with his fist. He kicks it furiously*” (192), and Joe invites Frank to “come on out here to hell” (192). In Murphy’s world, reality is hell and there is no escape. The ending of *On the Outside* suggests that the characters “get on with their lives,” pointing to the absurdity of human existence. The everyday experience of spatial alienation, being “outside” a dancehall, gains metaphysical weight, and equally explains Murphy’s change of focus from hypermasculine working-class men to doubly marginalised women, if, as many critics argue, the burden of the everyday weighs more heavily on women.

At the heart of Murphy’s social, emotional and existential theatre is *Famine*. The play dramatises the greatest social calamity in the history of Ireland: the Great Famine in the 1840s that resulted in the loss of two and a half million people from hunger, its attendant diseases such as cholera, “typhus, relapsing fever, and dropsy”²⁷ and mass emigration. *Famine* looks directly at the root cause of the many distortions in the haunted psyche of the Irish.²⁸ The post-Famine generation thus suffers

²⁶ Tom Murphy, *Plays: 6: The Vicar of Wakefield, The Cherry Orchard, The Drunkard, The Last Days of a Reluctant Tyrant* (London: Methuen, 2010), xi.

²⁷ Ciara Boylan, “Famine,” in *The Princeton History of Modern Ireland*, eds. Richard Bourke and Ian McBride (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2016), 408.

²⁸ See Alexandra Poulain, *Homo Famelicus: Le Théâtre de Tom Murphy* (Caen: Presses Universitaires de

a kind of national-scale post-traumatic stress disorder. Murphy dramatises the literal and metaphorical hunger that manifests as desire for possession and control. If in the US this desire for success is popularised and understood as the “American dream,” a problematic concept in itself, in Ireland, the compulsion is even more complicated as there is no “Irish dream.” The dream must be sought elsewhere (to leave the country), or “imported,” as Murphy’s *Conversations on a Homecoming* reveals. Set in a small Irish pub named The White House with a portrait of John F. Kennedy (an inspiration and hope to the Irish community) hanging in its centre, the play explores the failed dreams of those who left and the bitterness of those who stayed, symbolised by the assassination of JFK. Murphy exposes the perniciousness of such imagined fairy-tales shared by the Irish diaspora. Taken to its most abstract extreme, the idealised prince and princess couple is killed by the pimp and prostitute in the fictional fairy tale forest in *The Morning After Optimism* (1971). These pipe dreams meet another point of crisis, disillusion and breakdown, with the rise and fall of the Celtic Tiger era featured in his later plays such as *The Wake*, *The House* (2000) and *Alice Trilogy*. Again, Murphy’s dramatisation of the anomalies of modernisation is at once social, emotional, and existential. These are the key terms that define his aesthetics, his theatre of everyday space.

Theorising Everyday Space

Since the late 19th century, modern theatre has increasingly sought to represent life as it is, proclaiming itself ever more “real” than the generations that came before. Modern Irish theatre has long been preoccupied with the everyday: W. B. Yeats wrote to Lady Gregory: “[w]e have been the first to create a true ‘People’s Theatre’, [...] making articulate of all the dumb classes each with its own knowledge of the world, its own dignity, but all objective with the objectivity of the office and the workshop, of the newspaper and the street, of mechanism and of politics.”²⁹ Within the evolution

Caen, 2008). Poulain regards Murphy’s *Famine* as the crux of his oeuvre. She contends that the Famine was a point of Ireland’s entry into “modernity,” whereby all communal structures, meaning, and values were destroyed, producing deprived people, thus the title *Homo Famelicus*. According to Poulain, Murphy’s work provides an ongoing critique of modernity.

²⁹ W. B. Yeats, “A People’s Theatre: A Letter to Lady Gregory,” *The Irish Statesman* 1, no. 23 (1919): 547-

of Yeats's aesthetic of theatre, he is at this point discouraged and defeated, believing instead in the "noble class" as the force for change. Aside from Yeats's complicated relationship with the People, J. M. Synge's peasant realism and the realist elements of Sean O'Casey's display of Dublin tenement life all attest to the ethos of representing reality "as it is" and as "still lived."

The everyday supersedes the existing critical vocabularies by which we understand theatre. Although the conventions, style and formal experimentation may differ, ranging from realism, symbolism, and expressionism to the postmodern, the mechanism of the everyday can be traced, even in the least "Irish" of Irish playwrights, Samuel Beckett. Joe Cleary interprets Beckett's works in the context of "scabrously comic Irish naturalism."³⁰ According to Cleary, Beckett pushes "naturalist conventions to the point where that mode begins to capsize on itself. [...] stasis, lassitude, dejection, and mechanical repetitiveness become the very essence of things."³¹ Cleary maintains that in Beckett's world, there is no romance to be demolished, as there is no romance begin with: "a sordid, disenchanted world is taken to its ultimate extremes and conceived as a subject for wry philosophical speculation rather than as an historical or social problem to be solved."³² Murphy is a pivotal figure in this discussion. If Beckett's drama presents the essence of everyday (of "stasis, lassitude, dejection, and mechanical repetitiveness") in which the space is nowhere, Murphy's plays retain many of the specifics and spaces that appear to be naturalistic conventions. Nevertheless, instead of erasing or looking beyond it, by confronting fiercely the everyday realities and grappling with the spatial possibilities and limits of naturalistic form, Murphy retrieves in the same everyday life the power to reconfigure its own physical and material shape that redraws its emotional and ethical contours.

Murphy's theatre of everyday space—arguably exemplary of the offspring of Naturalism and Modernism that is Irish theatre—paves the way for an intellectual remapping of dramatic art, one that aligns neither with the "absurd" (avant-garde/postmodern) nor the "political" (Irish literary revivalist/nationalist). The everyday is the bedrock of modern drama and Irish theatre and theorising it provides

549, qtd. in *The Theory of the Modern Stage*, ed. Eric Bentley (London: Penguin, 1968), 331.

³⁰ Joe Cleary, *Outrageous Fortune: Capital and Culture in Modern Ireland*, 2nd ed (Dublin: Field Day, 2007), 155.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 156.

³² *Ibid.*

new critical tools to examine and discuss theatre. Murphy's drama is a model case where existing categories of -isms can no longer fully define or encapsulate the multifaceted experience of modernity. An integrative framework on everyday life and space is needed to analyse and better understand Murphy's plays.

Since the growth of everyday studies among post-war continental thinkers in the 1940s, it has been considered as a subject of cultural and social studies in the United States in the 1970s, alongside the rise of feminist discourses. Dedicating an issue of the journal *Yale French Studies* to everyday life in 1987, Alice Kaplan and Kristin Ross assert that approaching the everyday "means attempting to grasp the everyday without relegating it either to institutional codes and systems or to the private perceptions of a monadic subject," offering "a new alternative to phenomenology and structuralism," which were the two dominant French schools of thought incorporated into Anglophone intellectual culture.³³ To build a theory of the everyday is to evoke "a complex realm of social practice and to map out not merely a network of streets, but a conjunction of habit, desire, and accident."³⁴ Lefebvre's critique has been considered to have developed with "modernity," where the rise of the middle class and fall of the Church and the Monarch as well as the great population move to urban spaces made everyday activities organised and visible.³⁵ Profound and rapid social change has occurred with industrialisation and globalisation; the prevalence of consumer culture and mass production has shifted scholarship towards grasping everyday life in its extensiveness.³⁶

Another important intellectual shift was spatial, with Edward Soja declaring in 1989 that "[c]ontemporary critical studies in the humanities and social sciences have been experiencing an

³³ Alice Kaplan and Kristin Ross, "Introduction," *Everyday Life: Yale French Studies* 73 (1987): 4.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 4.

³⁵ See Lefebvre's *Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time and Everyday Life*, trans. Gerald Moore and Stuart Elden (London: Bloomsbury, [1992] 2013).

³⁶ Much of Irish history has been fixated on political history. Shifts in interest and perception in Ireland can be observed as historians and academics move away from a dominant political narrative to a social and cultural one. The practice of social history can be traced in Conrad M. Arensberg and Solon T. Kimball's works such as *Family and Community in Ireland* (1968). Terence Brown's *Ireland: A Social and Cultural History 1922-79* (1985) with the second edition covering up to 2001, and Luke Gibbons's *Transformations in Irish Culture* (1996), Peter Somerville-Large (ed.), *Irish Voices: An Informal History 1916-1966* (1999), Diarmaid Ferriter, *The Transformation of Ireland 1900-2000* (2004), Eugenio Biagini & Mary E. Daly (eds), *The Cambridge Social History of Modern Ireland* (2017), Kieran Keohane and Carmen Kuhling's *Collision Culture: Transformations in Everyday Life in Ireland* (2004) and Caitriona Clear's *Social Change and Everyday Life in Ireland, 1850-1922* (2008) all reveal further growing interest in everyday life studies in Ireland.

unprecedented spatial turn.”³⁷ Soja claims that the same critical significance and insight are now being given to “space” as were traditionally given to “time,” “history” and “social relations.” Emphasising that “geography matters,” the book *Human Geography Today* (1999), edited by Doreen Massey, John Allen and Philip Sarre, brings together different ways that the “spatial was always socially constructed,” and, concomitantly, how “the social was necessarily also spatially constructed.”³⁸ Equally, there has been a growing body of scholarly work examining theatre as space, with the recognition that theatre in essence is a spatial form.³⁹ From Anne Ubersfeld’s *Lire le Théâtre* (1977), Peter Brook’s *The Empty Space* (1968), and Marvin Carlson’s *Places of Performance: The Semiotics of Theatre Architecture* (1986), to Una Chaudhuri’s *Staging Place: the Geography of Modern Drama* (1997) and Gay McAuley’s *Space in Performance: Making Meaning in the Theatre* (1999), the prevalence of space-based studies has broken new ground in interpreting theatre.

This “spatial turn” has been adapted by many Irish theatre scholars, with Christopher Morash and Shaun Richards’s *Mapping Irish Theatre: Theories of Space and Place* (2013) providing the overarching conceptual framework to discuss Irish theatre in spatial terms. Patrick Lonergan’s *Theatre and Globalization* (2009) and Helen Heusner Lojek’s *The Spaces of Irish Drama* (2011), as well as Nicholas Grene’s *Home on the Stage: Domestic Spaces in Modern Drama* (2014) explore theatre as space. The recent *Oxford Handbook of Modern Irish Theatre* (2016), edited by Grene and Morash, devotes a considerable portion to performances of the dramatic texts, including consideration of the forms of theatrical space. Space-based studies have developed in various directions and across multiple disciplines including theatre, in the way that everyday life studies have; yet there is less of an integrated approach, with both concepts implying and referring to but not necessarily being central to one another. In his introduction to *The Everyday Life Reader* (2002), Ben Highmore sets up his dialectical vectors of the everyday: particular vs. general, agency vs. structure, experiences/feelings

³⁷ Edward W. Soja, “Thirdspace: Expanding the Scope of the Geographical Imagination,” in *Human Geography Today*, eds. Doreen Massey, John Allen and Philip Sarre (Cambridge: Polity, 1999), 261.

³⁸ Doreen Massey, “Issues and Debates,” in *Human Geography Today*, eds. Doreen Massey et al. (Cambridge: Polity, 1999), 6.

³⁹ At its Greek root, “theatre” means “seeing the place.” See David Wiles’s *A Short History of Western Performance Space* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2003). According to Wiles, “[t]heatre worth experiencing [...] necessarily folds together ‘place, performance and public’” (4).

vs. institutions/discourses, resistance vs. power, and micro-analysis vs. macro-analysis.⁴⁰ We can apply these same vectors to the existing theories of space: for example, place is particular while space is general; place is institutional—or “strategic,” disciplinary and stable as Michel de Certeau would argue—while space is feeling—or practiced and “tactical”; but equally, place can be a meaningful and experienced space (as Yi Fu Tuan and Edward Casey would argue) or suggests a kind of poetics (as Gaston Bachelard purports), while space is abstract and discursive; place and space can be both power and resistance (most evident in David Harvey and Doreen Massey’s argument). Associated with “freedom,” some scholars regard space-making of the rationalised and colonised place as liberating, with a utopian impulse. Other scholars emphasise the importance of place-making; according to them, people’s particular and personal experience of space is more meaningful.⁴¹ Space-making and place-making draw our attention to who the agents are, in the way that everyday studies first asks: “whose everyday life?”⁴² There are multiple ways of interpreting and forming arguments in the shared language of everyday and space; this dialectic between the production (or framing) of everyday space and the consumption (or lived experience) of everyday space by different agents is crucial.⁴³

It is in this intersection of the interpretive frameworks of the everyday and space that theatre contributes the most, in that both space/place and everyday life are “performed.” Goffman and Brooks both recognise the ways in which the dramatic world and everyday world inform and shape one another. Both corroborate in critical terms the sociological (Goffman) and theatrical (Brook) significance of the everyday as performance and performance as inseparable from the everyday. While theories of everyday life, space and theatre form the backbone of my analysis of Murphy’s plays, the materials

⁴⁰ Ben Highmore, “Introduction: Questioning Everyday Life,” in *The Everyday Life Reader*, ed. Ben Highmore (London: Routledge, 2002), 5.

⁴¹ The debate is well summarised in Tim Cresswell’s *Place: An Introduction*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2015). See also Edward S. Casey’s *The Fate of Place: A Philosophical History* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1997), in particular “Part Two: From Place to Space” (75-132) and “Part Four: The Reappearance of Place” (197-342).

⁴² Highmore, “Introduction,” 1.

⁴³ Pierre Bourdieu’s concepts of “habitus” and “fields” are useful in understanding this cultural distinction between classes. Bourdieu claims that habits, dispositions, tastes in music and sports, mannerisms, and skills are socially ingrained and collectively shaped, determined by one’s class. Different “agents” or “actors” belonging to different “fields” use various (social) capitals to pursue and augment their interests. See the collection *Habitus and Field: General Sociology, Vol. 2 (1982-3)*, trans. Peter Collier (Cambridge: Polity, 2020).

that make up his plays—the numerous drafts and productions in the archives—are used to further examine his artistic vision and craft, the ways Murphy turns the everyday into a dramatic reality.

Archival Turn

Murphy's writing process was instinctive and speculative. He once confessed: "I don't set out with any great plan to write a play. [...] I can't plan that far ahead. I have to discover it and it becomes an adventure for me, an adventure made up greatly of nightmare because one gets oneself into terrible trouble."⁴⁴ A long night's journey becomes an apt metaphor not only for his characters but also in Murphy's own description of his "nightmarish" writing process. The extensive manuscripts preserved in Trinity College Dublin, consisting of 54 archival boxes (in addition to a new batch of materials received in 2017 yet to be catalogued), are documentation of the playwright's struggle. Murphy goes through countless stages of "writing, rewriting and recycling" to produce a play.⁴⁵ The painstaking research, brainstorming, experimenting, drafting, revising, and cutting, even after the play has been put on stage, suggest that in Murphy's artistic world, no product is final. The lack of finality and certainty reflects his restless imagination and opens the possibility for numerous interpretations. The special significance of the archive in the case of Murphy lies in his extensive and detailed preliminary sketches. Murphy uses novelistic details and precision to visualise and characterise his dramatic subjects early on, details which figure only vestigially in the final text of the play. He suppresses much of this image-making in the finished work. Like the careful drawings that Renaissance painters made as the underlay for their large works, Murphy creates a vast universe of his imagination in writing, then crystallises it down to its bare essences. The characters thus are always multi-dimensional and complicated, as if they are living people drawn out from an existing (Murphy)-world. In this big picture, Murphy then picks parts and pieces to adapt for numerous new productions

⁴⁴ Billington, "In Conversation," 105-106.

⁴⁵ Regarding Murphy's writing process, Grene comments: "There is an integrity in this commitment, an aesthetic satisfaction for those who appreciate the depth and resonance of the drama produced, but it makes the plays hard to place with standard theatre managements" (*Playwright Adventurer*, 20).

and for his TV dramas and radio plays.

Murphy's belated international acclaim can be ascribed to his venture into more difficult emotional terrain; the decades of uncompromising and unflinching inner excavation are only now beginning to be traced and understood with the emergence of genetic criticism in scholarships and access to a greater range of resources such as the archives. In *Text Genetics in Literary Modernism and Other Essays* (2018), Hans Walter Gabler distinguishes the author's "text" from "work": "'text' is always grounded in the materiality of transmissions, while 'work' is conceptually always immaterial. Under given situations of transmission, moreover, 'work' comprises multiple instantiations of material text."⁴⁶ In genetic criticism, there is no final product of writing, but multiple "texts." Examining Murphy's notebooks, diary entries, rough drafts, sketches, proofs and typescripts (known as "avant-texte" in genetic criticism) recovers a temporality—a set of evolutionary traces—as well as the vast possibilities underlying each text. Without undermining the richness of the "text itself," Murphy's creative process of turning ideas into "emotions" should be considered as what Louis Hay (a foundational figure of genetic criticism) describes as the "third dimension." The rich avant-textes provide conceptual depth and expand the scope of interpretive possibilities of Murphy's plays.

This methodological approach has been widely adopted by critics of Irish modernist writers, with Joyce and Beckett being the prime exemplars. The respective digitisation projects, the *James Joyce Digital Archive* and *Beckett Digital Manuscript Project* further attest to the scope of text genetics for offering interactive and dynamic ways of reading. Dirk Van Hulle and Mark Nixon outline how Beckett reads and acquires knowledge to develop a "poetics of unknowing."⁴⁷ Including the "diachronic axis" to Beckett's texts and examining the layers and process by which Beckett develops his aesthetics and philosophy adds new meaning to his work and scholarship. More recently, James Little has used genetic criticism and Beckett's "grey canon" to investigate how confined spaces are produced—a key theoretical application of Lefebvre. Little traces Beckett's "move from depictions of institutions of confinement to the closed spaces of his later works," which he deems central to the

⁴⁶ Hans Walter Gabler, *Text Genetics in Literary Modernism and Other Essays* (Cambridge: Open Book, 2018), 3.

⁴⁷ Dirk Van Hulle and Mark Nixon, *Samuel Beckett's Library* (Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 2013), xv.

author's "politics of aesthetics."⁴⁸ Murphy's manuscripts testify to how Murphy thinks in spatial terms. It is possible to observe the process by which his imagined everyday spaces materialise and are "produced."

Finally, the spatial dimension of performances cannot be divorced from the theoretical and textual representation of everyday spaces. How everyday spaces are transfigured into theatre and how the various productions engage with the everyday lives of the practitioners and the audience at a particular time and place are important questions to be considered. The project uses materials in the digitised Abbey Theatre archive and the Druid Theatre Company archive in the James Hardiman Library in National University of Ireland, Galway. The plays' production history, press cuttings, video recordings, set designs and photographs help to reconstruct how Murphy's play text was realised (or reinterpreted) on stage. The sources provide further ways of analysing the co-existing relationship between the everyday and theatre that Brook emphasises, in a less abstract and more grounded and specific framework. The director's and designer's intention, the stage craft, the different audience and reception of the plays form their own everyday sphere. The experience of space and how spaces are embodied constitute an important pillar of this thesis.

The chapters are organised thematically and roughly follow a chronological order, outlining a trajectory by which Murphy's theatre develops and matures. Each chapter contains and foregrounds different aspects of the triad—the social, emotional and existential—of everyday space. Chapter 1 focuses on the social landscape that Murphy lived in and the theatrical scene his plays were situated in; Chapter 2 is geared towards the emotional and existential, as the necessity to break through the constraints of social forces envelops Murphy, which he sees as the tragedy and cruelty of life; Chapter 3 merges the three, and displays Murphy's artistry of making everyday interactions and conversations convey the utmost depth and degree of emotions; Chapter 4 is an examination of religion and faith in people's daily lives, a re-evaluation of the existing means—church and therapy—by which humans encounter their existential condition; Chapter 5 is dedicated to women's everyday spaces that are

⁴⁸ James Little, *Samuel Beckett in Confinement: The Politics of Closed Space* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020), vii.

coded feminine, where previously sidelined characters are at the centre of Murphy's dramatic world. The spaces in the chapters—social/stage, tragic, liminal, sacred and women's—are not antithetical to the everyday and the everyday is not "what is left over" from them; rather, the spaces constitute the intersection, the "meeting place," the "bond," and the "common ground" that Murphy brings together in his theatre of everyday space. The answer to theatre's "ding-a-dong" is in the paradox of the everyday: its omnipresence and fleetingness, its tenacity and vulnerability, its power to incarcerate and comfort, to numb and to invigorate. Therein lies a new set of old questions that encourage us to "sing on forever."

Chapter I. Social and Stage Spaces: Murphy's Early Plays

December of 1992 was a crucial month for reassessing Tom Murphy's early plays. *A Crucial Week in the Life of a Grocer's Assistant* (1969), directed by Garry Hynes, was on the main Abbey stage while *On the Outside* (1974; [1959]) co-written with Noel O'Donoghue, and *On the Inside* (1974), both directed by Alan Gilsonan, were on the Peacock stage. The programme, which featured an introduction and information relating to these three plays together, appealed to both the plays' portrayal of social life in the '50s and their resonance for the contemporary audience, particularly the younger among them. In a 1992 interview with Lorcan Roche, Alan Gilsonan commented:

'58 just like now, was a fulcrum year. It marked the change from de Valera's green idyll to economic expansion. It was also a time of mass emigration. After we got used to dance-steps, the funny hair-dos and the clothes we began to realise that emotionally what those young people were going through when Murphy was a young man in Tuam is not that far removed from what young people are going through now. [...] Fascistic, fanatical, hypocritical drumming up of the Pro-Life movement, of SPUC, Family Solidarity and Youth Defence; [...] Moralistic, middle-class reactionary hatred of anything *different*.¹

The late 1950s and early '60s witnessed the take-off of Ireland's belated version of the industrial revolution, with 1958 being the first year of the First Programme for Economic Expansion prompted

¹ Lorcan Roche, "Scourge of the Smug," *Irish Independent*, Dec 1, 1992. In 1992, the High Court refused to allow a 14-year-old rape victim to have an abortion abroad, which became known as the X case. As the 14-year-old was at risk of suicide, the Supreme Court determined that if the mother is at a real and substantial risk of life then it was permissible for her to terminate the pregnancy. Subsequently, the 12th amendment which accepted suicide as a possible threat to life was rejected, whereas the 13th and 14th amendments, which granted freedom to travel abroad for abortion and greater access to information were passed. The Pro-Life Campaign (PLC) was formed in March 1992, and other groups such as the Catholic supporters that led the Eighth Amendment in 1983, Family Solidarity founded in 1984, and the Youth Defence founded in 1986 reemerged at this time. Society for the Protection of Unborn Children (SPUC) is the largest and oldest pro-life group in the UK. For more information, see "Origins of the X Case Ruling 1992," *RTE Archives*, Feb 13, 2017.

by Dr. T. K. Whitaker, the Secretary of the Department of Finance. Ireland's '50s is often described by historians as the "lost decade," marked by "doom," "crisis," "malaise" and "stagnation"; in the year 1958 alone nearly 60,000 people left the country.² Even though the 1990s was marked by the radical transformation that included secularisation, economic growth and women's empowerment, the insular and domineering ideology and forces of the state and church continued to repress many ordinary lives. Gilsenan's comment suggests how the emotional struggle of the young within the operation of the various ideological state apparatuses, as Louis Althusser calls them, was an on-going problem.

The staging of Murphy's plays contributed to the political discourse both of Murphy's and of Gilsenan's times. Murphy's early plays examine the emotional and physical confines of everyday life in Ireland. From de Valera's regressive vision of pastoral Ireland (epitomised in his famous 1943 St. Patrick's Day speech presenting a dream of Ireland as happy, frugal and spiritual) to the social confidence gained from the country's successful modernisation in the '90s, Ireland's ingratiating self-portrayal had turned a blind eye to the realities of social alienation such as repression, violence, poverty and illness. Gilsenan lashed out at the feeble conformity of the Irish theatre scene with these words: "[w]e are not going for that rawness, that roughness and energy which you see in the best theatre. What we are trying to do is ape the West End and Broadway. I mean, where is the anger, the disillusionment that we should be expressing?"³ For Gilsenan, Murphy's early plays were the fitting choice for expressing the anger and frustration that had been absent on the Irish stage.⁴

² Diarmaid Ferriter, *The Transformation of Ireland 1900-2000* (London: Profile Books, 2004), 463. Many historians remark that the number of people leaving in this decade was probably the greatest since the Great Famine. Questioning the phenomenon of the "vanishing Irish" (a term used by Rev. John A. O'Brien in the essay collection *The Vanishing Irish* in 1953), Enda Delaney explains that the massive emigration was not only motivated economically but also brought about by changes in aspirations and other socio-cultural elements related to living standards. Rising unemployment and absence of sustained economic development left choices that were unattractive to the youth in Ireland compared to the prospects living in Britain. Many felt "relative poverty." See Delaney's "The Vanishing Irish? The Exodus from Ireland in the 1950s," in *The Lost Decade: Ireland in the 1950s*, eds. Dermot Keogh et al. (Dublin: Mercier, 2004), 80-86. The most recent discussion of this is Clair Wills's *The Best Are Leaving* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2015).

³ Roche, "Scourge of the Smug," 1992.

⁴ Given the degree to which Irish drama has been bound up with national politics and the influence of theatre as the site of cultural contestation, re-staging Murphy's early plays, with their complex cultural and political dynamics, would greatly contribute to revising and negotiating the dominant narratives of the nation. For more in-depth discussions on the relationship between Irish politics and drama see Nicholas Grene's *The Politics of Irish Drama* (Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 1999) and Christopher Murray's *Twentieth-Century Irish Drama: Mirror Up to Nation* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1997). In the chapters "Versions of Pastoral" and "Murphy's Ireland," Grene argues that Tom Murphy's plays are anti-pastorals and refigure Ireland's past

Noel O'Donoghue described how *On the Outside* came to resonate with young people like him who had never found themselves properly represented on the Irish stage. He wrote:

On the Abbey stage, the kitchen was a permanent set. Kettles were boiled and sausages were fried. The more realistic the kitchen, the less real were the characters [...] who occupied it. [...] There was a compelling need to get away from the kitchen and the only place to go was to the dance-hall. Social life was less alcoholic then and most of the youthful population danced about twice a week. Sometimes, there were difficulties in getting in.⁵

In other interviews, he explained that the dancehall “was where you spent your life, more or less,” and that “[i]t was the only place you met girls then, or had any [...] connection, with them. You certainly *didn't* have intercourse with them. That was it. That was life. One of the purposes of art is to show society how it lives.”⁶ *Outside* was the first play Murphy and O'Donoghue wrote together. From its inception, there was an acute awareness of spatial confinements in both the Tuam men's lives and the theatrical scene at their time. In the end, the real significance of *Outside* lies in reconfiguring the Irish theatrical space, lifting it from the domestic confines and locating it in or outside of the dancehall.

According to Chris Morash and Shaun Richards, Irish theatrical realism relied on the audience's “sense of place” that defined their “Irishness” to the point of abstraction. Irish theatre used certain stable Irish spaces—the recognisable “west” and “peasant kitchen”—that the audience were comfortable with.⁷ “In Irish theatrical realism,” writes Morash and Richards, “an underlying structure of space and place exists in a dialectic that privileges place over space.”⁸ The nascent modernist Irish

against the tradition of earlier playwrights.

⁵ Noel O'Donoghue, “Programme Notes,” *Crucial, Outside, Inside*, Dec 1, 1992 [Programme], ATDA at NUIG, 0523_MPG_01, p.11-12.

⁶ “From Playmates to Playwrights,” *Outside*, Dec 1, 1992 [Press Cuttings], ATDA at NUIG, 0701_PC_0001, p.4.

⁷ Chris Morash and Shaun Richards, *Mapping Irish Theatre: Theories of Space and Place* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2013), 47-54.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 54.

theatre, which aimed at exposing the inadequacy of realism for staging the conditions of modernity in tandem with the collapse of traditional, knowable places in Ireland, remained only immanent “because in Ireland those alternatives were identified as extraterritorial, and realism was so closely tied to a defining and indigenous sense of place.”⁹ Exemplified by the more enclosed national Abbey stage and the more modern and experimental Gate stage, Irish theatre in the 20th century has been driven by “a dialectic of expansive and restrictive space,” maneuvering its dialectical imagination “[b]etween the restrictive space of the kitchen box set and the expansive space of the sky-blue scrim.”¹⁰ It was not until the remodeling of the Abbey stage in 1966 that the limits of space were removed, and only at the end of the twentieth century was there an eruption of modernist spaces in Irish theatre.¹¹

In the context of Irish theatre history, Murphy’s early plays explicitly critique the restrictive spaces of realism that were dominant in his time. Neither do they fully subscribe to the alternative, modernist form, however. Instead, Murphy expands the boundary of realism from the domestic interior to the social spaces of everyday life. Thus, the audience’s “sense of place” which formerly relied on certain restricted country kitchens is also expanded.

Concepts of Social and Stage Spaces

Murphy often uses an identifiable Irish locale as the setting of his plays. The dancehall and the town reveal broader social forces and relations that make up a community. In one aspect, the settings in Murphy’s early plays are what Henri Lefebvre call “social spaces.”¹² Lefebvre’s (social) space consists of three interlocking elements—the *perceived* (spatial practice, physical, material),

⁹ Morash and Richards, *Mapping Irish Theatre*, 74.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 25.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 26, 74.

¹² Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, [1974] 1991). Lefebvre argues that spaces never exist in a vacuum; they are a “locus of production, as itself product and production” (109). Spaces are always a social construct—produced, controlled, manipulated, consumed and reproduced by various social forces and relations. Social spaces are often tied to institutional and ideological superstructures and are politically instrumental in that they can facilitate the control of society (349). The dancehall can be interpreted as a product of authoritative control and capitalisation of romance.

conceived (representations of space, abstract, symbolic) and the *lived* (representational, experienced, imagined). Murphy's plays can be said to draw their dramatic strengths from a severe discrepancy which he found in the Irish everyday between the perceived and the conceived space. For example, the dancehall became commodified and abstracted as a symbol of romance in the conceived space, but individuals were physically excluded or restricted in the perceived space.¹³ Authorities asserted control by reinforcing state ideologies in the realm of the conceived, which influenced and further repressed the inhabitants' perceived space. For Lefebvre, the danger lies in the abstraction and normalisation of space (the dominance of the conceived space over others) that conceal the underlying social forces. The lived space, where the characters negotiate between the intermingled perceived and conceived spaces, produces tragicomic effects in Murphy's plays. As Morash and Richards note, the different spaces interact moment by moment in theatre, creating a lived experience for the audience.

The interplay between the perceived, conceived and lived spaces in the (real) social sphere is manifested on the stage which, in turn, constitutes its own social space. Gay McAuley offers a taxonomy of spatial features in any given performance, consisting of 1) the theatre building itself, 2) the duality between physical reality and fictional place, 3) onstage/offstage spaces, 4) textual and 5) thematic spaces. In a performance, there is a constant dual presence: both the physical reality of the theatre space and the fictional worlds created. According to McAuley, the stage always fictionalises whatever is presented on it.¹⁴ Fictional places include not only what is represented or evoked onstage, but also what exists offstage. The offstage space (putting aside the audience space) can be further divided into localised/unlocalised spaces, depending on the degree to which the localisation is

¹³ Lefebvre argues that “*there is a violence intrinsic to abstraction*, and to abstraction's practical (social) use. Abstraction passes for an ‘absence’ – as distinct from the concrete ‘presence’ of objects, of things. Nothing could be more false” (*Production*, 289). Lefebvre presents the idea of a “concrete abstraction” in which abstraction itself is a practice. Space has been transformed into a commodity that can be produced, distributed and consumed. Abstract spaces are homogeneous and fragmented. For a more detailed analysis of Lefebvre's “concrete abstraction,” see Łukasz Stanek's “Space as Concrete Abstraction: Hegel, Marx, and Modern Urbanism in Henri Lefebvre” in *Space, Difference, Everyday life: Reading Henri Lefebvre*, eds. Kanishka Goonewardena et al. (New York: Routledge, 2008), 62-79.

¹⁴ Gay McAuley, *Space in Performance: Making Meaning in the Theatre* (Michigan: U of Michigan P, 1999), 28. See also Patrice Pavis's *Analyzing Performance*, trans. David Williams (Michigan: U of Michigan P, [1996] 2003). Pavis discusses the different categorisations of fictional and stage spaces, distinguishing between scenic and theatrical space.

specified in the play.¹⁵ “Localised off” are those places “that are contiguous with those onstage, immediately accessed through a door or stairway or partially glimpsed through a window,” whereas “unlocalised off” includes places that are not placed physically in relation to the onstage.¹⁶ Murphy’s realism conveys the continuity and mutability of the on/off stage spaces, anchored heavily in the “localised off”: the world outside is an extension of the world present on stage. Nevertheless, Murphy problematises the localised and seamless link between the on/off stage and the inside/outside space. For instance, the interior/exterior demarcation is complicated with the use of doors in *On the Outside*. Gaston Bachelard muses that the “door is an entire cosmos of the Half-open.”¹⁷ The door, depending on whether it is open or closed, is a door of “hesitation” and “strong possibilities.”¹⁸ It is strongly tied to desire and temptation. The door in Murphy’s *On the Outside* offers possibilities but the characters are denied access. It suggests how the ungraspable and illusory forces (offstage) can influence the way characters behave.

The social spaces observed in Murphy’s early plays are translated into the performative space of theatre, which in turn attests to its own complex dynamics of social space. Theatre buildings are socially produced as well. Lefebvre’s concept of social space exposes the power dynamics that deter or control the production and workings of any place. As McAuley puts it, “[w]hether power is represented by the church, king, town councils, or the government funding agencies of the late twentieth century, theatre is always in a rather ambivalent relation to it in that the activity theatres represent is both desired and feared by power, both supported and heavily policed and controlled. The building itself is one way in which control is exercised.”¹⁹ According to Lefebvre, “[t]he analysis of any space brings us up against the dialectical relationship between demand and command, along with its attendant questions: ‘Who?’, ‘For whom?’, ‘By whose agency?’, ‘Why and how?’”²⁰ Chris Morash describes how from the 1930s to the ’50s, there was a transformation of many Irish people from

¹⁵ McAuley, *Space in Performance*, 31.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (New York: Penguin, [1957, 1964] 2014), 237-238.

¹⁸ Ibid., 238.

¹⁹ McAuley, *Space in Performance*, 52.

²⁰ Lefebvre, *Production of Space*, 116.

audience into actors.²¹ Many amateur productions were held in small rural halls.²² The flourishing of small companies led to the All-Ireland Drama Festival in Athlone which was first held in 1953. The rise of such a vibrant community of amateur theatres reshuffled the Dublin-centered cultural scene. As Michael Farrell puts it in *The Bell*, “readers of the Country Theatre articles in *The Bell* already know [that] the better Festivals provide in a week or a fortnight a repertory of plays far better than can be found during any month in Dublin. [...] sometimes performances are much superior to those offered by some Dublin professional Companies.”²³ They also do “useful work of encouraging new dramatists and new methods. Some of the new plays thus uncovered have just the quality which reveals the potential dramatist and which the Irish Theatre most needs in these days.”²⁴ Murphy’s career as a playwright came through amateur theatre, especially through his active involvement in the Tuam Theatre Guild led by Father P. V. O’Brien. At a time when the Catholic Church was all-powerful, it is telling that people (although led by a priest) were creatively reproducing the constrained space, a practice that Michel de Certeau would deem “tactical.”²⁵ Murphy’s everyday spaces in the early plays reveal the homology between the dancehall, the small town and theatre as social spaces.

Spaces of (Social) Emotion

The interplay between various spaces produces theatrical effects of the lived and, in the process, there emerges a set of shared affects. As Morash and Richards argue, theatrical space is

²¹ Chris Morash, “Murphy, History and Society” in *Talking About Tom Murphy*, ed. Nicholas Grene (Dublin: Carysfort, 2002), 27.

²² Morash, “Murphy, History,” 29.

²³ Michael Farrell, “Drama Festivals in 1947,” *The Bell* 14, no. 1 (1947): 69.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: U of California P, [1980] 1984). Certeau writes how the concept of the city is regulated by panoptic administration and “disciplinary” procedures (96). Resonant of Foucault’s idea of discipline and power, Certeau elaborates on how institutionalisation, classification, “hierarchising” and management all contribute to the “strategies” that those in power employ. On the other hand, the spatial practices and “tactics” used by the inhabitants of the city resist such structures imposed on them. These tactics depend on the procedures of everyday creativity—ordinary consumers take advantage of opportunities, trickery, and wit, defying the rules set by authorities. They have to “do with what they have” (34-42).

“shared,” both “among members of the audience, among the actors-as-characters, and between the audience and the actors-as-characters” as the audience “*identify* with the characters in their place making.”²⁶ In addition, what is “shared” is not only the theatrical space, but the affectivities present in the space. Theatre not only produces place from space, but also creates lived atmospheres of affectivities. Combining Marx’s materialist imagination and phenomenology, Ben Anderson coins the term “affective atmosphere,” discussing how “atmosphere”—the undefinable force—“envelops” and “presses upon” society.²⁷ Atmosphere has a spatial form (*atmos* meaning “vapour” in Greek but also pointing to the potential of feeling to fill spaces like gas, and *sphere* to indicate a circular form of spatiality). Anderson writes: “affective atmospheres are a class of experience that occur *before* and *alongside* the formation of subjectivity across human and non-human materialities and in-between subject/object distinctions.”²⁸ In numerous interviews, Murphy defined his writing process in terms of recreating feelings of life in theatre. His theatre is the “Theatre of Emotion.” “I’ve never written a play about emigration,” Murphy once explained in an interview with Des Hickey. “Emigration can be a catalyst, or [...] the force that unleashes the larger degrees of long bitterness, aspiration, ambition, hatred, joy, celebration, depression, nostalgia. [...] I think that ultimately, [...] it’s about the choice, whether we have a choice to stay or leave.”²⁹ As a playwright, Murphy sees social forces as unleashing certain emotions. He also questions whether individuals have choices under their social circumstances. Raymond Williams argues that there are “structures of feeling,” meaning and values that are actively lived and felt, and which exert pressure on people’s social experiences. Williams opposes the reduction of the social to institutional and fixed forms; instead, social experiences are made up of “affective elements of consciousness and relationships.”³⁰

The social as felt experience also calls attention to the “sociality of emotion.” Sara Ahmed

²⁶ Morash and Richards, *Mapping Irish Theatre*, 76.

²⁷ Ben Anderson, “Affective Atmospheres,” *Emotion, Space and Society* 2 (2009): 78.

²⁸ Ibid. Similarly, incorporating Kathleen Stewart’s work on atmosphere, David Crouch argues that atmosphere becomes “live background of living in and living through things” in our everyday life (“Space, Living, Atmospheres, Affectivities,” in *The Question of Space: Interrogating the Spatial Turn between Disciplines*, ed. Marijn Nieuwenhuis and David Crouch [New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017], 6).

²⁹ Des Hickey, “Appraisal,” *RTE Radio 1*, Sep 2, 1988, Crucial, Sep 1, 1988 [Press Cuttings], ATDA at NUIG, 0701_PC_0001, p.2.

³⁰ Raymond Williams, “Structures of Feeling,” in *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1977), 132.

claims that emotions are “conditional” to social practice; she refers to the “outside-in” model rather than regarding emotion as a psychological state.³¹ Although emotions are not “in” either the individual or the social, they “produce the very surfaces and boundaries that allow the individual and the social to be delineated as if they are objects” and become “effects of circulation” rather than being the cause.³² The central question then becomes: “how do emotions stand and circulate in the various power relations and production of space?” By applying Ahmed’s perspective alongside those of other social theorists, one can progress from asking “how does the character feel?” to “*where* does the feeling come from?” and “what does it *do*?” Murphy’s plays convey feelings that prevail in the social spaces that they are set in, revealing the complex interconnection between the practice of emotion and the practice of space.

Murphy delineates spaces of emotion that have a social presence. Emotions such as fear, pain, anger, hatred, empathy, and love accumulate and circulate in and around particular spaces. In the theatrical tradition, the most evident space of emotion has been the interior space of the mind. Expressionism has been the dominant form that foregrounds the mindscape and the subjective experience of the protagonist. This involves various distortions of reality to challenge the rigid lines of social order. From early on in *Crucial Week*, Murphy uses a “semi-expressionistic” style to explore the territory of emotion, illuminating the experience of emigration which goes beyond the binary of “staying or going,” dream or reality. In a draft note to himself, Murphy wrote that the play “does not aim at a typical week or at realism in the sense of showing how the characters continually live. Its main concern is to recreate the feelings of a young man and *his* attitude towards, and his vision of, the environment he lives in.”³³ *Crucial Week* is comparable to earlier works of European expressionism, in particular pre-Brechtian German Expressionism between 1917 and 1923. This link manifests itself in the form of *stationendrama* (a non-traditional dramatic presentation of the various stages of the protagonist’s development, played out in the seven days of *Crucial Week*); the motif of transformation;

³¹ Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. 2nd ed. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, [2004] 2014), 9. She describes emotions as “com[ing] from without and mov[ing] inward” (9).

³² *Ibid.*, 10.

³³ TCD MS 11115/1/5/3a.

the allusion to the figure of Christ and crucifixion; the focus on the working-class everyman (the Grocer's assistant in *Crucial Week*); dream projections and spiritual odyssey; skepticism towards institutions; and the theme of man versus society, all of which bring to mind the works of Ernst Toller (*Die Wandlung* [Transfiguration], 1919; *Masse Mensch* [Masses and Man], 1920) or Georg Kaiser (*Von morgens bis mitternachts* [From Morning to Midnight], 1917). *Crucial Week*, however, differs from German expressionism not only in historical context, but also in that it does not fully subscribe to the interior mindscape that is the obvious bedrock of emotion. The play retains a kind of soberness and banality (thus the emphasis on Murphy's part on *semi-expressionistic* style). The small town is an interlocking space of reality and dream and the two interpenetrate one another in the lived experience of the character.

Other forms of theatre beside Expressionism equally use space to convey emotional truths. In Thomas Postlewait's analysis of Tennessee Williams's works, three spatial realms come to the fore: "an enclosed space of retreat, entrapment, and defeat, a mediated or threshold space of confrontation and negotiation, and an exterior or distant space of hope, illusion, escape, or freedom."³⁴ Physical space itself can become representative of certain emotions; in line with Postlewait's interpretation, Felicia Hardison Londré comments that in *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947), "the physical interior and exterior of the simultaneous setting [...] reinforce the mingling of objective reality and the subjective reality that is seen through the eyes of Blanche Dubois."³⁵ Murphy's plays are comparable to those of Williams in that realities converge, with the interlinked spaces of the physical (perceived) and the mental (conceived) creating lived affective atmospheres. *Crucial Week*, for instance, offers total visibility of the town to the audience and the protagonist's internalisation of such claustrophobic setting.

One critic remarks that Murphy's early plays "have captured that stage in young people's lives when they aren't quite sure where they are going yet desperately need to declare themselves, to

³⁴ Thomas Postlewait, "Spatial Order and Meaning in the Theatre: The Case of Tennessee Williams," *Assaph: Studies in the Theatre* 10 (1994): 49.

³⁵ Felicia Hardison Londré, "A Streetcar Running Fifty Years," in *The Cambridge Companion to Tennessee Williams*, ed. Matthew C. Roudané (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997), 48.

breathe.”³⁶ Youthful resentment towards society can be strongly felt in these plays. Individuals are profoundly in conflict with their surroundings. Anger, frustration, and hatred are thrown together in the lived space of the dancehall and the small town, which in turn is shared in the lived space of the theatre.

On the Outside (1959), On the Inside (1974): The Ballroom of Reality

On the Outside and *On the Inside* are set in 1958, outside and inside a country dancehall. Dancing is deeply associated with the development of Irish culture and society. From the traditional Irish dances to the influx of foreign dancing such as jazz dance, dancing has been a significant part of Irish nationalist movements, a target of social control, a market for commercial industry, as well as an everyday leisure activity for the local community. Emblematic of Irish culture, the staging of the dancehall in *On the Outside* and *On the Inside* thus questions the social issues that dancing encompasses, touching on institutionalisation, containment culture, class divisions, gender politics, urbanisation, commercialisation of romance, the repressiveness of the Catholic church, Americanisation and more. In other words, the plays materialise the practice of space surrounding the dancehall, deconstructing its conceived representations and the forces that oppress the characters’ lives.

In “Locked Out: Working-Class Lives in Irish Drama 1958-1998,” Victor Merriman describes Tom Murphy as “the laureate of the working-class.”³⁷ This working-class experience is encapsulated in Frank’s speech in *On the Outside*. Frank, a “towny” and “an apprentice to some trade” complains about provincial small-town life:

it’s like a big tank. The whole town is like a tank. At home is like a tank. A huge tank

³⁶ “Murphy’s Law,” *Hot Press*, Dec 16, 1992, *Outside*, Dec 1, 1992 [Press Cuttings], ATDA at NUIG, 0701_PC_0001, p.15.

³⁷ Victor Merriman, “Locked Out: Working-Class Lives in Irish Drama 1958-1998” in *A History of Irish Working-Class Writing*, ed. Michael Pierson (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2018), 321.

with walls running up, straight up. And we're at the bottom, splashing around all week in their Friday night vomit, clawing at the sides all around. And the bosses – and the big-shots – are up around the top, looking in, looking down. You know the look? Spitting. On top of us. And for fear we might climb out someday – Do you know what they're doing? – They smear grease around the walls. (*Outside*, 180)

Murphy considers this the worst passage in the play because of its overt moralising.³⁸ Nonetheless, the tank metaphor became representative of the grim reality and struggle—of being both locked-out and locked-in—that the young working-class faced in a '50s Ireland undergoing rapid change, and has become the most cited passage from *On the Outside*. Fintan O'Toole asserts that *On the Outside* shows “the division of the classes and the antagonism between city and country.”³⁹ What O'Toole finds remarkable about Murphy is his ability to write against the conventional vision of the countryside and the innocent image of peasants put forth by the officials and the literary tradition of many Irish writers. Paul Murphy equally regards Murphy's plays as illustrating the “syntax of Irish history,” seeing *On the Outside* as an “issue of class politics” and *On the Inside* as an “issue of sexual politics.”⁴⁰ According to Grene, the scenes depict “actual horrors of the dance-hall, inside and out” and “the abrasions of the minute class distinctions, the corseting of a rigidly conservative social order, the furtive would-be mutinies against its moral policing.”⁴¹ To these critics, Murphy's early plays are rooted in a specific time and place, reflecting the political, social and cultural realities of Ireland.

The dancehall, as Grene and O'Toole acknowledge, is in itself a “significant feature of its time and place,” suggestive of other “state-sanctioned places of compulsory confinement.”⁴² Indeed, both critics refer to the Dance Hall Act of 1935, which aimed at licensing and controlling public dances. The Dance Hall Act was a response to many “paternalistic and nationalistic [...] pronouncements on

³⁸ Grene, *Playwright Adventurer*, 22-28.

³⁹ Fintan O'Toole, *The Politics of Magic* (Dublin: New Island, 1994), 38.

⁴⁰ Paul Murphy, “Tom Murphy and the Syntax of Irish History,” in *Alive in Time: The Enduring Drama of Tom Murphy*, ed. Christopher Murray (Dublin: Carysfort, 2010), 58-59.

⁴¹ Grene, *Politics*, 209.

⁴² Grene, *Playwright Adventurer*, 28.

‘the evils of dancing.’”⁴³ “Public morality” regarding sexuality was questioned, while foreign music was considered a threat to traditional Irish culture and spirituality. As Barbara O’Connor notes: “the normative discourses on dance in the 1920s and 30s” were characterised by “a climate of economic protectionism and cultural authoritarianism.”⁴⁴ The Carrigan Report (1932) to combat juvenile prostitution, the anti-Jazz campaign led by the Gaelic League in 1934,⁴⁵ and the sermons and statements made by the Catholic Church are key examples revealing the authorities’ attitude towards the “degeneracy” of dancehalls. These examples show their fear of losing control of the people—women and young people in particular—in a rapidly changing and increasingly mobile society. Cars and bicycles allowed greater mobility, which had become a central concern for many priests who proposed geographic limitations to restrict “morally irresponsible strangers” to the dancehall.⁴⁶ To control and inspect immoral behaviour, cars were included in the definition of “street,” making cars a public place.⁴⁷ Figuratively, these outsiders were regarded as a romantic projection of young girls—the “tall dark stranger”—but the classic story of “Devil in the Dance Hall” attempts to undercut such notions by illustrating that the stranger in fact has a “cloven hoof.”⁴⁸

In the 1930s, there was a proliferation of parish halls all over the country. As “persons of good character,” parish priests had a monopoly on the numbers of dance licenses issued.⁴⁹ These halls were a vital source of funding for the church and a source of taxation for the government. It should also be noted that despite efforts to control the inflow of foreign dancing and dancehall practices and encourage traditional forms of dance, “the appeal of modern music and dance was far greater for the

⁴³ Helen Brennan, “‘The Hobs of Hell’: The Clergy and Irish Dance,” in *The Story of Irish Dance* (Dingle: Brandon, 1999), 125.

⁴⁴ Barbara O’Connor, *The Irish Dancing: Cultural Politics and Identities 1900-2000* (Cork: Cork UP, 2013), 59.

⁴⁵ Revulsion against jazz was linked with sexual, racial and ideological prejudices. The “nigger-music,” “with its abominable rhythm was borrowed from Central Africa by a gang of wealthy Bolsheviks in the USA to strike at Church civilization throughout the world” (O’Connor, 54). The association of Jazz with black/African sexuality was regarded as primitive and threatening (55). As Jazz was considered anti-national and demoralizing, the anti-Jazz campaign was launched by the Gaelic League in 1934 and was endorsed by Éamon de Valera with an official statement “to restore national forms of dancing”; see Jim Smyth, “Dancing, Depravity and All That Jazz: The Public Dance Hall Act of 1935,” *History Ireland* 1, no. 2 (1993): 54.

⁴⁶ Gearóid Ó hAllmhuráin, “Dancing on the Hobs of Hell: Rural Communities in Clare and the Dance Halls Act of 1935,” *New Hibernia Review* 9, no. 4 (2005): 14.

⁴⁷ Smyth, “Dancing, Depravity,” 54.

⁴⁸ O’Connor, *The Irish Dancing*, 53.

⁴⁹ Ó hAllmhuráin, “Hobs of Hell,” 16.

majority of the population.”⁵⁰ The Dance Hall Act, “like many laws in Ireland was probably honoured more in the breach than in observance.”⁵¹ For instance, unlicensed house dances continued to be held by impoverished farmers to raise a few shillings to feed their family.⁵² The Dance Halls Act was “misapplied as often as it was applied, and especially in rural communities. Department of Justice files finally released in the late 1980s and early 1990s offer some disturbing insights into the confused interpretation of the act by its handlers.”⁵³ Individual gardaí and sympathetic priests “turned a blind eye” to the dances and even brought musicians together.⁵⁴ There were also counter-cultural instances where the dancehall was used to resist social and ideological control. Jimmy Gralton (1886-1945), a prominent but perhaps exceptional example of this, was a socialist leader running a dancehall in rural Leitrim. Part of the Revolutionary Workers’ Group (a forerunner of the Communist Party of Ireland), he organised free events and used the dancehall for meetings, but was later deported as an “undesirable alien” by de Valera’s government. His story was made into a film entitled *Jimmy’s Hall* (2014) by Ken Loach, and was adapted into a play in 2017 at the Abbey, directed by Graham McLaren.

While the 1920s and ’30s were marked by antipathy to and control over modern dancing by the State, Church and various cultural groups, the dancehalls became more commercialised and were associated with increasing consumption and urbanisation in the 1940s and ’50s. Drawing on Eva Illouz’s claims about the consumption of romantic utopia and how romance replaced religion as the focus of everyday life in the twentieth century, O’Connor asserts that “dance venues fostered the performance of romance in the everyday life,” where “romance is lived on the symbolic mode of ritual, but it also displays the properties of the staged dramas of everyday life.”⁵⁵ O’Connor examines the emergence of many commercial ballrooms, paying particular attention to the original “Ballroom of Romance” (which provided the title for William Trevor’s well-known short story) in Glenfarne, County Leitrim. The owner, John McGivern, tactfully used various artefacts such as music, light, props

⁵⁰ O’Connor, *The Irish Dancing*, 59.

⁵¹ Smyth “Dancing, Depravity,” 54.

⁵² Ó hAllmhuráin, “Hobs of Hell,” 13.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 14-15.

⁵⁵ O’Connor, *The Irish Dancing*, 61.

and food to create a romantic ambience. Playing upon the theme of romance, McGivern hoped for “respectable mingling of the sexes” in the ballroom, which would eventually help people to find marriage partners.⁵⁶ Aspirational consumer culture was formed through film, advertisements and popular media, and O’Connor goes on to argue that the dancehall space was a “romantic utopia,” especially for many women. Dancehalls “gave dancers the opportunity to transcend their everyday reality and enter an alternative, more exciting and magical world” which was created by “a sensuous material reality.”⁵⁷ Although O’Connor exposes the contradiction that existed in these dancehalls, mainly discussing the power imbalance between men and women, the binary logic of seeing the dancehall as “utopian” as opposed to the mundane “everyday” requires further examination.

Many of these historical details and discourses surrounding the dancehall appear in *On the Outside* and *On the Inside*. As the stage directions outline,

The dancehall, in the background, is an austere building suggesting, at first glance, a place of compulsory confinement more than one of entertainment. Then through a small window, high up on the wall, can be seen the glow of the ballroom lights, and, occasionally, to complement the more romantic numbers, a revolving crystal ball, tantalizing and tempting to anyone on the outside without the wherewithal to gain admission. (*Outside*, 167)

Again, the element of “compulsory confinement” is mentioned from the outset. Nevertheless, it is only “at first glance” that the building seems confining; the stage directions move on to describing the romantic, “sensuous material reality” of the dancehall—the crystal ball, lights and music—evoking what O’Connor would describe as the “staged drama” of the “romantic utopia.” Kathleen and Anne, two girls waiting outside for Frank, are affected by the romantic atmosphere surrounding the dancehall. Anne is “very naive and anxious to be conventional. She is sincere but rather stupid; the words of a

⁵⁶ O’Connor, *The Irish Dancing*, 62-63.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 67.

popular song are the true expression of human spirit” (*Outside*, 167). Kathleen “has less romantic illusions [...]. But that is not to say that she is unromantic. She simply has a better idea than Anne of what it is all in aid of” (167). It is later revealed, however, that the dancehall is neither a space of romance nor erotic fulfilment. Frank and Joe are excluded from the dancehall because they cannot afford the admission price of six shillings. They are twenty-two, fairly young, “old enough, however, to be aware of the very rigid class distinctions that pervade a small, urban-rural community and [Joe] resents ‘them’ with the cars and money because he has not got the same. It is hard to say how far he is really bad and how far he is only an intelligent product of his environment” (170). Frank and Joe contrast with Mickey Ford who is “well-off, having a car and no lack of money” (175). He wears “a loud American-style tie” and often “affects a slight American accent whenever he thinks of it” (175). The name Ford itself is also a reminder of Fordism—the industrialised and standardised mass production of cars in the United States. Mickey later exits the dancehall with Anne, Frank’s original date, and humiliates Frank by saying “Pick on someone your own class now” (191). Economic concerns and class distinctions are evident; the characters can be said to be products and victims of structural forces. Their affective lives, desires and relationships are repressed and obstructed because of their class status.

To pursue the argument further, the nature of the characters’ desire and relationship is questionable; they are manipulated and exploited in the “aspirational consumer culture” that had already emerged by the ’40s and ’50s. Frank and Joe’s frustration, in some sense, comes from an unfulfilled desire, but one that is false—as is shown in *On the Inside*, the dancehall is far from a romantic utopian space that allows for fulfilment of desire or an escape from reality, which Joe calls “hell” (*Outside*, 192). Their motivations are flawed and empty. Towards the end of the play, Frank curses “[t]his damn place, this damn hall, people, those lousy women! I could – I could – *He rushes over to the poster and hits it hard with his fist. He kicks it furiously*” (192). Being denied entrance to the dancehall prompts Frank’s anger; but Anne’s dismissal and Mickey’s comments leave him feeling humiliated, frustrated and impotent. Although Frank may not realise it, in the class-structured tank-world (whether it be outside or inside a dancehall), he would not have had a chance with Anne anyway.

In the “aspirational consumer culture,” the dancehall is a space that perpetuates false desires.

The dancehall as a space of illusory desire is realised onstage using the offstage space. The dancehall in *On the Outside* is only partly visible, and only the swinging doors where people come out occasionally, along with the sound of music, suggest that there is an actual dance happening next door. The interconnectedness of the spaces reveals the offstage space to be fiercely present. It is an unreachable elsewhere (an object of desire, the “secret kingdom”), but also a presence that dictates the reality of the here and now. Again, Gaston Bachelard’s “door of hesitation” serves as a fitting analogy: the door, although full of potential, marks the separation absolutely. To the characters, and by extension the audience, the door remains resolutely closed; it is even guarded by an official doorkeeper. The door physically manifests the exclusion (perceived) and the possibility or desire that is absent but present (conceived).

On the Inside comes from the earlier material of Murphy’s television play, *A Young Man in Trouble* (1969), which focuses on the relationship between Frank, a schoolteacher, and Margaret, a telephonist, and their “trouble” dealing with an unwanted pregnancy. While the TV version shows multiple venues—Margaret’s flat, switchboard (her workplace), a pub, a country road, headmaster’s office, and the interior of the car Frank has borrowed from the headmaster Mr. Collins—with constant switch over between scenes, *On the Inside* brings all the action and stories together into one night in the dancehall. The dancehall thus becomes a microcosmic representation of people’s provincial lifestyles, attitudes and values. Rather than the dancehall (the space of “romantic utopia”) being in opposition with the dreary everyday, the weekly dancing is merely an extension of the realities the characters live in. The dance is not in any way eventful or spectacular. From the outset, Miss D’Arcy, a neurotic teacher in her thirties, complains about the men being a “bunch of mullackers” with “no finesse” (*Inside*, 195). Mr. Collins also expresses his annoyance about the dance as being “only mixed middling” and that “six bob was too much” (196)—the same entrance fee which kept Frank and Joe out in *On the Outside*. Although young Angela and Bridie, “a good figure; home on holidays from England” (196), attract much attention from the men, the dance is dull and repetitive overall. Willie, a bank clerk womaniser, is in the background throughout, chasing after the girls, but is shunned by

others as “ridiculous. Only disgracing himself” (199). The dance is a “wary mating game,”⁵⁸ carried out under strict supervision. Mr. Collins and his wife Mrs. Collins, who is “at her best when he is not with her” (*OI*, 196), are seen to be “unhappy” (216), and have “nothing to say to each other” (209). Kieran (not Frank anymore as in *Young Man*) searches for love only in vain; his friend Malachy has never had sex.

Since the 1950s, Ireland has moved from a repressive Catholic culture of “self-abnegation” to a culture of consumption and indulgence. Sociologist Tom Inglis posits that “[w]hile this shift reflects not so much sexual liberation as a transition from one sexual regime to another, the clash of cultures can produce insecurity and instability at the heart of ordinary everyday life, which can in turn have repercussions for the general way that people deal with desire and pleasure.”⁵⁹ Inglis discusses how social control was exercised at an everyday level, whereby controlling desire and pleasure was one of the primary mechanisms of policing; individuals practice self-denial and anxieties grow from these clashing cultures. Indeed, Murphy’s characters feel torn between those clashing moralities and desires, self-abnegation and self-indulgence. Malachy denounces the Church’s monopoly over morality; he condemns the “celibates” who control “three-quarters of the jobs in the country” (*Inside*, 209): “From birth to grave, Baptism to Extreme Unction there’s always a celibate there somewhere, i.e., that is, a priest, a coonic. Teaching us in the schools, showing us how to play football, taking money at the ballroom doors, not to speak of preaching and officiating at the seven deadly sacraments” (208). Kieran’s frustration is based on introjected feelings of inhibition and entrapment. The church’s institutional power and monopoly over all aspects of the characters’ lives impinge on their desire and privacy.

Problems of education and the repressiveness of the community are further exposed in the conversation between Mr. Collins and Malachy. Malachy asks Mr. Collins, “[s]till beating the children up there?” to which Mr. Collins replies: “[w]e didn’t succeed in beating much into you” (*Inside*, 197). Apart from the violence inflicted on the students and the trauma experienced by the young, the teachers

⁵⁸ Grene, *Playwright Adventurer*, 29.

⁵⁹ Tom Inglis, “Origins and Legacies of Irish Prudery: Sexuality and Social Control in Modern Ireland,” *Éire-Ireland* 40, no. 3&4 (2005): 11-12.

do not enjoy a better life than the outsiders. Kieran complains, “what kind of a job is teaching anyway? When you’re slave-driven. Four hundred and two pounds a year! And it’s so dead, so dead around here. Everyone should see a bit of the world. And do you know what’s wrong? Celibate personality. [...] To welter for years in guilt and indignity” (219). He also expresses his desire to be free: “I’d love to be free [...] FREE! Free, free!” (217). O’Toole interprets Kieran as being caught between “false freedom” and “old celibate repressiveness.”⁶⁰ Grene claims that *On the Inside* exposes the “claustrophobic inside of the social panopticon and the introjected guilt that accompanies it.”⁶¹ It can be argued that the characters’ everyday life is thoroughly colonised by the insecurity and anxiety caused by the clashing ideologies of capitalism and religion. This social claustrophobia ties back to the sociality of emotions, of affectivities that press upon society. Bachelard’s door is thoroughly closed, not only from the outside-in, but equally from the inside-out.

Dancehall as Lived Theatrical Space

As a social space the dancehall is where people come together and build their communal relationships. Dancing, itself a performative act, shares certain affinities with theatre; as the 2017 Abbey production of *Jimmy’s Hall* demonstrated, dancehalls are similar to theatres in that they provide entertainment to people with their performativity, creativity and festiveness. However, in Murphy’s version of the dancehall, we see ordinary characters as products of economic and social structures, who cannot escape nor resist, but must struggle to live in the given reality. The theatricality of the plays shows that the absurdity and grimness of the everyday can become a source of laughter. The nature of the laughter is in no sense therapeutic; it does not purge the feelings of guilt, shame and anger but rather highlights the pathetic and bleak situation of the characters. Nevertheless, the theatricality alone conveys glimpses of the strength of the ordinary that can be life-affirming.

⁶⁰ O’Toole, *Politics of Magic*, 50-51.

⁶¹ Grene, *Playwright Adventurer*, 30.

On the Outside combines a sense of Joycean paralysis and Beckettian language game, as Frank and Joe's struggles are foregrounded, and the dancehall merely stands in the background. Frank and Joe, like Corley and Lenehan in "Two Gallants," plot to obtain money even if that means using people around them—they dismiss Drunk Daly but attempt to get money from him. In an early draft of *On the Outside*, Joe "has no respect for other people, rich or poor, young or old. They are all instruments to be used in getting him what he wants."⁶² They idly pass the time, living a shallow life with no prospects. Moreover, in the same way that Mangan's sister and the bazaar in "Araby" were a projection of the boy's escapist desire from the drudgery and the mundane reality, Frank and Joe see the dancehall as a resolution to their problems, only to be disappointed. On the other hand, Roche and Grene point to the Beckettian elements in *On the Outside*: "two men waiting; a determined effort by one to keep up the spirits of the other; a belief that, if they get inside, all their troubles will be over."⁶³ Grene sees *On the Outside* as, "a sort of *Waiting for Godot* in a minor realistic key," portraying the "repeated frustration of their repeated failures."⁶⁴ Resonating with the Beckettian acceptance of waiting as the existential human action that sustains life, Murphy's portrayal of Frank and Joe reveals the force of bonding between them that allows them to go on. The language games that Frank and Joe play to fill up their time, the mundane and repetitive aspect of their everyday life is brought to the centre of the stage. Despite the bitterness, the dialogue and jokes between Frank and Joe show how they can laugh about things:

FRANK. Do you see him [Mickey] driving round the town always with one arm sticking out the window? Hail, rain or snow the elbow is out. I don't know how he doesn't get paralyzed with the cold. I'm going to write to Henry Ford.

JOE. Yeh?

FRANK. And tell him to invent a car – great idea – with an artificial arm fixed on and sticking out the window. The hard man car they'll call it. Then fellas like

⁶² TCD MS11115/1/2/1.

⁶³ Roche, "Murphy's Drama," 86.

⁶⁴ Grene, *Politics*, 121.

Mickey can still be dog tough without exposing themselves. Get me?

They laugh. (Outside, 176)

Even though Frank and Joe cannot compete with Mickey in terms of wealth and class status, their way of satirizing and making fun of his behaviour compensates for the sense of defeat and evokes a Beckettian tragicomedy. Although *On the Outside* does not contain the deep metaphysical anguish of Beckett or Joycean moments of epiphany, the impulse to stage the most trivial aspect instead of intense dramatic action exemplifies how, from the outset, Murphy was concerned with the most elemental condition of ordinary people and their everyday struggles.

Although not fully actualised, there is a metaphorical dimension to the play. As Joe invites Frank to “come on out here to hell” (*Outside*, 192), the world Frank and Joe occupy becomes “a purgatorial world,”⁶⁵ or a “space between,”⁶⁶ denying entrance to the “heavenly” dancehall. They are not only caught between going in or going back home, but also between life choices that are equally grim. Drunk Daly, who is looked down on by everyone and kicked out by the Bouncer who knows him by name, is a reminder to Frank and Joe of their bleak future if they were to stay in the small town. Frank considers emigrating to England and bailing out of “the lousy job,” but it is uncertain whether he will pursue this path. By staging the “outside” world of a dancehall packed with social meaning, Murphy experiments with the exterior/interior, exclusion/inclusion and freedom/confinement binaries. As a result, the space the characters occupy becomes a “no place.” They are “outside” the surveillance and confining structure of the dancehall, but that does not mean they are free. They are equally “caught in” their economic circumstances and their everyday struggles. That also does not mean they are “inside” in the social world of the other characters. The space itself becomes a strange place, refusing to fit into any clear categories.

Even though the dancehall is in the background, Frank and Joe’s struggle, like a dance performance, provides entertainment to the audience in the theatre. What the dancehall cannot provide

⁶⁵ O’Toole, *Politics of Magic*, 44.

⁶⁶ Roche, “Murphy’s Drama,” 87.

to the characters, the theatre hall provides to the audience through the actors-as-characters. There is an ironic and theatrical dimension to the narrative that changes the bitter-sour atmosphere of the play. The “repeated failures” and the “repeated frustrations” become sources of farce and laughter for the spectators. Frank and Joe curse and shout at Mickey, who is leaving with Anne:

FRANK (*quietly*): Shout at them.

JOE: What?

FRANK: Shout, shout, shout at them!

JOE (*roars*): Spark-plug face! Handsome! Glue-bags!

FRANK: Torn mouth!

JOE: Carburettor head! Cop on yank!

FRANK: Torn mouth! – Torn mouth! (*Laughing harshly, drawing DRUNK into their company.*) [...]. (*Outside, 191-192*)

These remarks emphasise the pathetic nature of Frank and Joe’s situation, in which they can do nothing, or are left with nothing but silly words. In the theatrical realm, however, the words themselves are enough to produce laughter when enacted on stage.

The opening stage directions indicate that “popular music of the time (late fifties) played badly by the band, continues throughout the play” (167). Along with the occasional clapping noises when the dance ends, the whole play is awash with music, sometimes gently and sometimes not so gently. In the fictional world, the songs serve as the music of the dancehall, but on stage, they equally constitute background music for the show that Frank and Joe enact before the audience. When Murphy was brainstorming the play, he originally planned the piece in 16 different scenes,⁶⁷ which approximately matches the music numbers chosen for the background tape.⁶⁸ By imagining the sequence of different struggles in musical chunks, Murphy merges the social reality with ironic

⁶⁷ TCD MS11115/1/2/2.

⁶⁸ TCD MS11115/1/2/3.

choreographed movements: not the actual dance in the dancehall, but another type of Frank-and-Joe dance for the audience.

In the way that the discrepancy between the physical exclusion and conceived notion of the dancehall for Frank and Joe becomes transformed into a tragicomic piece for the audience, Kieran and Margaret's quest to resolve their trouble (pregnancy) becomes a theatrical spectacle. At first, Kieran and Malachy's contemplation of love only seems to emphasise its absence and hollowness. Malachy's last line "what is this thing called love?" (*Inside*, 222) taken from Cole Porter's popular song title, and Kieran's "what happens to it, where does it go?" (207) highlights the discrepancy between their aspiration (influenced by "poet Yeats," and the music and culture of consumption) and the lived reality, where love becomes "in-con-venient" (206), according to Kieran. To his own question, "where does it [love] go?" Kieran adds, "(*Indicating dancehall.*) Look at it! Look! Is this it?" (207). The dancehall to Kieran is a repressive and deadening space, representative of the community and their celibate attitudes. One of the reasons for such feelings of pressure and constraint derives from actual physical restraints, where no suitable place for sexual intercourse is available. When Kieran finds out that Margaret is in fact not pregnant, Kieran suggests that they will "do it right this time" (221) in Malachy's house which they can occupy all to themselves, instead of "the usual places" (221).

Murphy does not deride nor romanticise the ending as the ultimate escape or solution. Murphy writes that "these characters are ordinary people – no great heights, no great depths. They go thro' life dealing with their problems."⁶⁹ In an annotated typescript of the play, Murphy recrafts the ending:

KIERAN: I love you too

They laugh [Ins. (What is love? A celebration of life)] delighted. Then she becomes serious.

MARGARET: Do you?

He nods. They ~~laugh~~ smile again.

⁶⁹ TCD MS11115/1/8/2.

KIERAN: [Ins. (Serious) (A serious step he is now considering)] Will you come somewhere with me? tonight.

[...]

KIERAN: Not the usual places ... We'll do it ~~properly~~ [Ins. right] this time. (*She nods*).
They Laugh [Ins. serious excitement rather than laughing. Joy.]⁷⁰

As underlined in the passage above, the handwritten insertion of the stage directions reveals the tenderness and life-affirming force that these ordinary characters may possess, despite the dismal reality they live in. Murphy replaces a laugh with a smile, to emphasise subtle yet genuine joy and affirmation. Murphy himself answers the question “What is love?” in the insertion, by defining it as “a celebration of life.”

In the annotated stage directions for *On the Outside*, presumably for the 1974 Abbey production that Murphy himself directed along with the newly written companion piece *On the Inside*, Murphy works with music that interweaves both plays and detailed movements accompanying the characters. Murphy designates “Don’t Let the Stars Get in Your Eyes” by The Dixies, an Irish showband based in Cork, as the starting song for both plays.⁷¹ In the 1992 production, the song was changed to “How Much is that Doggie in the Window” but still functioned as the bracketing feature of the two separate plays. The repeated musical cue leads the audience to think that they are experiencing the same moment outside and inside of the dancehall. There is the same poster sign organized by the I.N.T.O (Irish National Teachers Organization) with the same entrance price of six shillings, to denote that it is the same dance event. The continuity, the linkage being the dancehall itself, makes the irony starker: inside or outside, life is dreary for the characters.

In the 1992 production, the audience were seated on both sides of the central stage. Reviewers questioned the validity of this staging choice because the lighting included patches of spectators that diminished cohesion and diffused the play’s action.⁷² Nevertheless, by having the central floor cut

⁷⁰ TCD MS11115/1/8/5

⁷¹ TCD MS11115/1/2/3, MS11115/1/8/7.

⁷² Gerry Colgan, “Review: On the Outside, On the Inside,” *Irish Times*, Dec 2, 1992; Frank Shouldice,

through the audience, Karen Weavers's set managed to materialise the country road in *On the Outside* and the bustling atmosphere of people in the dancehall in *On the Inside*.



[1992 ATDA NUIG Video *On the Outside*]



[1992 ATDA NUIG Video *On the Inside*]

“Peacock Puzzle of 50s Frolics,” *Irish Press*, Dec 2, 1992.

In the play, multiple characters occupy the same space and various actions unfold simultaneously. Although the main dialogues lead the play's narrative, other characters are constantly interacting and dancing with one another in the background. Thus, having the audience around the stage opened the space further, diffusing the gaze. The eyes of the spectators on both sides highlighted the panoptic and claustrophobic nature of the town (whether outside or inside), and they became part of the environment for each other. The production pointed to the metatheatrical dimension of the play, in that the audience, like the characters, were also excluded or included in what was visible and invisible onstage. The theatrical space was "shared," constituting its own social space with the audience.⁷³

Even in Murphy's annotated stage directions, the timing and effects of music and movements are intricate. For instance, during Kieran and Margaret's serious dialogue about their relationship, other characters are seen doing other things, echoing the spoken interchange:

MARGARET: I thought that things would change after – Recently.

KIERAN: After what – after what?

MARGARET: Nothing.

Pause. [Ins. 2nd man takes drinks from bar to Miss D, invites her to sit, she refuses, and moves R to edge of dance floor, followed by 2nd man.]

KIERAN: Of course we've come a long way.⁷⁴

The broken movement of the dialogue between Margaret and Kieran is mimicked in the blocked attempt by the second man to get together with Miss D. In other instances, characters watch and approach one another, go to the bar or the toilet, light a cigarette, cross the stage, move around the

⁷³ Alan Gilsonan's 1992 revival was very different from the original 1974 production which Tom Murphy himself directed in the Project Arts Centre. In that first production, the play was a huge success, and was subsequently produced in Scotland (Traverse Theatre in Edinburgh 1975) and the US (Long Wharf Theatre in New Haven 1976). The most notable revival was in 1986 when inmates performed *On the Outside* in Mountjoy jail as part of the Mountjoy Theatre Project. These productions reveal the intricacies of social spaces and how they interact with the community in which the play is staged. See TCD MS11115/6/2/21.

⁷⁴ TCD MS11115/1/8/5.

pillar etc. These choreographed movements interrupt or are interwoven into the dialogue, and show how the “trouble,” talk of sex, and the drama surrounding it blend into other ordinary activities.

The characters in *On the Outside* and *On the Inside* are physically excluded from or restricted to the perceived dancehall space. In the conceived space, however, dancehalls are mystified as a space of erotic and romantic fulfillment while religious authorities control people by inculcating ideas of moral sinfulness associated with the dancehall. In the lived space, Frank and Joe, excluded from the dancehall, attempt to get pass outs, tell each other stories, try to trick Drunk Daly and the bouncer, and even assuage themselves by calling the girls lousy or insulting Mickey behind his back. Their repeated attempts become sources of farce and humour on stage. Margaret and Kieran dance and converse with one another, negotiating their feelings and future within the restricted space. Their drama, blended into the action of other characters, contributes to the lived theatrical space of the dancehall. *On the Outside* and *On the Inside* materialise the social life and practice of space surrounding the dancehall, deconstruct its conceived representations and the forces that oppress the characters’ lives, and transform the space into a theatrical interplay between the perceived and conceived.

A Crucial Week in the Life of a Grocer’s Assistant (1969): The Small Town as Panoptic Dreamworld

On the Outside and *On the Inside* de-romanticise the hollow space of the dancehall: it is a space of illusion in which the experiences both within and without are equally bleak and dull. *A Crucial Week in the Life of a Grocer’s Assistant* reshapes the contours of everyday life where the protagonist’s illusory dreamworld has been conquered by reality. “Dreaming” being his ordinary everyday activity, John Joe Moran, the grocer’s assistant, continues to live out his daily routines, unable to stay in or leave his hometown. The continuous shifting between his dreams and his mundane reality show that both realms are, in fact, harrowingly similar. The perceived space of his town and conceived space of his desires have become so entangled that he cannot even escape to his imaginary

dreamland. He is trapped in the country's stultifying environment and the predicament of individual life.

Many critics have dealt with the issue of division between reality and dream, the incompleteness of identity and emigration in *Crucial Week*. Helen Heusner Lojek discerns a "parallel melody" between *Crucial Week* and Williams's *The Glass Menagerie* (1944). By pointing out the similarities—young men trapped in existential dilemmas, with matriarchal mothers and split identities—she argues that both plays "share a willingness to violate realistic conventions in an effort to convey emotional realities."⁷⁵ Lojek maintains that both Tom in *The Glass Menagerie* and John Joe in *Crucial Week* have fractured identities as they attempt to become independent. Tom's tragic suffering comes not only from his split identity as poet and warehouse worker but more profoundly from the irreconcilable rupture between Tom present and Tom past. Williams's innovation is to place both Toms onstage to highlight the ravages of time. On the other hand, Murphy finds the locus of John Joe's suffering in the repressive orbit of dreamscape and landscape. As Lojek writes, "[t]he rich fantasy life revealed by his dreams is a stark contrast to the dullness of work in Mr Brown's grocery shop, the repressions indicated in his relationship with Mona, and the guilt-inducing sameness of his home life."⁷⁶ She goes on to suggest that "the coupling of John Joe 'real' and John Joe 'dream' involves a stage doubling as powerful and suggestive as that embodied in the two Toms."⁷⁷ Fintan O'Toole claims that the small town in Murphy's play is "set as a metaphor for schizophrenia": neither rural nor urban, Tuam is "a social version of Purgatory."⁷⁸ He continues: "the play builds a sense of world in which everything is incomplete. The world of dreams is divided from the world of reality. Men are divided from women. The soul is divided from the body."⁷⁹

Although the metaphorical and theatrical split of both identity and place seems apparent in

⁷⁵ Helen Heusner Lojek, "Parallel Melodies: *A Crucial Week* and *The Glass Menagerie*," in *Alive in Time: The Enduring Drama of Tom Murphy*, ed. Christopher Murray (Dublin: Carysfort, 2010), 83.

⁷⁶ Lojek, "Parallel Melodies," 80-81.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 81

⁷⁸ O'Toole, *Politics of Magic*, 82.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 88. The play often invites comparison to Brian Friel's *Philadelphia, Here I Come* (1964), in which the split of the protagonist into Public and Private Gar allows the inarticulate protagonist to express his emotions. Grene argues that "in moving his characters towards caricature, Murphy created a harsher, more satiric vision" than that offered by Friel (*Playwright Adventurer*, 31).

Crucial Week, it is not so much the stark contrast as the mutual embeddedness and resemblance of these seemingly opposite modes that is striking. The “world of dream” is not necessarily divided from the “world of reality” in which dreams are a “rich fantasy,” while the everyday is composed of the “dullness of work.” Despite the presence of expressionist techniques in *Crucial Week*, the play also shares an agenda with naturalism. After discussing various uses of spatial separation in her analysis of Strindberg’s *Miss Julie*, Una Chaudhuri argues:

The rhetorical process of the play (and, I am arguing, of naturalism itself) is one that takes these literal spatial oppositions (along with other more figurative ones, especially private and public, known and unknown) and rewrites them so that they are not mutually exclusive opposites but rather versions of each other. In the staging and meaning of the play, just as in the logic of naturalism, inside is not merely contiguous and continuous with outside but thoroughly penetrated by it; similarly, the private is not a realm withdrawn and protected from the public but fully determined by it.⁸⁰

In *Crucial Week*, John Joe’s life is determined by the priest getting him jobs and his mother’s plan for him to inherit his uncle’s shop. He is still dependent on his parents, living in their house. John Joe also feels that as the gravedigger’s son, the town will laugh at him for having high notions. Such realities affect his dreams. Dreams and realities interpenetrate each other, imbuing John Joe’s lifeworld with an uncanny atmosphere. His dreams are often nightmares, reflecting amplified versions of his reality. His feelings of guilt, shame and paralysis also make their way into his dreams, creating a sense of stasis.

The dreams do not provide an escapist alternative to his reality but petrify him further. Even in his dreams, from the outset, he fails to take the opportunity to leave the town with Mona.

⁸⁰ Una Chaudhuri, *Staging Place: The Geography of Modern Drama* (Michigan: Michigan UP, 1995), 30.

JOHN JOE (*trying to put a chair into his bag*). It won't fit, it won't fit!

[...]

JOHN JOE (*crying*). They won't let me go, they won't let me stay!

MONA. Quick, before you're thirty! Quick, get up, it's Monday morning!

Mona jumps out the window and is gone. John Joe tries to follow carrying the hold-all and the chair: he gets stuck in the window.

JOHN JOE (*crying*). It's not just a case of staying or leaving! (*Crucial*, 93)

This moment is followed by his mother calling him “foolish” and a “traitor” for trying to leave the place like his brother Frank (94). The “pool of unreal light” (91) and the absurd attempt to pack his chair into the bag indicate that he has been dreaming up to this point. Nevertheless, his dream is only an extension of his real situation, of being “stuck.” The line, “[i]t's not just a case of staying or leaving” is significant, as it is later repeated during the big climactic speech in John Joe's reality.

In addition to his feeling of entrapment, John Joe's dreams show his phobia of “penetration,” hinting at masculine sexual anxieties. As the stage directions indicate, “[s]omeone is trying to force the window to break into the bedroom. [...] Mona climbs into the room through the window. She is in her early twenties. She is scantily dressed in a slip. John Joe, immobile with fear, awaits an explanation” (91). Mona forces herself into John Joe's personal space, the bedroom suggesting his body. This act is a reversal of male penetration of the female, that patriarchal wielding of male sexual power. John Joe's dreams depict real fears and desires that he experiences in his everyday life.

John Joe's dreamy state persists in his wakened life as he is often “not yet fully awake” (95) in his reality. That he lives in dream is further recognised by other characters who call John Joe “only a dreamer” (125), not in the sense of a romantic visionary but a foolish inept lad. When dreams are contradicted by reality, he abandons reality, feeling his dreams more real. On Tuesday, he dreams about a new address he acquires in America: “two-two-two A, Tottenham Court Road, Madison Square Gardens, Lower Edgebaston, Upper Fifth Avenue, Camden Town, U.S.A., S.W.6” (116). In the dream, this new “American” place is where the “fields and bogs” all delight him. Not only is the new address

a mixture of various exotic and mundane sounding places abroad, but it also reflects his contrary desires associated with the place. When he wakes up, John Joe is “feeling the loss of his new address” (117), which is followed by his refusal to go to work. His private life—made up of his inner thoughts and yearnings—is fully determined by the public life, and similarly his private life in turn brings changes to his public life which will later culminate in a climactic, angry outburst. It is not the division but the connection between his reality and dreams, however distorted, that makes John Joe’s situation and the overall play tragicomic.

More than the dream world, it is the hay shed that functions as a space of escape, a place where the young couple can romantically engage with each other, sing and dance together, and express their feelings, however thwarted they may turn out to be. The transformation of the non-individualised space into a personal, individuated, and meaningful place is significant. The hay shed is originally used only for storage purposes built for farmer’s work. However, the space evokes a sense of intimacy and timeless longing which is different from its original function. For instance, the image of the hay is linked to the straw in the hut that John Joe would like to escape to. He half-jokingly tells Mona:

JOHN JOE. Yis! The huteen! Up the mountings! Trees! No people –

MONA. Me! –

JOHN JOE. Straw on the floor! Nice smell! Room to stretch! And the only light would be light from the fire. No turf though, no coal, none of that. Log fire. (115)

The scene moves on to talk about taking a cat to the hut instead of a dog; we later learn that John Joe likes cats because they are more independent. In scene six, he talks of kittens leaving their homes, to which the priest replies dismissively: “Tck-tck-tck! Leave the cats to the women John Joe, and get a dog for yourself. Man is made in the likeness of God, not in the likeness of your kittens” (133). The pun dog-God is implied here, making their dialogue humorous. John Joe’s preference goes against the social pressure of gender norms; even down to the smallest detail, he is affected by his current state of dependence.

The published version of the dialogue between Mona and John Joe seems to move on quickly from one topic to another. However, in the earlier drafts, the reason why John Joe would have wanted to live in a hut is more specified:

JOHN JOE: [...] And the hut'd be made of timber. No cracks in it though. No draughts. Nice, isn't it. Lyin' there on clean, gold straw and shadows from the light of the flames makin' it like a cradle – like as if it was swayin' an' makin' any face in the hut beautiful. Did you ever notice that? People are always better lookin' when you see them by the light of a fire.⁸¹

In John Joe's imagination, the straw and flame would make the space feel like a cradle, a cave-like primordial space he can feel alone and comfortable in. The hut would be closer to the ideal of home buried in John Joe's innermost being. Gaston Bachelard describes how “a dreamer of refuges dreams of a hut, of a nest, or of nooks and corners in which he would like to hide away, like an animal in its hole. In this way, he lives in a region that is beyond human images.”⁸² Most “hut dreams” seeks to escape to an elsewhere, a real refuge distant from over-crowded houses.⁸³ The hut, even though it resembles the maternal womb, contrasts with his actual home where his mother controls everything.

In the hay shed, John Joe and Mona share moments like Kieran and Margaret in *On the Inside*, where they laugh and “smile at each other” (*Inside*, 116). Yet John Joe is more reluctant to admit and release his emotions. After they kiss, John Joe “grows self-conscious, and on the pretext of stretching himself, he pulls himself higher up on the hay away from her,” while Mona, “smiles to herself at a new thought” (*Crucial*, 113). For John Joe, the hay shed is another liminal space which represents his state of being caught between the twin impossibilities of marrying Mona or ending the romance.⁸⁴ Unlike John Joe, Mona is courageous, affirms her feelings toward him, and does not mind what the

⁸¹ TCD MS/11115/1/5/2.

⁸² Bachelard, *Poetics of Space*, 50.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 51.

⁸⁴ In a covering note, Tom Murphy writes that the play “covers a week in the life of young man, a shop-boy, who can neither live in nor leave his home town; who can neither marry his bank-clerk girl nor end the romance” (TCD MS 11115/1/5/3a).

neighbours think of them (*Crucial*, 114). This maturity is reflected in the way she sings. In the beginning of Scene Four, she sings “I Know My Love,” “without taking a breath” (112) in a silly way, but by the end of the scene, “Mona sings – this time slowly” (116). This feature of contrast between mockery and solemnity is something Murphy uses again to great effect in *Conversations on a Homecoming*.

One of the scenes that appears in the early drafts but does not make it into the final published version is the bonfire scene. The “light from the fire” that John Joe mentions at the hay shed is related to the extended bonfire scene, where people dance to ceildh music, which is soon superseded by rock-n-roll and ballads. At the bonfire, “Mona’s exhibition is completely uninhibited, vital fresh, beautiful, sensuous. She seems to be biting at life, eating it. John Joe watching cannot help admiring.”⁸⁵ Nevertheless, John Joe cannot enjoy the occasion or connect with the festivity that Mona embodies. He tells Mona:

I wanted to dance too and well-be-ah-sort-of near you. But I saw all the bagses openin’ their bird eyes an’ “tckin’” an’ that, so I kept out of your way most of the night. [...] An’ if there was another bonfire tomorrow night the same thing’d happen’. I might even say “tck” myself You want to let yourself go an’ enjoy yourself but the’re [sic] all there watchin’, noddin’, watchin’, whisperin’, blinkin’, talkin’. They never let you alone. So all you can do is go away someplace else that’s not as bad or maybe worse. A new place ... Or, become one of them yourself. An’ if you rust enough you might even enjoy being one of them ...⁸⁶

The tension between the individual and the community is apparent in this scene as well. The bonfire is a festive communal occasion but John Joe feels isolated from both the celebration and the communal “tck”ing. He can neither dance freely nor join the crowd.

The original 1969 production, directed by Alan Simpson, offered a “picturesque fresco of

⁸⁵ TCD MS11115/1/5/2.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

small town life,” with Brian Collins’s “pretty toy-town set spread out like a concertina.”⁸⁷ As Murphy himself described in an interview with Grene, the stage resembled a “melodeon street.”⁸⁸ Reviews described the stage as follows: a “highly-coloured West Midlands locale, [...] in full view as you enter the auditorium, bears the stamp of pantomime, complete with perambulating scenery. From a stylised opening dream sequence, one of many, we pass to a form approaching ballet. Some characters make their appearance accompanied by a tune (such as “Tit Willow” from Peadar Lamb’s imbecilic villager”).⁸⁹ In both the 1988 and 1992 productions directed by Garry Hynes, the dream and reality scenes were blurred by using dimmed lightings throughout the play. As Fintan O’Toole commented in his 1988 review, “narrowing the difference between the dream caricatures and the ‘real’ characters” gave a “shuddering nightmarish quality to the whole thing, even at its funniest.”⁹⁰ Monica Frawley designed “a surrealistic, claustrophobic setting of dark, faceless, forbidding houses,”⁹¹ to the extent that some reviewers thought the set was “too dominating” because it “tries to get in too much of the whole town.”⁹²

⁸⁷ Maureen O’Farrell, “A Play of Truth and Laughter,” *Evening Press*, Nov 11, 1969, TCD MS11115/6/2/4.

⁸⁸ Grene, *Playwright Adventurer*, 181.

⁸⁹ John J. Finegan, “Mixture of Styles in Comedy-Drama,” *Evening Herald*, Nov 11, 1969, TCD MS11115/6/2/4.

⁹⁰ Fintan O’Toole, “Murphy’s Marvels,” *Sunday Tribune*, Sep 4, 1988, *Crucial*, Sep 1, 1988 [Press Cuttings], ATDA at NUIG, 0701_PC_0001, p.9.

⁹¹ John J. Finegan, “Review: Revived Play a Winner,” *Evening Herald*, Sep 2, 1988, *Crucial*, Sep 1, 1988 [Press Cuttings], ATDA at NUIG, 0701_PC_0001, p.6.

⁹² David Nowlan, “Review: A Crucial Week in the Life of a Grocer’s Assistant,” *Irish Times*, Sep 2, 1988, *Crucial*, Sep 1, 1988 [Press Cuttings], ATDA at NUIG, 0701_PC_0001, p.21.



[1988 ATDA NUIG Video]

In the 1992 production, a plain spotlight was used to light John Joe in his dream sequence, while the lighting in the background that could be seen through the windows outside was unreal yellow.⁹³



[1992 ATDA NUIG Video]

Frank Halliman Flood's setting artificially framed John Joe's house in the centre with uneven patches on the floor, at a slanted angle, which in effect highlighted the caricature quality of the play. The stage offered total visibility of the microcosmic setting of the small town, a distorted dream vision of John

⁹³ Abbey Theatre, *Crucial*, Nov 17, 1992 [Video], ATDA at NUIG, 513_V_001.

Joe's reality.

The Small Town as a Grotesque Rite of Passage

Crucial Week foregrounds John Joe's state of stasis connected to the idea of growth and independence. O'Toole sees John Joe's childishness and stunted growth as a metaphor for an independent Ireland struggling to grow into adulthood. John Joe "represents the coming Ireland of his times" and the longing "to shake off the shameful past of prolonged dependence and step forward into a new self-confidence."⁹⁴ John Joe is thirty-three, but his dreams are "childlike," and his mother dictates the kind of life he should live. His economic dependency mirrors his psychological dependency. The image of grown-ups as children, as O'Toole suggests, is the coloniser's image of the colonised,⁹⁵ and Ireland has adopted such a self-image. Although the idea of John Joe as a modern-day emasculated male version of Cathleen Ni Houlihan is interesting, O'Toole's analysis sits rather too easily within the interpretive framework of state-of-the-nation drama. Even though the character's personal immaturity has correlations with Ireland in the '50s, the play is also about the wider struggle of the individual against society. *Crucial Week* cannot be understood without examining its relationship to the literary trope of the *Bildungsroman*, with John Joe's development conceived as an unconventional version of *Bildung*. As much as John Joe is a metaphor for Ireland against Britain, he is also an individual profoundly in conflict with his society, the small town he lives in. If John Joe is a metaphor, an Everyman figure, it is Mother who represents an independent Ireland filled with "bitterness and venom" (*Crucial*, 159)—stuck in the "nineteenth century" (94) mentality, stultifying the young individuals, the many John Joes in Ireland.

From a socio-cultural perspective, John Joe represents the young bachelors and "schizophrenics" who populate Irish society and may be symptomatic of its widespread social

⁹⁴ O'Toole, *Politics of Magic*, 85.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 86-87.

problems. Nancy Scheper-Hughes's study of schizophrenics in rural Ireland suggests that certain child rearing patterns—lack of physical contact with the mother, rewarding passivity, low tolerance for crying—contribute to the development of schizophrenic symptoms: “[t]he relative isolation of the infant and small child, followed by the traumatic weaning into public life, might result in a predisposition to resolve conflict and handle painful interactions by ‘flight’ (into withdrawal and fantasy) rather than ‘fight.’”⁹⁶ Schizophrenic patients showed hostility to and fear of their domineering mothers and attributed little importance to their fathers.⁹⁷ According to Scheper-Hughes, many individuals in the rural parts of Ireland suffered from Durkheimian anomie and belated identity crisis due to aspirations constantly blocked by the family, Church and community.⁹⁸ She writes that the “[c]onfiguration of Irish schizophrenia, as revealed through the life histories of young mental patients, expresses the continuing dialogue between the repressed and unfulfilled wishes of childhood, and the miseries of adult life in devitalised rural Ireland.”⁹⁹ Scheper-Hughes's study has faced widespread criticism.¹⁰⁰ Nonetheless, even if the experiences cannot be easily generalised, John Joe's situation displays an aspect of Irish individuals' coming of age and the fate of those marginalised in the process.

Despite the differences among Irish migrant experiences, according to Clair Wills, there were “majority” experiences that formed a distinct genre of Ireland's migrant literature in the post-war period. These experiences were framed by “a set of narratives and stereotypes derived principally from Victorian discourses of Celticism, related Revivalist idealisations of rural Ireland, and modernising

⁹⁶ Nancy Scheper-Hughes, *Saints, Scholars, and Schizophrenics: Mental Illness in Rural Ireland* (Los Angeles: U of California P, 2001), 260-261.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 260.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 50.

⁹⁹ Scheper-Hughes, *Mental Illness*, 73.

¹⁰⁰ In the preface to the later version, Scheper-Hughes acknowledges that Irish medical directors tended to over-diagnose schizophrenia and many hospital administrators would label patients as “first” admission to their hospital despite the patients having been hospitalised elsewhere. Statistically, the first-admission rates for schizophrenia may be unreliable, yet Scheper-Hughes concludes that diagnoses of schizophrenia were made based on “moral judgements of Irish villagers who were willing to consign large numbers of troublesome and surplus people to a variety of total institutions from the workhouses of the mid-nineteenth century to the Catholic seminaries that proliferated after the Great Famine in the nineteenth century to the district mental hospitals and Church-run special institutions for the ‘mentally handicapped’ and the ‘infirm’ that emerged in the early twentieth century” (40-41).

Catholic discourses of (primarily female) Irish purity and respectability.”¹⁰¹ The set of inherited tropes and representations circulated and fed back into the ways individuals understood their experiences of migration. Wills refers to various representations not only at the popular level of romances and media but also in the works of Irish writers such as Murphy, M. J. Molloy, Edna O’Brien, and Anthony Cronin, who have all reflected on these issues. In the genre of migrant literature, *Bildung* is often frustrated, thwarted and incomplete. Sarah L. Townsend similarly claims that compared to the classic models of *Bildungsroman* in Germany (Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister*), France (Voltaire’s *Candide*), and Britain (Dickens’s *David Copperfield*), whose national status as well as their novel form allows the luxury of unlimited time and space for fullest exploration of individual growth, in the narrative development of the periphery, “human dispositions often must be forged quickly, against insuperable forces, and upon unstable terrain.”¹⁰² If the migrant genre within Irish fiction had to negotiate this “hiatus” between form and content, is it possible that in fact “the most faithful adherents to a model of human and societal development within peripheralized literatures [...] appear not in the familiar form of the *Bildungsroman* but in different generic configurations altogether?”¹⁰³ Townsend claims that within these fractured and unsettled conditions “the temporal and spatial compression of drama facilitates otherwise improbable transformations.”¹⁰⁴

When considering *Bildung* as a literary trope, John Joe’s story can be characterised as “the drama of peripheralized *Bildung*,” to borrow Townsend’s words. Townsend uses the term “peripheralized” to describe “traditions that confront the felt conditions of being economically, politically, and culturally peripheral through an array of genres and literary modes that cannot be reduced to derivative formations.”¹⁰⁵ Having given examples of revivalist drama including those of Yeats (*Cathleen Ni Houlihan*) and Synge (*The Playboy of the Western World*), Townsend goes on to argue that “accelerated stage transformations in revival-era drama function both as formal sign of, and

¹⁰¹ Wills, *Best are Leaving*, 10.

¹⁰² Sarah L. Townsend, “The Drama of Peripheralized *Bildung*: An Irish Genre Study,” *New Literary History* 48, no. 2 (2017): 338.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 337.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 338.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 337.

enabling condition for, a radically optimistic strand of Irish developmental thinking,”¹⁰⁶ enacting a crucial rupture in historic time. The urgent realisation of such transformations served to counter the imperial logic of belatedness or infantilisation with regards to peripheral culture. In an analysis of John B. Keane’s *Sive* (1959), Townsend comments that although by the ’50s and ’60s, “the lofty ideal of *Bildung* becomes reduced, distorted, compromised, instrumentalized, pre-empted, or deferred, it is defended as an inalienable right in the drama of this period with an unprecedented fury.”¹⁰⁷ It is every person’s “inalienable right” to pursue their aspirations of love, marriage, and other opportunities. In the context of the peripheralised *Bildungsdrama* of this period, *Crucial Week* not only reflects the deferred and compromised ideal of *Bildung* but also the deep inner struggles of the Everyman figure in an environment that has deprived him of his “inalienable right.”

Crucial Week works within the limits of dramatic structure, but stretches the time frame to a week and expands the spatial terrain to the psychological dream space. In so doing, the urgency of a rapid transformation is delayed (or the impossibility of any transformation foregrounded) and the subtle changes that unfold in the character are fully explored. Karl Morgenstern, who coined the term *Bildungsroman* in 1819, argued that “the novel has more time and space to develop and present its [characters’] dispositions than the drama” and therefore “is suited more than any other genre to show the inner aspect of the human soul and to reveal its intimations, endeavours, battles, defeats, and victories.”¹⁰⁸ Nevertheless, the dramatic form that Tom Murphy employs depicts John Joe’s stultifying surroundings, the repetitious nature of his everyday life, his thwarted aspirations, sexual anxiety, confrontation with his community and finally his realisation that he ultimately has a choice. The crucial point in time—stretched to a week—and the alternation between his dream and reality create an arc that takes the audience through the inner process of his growth. Theatre becomes the space that enacts a rite of passage—albeit, in John Joe’s case, a grotesque and distorted one.

Theatre, then, provides a space of transformation, and *Crucial Week* shows how one’s spatial

¹⁰⁶ Townsend, “Peripheralized *Bildung*,” 350.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 355.

¹⁰⁸ Karl Morgenstern, “On the Nature of the *Bildungsroman*,” trans. Tobias Boes, *PLMA* 124, no. 2 ([1819] 2009): 651.

mobility and positioning are related to one's *Bildung*. In the social space of the small town, characters are perceptually and conceptually confined, their freedom limited in equal terms. *Bildung* becomes a matter of establishing one's territory and social relations in the always already interpellated world. The play's central action relies on this tension between the clashing spaces of the individual and the social: John Joe struggles to come out of the given space while social forces continue to press down on him.

In *Crucial Week*, *Bildung* is not so much a matter of time as space. After the thirty-three years of his prolonged stasis, John Joe begins to reject social norms, refusing to be part of his community. At first, John Joe's Kafkaesque refusal to go to work concerns his mother and employer Mr. Brown, who makes a visit to check up on him. John Joe stands up to Mr. Brown, arguing about wages and refusing to join the Sodality or Legion of Mary.¹⁰⁹ He even offends Mr. Brown by disclosing his past as a poor outsider. The other characters are dumbfounded: "Father and Alec are inside front door at this stage. Mother is crestfallen. John Joe is feeling something of an elation. He looks at each of them in turn, almost fiercely and marches into his room where he starts to dress. Mother, Father and Alec are silent for a few moments" (*Crucial*, 125). From feeling some sort of "loss" after coming out of his dream to "feeling something of an elation," John Joe has undergone a metamorphosis, shocking the community.

John Joe's refusal to become part of his community reaches its peak at the end of the play, when he airs all the secrets of the town, both real and imagined, including his own family's:

JOHN JOE. Mrs Smith! Jack Smith! Are you in position? Peter! Mrs Mullins! Alec!

I have valuable news for you. Pay heed! Listen. You saw the priest here this evening.

¹⁰⁹ According to Colm Lennon and Robin Kavanagh, these "pious associations provided a comprehensive system of spiritual security from youth until old age, and, at the time of death [...]. For most, membership was initiated through children's sodalities in the schools, and the confraternal attachment was carried on through adolescence and into adulthood, framing most aspects of their social and cultural as well as religious experience" (76); see their article "The Flowering of Confraternities and Sodalities in Ireland, c.1860-c.1960," in *Confraternities and Sodalities in Ireland: Charity, Devotion and Sociability*, ed. Colm Lennon (Dublin: Columba, 2012), 76-96. The association-centred culture of religion was a way to promote active roles for laypeople within the community, but also became a way of controlling and monitoring all aspects of people's lives outside the church.

No, it wasn't about the job he's trying to get me. I spent all night in Fogarty's hay shed last night with a girl called 'streeleen' that's working above in the bank. I raped her. Out all night with her, what else could it be? 'Twas lovely. Tell everyone. We have flour-bags sewn together for sheets. My mother asked Alec for the shop today. [...] Oh, but we know Mrs Smith doesn't use a sheet at all. [...] And what else? Oh, the rig-out Mrs Mullins had on last Wednesday wasn't new at all; a cast-off, bought by her sister in Seattle off one of them cheap-jacks they have over there, for thirty-eight cents. And that she doesn't sleep with Peter; and hasn't for a number of years. [...]

My brother Frank done jail in America. Fourteen months, drunk and fighting a policeman.

[...]

That everybody knows about the amount of everyone else's policy. (*Crucial*, 160)

The scandals include not only sexual activities and crimes but also knowledge of the exact "amount" of other people's insurance policies; the newsgatherer in chief Peter Mullins is an insurance agent. The panoptic setting of the hometown, as John Joe goes on to say, is a cycle of "the poor eating the poor" (162). John Joe's everyday life has been colonised by poverty: he tells Mona "I can't enjoy this sportscoat" and asks, "Do you feel guilty for every sip of a drink you take" and "for every cigarette you smoke?" (151-152). He even feels guilty of going out at night to meet Mona. John Joe feels alienated from his own consumer practices and possessions; the first thing he wants to do when he earns money is to pay Mother back. At his mother he shouts, "It isn't a case of staying or going. Forced to stay or forced to go. Never the freedom to decide and make the choice for ourselves. And then we're half-men here, or half-men away, and how can we hope ever to do anything" (162).

The first draft of *The Fooleen* (the original title of *Crucial Week*) had only one long dream sequence. Grene summarises the dream as "John Joe's nightmare imagination of the characters who loom up in his consciousness: the sexually alluring Mona, Father Daly denouncing him from the pulpit,

his family whom he denies out of social shame, the neighbors who turn into a lynch mob.”¹¹⁰ Similar to James Joyce’s “Circe” in *Ulysses*, in which Stephen and Bloom venture into the hallucinatory night town, which also demarcates their psychic territory, John Joe goes through a long journey into his dream world confronted by the crowd at the congregation. The sense of being warped in an intense dream-state and the journey into a nightmarish world are aspects again resonant of German expressionistic drama; in one of his stations, the Cashier/Clerk in Kaiser’s *From Morn to Midnight* enters the night club (sex club) only to be met with grotesque female masks; one Mask he invites to dance has a wooden leg. Instead of shifting back and forth between his dream and reality, which in effect weaves the dreams into the tapestry of everyday life, this early version of *Crucial Week* sets up a separate world which the protagonist can venture into, questioning whether one can achieve maturity through dream experiences even when one is physically bound. Much of the original dream sequence is too wild and phantasmagoric to be staged. For example, Mullins and Mrs Mullins “have grown one enormous ear: the one they listen with” and Mrs. Smith carries “gigantic rosary beads” while Rosaleen and Agnes have “prayer-books so big that they eventually make seats of them.” These gigantic tools later turn into weapons to chase John Joe with.¹¹¹ Alec is “ridiculously made up with lipstick, rouge, powder, etc.”¹¹² In this dream world, things go awry spectacularly, Alec’s gender is blurred, and even language is torn apart. In the early edited version of the nightmare,

He [Father Daly] starts to advance followed by the crowd, the pace quickening the voice sounding like an accelerating steam engine.

Crowd: A man should do what he should do. Aman shoulddo whathe shoulddo. Aman sshouldoo whathe sshoulddoo. Amanetc.

¹¹⁰ Grene, *Playwright Adventurer*, 31-32.

¹¹¹ It is worth noting that in Murphy’s unpublished draft of a short story (closer to a diary entry), handwritten on 10 November 1959 under the title “Long Night’s Journey into Day,” the imagery of the “soul operation” was inspired by Murphy’s experience of having his tonsils removed. He wrote: “Think of all the operations you operate in your own mind; [...] The lancet that slips right through your neck, the scalpel that..... Thank God my vocabulary of the surgeon’s ‘weapons’ is limited. [...] He just went in to get his tonsils out – yeh know a simple little operation – next thing we know, next morning, he was dead. So young, yeh know. Ah! A grand chap” (TCD MS 11115/4/7a).

¹¹² TCD MS11115/1/5/3.

John Joe (*in terror*): Pray for me. Make me Adult. Pray for me.¹¹³

John Joe's confrontation with the crowd and his desperate plea to become adult amount to a dream version of his traumatic rite of passage.

Ironically—or perhaps aptly—John Joe becomes integrated into society after the nightmare in this early version. Father Daly persuades John Joe: “...We're all young sometimes Drop too much needed at home obligation..... bad country England ... Don't worry about anything Good man that's the spirit Promise Mother As if nothing had happened Good people Mother” In the end, “John Joe comes out in his working clothes. He mounts the bicycle and cycles to work. All the neighbours beam at him as good neighbours should.”¹¹⁴ This draft version may on the surface indicate an achievement of *Bildung* in the sense that he has become integrated into his community, but polemically it is an anti-*Bildung*. John Joe's powers of development have been terminally ended by his conformity to society. His sense of defeat and bitterness lingers, which, if staged, would have left the audience uncomfortable.

In the published version, John Joe is able to stay within his community on his own terms, having a renewed sense of self. In the scene, after broadcasting all the news of the town, he tells uncle Alec, “I'm going up town to get a job for myself” and “open a bank-account too with a girl I know” (*Crucial*, 164). However implausible this change in the ending may be, John Joe's breakthrough is revolutionary because he is not an artist (as in the earlier version where he writes bad poems) but an ordinary man.¹¹⁵ If John Joe had been an artist figure, then the play might have been another version of the *Künstlerroman*, another portrayal of the artist as a young man flying by the nets of society, religion and the nation. John Joe does not leave Ireland; staying in town is a compromise. Nevertheless, it is a step that can end the cycle he has been living for thirty-three years. John Joe can be read as an Everyman counterpart to the romantic and heroic Christy Mahon at the end of Synge's *Playboy*.

¹¹³ TCD MS11115/1/5/6.

¹¹⁴ TCD MS11115/1/5/3b.

¹¹⁵ In one of the loose notes, there is an emphasis that John Joe is “An ordinary man [...] caught up in provincial life. Frustration” (TCD MS11115/1/5/9).

Christy Mahon has transformed from being a country fugitive to a local hero by enacting his own story of killing his father in front of the crowd. But the crowd betrays Christy, and he leaves the village with his decidedly un-dead father. There is no overt violence involved with John Joe, yet the dynamics of transformation within the communal setting can be interpreted as a form of *Bildung*, where theatre becomes the performative site of the character's rite of passage. In the same way that Christy Mahon can be read as mock-Christ, John Joe's journey into the week is comparable to the Passion Week that Christ goes through. The word "crucial" in *Crucial Week* literally means "cross," "important," a week that leads John Joe to making a "critical" decision; however, it also connotes the verb "crucify." In her review, Emer O'Kelly described that the play is "about the crucifixion of reason and spirit on the barren heath of Irish small-town life": it is "a hymn of hate to the choking strength of orthodoxy's foot as it lies across the throat of independence, grace, and intellect."¹¹⁶ John Joe's nightmare of surgical crucifixion occurs on a (Good) Friday. He is the Everyman scapegoat of the community's hypocrisy, insular morality and repressed vulnerability. It is telling that the everyman figure John Joe, however fictional and implausible, manages to opt for "fight" over "flight," having found a new transformed self.

Murphy traces the subtle changes that occur in the week of an ordinary grocer's assistant, expanding the territory and definition of the everyday by interweaving it with the dreams and emotions that the protagonist goes through. Although it is not written in the text, in addition to the train "whistling impatiently," which contributes to creating the affective atmosphere of the theatrical experience of emigration, another sound device was employed for the transition between the scenes in both the 1988 and 1992 production that enhanced the eeriness of the play. The same lullaby tune was played, mostly by a piano and sometimes a violin, in between the scenes. The sound that is used to put a child to sleep ironically emphasised John Joe's state of childishness and added to the nightmarish quality of the play as it was repeated amidst the darkness several times. The lullaby as the interlinking medium between scenes transported the audience to the space of the uncanny—a blend

¹¹⁶ Emer O'Kelly, "Gimmicks Mar Murphy's Classic," *Sunday Independent*, Nov 22, 1992, *Crucial*, Nov 17, 1992 [Press Cuttings], ATDA at NUIG, 0701_PC_0001, p.15.

between John Joe's psychological dreamscape and the stultifying atmosphere of the town. The original 1969 production used "cinema organ music, acting as a sort of mock chorus to much of the dialogue."¹¹⁷ In his 1970 review, Seamus Kelly wrote that the "mood-music" devised and played by Maeve McSwiney enhanced "the author's ironic intentions."¹¹⁸ The repeated and distorted sounds contributed to the grotesque theatrical ritual of John Joe's crucifixion and *Bildung*.

Although never resolved, there is a tension that exists between Murphy's play as critique (stasis, oppression, bleakness, anti-*Bildung*) and the play as vision (hope, freedom, resistance, *Bildung*). It reflects the nature of space itself: the tension, contradiction and conflict between the perceived and conceived spaces that in turn leads to the possibility of change and redemption in the lived space. Theatre becomes a rite of passage. In the alternating tension between the forces of repression and resistance, the character ultimately finds a theatrical exit and attains maturity (*Bildung*), no matter how painful and grotesque the process may have been.

Murphy's early works challenge social fixtures and norms by expanding the audience's sense of place: the audience is removed from the permanent kitchen set that defined so much of Irish theatrical realism at the time, to the dancehalls and the small town. Murphy's early plays can also be situated within larger theatrical trends in Britain, notably those of the Kitchen Sink drama and British New Wave filmmaking; the frustrated male characters in Murphy's plays are (Irish) versions of the "angry young man" in John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* (1956), where social restraints also wreak havoc on the real lives of the ordinary working-class people. The Kitchen Sink drama is not necessarily confined to the domesticity of the working class, but rather reflects a shift in focus to the everyday lives of people who felt underrepresented: Arnold Wesker's *Kitchen* (1959), set in an overcrowded restaurant kitchen, a microcosm of staff workers who are Jewish, ex-prisoners and immigrants from Ireland, Germany and Cyprus, conveys Wesker's life view that "[t]he world might have been a stage for Shakespeare but to me it is a kitchen, where people come and go and cannot stay long enough to understand each other, and friendships, love and enmities are forgotten as quickly as they are made."¹¹⁹

¹¹⁷ O'Farrell, "A Play of Truth."

¹¹⁸ Seamus Kelly, "'Grocer's Assistant' Revived," *Irish Times*, Aug 18, 1970, TCD MS11115/6/2/4.

¹¹⁹ Arnold Wesker, "Introduction and Notes for the Producer," in *Three Plays: Fiver Finger Exercise, The*

Alan Sillitoe's *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1958), a novel which was adapted into a film in 1960 directed by Karel Reisz, tells another story of an angry young man working in a bicycle factory, who spends his weekends drinking and having affairs. As in Murphy's use of the term, the man is "in trouble," having impregnated his girlfriend.¹²⁰ Shelagh Delaney's *A Taste of Honey* (1958) deals with the working-class life of a teenager, Jo, and her relationship with a self-absorbed mother, in whose absence Jo develops a close friendship with her homosexual friend; together they navigate Jo's difficult situation of being impregnated by a Nigerian sailor. Murphy's early plays take part in disclosing social issues that changed the landscape of what and how art can contribute to the lives of underrepresented people in a society that offers them no opportunity for freedom or growth. At the same time, as evident in *Crucial Week*, Murphy incorporates forms of expressionism, of European theatre (such as later works by Strindberg, Toller and Kaiser) and American theatre (Tennessee Williams) to express the rich and haunted psychological and emotional landscape of his characters.

Lefebvre claims that "Man must be everyday, or he must not be at all."¹²¹ For Lefebvre, the ultimate marker of social change and revolution is the everyday, not the political system, not the economic structure, not the cultural edifice: society can be said to have changed only when its everyday has changed. Murphy's genius is precisely in that he considers the everyday space to find possibilities of genuine improvement in human life and social relationships. The three plays examined in this chapter—*On the Outside*, *On the Inside* and *Crucial Week*—redraw the boundaries of theatrical realism around the everyday spaces found in the social lives of people. Murphy's social spaces, comprised of the interplay between the perceived, conceived and lived spaces in the (real) social sphere, retrieve the communal spirit and the innate theatricality that these spaces encompass. When manifested on the stage, the spaces constitute their own social space: that of the live theatrical event. The audience experience the tragicomedy of everyday just as the characters onstage do, in the

Kitchen, *The Hamlet of Stepney Green* (London: Penguin, [1960] 1964), 93.

¹²⁰ It is worth noting that "in trouble" was virtually always used of the woman: "to get a girl in trouble" was to get her pregnant. When Murphy called his TV play *Young Man in Trouble*, he was playing on this normal usage: the focus in the play is on Frank and his uncertainty about the relationship. Men were not generally thought to be too troubled by their partner's pregnancy; the "trouble" was a euphemism for the social disgrace which the woman, not the man, was bound to suffer.

¹²¹ Lefebvre, *Critique*, 127.

everyday space of the theatre. It demonstrates the theatrical performativity of the everyday, and the everyday performativity of theatre. These social spaces reveal the dynamism of social relations that underpin an aspect of Murphy's theatre. The social spaces are the ground in which his works are rooted; at the same time, however, Murphy felt the need to break through them radically. The expression of anguish and dissatisfaction, barely contained in the tragicomedy form, is pushed further in his tragedies, where violence erupts to shake the nerves and awaken the senses.

Chapter II. Tragic Spaces: Terror and Cruelty in Murphy's Tragedies

In his handwritten miscellaneous notebook, Murphy took extensive notes from F. L. Lucas's 1927 book on tragedy, paying particular attention to the definitions of mimesis and catharsis. Murphy added his own annotations and comments to Lucas's text:

Representation better word than imitation. It is the feelings, not appearances that we set out to recreate; emotions like those of life. Catharsis: certain passing which cannot safely be indulged in [...] theatre is not a hospital. A man leaving the theatre more passionate and excited than when he went in does not mean the play has failed. He has perhaps, been purged of a lethargy, spiritual and physical.¹

Murphy seeks to recreate the emotions of life (mimesis) and affect the audience with an awakening of the senses (catharsis). If the discrepancy between the perceived and the conceived space in the plays examined so far has leaned towards caricature, exposing the tragicomedy of everyday life, Murphy's three other early plays—*A Whistle in the Dark* (1961), *Famine* (1968), and *The Morning After Optimism* (1971)—delve into the realm of tragedy. Here, the failure of language to express the feelings of loss, suffering and guilt gives rise to imminent violence and death. The tragicomic plays in the first chapter exposed the social realities and mental stasis of the small town; here, the scope is broader, and the scale much larger than its "locality." Murphy experiments with—successfully adopting and moving away from—tragic forms, in order to come to terms with the haunting past and the turbulent present. This switch of perspective lends itself to a radical reconceptualisation of space.

Murphy's consideration of theatre as a space of "purging lethargy," as opposed to a "hospital," raises the question: how are tragedy and tragic values (or their loss) spatially realised? How do

¹ TCD MS11115/5/1/25.

tragedies manifest in the realm of the everyday? The loss of Eden and the purgatorial stasis related to Christian notions of sin and guilt, the adoption of Greek tragic models for Ireland's nation-state politics, the branding of Irish violence according to the rural and urban spatial divide, and the tragic spaces of fiction and reality are central questions that need to be addressed. Murphy's tragic plays not only represent the culture of Ireland in the '50s and '60s, but also refigure the national and transnational politics of space. One example of this spatial appropriation of tragedy can be observed in the way Murphy responds to the "chorus" in Greek tragedy. In the same notebook on tragedy, Murphy wrote: "Chorus was a form of contrast: ordinary people and towering over them the heroic figure. Also the one against the enemy. To day the main characters are themselves ordinary human beings, therefore they do not need ordinary human beings to contrast with them."² If the chorus serves as a bridge between the spectator and the characters, offering wise and objective commentaries, providing an external perspective on the enclosed family drama of the heroes, in Murphy's dramatic world, there is neither contrast nor outside perspective; the chorus (the ordinary) are totally entrapped in their life, whereby life itself is one big prison. Although the genre has changed from comedy, as in his early plays, to tragedy, Murphy continues to engage with ordinary working-class people. Eschewing the chorus, he shifts the focus from the tragic heroes of antiquity to tragic victims of modernity, imparting a new significance to the terrors of everyday life.

Arthur Miller argues that it is in the life of the ordinary and "average man" that modern tragedy resides. He claims that tragedy "is the consequence of a man's total compulsion to evaluate himself justly" and in the process of examining one's identity comes the "terror and the fear": "fear of being displaced, the disaster inherent in being torn away from our chosen image of what and who we are in this world. Among us today this fear is strong, and perhaps stronger, than it ever was. In fact, it is the common man who knows this fear best."³ Miller continues, "[t]he revolutionary questioning of the stable environment is what terrifies." Similarly, Murphy explains that his plays explore "the contradictions and the complexities—the extremes—in people who are ordinary and who are abject."⁴

² TCD MS11115/5/1/25.

³ Arthur Miller, "Tragedy and the Common Man," *New York Times*, Feb 27, 1949.

⁴ Tom Murphy, *Plays: 1* (London: Methuen, 2004), xvi.

The “average man’s terror” espoused by Miller and Murphy’s “ordinary abjection” seem to echo one another. Murphy sounds out the spaces of terror in an industrial city in England, a fictional village in rural Ireland, and a fairy tale forest, blending O’Casey’s social realism with Beckett’s displaced modernism.

Murphy’s Tragic Theatre

Critics such as Fiona Macintosh and Ronan McDonald have argued that a distinctively Irish tradition of tragedy can be identified in the plays of Yeats, Synge, O’Casey and Beckett, who have all in their own way engaged in creative appropriation of Attic tragedy to capture modern Irish experiences.⁵ Nevertheless, critical attempts to establish the tradition of Irish tragedy have not been extended to Tom Murphy, whose plays not only sit well in this tradition but also expand some of the established notions of tragedy. Moreover, the question of tragedy in many analyses concerns predominantly the nature and fate of the characters, the many heroes and anti-heroes—whether it be their status or their noble spirit—and less the way tragic art deals with space.

Murphy is concerned not so much with conforming to the rules and formulas of tragedy as capturing the tragic spirit. His tragic theatre aligns with earlier theorists of tragedy, who, departing from the Aristotelian definition, established their own vision of the “tragic.” In *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), Nietzsche finds a “life-enhancing force” in tragedy and calls Dionysian art “the eternal life of the will,”⁶ an “unbridled craving for existence” that is experienced “behind phenomena.”⁷

⁵ Fiona Macintosh, *Dying Acts: Death in Ancient Greek and Modern Irish Tragic Drama* (Cork: Cork UP, 1994); Ronan McDonald, *Tragedy and Irish Literature: Synge, O’Casey, and Beckett* (New York: Palgrave, 2002). Macintosh concentrates on the way death is handled in Greek and modern Irish tragedies, highlighting their close affinities. Some of the shared features include: an elaborate and lengthy process of death; last words and big speech conventions; death reports; and the mourners’ responses to death. By contrast, McDonald negotiates tragic theories to discuss the central values found in modern Irish tragedies. Synge’s tragic art is characterised by his self-conscious evasion of history and politics, while O’Casey’s is the tragedy of meliorism. Beckett’s works, which are placed beyond tragedy, foreground the condition of stalemate and confusion. According to McDonald, it is the three writers’ Irishness that leads to the dissonance between the Dionysian and the Apollonian, the disjuncture between content and form.

⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, trans. Douglas Smith (Oxford: Oxford UP [1872], 2000), 90.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 91.

Phenomena—the “world of *appearance*,” “image,” and “dream-reality”—corresponds to the Apollonian in Nietzsche’s definition.⁸ Nietzsche refers to Schopenhauer’s depiction of the tragic “*horror* which grips man when he suddenly loses his way among the cognitive forms of the phenomenal world, as the principle of reason in any of its forms appears to break down”; this collapse is “the essence of the Dionysian” (22). However, unlike Schopenhauer’s thoughts on tragedy, in “Attempt at a Self-Criticism,” Nietzsche writes that the essence of the tragic spirit is not resignation but acceptance: for Nietzsche, the “Dionysian monster” is a “thorough pessimist” who insists on “laughing” at life, who “proclaimed laughter holy” (12-13). According to Silk and Stern, Nietzsche protests against Aristotle’s emphasis on tragedy as action (*praxis*), replacing it with “pathos”: an intensity of emotion that is closer to the German *Stimmung*, which means “mood” or “impression.”⁹ For Nietzsche, tragedy has an “inner pattern” which “must be felt, lived through, to be known.”¹⁰

These words are reflected in Antonin Artaud’s various manifestos on theatre. The Dionysian primordial force, or more accurately, Nietzschean will, resonates in Artaud’s understanding of “life”: “when we say the word *life*, we understand this is not life recognised by externals, by facts, but the kind of frail moving source forms never attain.”¹¹ In order to contact “life,” theatre needs to be reinvented, whereby language in the form of words and representation is shattered. Cruel representation must “permeate” the individual. In *Writing and Difference* (1978), Jacques Derrida analyses Artaud’s *Theatre and Its Double* (1964) using Nietzsche’s ideas:

The theater of cruelty expulses God from the stage. It does not put a new atheist discourse on stage, or give atheism a platform, or give over theatrical space to a philosophizing logic that would once more, to our greater lassitude, proclaim the death of God. The theatrical practice of cruelty, in its action and structure, inhabits or rather produces a non-theological space.¹²

⁸ Nietzsche, *Birth of Tragedy*, 19-20.

⁹ M. S. Silk and J. P. Stern, *Nietzsche on Tragedy* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1981), 226.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 252.

¹¹ Antonin Artaud, *Theatre and Its Double*, trans. Victor Corti (Richmond: Alma, [1964] 2017), 7.

¹² Jacques Derrida, “The Theatre of Cruelty and the Closure of Representation,” in *Writing and*

Thus, for Derrida, “nonrepresentation” is “original representation, if representation signifies, also, the unfolding of a volume, a multidimensional milieu, an experience which produces its own space.”¹³ This space is one that “no speech could condense or comprehend.”¹⁴ Nietzsche’s idiosyncratic ideas on tragedy combined with Artaud’s theatre comes close to something approaching Murphy’s own venture into the tragic. Nietzschean understanding of tragedy as *Stimmung*, “mood” or “impression,” is perhaps literally dramatised in Murphy’s *Optimism*. The shattering of form and language and the intense experience of space (“felt and lived through”) are characteristic of Murphy’s tragic theatre.

In *The Death of Tragedy*, George Steiner claims that the decline of tragedy is inextricably linked to the rise of the novel, with its realistic prose chronicling the epic and national narratives at a grander scheme and scale, as well as the decline of the “organic world view and of its attendant context of mythological, symbolic and ritual reference.”¹⁵ “The mythologies that have centred the imaginative habits and practices of western civilization, that have organized the inner landscape,” writes Steiner, “were not the product of individual genius. A mythology crystallizes sediments accumulated over great stretches of time.”¹⁶ In Steiner’s view, tragic theatre is “an expression of the pre-rational phase in history.”¹⁷ Its essence lies in spectators’ participation in “religious or civic exercise,” but the rise of commercial playhouses has made spectators satisfied with “mere entertainment.”¹⁸ The only surviving “mythology” in the 20th century is Marxism. Steiner regards Marxism as “the third principal mythology to have taken root in western consciousness” after the classical and Christian world orders.¹⁹ Nonetheless, he views Marxism as “anti-tragic” and thus regards Brecht’s Marxist theatre as

Difference, trans. Alan Bass (London: Routledge, [1967, 1978] 2001), 296. Artaud, “like Nietzsche,” reacts against the “theological spectacle,” and refuses to “subsume Life to Being” (310-11). See also Jane Goodall, *Artaud and the Gnostic Drama* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994): “If Nietzsche’s philosophy has led the way in the modern assault on the onto-theological foundations of Western humanism, Artaud’s dramaturgy re-echoes the terms and images of an older and absolute assault” (222).

¹³ Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 299.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 299.

¹⁵ George Steiner, *The Death of Tragedy* (London: Faber, 1961), 292.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 323.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 342.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 115-6.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 323.

an “incomplete tragedy.”²⁰ Standing “midway between the world of Oedipus and that of Marx,” Brecht’s tragedy is incomplete because of its “redemptive politics” but is still “real and consuming” as a tragedy: “necessity is blind but like all true poets, [Brecht] knew she often closes her eyes.”²¹ In *Tragedy and Dramatic Theatre* (2016), Hans-Thies Lehmann uses Maurice Maeterlinck’s plays to explain the conception of the “everyday tragic.” The 18th century “paved the way for the (bourgeois) everyday to enter the realm of serious theatre; in so doing, a movement was inaugurated that led, via naturalism, to the theatre of everydayness in the 20th (and now the 21st) century.”²² One of the distinct features of this change in the tragic mode is the “omnipresence of death”:

[t]he everyday tragic does not follow simply awareness of death, but from the unviability of human desire to continue a compromised ‘game’ [...] insofar as the tragic impulse for something excessive, impossible desire, no longer has an anchor in plot (and its conflicts), it comes to occupy precisely this hollow space between interiority and discourse (or action). Both are felt as inadequate. The impossible wish to achieve mediation despite it all must fail.²³

While Murphy’s tragedies have not abandoned historical processes as an anchor in *Famine* for instance, they sustain this sense of “everyday tragic”: the “omnipresence of death,” the ways “the figures onstage react to the threatening reality of death,”²⁴ and “the dissolution of the dramatic.”²⁵ In his plays, violent energies erupt at the point where language breaks down. The spatial implication is that the limits of conventional tragic structure are strained and shattered, as is naturalism’s domestic setting: houses are collapsed, and void fills the empty space.

Murphy attempts to revive modern tragedy in the Irish context, going back to common

²⁰ Steiner, *Death of Tragedy*, 349. “The conception of tragedy as waste rather than predestined or inevitable disaster, is central to the art of Brecht” (341).

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Tragedy and Dramatic Theatre*, trans. Erik Butler, (London: Routledge, 2016), 374.

²³ *Ibid.*, 375.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 368

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 371.

narrative roots of the Irish psyche—the Famine and emigration—and endowing them with the tragic stature and mythological significance of Attic tragedies. This national tragedy, like Steiner’s mythology, “gathers into conventional form the primal memories and historical experience of the race.” Murphy uses tragic form to delineate, redefine and further complicate the everyday spaces that are pervaded with terror in *Whistle*. In *Famine*, however, Murphy is faced with the impossibility, the inadequacy of tragic models to express the sheer horror of the Famine, going on to show the total disintegration of society and hence the breakdown of form. It is at this point that Murphy applies aspects of Brechtian theatre, as showcased in Brecht’s “A Short Organum for the Theatre”: looking at the “historical conditions,” imagined not as “mysterious Powers,” but as “created and manipulated by men.”²⁶ Murphy exposes the political and economic failures of the British government, the Repeal movement and the systems that exacerbated the Great Hunger.

Murphy’s plays not only exemplify Raymond Williams’s point that tragedy deeply realises a set of values and shape of culture at a certain period, but also offer a tragic vision, appropriating the *ethos* that Williams puts forth in *Modern Tragedy* (1966). Instead of a tragedy where man ends up “bare and unaccommodated, exposed to the storm he has himself raised,”

there is another kind of tragedy, [...] which in fact begins with bare and unaccommodated man. All primary energy is centred in this isolated creature, who desires and eats and fights alone. Society is at best an arbitrary institution, to prevent this horde of creatures destroying each other. [...] Tragedy, in this view, is inherent. It is not that man is frustrated, by others and by society, in his deepest and primary desires. It is also that these desires include destruction and self-destruction. [...] The process of living is then a continual struggle and adjustment of the powerful energies making for satisfaction or death. [...] it is inevitable that satisfaction, however intense, is temporary, and that it involves the subjugation or defeat of another. [...] Death, by contrast, is a kind of achievement, a

²⁶ Bertolt Brecht, “A Short Organum for the Theatre,” *Brecht on Theatre*, ed. Marc Silberman et al. (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 190.

comparative settlement and peace.²⁷

Life is an inherent struggle and it desires destruction. These “powerful energies” resonate with the “cruelty” of life that Artaud puts forth in his theatre of cruelty, and with the expressions of Murphy’s characters. The three plays stage violence in extreme situations; Dionysian in his vision,²⁸ Murphy destroys the Apollonian containers—social order and dramatic form—as a necessary act of purging spiritual and physical lethargy.

Entrapped in their social fate, the characters in Murphy’s tragedies fail not only to revolt against the constricted order but also to “make-do” and creatively re-appropriate their own space. “Make-doing” is a concept developed by Michel de Certeau, a central figure in everyday life studies, whose work stands in dialectic tension with Lefebvre. The concept will be discussed in greater depth when analysing *Whistle*. The tragedy in these plays derives from the *failure* of place-making. In *Whistle*, the Carneys fail to refashion the constricted foreign space into their own home place. Michael inherits from Dada the same (structural) violence that he so wishes to escape from. The youngest son Des is killed in the Carney championship that has a cathartic effect of “pity and fear.” Nevertheless, the horror and irony of the ending without the choral ode or lyrical coda leaves the audience baffled and shocked rather than cleansed, as evident in the varying audience reception. As against the “well-made” tragedy, which abides by the Aristotelian unity of time and place, Murphy moves towards finding dramatic and theatrical means to re-present the fragmentary and traumatic experiences of ordinary people in *Famine*.

In *Trauma-tragedy: Symptoms of Contemporary Performance* (2012), Patrick Duggan asserts that the current structure of feeling is “one in which we desire a more authentic mode of expression, a more embodied tragic experience in which we seek simply to ‘do’ the trauma, to make it ‘present’,

²⁷ Raymond Williams, *Modern Tragedy* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1966), 106.

²⁸ Murray Krieger argues that the Dionysian vision in modern tragedy presents a “world into which Dionysus cannot be reabsorbed by way of the Apollonian [...] Our modern tragic vision is the Dionysian vision still, except that the visionary is now utterly lost, since there is no cosmic order to allow a return to the world for him who has dared stray beyond” (10-11). Murray Krieger, *The Tragic Vision: Variations on a Theme in Literary Interpretation* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1960).

rather than solve it through (classical tragic) form.”²⁹ *Famine* is a trauma-tragedy that dramatises the failure of place-making, showing the “presence of absence.” The space becomes defamiliarised and bare, leaving the audience to bear witness to—rather than identify or sympathise with—the event and characters. As Walter Benjamin puts it, “the art of the epic theatre consists in producing astonishment rather than empathy. [...] instead of identifying with the characters, the audience should be educated to be astonished at the circumstances under which they function.”³⁰ In the play, there is a constant awareness, a presence of the void. Any form of construction or container—bodies, houses, the village and the land—becomes disintegrated, and any attempt to “make-do” with what is left becomes futile. In *Optimism*, the abstract and escapist dream-space is destroyed by the characters themselves. One could argue that *Optimism* was a partly successful early experiment showing Murphy’s need to go beyond tragedy. While the play will not be discussed in great length in this chapter, *Optimism* captures Murphy’s tragic sensibility and the need to transcend the limitations of conventions, social norms, and ideologies.

***A Whistle in the Dark* (1961): A Cruel Necessity**

Rejected by the Abbey theatre’s managing director Ernest Blythe, *A Whistle in the Dark* premiered abroad. When first performed in 1961 at the Theatre Royal, Stratford East, the play became infamous for its show of violence on stage. In the oft-quoted words of Kenneth Tynan, the play was “arguably the most uninhibited display of brutality that the London theatre has ever witnessed.”³¹ As Nicholas Grene has described, *Whistle* stirred a striking level of racist abuse, reinforcing standard stereotypes of the Irish. The Home Secretary was called upon to deport all Irishmen as the play showed

²⁹ Patrick Duggan, *Trauma-tragedy: Symptoms of Contemporary Performance* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2012), 56.

³⁰ Walter Benjamin, “What is Epic Theatre?” *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken: 1968), 150.

³¹ Kenneth Tynan, “Wolves at the Door,” *Observer*, Sep 17, 1961; qtd. in Grene, *Playwright Adventurer*, 44.

“just what bog vipers we are nursing in our bosom – savage kerns like the five Carney brothers.”³² The play provoked much controversy and publicity from early on. It later became a renowned classic of Murphy’s, receiving many subsequent revivals, the most notable being those of the Druid Theatre Company.

As a play dealing with hypermasculinity and violence, Garry Hynes’s Abbey production in the ’80s left some critics wondering: “it does seem odd that five violent men are under the direction of a petite female in her early 30’s. I found it hard to imagine a polite, amusing and intelligent woman making any impression on the likes of Iggy, Hugo or Harry Carney.”³³ To this, Hynes responded: “[Murphy] is terribly important, what he says, the kind of things he explores. The *mental territory* he occupies means a lot to me, it’s something I recognise.”³⁴ In another interview, she explained, “The play explores violence in terms of the political resonance and of Irish identity, but also in terms of violence within people personally.” She continued, “I do not think there is anybody not capable of violence. I hope that people will not comfortably sit back and dismiss violence as the *territory of others*.”³⁵ Even though the politics of Irish identity is central to understanding the play, Hynes’s comment suggests how the *recognition* of the “other” in oneself at a personal level and our attitude towards violence are equally important. It is worth noting that Hynes’ repetitive use of the word “territory,” a spatial concept, highlights the function of theatre as providing a “shared” space that allows for this recognition. *Whistle*, however, as a tragedy, causes the audience to feel “pity and fear” as they witness the characters’ failure of place-making. The recognisable home space is destroyed over the course of the play. The audience feels pity for the characters, fear of suffering a similar fate, and revulsion towards the violence within themselves.

Terry Eagleton asserts that, despite the reductive potential of the “pity-and-fear formula,” it “suggests something of the dialectic of otherness and intimacy which tragedy can involve. Pity,

³² Grene, *Playwright Adventurer*, 44.

³³ Barbara McKeown, “Hooked on Theatre,” *Irish Press*, Sep 26, 1986, *Whistle*, Oct 6, 1986 [Press Cuttings] ATDA at NUIG, 0720_PC_0001, p.4.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, emphasis added.

³⁵ “Taking the Irish Angle,” *Evening Press*, July 10, 1989, *Whistle*, Jul 5, 1989 [Press Cuttings] ATDA at NUIG, 4916_PC_0001, p.5, emphasis added.

roughly speaking, is a matter of intimacy, while fear is a reaction to otherness.”³⁶ Eagleton builds on Thomas Hobbes’s idea that human actions spring from pride (the desire for power, in effect) or fear; the former is a desire to appropriate an object, whereas the latter seeks to repel it. Similarly, “pity is the impulse to approach, and fear is the reflex to retreat, into perfect equipoise. [...] between identification and dread—between the mimetic desire to merge with the world, and the terror of being taken over by alien forces which this brings with it.”³⁷ That tragedy is mostly a family matter and that it involves the affinity and distance between the self and other demonstrates Murphy’s point about how “a family is a blood-knot—it’s also a trap.”³⁸ Murphy balances the affective dialectic of tragedy in *Whistle*, allowing for a different relationship between the spectator and the actor-as-character. The play both confronts and imaginatively engages the audience into a deeper and more complex experience of the Irish community in Britain.

Set in Coventry, England, in the living room space of Michael, the eldest son of the Carney family who come from County Mayo, *Whistle* reveals the tension between the tragedy of naturalism centred around the domestic space and the classical inheritance of Greek tragedy comprised of Dionysian vision and Apollonian structure. In the play, the sense of displacement and dehiscence prevails, and the audience experiences the terror of the characters’ everyday life.³⁹ Many critics have interpreted the Carney family as being entrapped in their social fate: their status as migrant, Irish, working-class men hinders them from changing their impoverished condition and violent life.⁴⁰

³⁶ Terry Eagleton, *Sweet Violence: The Idea of the Tragic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 161.

³⁷ Eagleton, *Sweet Violence*, 161.

³⁸ Deirdre Purcell, “Into the Dark,” *Sunday Tribune*, Oct 21, 1986, *Whistle*, Oct 6, 1986 [Press Cuttings] ATDA at NUIG, 0720_PC_0001, p.68.

³⁹ See Anna McMullan, “Samuel Beckett’s Theater: Liminal Subjects and the Politics of Perception,” *The Princeton University Library Chronicle* 68, no. 1-2 (2007): 450-464. “Dehiscence” is the phrase used by Beckett in his 1934 review of Sean O’Casey’s *Windfalls*. Beckett commends *Juno and the Paycock* (1924) “because it communicates most fully this dramatic dehiscence, mind and world come asunder in irreparable dissociation” (McMullan 453).

⁴⁰ Joe Cleary argues that *Whistle* shows a development of Irish naturalism whereby migrants are caught in the cycle of violence; the play charts the failed attempts of the aspiring Michael to gain respectability within working-class society in England (*Outrageous Fortune*, 170). Similarly, see Aiden Arrowsmith, “‘To Fly By Those Nets’: Violence and Identity in Tom Murphy’s *A Whistle in the Dark*,” *Irish University Review* 34, no. 2 (2004): 315-331; Bernard F. Dukore, “‘Violent Families’: *A Whistle in the Dark* and *The Homecoming*,” *Twentieth Century Literature* 36, no. 1 (1990): 23-34; Michelle Caroll, “The Indeterminacy of Identity in Tom Murphy’s *A Whistle in the Dark*,” *Nordic Journal of English Studies* 13.2 (2014):145-167. Arrowsmith claims that “in England, the ubiquitous stereotype of the Irish ‘Paddy’ becomes an insurmountable barrier to Michael’s aims of assimilation [...]. As in the new Ireland of Lemass, the envisaged utopia of undivided

Fighting and unchanging brutality is a mode of living for the Carney brothers. Clair Wills refers to Richard Power's observation that Irish gang fights were "goal-less, full of venom and strife. They revealed the labourers' lack of agency and the impossibility of combating the natural and socio-economic laws which had positioned them at the bottom of the pile."⁴¹ Many of the British New Wave narratives—defined as the late 1950s and early 1960s artistic style voicing the working-class experience—show patterns of domestication and increasing affluence; however, "Irish migrants ha[d] failed to adapt themselves properly to the milieu of the respectable working class, and particularly the female-dominated domestic scene which is key to the presentation of post-war affluence."⁴² Irish migrants refused to conform to the work ethic of the socially mobile English working-class men.⁴³ The violence portrayed in *Whistle* is a product of social conditioning. The consequences reveal themselves in the domestic space, the private sphere of the family's life, foregrounding the psychological processes behind the clashing forces and desires on stage.

Michel de Certeau explains that in a constrained space, people "have to get along in a network of already established forces and representations. People have to make do with what they have."⁴⁴ Giving the example of immigrants living in France, Certeau goes on to argue that

a North African living in Paris or Roubaix (France) insinuates *into* the system imposed on him by the construction of a low-income housing development or of the French

meritocracy proves to be far from the reality of England. A protean and apparently all-consuming stereotype automatically fixes him triply, in terms of ethnicity, class and gender" (326). Comparing *Whistle* with Harold Pinter's *The Homecoming*, Dukore defines violence in the former case as standing "in the tradition of urban naturalism," as "it is more extreme, and it is more explicitly a social condition – partly a consequence of paternal upbringing, partly a consequence of class relationships outside the home" (27). Pinter's drama, by contrast, is characterised by "minimalization and allusiveness" (27). Analysing the play from a postcolonial perspective, Carroll argues that the Carneys possess indeterminate and hybrid identity by being caught "in-between" ascribed identities constructed upon essentialist and authoritative national narratives (164-5). On the other hand, Fintan O'Toole regards the play as Ireland's struggle to become "belatedly civilized" (*Politics of Magic*, 58) and argues it is more a tragedy than a naturalistic play. For O'Toole, the play is not so much about emigration as the clash between industrial future and rural past in the history of Ireland.

⁴¹ Wills, *Best Are Leaving*, 128.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 130.

⁴³ Wills sees the play as a faithful and realistic treatment of the migrant experience, "an expression of the association of the migrant Irish with socially excluded and racially 'other' labour, contrasted with the socially mobile white working class" (129-130).

⁴⁴ Certeau, *Practice of Everyday*, 18.

language the ways of ‘dwelling’ (in a house or a language) peculiar to his native Kabylia. He superimposes them and, by that combination, creates for himself a space in which he can find *ways of using* the constraining order of the place or of the language. Without leaving the place where he has no choice but to live and which lays down its law for him, he establishes within it a degree of *plurality* and creativity.⁴⁵

Certeau’s take on creative reproduction of the established place through everyday practice does not, however, resonate with the Irish community in Britain. In a report of research undertaken for the Commission for Racial Equality, Mary J. Hickman and Bronwen Walter discuss how Irish migrants were “doubly invisible”: racism was only understood along lines of black and white, so anti-Irish racism was unacknowledged, and their status as “immigrants” and migrant background were not recognised.⁴⁶ The characters can neither be assimilated nor recognised for their difference. Such problems of assimilation and recognition are at the core of their conflict and identity; certain anti-Irish stereotypes have been internalised by the characters themselves. In the play, the “native custom” of the Carneys becomes a source of self-ridicule:

BETTY: What? But isn't it daft? Everything. Look. Just look at the place after a few weeks of family life with your brothers. And now two more.

MICHAEL: Not tonight, Josephine.

BETTY: You what?

MICHAEL: (*English accent, joking*) You what? We can drink out of the saucers; it's an old Irish custom.

BETTY: No, it's daft.

⁴⁵ Certeau, *Practice of Everyday*, 30.

⁴⁶ Mary J. Hickman and Bronwen Walter, *Discrimination and the Irish Community in Britain: A Report of Research Undertaken for the Commission for Racial Equality* (London: Commission for Racial Equality, 1997), 144-5.

MICHAEL: And we'll get a little pig, a bonham, to run around the kitchen as a house pet.

BETTY: Daft.

MICHAEL: And we'll be progressive, and grow shamrocks instead of geraniums. And turn that little shed at the end of the garden into a hotel for the fairies and leprechauns.

BETTY: You're daft. You really are. We were doing pretty well before you asked them here. Daft! (*Whistle*, 7)

The characters cannot refashion their home place according to their own needs and desires. In the context of British society, migrants are to be met with tragic consequences unless they submit themselves to the law and order and cultural imagination set by the Establishment. Heterogeneity in the British context seems to be a disguised form of cultural assimilation; one may be culturally assimilated into mainstream ideas and ways of life but cannot be racially assimilated. Anthony Roche explains that the Carneys rebel against the “manners and the constraints of the new civilisation” set by their British surroundings by wrecking “the premises and by ostentatiously refusing to conform to these new imposed standards of behavior.”⁴⁷ It is, at one level, “a reaction against an ideology which is doubly alien.”⁴⁸ The tragedy lies in the characters’ displacement and failure of place-making. The play operates both as a social critique of Murphy’s time and as an insight into the tragic condition of humanity.

According to Raymond Williams, in the world of naturalism, life itself is fate. Life is made up of deterministic principles – social conditioning and heredity. As he writes,

⁴⁷ Roche, “Murphy’s Drama,” 91.

⁴⁸ Ibid. Although playwrights such as John Osborne, Shelagh Delaney, Arnold Wesker, Edward Bond and even Harold Pinter were on the theatrical scene, Roche goes on to argue that *Whistle* can be taken as Murphy’s own rebellion against the urban bourgeois drama that prevailed in England, “[r]efusing to confine passionate speech and action within the polite formalities of middle-class manners and social chit-chat [...] spilling some blood in the waxworks museum” (92).

The tragedy of naturalism is the tragedy of passive suffering, and the suffering is passive because man can only endure and can never really change his world. The endurance is given no moral or religious valuation; it is wholly mechanical, because both man and his world, in what is now understood as rational explanation, are the products of an impersonal and material process which though it changes through time has no ends. The impulse to describe and so change a human condition has narrowed to the simple impulse to describe a condition in which there can be no intervention by God or man, the human act of will being tiny and insignificant within the vast material process, universal or social, which at once determines and is indifferent to human destiny.⁴⁹

The characters' social status, determined by their race, class and gender, confers a sense of inevitability on their way of life. This inevitability serves as fate's role in tragedy. In his preface to *Miss Julie*, Strindberg connects the destructive passion of the characters with the conflicts of social classes. Miss Julie is a tragic figure because she is "a victim of the discord which a mother's 'crime' implanted in a family; a victim of the errors of her age, of circumstances, of her own flawed constitutions."⁵⁰ In a world where there is no God, no justice and no external law, human beings destroy themselves and each other, driven only by their own ideas and illusions. Even though the categorisation of types informed by biological evolution in naturalism cannot be simply applied to the Carney brothers, the principle of tragedy rooted in the "milieu" of social circumstances underlies *Whistle*.

This tragedy of displacement echoes that of Eugene O'Neill, who finds tragedy in "seeing somebody on the stage facing life, fighting against the eternal odds, not conquering, but perhaps inevitably being conquered. The individual life is made significant just by the struggle."⁵¹ The audience witnesses the failed attempt of the characters to dominate life. There is a sense of being displaced in one's home and longing for an impossibility. In the manuscript draft notes regarding the characters, Murphy writes that Michael "still fancies the family should be together. This [is] due to

⁴⁹ Williams, *Modern Tragedy*, 69.

⁵⁰ August Strindberg, "Preface" in *Miss Julie* (London: Methuen Drama, [1893] 2009), 4.

⁵¹ Williams, *Modern Tragedy*, 116.

never having a childhood family life. [...]. There is a great loneliness in his life, a searching for something which his wife can't give him. He should not have been born a Carney.”⁵² The house of Michael and his English wife Betty in Coventry is a temporary accommodation, a stay against the rootlessness of Michael's position as immigrant. Their home is destroyed by the disruptive force of the Carney clan. The audience witnesses their cruel struggles against the tide of disintegration.

Although set in a different geographical and socio-economic context, O'Neill's play, *Long Day's Journey into Night* (1956) also focuses on Irish immigrant life. The outward expressions or symptoms of social displacement are different—alcoholism and drug addiction in O'Neill, violence and prostitution in Murphy—but both plays share the sense of being displaced in one's home. Mary, in *Journey*, constantly reminds us that the summer house is only a temporary home and that she does not have a real home. The violence and destruction in O'Neill's Tyrone family are self-inflicted while the Carneys tend to express their displacement and frustration toward others. In other words, the Tyrones are obsessed with their encircled “self,” whereas the Carneys have little reflective sense of selfhood, tending to define their selves in terms of territorial contestation with their (imagined) others, such as the rival Irish gang the Mulryans and the “English polly” Betty. Harry expresses his thoughts regarding Muslims: “I still like them. Respect them. Blacks, Muslims. They stick together, their families and all. And if they weren't here, like, our Irish blue blood would turn a shade darker, wouldn't it? (To MICHAEL) Hah? And then some people'd want our cocks chopped off too” (*Whistle*, 10). Betty is confined to the kitchen or the bedroom space. As she complains to Michael, “[i]f I'm on my own here, I'm standing in there (*kitchen*) afraid to make a sound; if I'm upstairs I'm afraid to make a sound” (8). Betty confronts Michael: “[t]o hell with Des and the rest of them! It's us or them. Which is more important to you?” (9). Betty and Michael's legal bond is disrupted by familial blood ties. When celebrating their victory over the Mulryans, Betty is excluded from the party. Michael tells Betty to “[g]o upstairs” and repeatedly insists that “you don't belong to this great victory party over *them*” (75). Betty is both verbally (being called “Bitchey,” “Whore,” “English trash” throughout) and physically abused to the point where her own husband Michael hits her “triumphantly” (76). The “us-and-them”

⁵² TCD MS11115/1/1/2.

mentality is at the core of the play's violence and destruction.

The "wildness" of the Irish is a primitive and animalistic trait often attributed to the Irish by the English. Betty labels the Carney brothers "Pigs! Pigs! You're only pigs! Animals! That's all you are" (75). Nevertheless, Murphy seems to adopt this cultural trope in order to subvert it, giving his characters primordial energy, honesty and truthfulness. There is a tension between the abysmal reality of violence and the illusory fantasy of freedom, honour and meaning in Murphy's play that is resonant of Tennessee Williams's drama. In Raymond Williams's words, Tennessee Williams's characters are

At their most satisfying [...] animals; the rest is a covering of humanity, and is destructive. It is in their consciousness, their ideals, their dreams, their illusions that they lose themselves and become pathetic sleepwalkers. The human condition is tragic because of the entry of mind on the fierce, and in itself tragic, animal struggle of sex and death. The purpose of the drama is then to cut through these mental illusions to the actual primary rhythms.⁵³

In an interview, Murphy told a story of how *Whistle* came to be:

a brother of mine had told me a very cruel and awful story about a family that operated around the Birmingham area, in which one of them carried half of another man's ear in a match box. I was shocked, amazed, fascinated even by this – the cannibalism, the primitiveness of it. [...] it is more about the emotionally charged blood knot that is the family, that is every family.⁵⁴

Murphy's characters, tied by their family, possess the animalistic primitiveness of Williams's. Dada is certainly the "pathetic sleepwalker" that Williams describes; he is not only delusional himself, but also

⁵³ Williams, *Modern Tragedy*, 119-120.

⁵⁴ Billington, "In Conversation," 96.

builds a kingdom of delusion in which he raises his sons. Dada tells Michael: “I let the rest of you make your own choices, decisions. Free will. Always believed in that” (*Whistle*, 28), when the reality is the complete opposite. Again, in the manuscript draft notes, Murphy describes how the Carney sons—with the exception of Michael—look up to Dada to the extent that Hugo regards his father as god.⁵⁵ Dada is an all-talk, no-action fighter. After the battle with the Mulryans, in which Dada himself did not participate, he ceremoniously hands a small silver-plated cup to Harry as a “magnificent trophy – for your courage and bravery in the face of the enemy [...] indomitable courage” (*Whistle*, 67). As Grene points out, Murphy chose Falstaff as a model for Dada: “a man whose life is mostly a dream. Obsessed with violence though a coward. Light-headed and senseless who builds up his family with wrong ideals and continues to *live on* in his stupid state of unreality.”⁵⁶ Although Dada completely lacks the grandiose magnanimity of Falstaff, whose character exudes jubilation, Dada’s attitude and cunning ability to concoct a battle story are pure Falstaff. Murphy’s drama is designed to burst the bubble of such illusory worlds, bringing the audience closer to violent primordial energy.

Murphy adapts the conventions of naturalism to show the conflict, tension and destructive passion within the home space while giving a structural unity comparable to that of Greek tragedy. Within the breakdown of the family, Michael follows the trajectory of a tragic hero who fights against an uncontrollable force. There is a deceptive Oedipus complex in operation, whereby Michael refuses to be like his father but becomes the image moulded out by Dada—not what Dada truly is but the ideal that he has created for himself and his sons. Dada wants to be a “a fighting man” who can also “talk with the best, and mix with them” (*Whistle*, 30). He brags about once being a guard, a respectable position at the lower end of the professional classes. He feels entitled to be associated with higher professionals like Anthony Heneghan, the architect, or John Quinlan, the doctor, at the golf club. Although Des reveals that, after being dismissed from the guards and being offered a low-level position of caretaker, Dada in fact stole Heneghan’s coat (38), Dada still holds on to his illusion. He accuses Michael of being a coward: “you can talk a bit, but you can’t act. Actions speak louder than

⁵⁵ TCD MS11115/1/1/2.

⁵⁶ TCD MS11115/1/1/2; Grene, *Playwright Adventurer*, 40.

words. The man of words fails the man of action” (31). Dada’s ideal of unity between action and talk is realised when Michael, the educated talker, also performs the brute act of killing Des. Meanwhile, Michael’s own dream to have Des be “something, respectable, to be at home” (17) has been destroyed.

MICHAEL: [...] I want to get out of all this. And this awful feeling that something is going to happen me. I want to get out of this kind of life. I want Des – I want us all to be – I don’t want to be what I am. [...] But I can’t get out of all this. I could have had a good job. [...] I could have *run* years ago. Away from them. I could have been a teacher. I had the ability (57)

There is both fall and progression within Michael’s tragic narrative: the fall of his own ideal to be other than what he is, and a fulfilment of his destiny laid out by his father.

This tragic trajectory is spatially realised. First, there is the division of the Carney clan into the “brainy blokes” and “thick lads”; then there is the killing of Des, which operates as a tragic coda; finally, there is a re-centering of the configuration of characters from Dada to Michael. This gives the same structural impression and effect as the emotional purgation of a “well-made” tragedy, but here it is confusing and shocking rather than purifying. Various forces and worlds collide in the closed living room space of Michael’s house. In Dada’s words, there is always a “friction” (33) between “us” and “them.” Within the Carney clan the characters can be separated into the Cartesian dichotomy of mind and body. Harry is representative of the thick lads, a pimp who exploits young prostitutes. Iggy is physically the biggest and stammers in moments of tension. Hugo is described as “rather stupid” (3). Against them, Dada and Michael are more educated. Dada manipulates his sons using persuasive language; Michael attempts to avoid fighting and shows a capacity for logical thinking. He sees through the pointlessness of the battle against the Mulryans, telling Harry, “Ye’re crazy. That daft father has ye all gone mad. Fighting Carneys! If ye were fighting for a job, even! – A woman even! Can’t you see there’s no point. The whole thing is wrong. . . . Well, what if ye win? What does it do for you? Where does it get you? What good is it” (53). Harry confronts Dada, Michael and Des: “[...]”

No explaining to me. Things are clear enough to me. There's been so many good intelligent blokes for so long explaining things to thick lads. [...] (HARRY *is suppressing tears.*) But I'm thick. Thick lads don't feel, they can't be offended" (79). When Des corrects Harry for a grammatical mistake regarding the word inferior(ity) complex, Harry "(glances at DADA; then to DES). You're another almost terribly brainy bloke. You explain to me too" (80). When the conflict between the men of words and men of action intensifies, the stage becomes divided. The stage directions indicate that "HARRY, IGGY and HUGO are on one side of the stage, MICHAEL, DADA and DES on the other" (81). The spatial division represents the varying power dynamics within the constricted room. They may be fighting a life-and-death game, but one with scant reward. Whoever wins, the territorial (spatial) gain for the winner is still poor and negligible. The tragedy of these common men resides in the fact that they get nothing out of the victory, emphasising the triviality and pettiness of the Irish way of life in England, the abjection of Carneys and the absurdity of the situation.



[1986, Abbey Theatre, Dir. Garry Hynes]

This 1986 photograph is one example, with the tension between the family members reflected spatially on stage. Dada is standing on the chair, accentuating his superiority and authority, and is guarded by the three Carney brothers; Betty stands between them—in bright clothes—asking Michael to choose. Michael is cornered and alone.

These two Carney worldviews, each with its distinct system of logic and value, are equally legitimate (and illegitimate), and the play distinguishes itself from becoming a melodrama of ethical simplicity. For Albert Camus, tragedy is “ambiguous”: he professes that the ideal tragedy is “first and foremost tension, since it is the conflict, in a frenzied immobility, between two powers each of which wears the double mask of good and evil.”⁵⁷ Murphy respected Arthur Miller but disagreed with his tendency to moralise. *Whistle*, by contrast, is morally ambivalent. As Murphy put it: “it was once said that the failure of the moralist is the triumph of the tragedian. [...] I’m not passing judgements on these people. I found that I was greatly sympathetic towards the character of Harry. [...] Harry is like the hidden hero who is articulating for the thick people of the world.”⁵⁸

The killing of the youngest son Des operates as a tragic expression of the tensions latent in the closed world of the Carneys. In the World Champ Carney, a game Dada invented to make his sons fight each other, Michael hits Des with a broken glass bottle, killing him. The killing has a tragic effect of “pity and fear” that leaves the audience shuddering. Michael wished to save Des from the savage low-class life in Coventry, urging Des to return to Ireland. Nevertheless, Des gradually becomes assimilated into the clan, displaying acts of brutality and exaggerated machismo. The ending lays bare the terror of reality. In the earlier drafts of *Iron Men*, the play’s original title, the murder of Des is dramatically extended, highlighting Michael’s torn psyche:

D: (Rushing at Michael) He’s mine. I’m taking him. (Michael pushes and kicks him back clumsily. He grabs the knife off the floor. He brandishes it in trembling hands).

M: I’ll use. I’ll use it. Go back.

[...]

D: Leave him to me. Use it again’ me.

(Des rushes past Iggy. He claws at Michael. Michael terrorised, plunges the knife into

⁵⁷ Albert Camus, “On the Future of Tragedy,” in *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, trans. E. Kennedy (New York: Knopf, 1968), 295–310, qtd. in Julian Young, *The Philosophy of Tragedy: From Plato to Žižek* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2013), 302.

⁵⁸ Billington, “In Conversation,” 97.

Des shouting: “Go ’way, Go ’way, Go ’way.” Des falls with a groan and is still. Iggy and Hugo stand dumbfounded looking at Des for a second. They look at Father).

M (Berserk): Now Carneys, iron men. Now Carneys. Now Carneys. (He tries to charge through Iggy and Hugo at his father. Iggy stops him with one mighty blow. He sags to the ground and falls over the body of Des. Iggy bends and throws Michael aside. He puts his hand over Des’s heart).

I: God....I think he’s dead.⁵⁹

The brothers leave the room in search of a doctor and later return with a police officer. Meanwhile, “MICHAEL alone in the room groans. After several attempts he finally stands. He sees the knife, picks it up, looks around, his eyes coming back to the knife again, wondering was it all a dream.”⁶⁰ Michael’s struggle to fight against the destructive force—pushing the knife into Des while begging him to go away—shows the maelstrom of his contrasting impulses. Compared to the published version, where hitting Des with a broken bottle inadvertently and immediately kills him, Michael’s extended struggle with a knife creates greater tension. Nevertheless, Murphy rejected this version, favouring a more ordinary object, where death occurs suddenly and somewhat unexpectedly. Trained in the appearance of the bottle earlier, this ordinary object gains a symbolic significance, as in a Chekhov play (or Chekhov’s gun), foreshadowing death. Death materialises not as a result of malicious intent, but in its accidental randomness. There is more room for pity and terror in the ordinary meaninglessness of the situation than in a tormented “to kill or not to kill” psychopathic hero. The published version retains the absurdity in the tragic unfolding of the family drama.

In the end, Dada gives a speech of self-exculpation, in place of a lamentation, that further points to the irony of the tragic situation:

DADA: [...] Him! Michael. Look at him. What kind of nature is in him? (HARRY

⁵⁹ TCD MS11115/1/1/5.

⁶⁰ TCD MS11115/1/1/6.

turns away from DADA and joins MICHAEL beside DES's body.) Always the cause of trouble in the house. [...] (IGGY *joins MICHAEL and HARRY.*) Ignatius. Look at him. The disrupter. The disrupter, Hubert. (HUGO *joins HARRY, IGGY and MICHAEL. DADA is isolated in a corner of the stage.*) Hubert . . . Wha'? . . . Boys . . . Ye're not blaming me. . . . No control over it. No one has anymore. . . . Did my best. Ye don't know how hard it is. Life. Made men of ye. What else could I have done? Tell me. Proud. Wha'? [...]. Never got the chances. Not there for us. Had the ability. Yas. And lost the job in the guards, police. Brought up family, proper. Properly. No man can do more than best. I tried. Must have some kind of pride. Wha'? I tried, I did my best . . . I tried, I did my best . . . Tried . . . Did my best . . . I tried . . . (*Whistle, 87*)

Harry, Iggy and Hugo join Michael, with Dada left isolated in the corner. Dada denies any responsibility, and his self-deceiving language, made up of clichés, has begun to collapse. His sons will no longer subscribe to Dada's world of delusion. The horror of Des's death cannot be mitigated with language; Dada's speeches cannot contain nor conceal the terrible realities that the Carneys face. In Nietzsche's opposition between the Dionysian and the Apollonian drives, tragedy confronts a chaotic reality through Dionysian insight, but transmutes it into the coherent lyricism and poetic exuberance of the Apollonian form. Dada's broken speech does not offer the "metaphysical consolation" that would characterise Apollonian aesthetics.



[2001, Abbey Theatre, Dir. Conall Morrison]

This tension is again, spatially realised on stage. Michael kneels in regret and horror; the brothers have turned their backs to Dada; and while on the stool, Dada no longer exudes the same power. The image captures the moment of anagnorisis, of death, of shattered hopes, and meaninglessness.

While predominantly Dionysian in his vision where the Apollonian can barely hold, Murphy retains the classical structure of tragedy through plot, spatial ordering and the intention of violent purge that gives a cathartic effect. Again, such views are resonant of Tennessee Williams's drama. "I have always felt a release," writes Williams, "from the sense of meaninglessness and death when a work of tragic intention has seemed to me to have achieved that intention, even if only approximately, nearly."⁶¹ This note was written in defence of his "cycle of violent plays," which for Williams, may "have had a moral justification after all," "if there is any truth in the Aristotelian idea that violence is purged by its poetic representation on stage."⁶² Artaud writes that cruelty is synonymous to "life" or "necessity" because "life cannot help exercising some blind rigour that carries with it all its conditions, otherwise it would not be life."⁶³ Chris Morash has pointed to the affinity between Murphy and Artaud;

⁶¹ Tennessee Williams, "Foreword to *Sweet Bird of Youth*," *Penguin Plays: Sweet Bird of Youth, A Streetcar Named Desire, The Glass Menagerie*, ed. E. Martin Browne (Middlesex: Penguin, 1978), 13.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 12.

⁶³ Artaud, *Theatre and Its Double*, 113-4.

Murphy's plays reveal "the purest form of that 'blind rigour', the irreducible necessity of what it is to be human."⁶⁴ Thus, the killing of Des achieves a sense of release, in its enactment of that "blind rigour" in all its meaninglessness and death. It is at this point that the tragic intention meets the Theatre of Cruelty; as Dada exclaims, "No control over it. No one has anymore [...] Ye don't know how hard it is. Life" (*Whistle*, 87).

The contesting poles of the Dionysian and Apollonian can be observed in *Whistle* at multiple levels. Rationality and language are on the brink of breakdown. Chaos, loss and suffering cannot be incorporated into a meaningful context. Contrasting forces collide within the individual characters and throughout the entire plot. Like a dormant volcano, the impending Dionysian force lies just beneath the surface of the Apollonian. The opening establishes a sense of disorder that can erupt any time. In the beginning, "*the play opens on a confusion of noise, movement and preparation*" (3). Harry looks for his socks ("sock-sock-sock-sock-sock? Hah? Where is it? Sockeen-sockeen-sockeen?"), Hugo is singing ("Here we go loopey loop, here we go loopey laa . . .") and Iggy is stammering ("Are we r-r-ready?"). The noise that the brothers make together form a Dionysian dissonance and cacophony.⁶⁵ When their sycophant friend Mush throws a sock at Hugo, Hugo "retaliates by throwing a cup at MUSH which smashes against the wall, MUSH shooting at it with an imaginary gun" (*Whistle*, 4). Throughout the play, Michael instinctively feels that "something terrible is going to happen" (35, 57).

Whistle enacts the violence that cuts through the world of illusions and ideals that the characters are victims of. In the various drafts of *Iron Men*, there were attempts to have this Dionysian

⁶⁴ Morash, "Murphy, History," 30.

⁶⁵ The opening played in the premiere production is a major change from the conventional naturalistic exposition. The brothers have already gone out to the train station; Betty prepares tea and Michael reads the newspapers; they converse casually over tea (TCD MS11115/1/1/2). This would have followed a more conventional formula and made the audience feel safe. By contrast, the published version (traditionally played since the play's premiere) establishes a sense of insecurity and danger looming. Regarding the changes in the opening Murphy wrote: "After West End and Dublin productions, I reverted to my original idea: a quieter opening, between Michael and Betty. But now I wonder if this doesn't give the whole thing a smack of the old-fashioned, and put weight of exposition on the scene" (TCD MS11115/9/1/1/2/38). Murphy went back to the conventional beginning for the *DruidMurphy* production; see the changed playscript in *DruidMurphy: Plays by Tom Murphy* (London: Methuen, 2012): 89-186. Even in the quieter opening, Murphy was hoping to convey a tragic feeling from the start. In a letter to Arvin Brown, the director of Long Wharf Theatre, on August 18, 1969, Murphy wrote: "I feel this atmosphere of 'doom' about Michael right from the start. Tiny moments in that first scene between Betty and himself, when they look at each other and smile: the way they look at each other, the way they smile, in the silence, a lull in the middle of the trap. There's something desperately sad about it" (TCD MS11115/9/1/1/2/34).

force covered up by the Apollonian order of law and authority. Murphy devised rather different endings and in these versions, Dada is persistently irresponsible and deluded:

A police-man comes in the hall door with Mush. The father, tear-stained pushes past them. Harry, Iggy and Hugo, with determined expressions, stand in the hall door way. The father points at Michael.

F: We're all witnesses. That's him officer. (The policeman walks over to Michael and stands over him as the CURTAIN falls).⁶⁶

Handing over his own son to the police, Dada not only eschews moral responsibility, but also relies on external authority to justify a sense of innocence and righteousness built upon self-deception. The brothers are equally “determined” to continue to support Dada. Here, Michael is a lone scapegoat. In another version, Dada is completely self-absorbed:

The words, “Did my best,” barely audible come out. And then he is out of his thought. He looks around and wonders what he is doing in the room alone. He goes out to the hall for his hat and coat, returns with them and puts them on before the mirror, adjusting his hat carefully and muttering, “Poor Desmond, Poor Desmond.” Then he exits, proud of his appearance.⁶⁷

It is the persistence of Dada's conceived space, despite the confrontation with his son's death, that is harrowing. Dada exits proudly and he will continue to live in his world of illusions to sustain himself. What the final version achieves is a changed stage configuration in which Dada is isolated and therefore his attempts at continuing self-deception break down into incoherence. The portrayal of Dada's complete self-absorption in the earlier versions of *Iron Men* denies the audience the feeling of

⁶⁶ TCD MS11115/1/1/5.

⁶⁷ TCD MS11115/1/1/6.

any pity—a deep form of sympathy—for the character Dada. Consequently, it makes it difficult for the audience to recognise such terror within themselves. The published version, with Dada’s broken speech and doubtful incomprehension of what has happened, leaves room for the audience to experience greater pity and fear.

Betty’s reactions demonstrate some of the literal effects the Carneys have on others, including the audience. Betty leaves the house, breaking free from the abusive marriage that she was barely able to sustain. In *Whistle*, Betty leaves before Michael kills Des, whereas in *Iron Men*, she was aware of what has happened, feeling “pity” and “scorn” towards Michael:

Betty is heard coming down the stairs. She enters wearing an overcoat, hat, and carrying a suitcase. [...] A form of pity shows on her face when she turns towards Michael but then the expression changes to one of scorn. Michael, who cannot see her face winces. She exits quickly and her footsteps can be heard progressively fading. Michael remains with his back to the door, not moving, wanting to call after her, restraining himself, digging his fingernails into the palms of his hands. Then he cries silently.⁶⁸

Betty’s mixed feelings approximate what the audience might experience after seeing the savagery on stage: pity for the character who, caught in the forces of his past, his upbringing, and his family, fails to change things. His aspiration has been thwarted: Des, the embodiment of Michael’s hope and fantasy, is dead. At the same time, Michael’s fratricide is met with repulsion, a reaction against the horror of it all.

Actual performances may bring a new political dimension to the play’s theme, as each performance is met with varying audience reception. In response to the 1986 Abbey production, Kevin O’Connor commented:

[p]eople were slumped in their seats. A woman beside me started to breathe deeply and

⁶⁸ TCD MS11115/1/1/6.

when a particular incident happened she let out a yell. Other people were absolutely horrified by it. And they were grudging in their applause because they don't want to accept the authenticity of Murphy's version of the Irish in Britain [...] a very middle class audience last night. Let's face it, I'm middle class, we're all middle class practically who go to the theatre on opening night. They were slumped down in their seats and they didn't want to believe what was happening on the stage.⁶⁹

Peter Thompson reviewed: “[f]or we Irish, *A Whistle in the Dark* is an extremely severe lesson in self-criticism. [...] The players bestow a raw human sympathy on the characters. [...] It's an evening of catharsis and release.”⁷⁰ Another reviewer recounted how “[a]udiences file out dazed, battered, extremely thoughtful”; the play “heaves and rocks us. It is of terryfying [sic] immediacy. We walk out of the theatre with it hung around us.”⁷¹ While the performances in Ireland were regarded as a confrontation, a self-reflective occasion for the (middle-class) Irish who had ignored the realities of working-class emigrant life, the play took on different meaning when performed at the Royal Court, London in 1989. Michael Coveney wrote: “[t]he play is certainly another bad advertisement for the close-knit Irish Catholic family, but it has also acquired a grim metaphoric resonance as a study in the rights of a minority to pursue its customs, however noisily and barbarously, in an alien host culture.”⁷² Michael Billington praised the play for retaining its “[r]aw, shocking, visceral impact.”⁷³ Charles Spencer noted that the play resonated differently in England due to the Northern Irish Troubles, allowing it to be viewed as a “depiction of deeply ingrained ignorance and hatred, of mindless thuggery and resentful pride,” which “crystallises the mentality of sectarian violence.”⁷⁴ Spencer also

⁶⁹ Kevin O'Connor and David Hanly, “Morning Ireland,” *RTE Radio*, Oct 7, 1986, *Whistle*, Oct 6, 1986 [Press Cuttings] ATDA at NUIG, 0720_PC_0001, p.39

⁷⁰ Peter Thompson, “Murphy Drama Scourges Cruelty,” *Irish Press*, July 30, 1987, *Whistle*, Jul 28, 1987 [Press Cuttings] ATDA at NUIG, 0710_PC_0001, p.7.

⁷¹ “A Savage Production,” *Cork Examiner*, Aug 3, 1987, *Whistle*, Jul 28, 1987 [Press Cuttings] ATDA at NUIG, 0710_PC_0001, p.9.

⁷² Michael Coveney, “*A Whistle in the Dark*: Royal Court,” *Financial Times*, July 10, 1989, *Whistle*, Jul 5, 1989 [Press Cuttings], ATDA at NUIG, 4916_PC_0001, p.9.

⁷³ Michael Billington, “Pacifist in a Punch-up,” *Guardian*, July 10, 1989, *Whistle*, Jul 5, 1989 [Press Cuttings], ATDA at NUIG, 4916_PC_0001, p.10.

⁷⁴ Charles Spencer, “Painful but True,” *Theatre*, July 12, 1989, *Whistle*, Jul 5, 1989 [Press Cuttings], ATDA at NUIG, 4916_PC_0001, p.11.

remarked that the play felt “like being on the receiving end of a viciously aimed kick to the solar plexus,” and “[o]ne leaves the theatre emotionally drained.”⁷⁵ Depending on the context of the performance, the emotional impact registers differently, as the audience’s “othering” of the characters changes as well.

When designing the set for the 1986 production at the Abbey, Brien Vahey had to deal with the theatrical distance and the sheer size of the Abbey, which threatened to diminish the intimate approach the play called for. As a solution, three rows of stall seats were removed to allow for a thrust stage—the round stage that Hynes wanted—creating space around the house where all the action took place. The effect of this decision was to bring the action right into the auditorium and sharpen the focus of the performance. Vahey explained:

We have to get over the problem that once something is behind the frame of the stage it seems far away [...]. So we try to break the frame and do away with the need for a lot of formalised acting. [...] We’ve treated the house and the outside world as a theatrical space. The notion which has influenced the way we’ve worked with the play, is that the family is now here [no-where] and have nothing. There *is* an outside world but it is a void. [...] I don’t know whether terms like naturalism or social realism have much meaning any more. But in some way we’ve got away from the need to place the drama in the real world. We’ve placed it in a theatrical world that’s got to do with feelings.⁷⁶

Vahey’s intentions for the set design reveal the necessity of narrowing the distance between the audience and the actors as well as creating the lived experience of the “void.” The creation of this theatrical and emotional nothingness conveys the impossibility of place-making. It accentuates the characters’ struggle to make or maintain a home place.

⁷⁵ Spencer, “Painful but True.”

⁷⁶ “Vehey [Vahey] Sets a Spacious Scene,” *Sunday Tribune*, October 5, 1986, *Whistle*, Oct 6, 1986 [Press Cuttings] ATDA at NUIG, 0720_PC_0001, p.32.

In *Whistle*, the impending violence, the failure of place-making, the re-grouping of space towards the play's ending, the realization of theatre production, and its relationship with the audience in arousing pity and fear, are all integral aspects of Murphy's tragedy, which puts pressure on the conventional forms of naturalistic tragedy. Relatively early on in his career, Murphy proved himself to be capable of writing a modern tragedy at a time when the possibility of tragedy was in doubt (George Steiner's *Death of Tragedy* was published in 1961), and when his predecessors and contemporary dramatists like Arthur Miller, Eugene O'Neill and Tennessee Williams were writing their own modern tragedies. Despite his ability to write a tragedy, however, Murphy would soon move further away from its formal construction. In *Famine*, the form is dramatically shattered, unable to bear the tragic events and the sheer scope of the Famine horror. Latent in many of Murphy's plays, the Artaudian model is best configured in *Famine*, in which the physical hunger and struggle for life can be felt most immediately and viscerally on stage.

***Famine* (1968): Enacting Trauma**

The most traumatic event in modern Irish history, the actuality and horrors of the Famine in the 1840s can never be fully grasped and have haunted the Irish psyche in recurring representations, historical narratives and oral accounts. Trauma requires a period of latency; Cathy Caruth describes trauma as a double wound, which is "not available to consciousness until they have been imposed again, repeatedly, in nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor."⁷⁷ She goes on to argue that "trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature—the way it was precisely *not known* in the first instance—returns to haunt the survivor later on."⁷⁸ Murphy rewrites the collective historical trauma to his own times, which like a double wound, can only be articulated through the stories and re-presentations after

⁷⁷ Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1996), 4.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

time's passing. They are stories that have haunted the Irish consciousness for centuries in many different forms. As Murphy puts it,

[...] Famine is a racial memory, it provides a debilitating history and that it has left its mark I have no doubt. And, consciously or unconsciously, rightly or wrongly, another thought/feeling was emerging: Was I, in what I shall call my times, the mid-twentieth century, a student or a victim of the Famine? It was that thought/feeling, I believe, that made me want to write the play, the need to write about the moody self and my times.⁷⁹

On *Famine*, Hiroko Mikami has commented that “personal recollections accumulate to become collective memories after being shared among a community [...] this process has an effect on the audience who are sitting in a quasi-community called the theatre.”⁸⁰ Murphy weaves the personal with the social.⁸¹ He is dealing with shared memories; however, *Famine* brings the traumatic past into a continuous present that distinguishes the play as tragedy. Raymond Williams argues that Brecht's mature work is characterised by the “recovery of history as a dimension for tragedy. The sense of history becomes active through the discovery of methods of dramatic movement, so that the action is not single in space and time and certainly not ‘permanent and timeless.’”⁸² While seemingly anti-tragic, Murphy, like Brecht, focuses on the effects and consequences of famine not as an inevitability but as a continuous living action; the action, like trauma, resurfaces again and again.

Dislocation and schism are symptoms of trauma. Patrick Duggan argues that system (the space, codes and language) of representation and reception of trauma-tragedies “are made increasingly

⁷⁹ Murphy, *Plays: 1*, xi.

⁸⁰ Hiroko Mikami, “Famine in Context,” in *Alive in Time: The Enduring Drama of Tom Murphy*, ed. Christopher Murray (Dublin: Carysfort, 2010), 42.

⁸¹ Murphy uses the term “racial memory,” but many cultural historians have dismissed the term for its biological and archetypal implications. Instead, “collective” memory is used to replace the biological framework with a cultural one. See Jan Assmann and John Czaplicka's “Collective Memory and Cultural Identity,” *New German Critique* 65 (1995): 125-133. For memory studies on the Irish Famine, see *Recollecting Hunger: An Anthology: Cultural Memories of the Great Famine in Irish and British Fiction 1847-1920*, eds. Magu rite Corporaal et al. (Newbridge: Irish Academic Press, 2012).

⁸² Williams, *Modern Tragedy*, 202.

alien to the point of fracturing.”⁸³ Similar to the paradox between “the desire to forget the trauma-event and the desire or necessity to remember/restage it in order to ‘know’ it and so effect some form of cure,” trauma-tragedy “produces an ‘undecidability’ which is experienced viscerally and painfully but paradoxically also with excitement and curiosity, causing a tension between the desire to look away and a desire to experience it.”⁸⁴ The audience is put into an uncomfortable position; denied the possibility of consuming the trauma-event as spectacle or of dismissing it as “other,” the audience implicate themselves in the ethical imperative inherent in the act of watching.

The inadequacy of language and literature to express the horrors of famine and the ethics of putting it on stage, led to the development of *Famine* as it stands. Not only is the Famine conspicuous for its absence in the Irish theatrical canon, but the existing five plays which directly address the famine have also been failures.⁸⁵ Early drafts of *Famine* show Murphy struggling to find a dramatic form with which to realise the daunting task of representing the un-representable or speaking the unspeakable. They also reveal that Murphy became increasingly apprehensive of the insufficiency, if not inadequacy, of Brechtian dramaturgy in capturing the inexpressible horror of the famine. Thus, he moved from the Brechtian epic that uses narrative intervention as an antidote to the illusionist conventions of traditional drama to something approximating Artaud’s theatre of cruelty in search of new theatrical means to convey the visceral immediacy of the famine experience.⁸⁶ As a playwright,

⁸³ Duggan, *Trauma-Tragedy*, 72.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 74.

⁸⁵ Famine scholars such as Chris Morash and Margaret Kelleher have pointed out the impossibility of representation, the limits of language to adequately express or describe the horrors of famine. Morash writes: “what is arguably the most important, certainly the most traumatic, event in modern Irish history has been conspicuously absent from Irish stages” (138). Only two famine plays existed before 1900 and only five professional productions about the Great Hunger had been made by the mid-1990s. Morash notes that “Irish Famine writing is marked by the figure of the body in pieces, and by the failure of representation, both as a trope within writing, and in the collapse of the work as a whole” (133). Kelleher, too, asks: “is it possible to depict the horror and scale of an event such as famine; are literature and language adequate to the task?” (2). Terry Eagleton also suggests the linguistic inadequacy in capturing the (almost) transcendental horror, referring to: “The Famine as apparently non-signifying, then, not only because it figures ideologically speaking as a brute act of Nature, but also because it threatens to burst through the bounds of representation as surely as Auschwitz did for Theodor Adorno” (12). A distinctive feature of famine literature is precisely this absence, silence and lack, the failure to address the issue. Chris Morash, “...How Feeble and Inexpressive is the Word!': Staging the Irish Famine,” in *Hunger on the Stage*, eds. Elisabeth Angel-Perez and Alexandra Poulain (New castle: Cambridge Scholars, 2008), 132-148; Margaret Kelleher, *Feminization of Famine: Expressions of the Inexpressible* (Cork: Cork UP, 1997); Terry Eagleton, *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger: Studies in Irish Culture* (London: Verso, 1995).

⁸⁶ Murphy was a regular theatregoer in London from 1962 and it is likely that he was aware of Peter Brook’s

Murphy was concerned not only with the possibility of aesthetic representation but also the ethics of such an attempt. Murphy's research on famine took much longer than the actual writing of the play and his historical precision is manifested and reflected in the various stories that the characters tell.⁸⁷

In his introduction to the play, Murphy writes: "I don't think that a play can do 'justice' to the actuality of famine: attempting to acknowledge that belief, and in writing-instinct, I concluded the action in spring 1847. The historical worst was yet to come, Black '47."⁸⁸ By using actual historical sources, adopting Brechtian techniques which create an emotional distance between the audience and the characters, while equally conveying Artaudian theatrical immediacy, and setting it at a time before the worst catastrophe, Murphy attempts to find ways of expressing the inexpressible. Murphy aims at an uneasy juxtaposition of Brecht and Artaud, in ways that implicate the audience in the theatrical event. Whether in the form of "distanced investigation" or "vital participation," Jacques Rancière argues that both Brecht and Artaud wanted to reform theatre as a "living community": "reform of theatre meant the restoration of its character as assembly or ceremony of the community. Theatre is an assembly in which ordinary people become aware of their situation and discuss their interests, says Brecht following Piscator. It is, claims Artaud, the purifying ritual in which a community is put in possession of its own energies."⁸⁹ Both tilt the locus of meaning in the text toward the spectator and

Theatre of Cruelty season at the Royal Shakespeare Company in 1964. *Marat/Sade* was produced by an enterprising student (Dir: Roc Brynner) in Trinity in 1966. The Trinity Players production of *Marat/Sade* won three awards (best production, best acted play, and individual best actor's award) at the Universities' Drama Association Festival in Galway. See Douglas Henderson, "The Future of Players," *Trinity News*, Apr 14, 1966. <http://www.trinitynewsarchive.ie/pdf/13-13.pdf>.

⁸⁷ Historical sources used include Cecil Woodham-Smith's *The Great Hunger: Ireland 1845-9* (1962), *The Great Famine* (1956) edited by R. Dudley Edwards and T. Desmond Williams, James Connolly's *Labour in Ireland* (1916), John O'Rourke's *The History of the Great Irish Famine of 1847* (1875), Charles Gavan Duffy's *Four Years of Irish History, 1845-1849* (1883) to name a few—as well as literary and oral sources, William Carleton's novels and the folk memories from the Irish Folklore Commission that Murphy used for his play. Extensive handwritten notes can be found in TCD MS11115/1/3/1 – MS11115/1/3/4. In addition, Murphy's other research notes reveal that he was later looking into other famines in India (1770, 1876-78, 1943) and Ethiopia (1983-85, which resonated in his later revivals of *Famine* in 1993, 2001 and 2012); see TCD MS11115/11. One source kept in the research box includes Deirdre Purcell and Pat Langan's *Ethiopia: The Dark Hunger* (Dublin: Magill, 1984).

⁸⁸ Murphy, *Plays: 1*, xvii.

⁸⁹ Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2009), 6. Rancière claims that all spectating involves an active participation: "[e]mancipation begins when we challenge the opposition between viewing and acting: [...] It begins when we understand that viewing is also an action [...] [The spectator] observes, selects, compares, interprets. She links what she sees to a host of other things that she has seen on other stages, in other kinds of place. She composes her own poem with the elements of poem before her. [...] They are thus both distant spectators and active interpreters of the spectacle offered to them"

Murphy, too, looks for ways to engage spectators in a historical and theatrical event that is not reduced to a mere “spectacle.”

Murphy utilises actual historical sources with Brechtian techniques to create the sense of distance that proffers the audience the space of cerebral engagement with history. In his “Short Organum,” Brecht maintains that “[w]e need a type of theatre which not only releases the feelings, insights and impulses possible within the particular historical field of human relations in which the action takes place, but employs and encourages those thoughts and feelings which help transform the field itself.”⁹⁰ Brecht’s theatre “treats social situations as processes and traces out all their inconsistencies,”⁹¹ and regards “society as if all its actions were performed as experiments.”⁹² Murphy’s play hints at the ways the Famine could have been different, how history could have changed if not for the British empire and the structural injustices that were in place.

Brechtian theatre is anti-tragedy, or as Steiner calls it, an “incomplete tragedy.” Murphy’s use of epic dramaturgy, however, is punctuated by the Artaudian visceral immediacy that perforates the soothing surface of an abstract or intellectual appropriation of historical experience. As Brecht himself notes, his epic style would enforce “thinking *above*,” whereas the narrative style of Aristotelian drama induces “thinking from *within*.”⁹³ In *Famine*, while the audience may be thinking “above,” they are made to *experience* the lived horror from “within.” On 26 February 1968, Murphy wrote to the Abbey’s artistic director Tomás Mac Anna, who directed the first production of the play:

I think the production should contain a large element of stylisation. [...] And that it should never be wholly natural – in the “slice of life” sense. The “natural” approach cannot recreate such an intensity of feeling and suffering. The stylised could, and could possibly encourage responses on other levels in the mind and imagination of the audience. I’m

(13). He also states that “[a]n emancipated community is a community of narrators and translators” (22).

⁹⁰ Brecht, “Short Organum,” 190.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 193.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 195.

⁹³ Bertolt Brecht, “The Literalization of Theatre (Notes to *Threepenny Opera*),” in *Brecht on Theatre*, ed. and trans. John Willet (London: Eyre Methuen, 1964), 43-47, qtd. in Williams, *Modern Tragedy*, 193.

thinking in terms of recreating on stage the images and tableaux depicted in sketches and paintings made at the time; [...] To use make-up to extremes. (White?) [...] For example, the man in despair, [...] head staring out over audience, body motionless, face immobile; the only expression is the bewilderment in the eyes.⁹⁴

Once again, this intense experience of space is what defines Murphy's tragic theatre. Moreover, by setting the play at a time before the worst catastrophe came, Murphy acknowledges the limits of literary imagination, while he enjoins the audience to become acutely aware of the inexpressible presence of the real.

Famine is a play about emotional and spiritual as well as material famine. In it, Murphy foregrounds the experiences of the ordinary people whose stories have been overshadowed by the politics and grand narratives of the famine. In the most frequently quoted passage from the introduction, Murphy explains:

the absence of food, the cause of famine, is only one aspect of famine. What about the other 'poverties' that attend famine? A hungry and demoralised people becomes silent. People emigrate in great numbers and leave spaces that cannot be filled. Intelligence becomes cunning. There is a poverty of thought and expression. Womanhood becomes harsh. Love, tenderness, loyalty, generosity go out the door in the struggle for survival. Men fester in vicarious dreams of destruction. The natural exuberance and extravagance of youth is repressed . . . The dream of food can become a reality – as it did in the Irish experience – and people's bodies are nourished back to health. What can similarly restore mentalities that have become distorted, spirits that have become mean and broken? Or, what price survival?⁹⁵

⁹⁴ TCD MS11115/9/1/3/2/37.

⁹⁵ Murphy, *Plays: 1*, xi.

Many forms of depravity and poverty attend the famine. Theatre is yet again confronted with a paradox: how can theatre “present” the physical and mental “void,” to show “the spaces that cannot be filled,” when what it does is precisely filling up the empty space with props and actors? *Famine* dramatises this “presence of absence,” this mass emptiness and collective trauma of Famine, by making the audience bear witness to the disintegration of bodies, houses, the village and the land, showing the characters’ failure of place-making. The characters cannot “make-do” with what is left.

Instead of showing the unity of time, place, and action so prominent in *Whistle*, Murphy sets the play in twelve different scenes in an episodic frame. Starting from autumn 1846 until spring 1847, the time frame jumps in days and weeks, and the space changes within and outside the fictional village of Glanconor. Each scene is given a title related to the central theme of the episode, which often shows the discrepancy between the title and the unfolding story. For instance, in Scene Four, “The Love Scene,” where Liam and Maeve share their mutual affection with one another by kissing, laughing and singing, the corpses of a woman and her two children, as well as the body of a groaning man in the background are revealed by the appearance of the moonlight (*Famine*, 42). This acts as a reminder of the horror of the famine, undercutting any possible romantic narratives and the expectations that were raised by the signboard labelling this as “The Love Scene.” In Scene Five, titled “The Relief Committee,” Murphy completely shifts the perspective from the villagers to the “authorities,” presenting a committee meeting in the town hall. The effect of this episodic set-up gives a sense of the totality of experience that cannot be encompassed by dramatic action and audience participation in it through identification. Thus, there is a distance created between the action and the spectators that allows for the possibility of an intellectual understanding of the dramatic situation. The sheer size of the cast—21 characters—adds to the fragmentary and mosaic nature of the play. All of these elements mark the play as Brechtian, what Brecht terms as the “alienation effect (A-effect)”: “a representation that alienates is one which allows us to recognize its subject, but at the same time make it seem unfamiliar.”⁹⁶

The fragmentary and mosaic nature of the play is further revealed by the multiplicity of

⁹⁶ Brecht, “Short Organum,” 192.

villagers' responses. Their varying responses prove there is no solution available to the famine *within* the community. Mark decides to emigrate, Malachy resists by force (killing policemen and shooting the relatively benevolent Justice of Peace), Liam collaborates acting as the Agent's enforcer, and Mother dies voluntarily; she asks John Connor, her husband and the village leader, "in this moment of freedom you will look after my right and your children's right, *as you promised*, lest they choose the time and have the victory" (*Famine*, 88). On top of this, John, who has been adamantly adhering to his principle of "what's right," beholds, helplessly, his community falling apart. Compared to Dada in *Whistle*, who manipulates his sons in a delusional kingdom built upon a distorted ideal of violence and success, John Connor is persistent in the most ordinary sense, struggling to maintain common sense in a nonsensical world. Whereas the ending of *Whistle* moves towards a new tableau expressive of the solidarity of the sons, excluding the father, John Connor is in a frenzied state at the end, completely isolated, and incapable of re-integrating into the community.

Responses vary and so do the collective memories of the famine: hence, the scenic structure and the Brechtian intervention. The moral sense of right is completely devoid of its moral weight because no action is available. As Mother puts it, "[n]o rights or wrongs or ráiméis talks, but bread, bread, bread. From where, but myself—Not him, not You—but always the slave, the slave of the slave, day after day, to keep us alive for another famine" (*Famine*, 87). *Whistle* is a "well-made" tragic play, with a single setting—the domestic interior—which concentrates attention on the tragic action developing around a single family, standing in for a wider society. Against that, *Famine* deliberately disrupts any stable sense of time and setting, opting for a dispersed and fragmented action to create a theatrical effect that does not allow tragic catharsis at the end.

In the beginning, the community manages to come together in a shared ritual of keening. The play starts outside John Connor's house where a wake is taking place. John's house provides a meeting place for other villagers. John even provides meals, intimating the grotesque asymmetry of his royal mantle and the paucity of his resources: "[w]e'll all have a share. No one ever went hungry from the house of a Connor. Sit, and don't offend us" (*Famine*, 41). However, as the play progresses, John is left with "the ruin of his house" (84). The Beckettian "nothing to be done" and sense of futility is

echoed throughout the play. Maeve wants to emigrate but is denied such a choice by her father. She tells Liam, “[i]f I went away I wouldn’t come back [...] I wouldn’t ... The waiting here. Waiting for what?” (45). The Shakespearean fool-like character Mickeleen who has deformities, prophesies early in the play: “[d]id ye think ’46 wouldn’t folly (*Follow.*) ’45? That bad doesn’t folly bad? That all is to be bad? That ye’ll all folly my style of thinking yet!” (19). In a village meeting, silence fills the talk:

DAN. You thought of something for us, Johnny?

JOHN. Well . . . The thing now is . . . I’m sure there’s lots we can do, if we all think.

Silence.

[...]

LIAM. Something useful to be doing, John.

JOHN. Yes.

Silence. (33-34)

The talk to fill the space only serves to underscore the total helplessness and emptiness of the villagers. The only thing “useful to be doing” that Mother suggests is making a coffin out of leftover boards to sell. Dan replies: “[y]is. They’ll be in demand” (42). The action again serves to underline the fact of death. In Scene Eight, Dan and John work on a coffin with a trap-bottom and discuss in detail which side they should be nailing so that they would not carry it on the corpse’s face. They put John’s son Donaill into the coffin to test, with the fact that a child is fit for a coffin emphasising the grimness of the whole situation. John’s house at this point “is almost bare of furniture and effects. A few coffins are stacked in a corner, one of them painted red” (70).

That nothing can be built is further realised towards the end. In Scene Ten, John has lost his house and comes home drunk, trying to build a “make-shift shelter”:

John: [...] Root out them doors! Root out them doors and we’ll make a shelter. Go on.

[...] I’ll throw up these doors and won’t we be secure against anything that’s sent. And

in a day or two I'll find better place where they can't shift us so easy. Sure, the Springtime is on us and look at all the holdings that'll be going. We'll be better off than ever. Cause we'll last it. (*He is finding it difficult to lift the door to make a roof for the shelter he has built; he chuckles to himself.*) Oh, bo-bo-bo-bo-bo! Maeve, come here and help me. (81)

The make-shift shelter represents John and the villagers' futile attempts to build anything. In the 2012 DruidMurphy production, the idea of a make-shift shelter was emphasised by the corrugated iron. Not only does the iron stand in the background functioning as the master space for *Whistle, Conversations* and *Famine*, but, as Garry Hynes explained, it is a material used in every shanty in the world. She pointed out that "we are still mentally in a place where nobody's been able to build anything."⁹⁷ The actor-as-John uses two pieces of the corrugated iron to set up a shelter that is just big enough to fit his wife's corpse.



[2012, DruidMurphy]

⁹⁷ Nicholas Grene, "An Interview with Garry Hynes," *Irish University Review* 45, no. 1 (2015): 121.

What is left is the sense of lingering “devastated grimness.” While John murders his wife and son, beside him is Dan whose wife has died. Even though they occupy the same stage and Dan’s monologue is interwoven with John’s situation, they do not engage with one another and Dan is completely detached from his surroundings. Dan is “sitting up in a bed of straw, laughing and rambling away to himself” in “a second make-shift shelter on the opposite side of the stage” (*Famine*, 84). Their personal tragedies show how the community can no longer stand together. Thus, the make-shift shelter marks the failure of place-making on multiple levels: the fictional and personal void is expanded to evoke social, spiritual and theatrical world of emptiness.

Another space that highlights such emptiness is the quarry. Malachy’s killing of the policemen takes place at a quarry. Malachy and Mickeleen converse while cooking a rabbit:

MALACHY (*quietly; looking into quarry*). Lime, Michael, the quick-lime: it burns them, diseases and all: the paupers, and the odd stray one they pick up dead in the fields.

[...]

MICKELEEN (*looking into quarry again*). I often heard tell of one being buried alive. How many would you say to fill it?

MALACHY *moves off, looking down into the glen*. (62)

The second policeman talks of a “fearful army of spectres” looking down into the quarry (64). He spots “a neat pile of stones on the ledge” when Malachy rushes out and pushes the policeman into the quarry. The quarry becomes a dark terrifying pit evoking and provoking death: it is an infinite void or black hole that consumes all living and dead.

The initial title for *Famine* was “Abode of Hela.” The epigraph of the early draft goes as follows: “Hel or Hela in Scandinavian mythology is queen of the dead. Her dwelling is dark clouds, her dish hunger, her knife starvation, her servants tardy-feet, her bed sickness, her bed-curtains

splendid misery.”⁹⁸ The village of Glanconor is a residence of the dead. It is, like the queen’s name, hell. The presence of death (absence) makes up the fictional and the stage space. When drafting *Famine*, Murphy had the image of ruins in mind. He began writing in prose form, and the description of the village focuses on the ruin:

The voice came from a mud hut, [...] the silhouette of which suggested a mould growing out of the earth rather than a dwelling place. Often “mounds” were squat on the earth around, rude tombs, listening impassively. Apart from the song, the only sign of life was suggested by the dull light that showed here and there under the dooms of the cabins. But the focal point of this scene was the ruin: two gagged [sic] gables, one of them supporting a chimney, sticking up into the night sky, a heap of rubble in the interval between them. The ruin seemed more awake than the surrounding huts, its gables, like two arms that had broken free from the earth, thrown towards heaven, calling for an explanation.⁹⁹

The village is scattered and torn down. The ruin “seemed more awake” than the huts and the relationship between life and death is reversed. The village is a space where the unknown and death prevail.¹⁰⁰

The premiere of *Famine* in 1968 took place in the Peacock Theatre, and the set designed by Brian Collins looks rather small to encompass all the people and props on stage: 16 actors and realistic patches of wood, turf, soil, a single bed, table and coffin are all crammed into one space, giving the effect of chaos but also claustrophobia.

⁹⁸ TCD MS11115/1/3/5.

⁹⁹ TCD MS11115/1/3/1.

¹⁰⁰ Murphy’s imaginative setting of *Famine* is a case study of how certain tropes of *Famine* recur and become re-appropriated by various forms of representations. Corporaal, Cusack and Janssen write that recurrent figures such as the “images of blackened fields and the stench of rot” suggest that “performance of memory often resides in the remembrance and reappropriation of previously used tropes” (*Recollecting Hunger*, 9).



[1968 Peacock Theatre, Dir. Tomás Mac Anna]

As opposed to this, the 1993 production directed by Garry Hynes, took a more minimalistic and symbolic approach. A stone wall in a ring-fort was used as the focal point and remained throughout the play. 14-year-old Justin Money from Sligo built the wall using dry-stone collected from the Wicklow mountains.¹⁰¹ Regarding the set, stage designer Frank Conway wrote in the programme note that stone walls

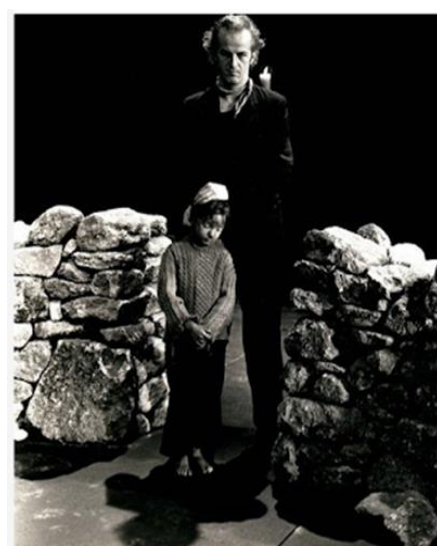
are lonely places, fragments of a powerful and mythical past, of a sense of a culture and community where ritual thrived and the sense of the spiritual was ever present. John Connor's kingdom. [...] it had been my world. They were my people and they are dead and their world has been eradicated. My wall, my stone circle is a homage to them, to the famine and its victims, and to famine victims everywhere.¹⁰²

Conway's set rebuilds the primordial kingdom as a homage to the people. John's "ordinary" and

¹⁰¹ Stephen Cullinane, "Putting Up Walls at Abbey," *Irish Press*, Oct 2, 1993, *Famine*, Oct 6, 1993 [Press Cuttings], ATDA at NUIG, 0504_PC_0001, p.2.

¹⁰² Frank Conway, "The Set," *Famine*, Oct 6, 1993 [Programme], ATDA at NUIG, 0504_MPG_01, p. 10.

“sacred strength”¹⁰³ is displayed in his obsession with the space he inhabits. He tells Mother, who has been accusing him of doing nothing: “*All that land was Connors’ once! And I’ll not go. Not for landlord, devil, or the Almighty himself! I was born here, and I’ll die here, and I’ll rot here! ... [...] Cause there’s ... Cause I’m right*” (*Famine*, 84). Mother understands John’s defiance, the hope that he “picked out of nowhere” (88). As Mickeleen explains, John is “a descendent of the Connors, kings and chieftains here in the days of yore [...] this village, Glanconor, called after the Connors” (15). The stage resuscitates the world lost in the famine. John’s voice represents the many evictees who refused to leave during the Famine. Murphy’s notes from Edwards and Williams’s *The Great Famine* reveal that people “would live on anything rather than go [...] evictees would sometimes build new cabins in common lands, bogs, on the mountains or sometimes on the boundary line of two estates, so that joint eviction by two landlords would be necessary to evict them again.”¹⁰⁴ The strong attachment to the place combined with the failure to maintain the place makes the drama even more devastating and heartrending. The circular wall allows for this unclaimed space to be temporarily inhabited by the people who have lost their homes. The wall brings the community together in a ritualistic manner, however fleeting it may turn out to be.



[1993, Abbey Theatre, Dir: Garry Hynes]

¹⁰³ Murphy, *Plays: 1*, xv-xvi.

¹⁰⁴ TCD MS11115/1/3/1.

At the same time, the stones form the crust of an empty shell. In the wake scene, the villagers are gathered around inside the walls, but in the middle, Mother holds the corpse of her daughter.¹⁰⁵ The image evokes an empty womb with death at its centre. Moreover, as the play progresses the distinction between inside and outside disappears, and the attempt to draw the borderline becomes futile. The space becomes de-familiarised, changing the atmosphere into one of uncanniness and abjection. Freud famously points out that the German word “unheimlich” for uncanniness comes from “heimlich” which means familiar, native, well-oriented, and belonging to the home.¹⁰⁶ He writes from a psychoanalytical point of view that:

unheimlich place, however, is the entrance to the former heim [home] of all human beings, to the place where everyone dwelt once upon a time and in the beginning. [...] whenever a man dreams of a place or a country and says to himself, still in the dream, “this place is familiar to me, I have been there before,” we may interpret the place as being his mother’s genitals or her body. In this case, too, the unheimlich is what was once heimlich, homelike, familiar; the prefix “un” is the token of repression.¹⁰⁷

The morbid anxiety and horror of uncanniness derive from the “heimlich” made strange. The stones delineating the home no longer provide the security and comfort of a home, pointing again to the terror and failure of home-making in the context of *Famine*.

While Murphy himself moved towards finding a theatrical language in *Famine*, the more recent the production, the more engaged the directors have been with the theatricality underlying the play. For instance, the 1993 production incorporated the sound of the drum, where one loud bang was heard at the end of each scene. In the 2012 Druid production, Garry Hynes decided to add a visceral

¹⁰⁵ Abbey Theatre, *Famine*, Oct 6, 1993 [Video]. ATDA at NUIG, 504_V_001.

¹⁰⁶ Sigmund Freud, “The Uncanny,” *Imago* 5 [1919], trans, Alix Strachey, *Sammlung* (Fünfte Folge, 1922), 2. <<https://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/freud1.pdf>>.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 15

image to the Relief Committee scene, where the actor-as-Donaill sat crouched, just below the table that the political figures were gathered around to discuss plans to emigrate the people. The boy acted as a reminder of the dire situation and the authorities' neglect of the poor child who represents innocent victims affected by the famine. Moreover, there were naked bodies crawling at the edge of the stage as this scene progressed, serving as another reminder for the terrible realities outside the committee room where decisions are made.

The Brechtian poetics are more evident in the early drafts of *Famine*. Murphy thought of including actual speeches, quotes and writings from political figures such as John O'Connell, Lord John Russell, James Fintan Lalor and Sir Charles Wood. In these drafts, political figures directly address the audience in a way that disrupts the flow of the play, not only cutting through the fictionality of the play's narrative but also ironically revealing the absurdity of their own discourses.¹⁰⁸ For example, at the beginning of Scene Two, when characters are watching the corn-carts, M.P. John O'Connell, son of the Liberator Daniel O'Connell, enters addressing the audience:

[...] even if the government do fail in their duty, I have that confidence in the Irish people, from their sublimity of character and exemplary fortitude, that I do believe even under the pressure of this calamity, they will still be true to those principles of peace and morality by which they have always been characterised. [...] we may rest assured that we are on the threshold of prosperity to them and happiness to our native land by the restoration of her native independence.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁸ In Scene Three, a young man from the Young Ireland Party rather abruptly visits Dan's house, giving a long speech about "time and places that demand force"; they are against O'Connell's peaceful resolutions of the Repeal Association." The Party representative says: "Opinion may operate against opinion, but force must be used against force. [...] The man that will listen to reason, let him be reasoned with; but it is the weaponed arm of the patriot that can alone avail against battalioned despotism." Before moving into Scene Four, Sir Charles Wood, Chancellor of the Exchequer, enters and addresses the audience: "rates must be collected. Arrest, remand, do anything you can; send horse, foot and dragoons, all the world will applaud you, and I should not be at all squeamish as to what I did, to the verge of the law." From a very different but no less political position, at the end of Scene Ten, the revolutionary figure, James Fintan Lalor enters and also addresses the audience: "A revolution is beginning which will leave Ireland without a people, unless it be met and conquered by a revolution which will leave Ireland without landlords." TCD MS11115/1/3/8.

¹⁰⁹ TCD MS11115/1/3/8.

John O'Connell represents the ideas and thoughts imbibed by John Connor, who insists that one must do "what's right" at all times (*Famine*, 22). John O'Connell famously remarked how proud he was to be "among a people who would rather die of hunger than defraud their landlords of the rent."¹¹⁰ Murphy seems to have wanted to convey the tragic terror that occurs when the platitudinous rhetoric of the politician is received and upheld by people like John Connor as moral principle. John's moral principle seems to reveal his inadequacy as a leader and to emphasise the hollowness of the rhetoric.

Murphy juxtaposes the actual horrific action with the political speeches. After the scene in which John kills his wife and his son, Prime Minister Lord John Russell enters, addressing the audience:

(As he speaks, and as it grows lighter behind him, Fr Horan and a man enter with a handcart. They remove the bodies of mother and Donail from the hut and wheel them off.) But other countries have been quite as badly off as Ireland is now asserted to be, which are present in the highest state of prosperity. To illustrate this, I will read a description of a country in which the following evils existed. 'The husbandman be thrust out of their own, or else either by covin or by fraud, or without oppression, they be put beside it; or by wrongs and injuries they be so wearied, that they be compelled to sell all. By one means, therefore, or by the other, either by hook or by crook, they must needs depart away, poor wretched souls – men, women, husbands, wives, fatherless children, widows, woeful mothers with their young babes, and the whole household'.¹¹¹

The stage directions are in contrast with the political narrative, making the irony starker. Murphy intended to create an alienation effect by incorporating the political discourses that surrounded the Famine, highlighting their inadequacy in relieving the crisis. Their words are out of touch with the reality and suffering ordinary people were faced with. The fictional village of Glanconor is a recreation

¹¹⁰ Michael Davitt, *The Fall of Feudalism in Ireland: or, the Story of the Land League Revolution* (London: Harper & Brothers, 1904), 47.

¹¹¹ TCD MS11115/1/3/8.

of the social reality at that time, and its situation is intensely grim; the political discourses appear not only unfitting, but absurd.

In the earliest drafts, when Murphy was still integrating political figures into the text, he focused particularly on Sir Charles Trevelyan. Drawing extensively from Trevelyan's *The Irish Crisis*, he gave Trevelyan the role of a narrator or lecturer between the scenes.¹¹² An embodiment of the political climate of his time, Trevelyan had the role of overseeing and administering relief during the famine. A demonised figure in Ireland, Trevelyan was notorious for taking a hard-line stance and withholding relief measures. In the selected quotes from *The Irish Crisis*, his matter-of-fact speech contrasts with the other characters experiencing the calamity. Murphy writes: "Trevelyan's lecture and the play progress as if they were independent of each other,"¹¹³ showing Trevelyan's lack of interest in and distance from people's experiences. Trevelyan discusses the famine much as a scientist would examine a phenomenon: the conclusion that can be drawn

by the result of these extensive experiments in the science, if it may be so called, is that two things ought to be carefully separated which are often confounded. Improvement is always a good thing, and relief is occasionally a necessary thing, but the mixture of the two is always bad. And when it is attempted on a large scale without proper means of keeping it in check, it is likely to affect in a very injurious manner the ordinary motives and processes by which the business of society is carried on.¹¹⁴

The more overt Brechtian form in the early drafts would have highlighted the striking discrepancy between the narrative of the authorities and the experience of the villagers. Nevertheless, Murphy cuts down on the historical and political drama and moves toward finding theatrical means to give adequate expression to the experience of the everyday and ordinary. Ireland's problem during the famine was often considered in political and theological terms, overshadowing other issues. Historians have

¹¹² TCD MS11115/1/3/3, MS11115/1/3/6.

¹¹³ TCD MS11115/1/3/6.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

debated the extent to which Britain’s administrative policies—driven both by the classical political economy with its “laissez-faire,” self-reliance and minimum intervention and the religious “providentialism”—led political figures to exacerbate the catastrophe. Therefore, Murphy’s decision to narrow the focus to the personal and social rather than the political and ideological by drawing on oral and folkloric memories, helps to bring forgotten realities and experiences to light.

Murphy extracted words for the traditional keen from the book *The Keen of the Saints of Ireland*,¹¹⁵ and for the Love Scene ballad of “Colleen Rua” from his research in the collections of the Irish Folklore Commission. One example where Murphy uses real accounts of the famine horror is found in the stories that the characters share with one another.

DAN. Well, I remember in ’17 – and the comical-est thing – I seen the youngsters and the hair falling out of their heads and then starting growing on their faces.

[...]

BRIAN. The worse I seen was a child –

DAN. In ’22 – In ’22 – In ’22! I counted eleven dead by the roadside and my own father one of them. Near the water, Clogher bridge, and the rats. I’m afeard of them since.

BRIAN. A child, an infant –

DAN. And some I seen, green from eating the grass, and yellow and black from fever and the divil-knows-what.

BRIAN. A child under a bush, eating its mother’s breast. And she dead and near naked.

(*Famine*, 13)

This dialogue is based on Roger McHugh’s “The Famine in Irish Oral Tradition,” in which McHugh recounts the story of his grandmother from Kenmare seeing a dead woman on the street: “[s]he died of famine fever – nobody would take the child, and in the evening the child was eating the Mother’s

¹¹⁵ Tom Murphy, “A Note by the Author,” *Famine*, Mar 21, 1968 [Programme], ATDA at NUIG, 0504_MPG_01.

breast.”¹¹⁶ Such accounts reveal the necessity to move away from attempting to understand the events of Famine and to convey the visceral horror associated with the cataclysm.

Instead of showing the horror with realism and verisimilitude, Murphy adopts the ethos and techniques of Artaud’s Theatre of Cruelty. Poulain identifies famine as the most significant event that shattered all forms of community and meaning, marking Ireland’s brutal entry into “modernity.”¹¹⁷ Poulain also incorporates Artaud’s conception of the theatre as the plague into her analysis. Artaud claims:

The plague takes dormant images, latent disorder and suddenly carries them to the point of the most extreme gestures. Theatre also takes gestures and develops them to the limit. Just like the plague, it reforges the links between what does and does not exist, between the virtual nature of the possible and the material nature of existence. [...] Like the plague, theatre is a crisis resolved either by death or cure. The plague is a superior disease because it is an absolute crisis after which there is nothing left except death or drastic purification. In the same way, theatre is a disease because it is a final balance that cannot be obtained without destruction.¹¹⁸

It is the famine’s shattering impact, creating a complete upheaval, physical, mental and moral, that Murphy’s theatre of cruelty conveys. It is at this point that Murphy’s discussion of tragedy as “representation of emotions,” “tableaux images” and “purging of lethargy, spiritual and physical” can be applied to Artaudian theatre. Murphy uses theatre’s unique features to explore the extreme limits of human nature. For Artaud, cruelty and life are synonymous:

I use the word cruelty in the sense of hungering after life, cosmic strictness, relentless

¹¹⁶ Roger McHugh, “The Famine in Irish Oral Tradition,” in *The Great Famine: Studies in Irish History 1845-52*, eds. R Dudley Edwards and T. Desmond Williams (Dublin: Lilliput, [1956] 1994), 419.

¹¹⁷ Poulain, *Homo Famelicus*, 61-68.

¹¹⁸ Artaud, *Theatre and Its Double*, 18-21.

necessity, in the Gnostic sense of a living vortex engulfing darkness, in the sense of the inescapably necessary pain without which life could not continue. [...] A play without this desire, this blind zest for life, capable of surpassing everything seen in every gesture or every act, in the transcendent aspect of the plot, would be useless and a failure as theatre.¹¹⁹

Artaud adds, “[e]ffort means cruelty, existence through effort is cruel.”¹²⁰ Jane Goodall interprets Artaud’s theatre of cruelty as a manifestation of “a new and transgressive form of consciousness” which “transforms suffering as occulted protest into an antagonistic force directed implacably against fate.”¹²¹ “If cruelty is the expression of a will that is inexorable,” Goodall continues, “theatre must become the site of reversal in the balance of power,” and “realize the power of this will as enactment.”¹²² The keening in the opening scene, Malachy’s murder, the death of John’s wife and son, combined with the minimal setting and lighting to present the “abode of helia,” and the deliberate erasure of clear borders, all foreground the elements associated with Artaud’s theatre of cruelty. In *Famine*, Murphy moves away from the Brechtian documentary intervention evident in the initial conception of the play and finds his own theatrical code that is somewhere between gesture and thought; language fails and there is nothing left but destruction.

Murphy’s juxtaposition of the Brechtian and Artaudian traditions led to the varying responses and reviews of the actual performance. Many were confused or unable to register the experience in the theatre. The 1993 production received critical reviews, as it was deemed “studiedly uncathartic.”¹²³ A reviewer wrote that the Relief Committee scene was “the largest and most ill-fitting [...] cloak of

¹¹⁹ Artaud, *Theatre and Its Double*, 73.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 74.

¹²¹ Jane Goodall, *Artaud and the Gnostic Drama* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994), 103.

¹²² Goodall, *Gnostic Drama*, 103. Goodall further explains that “[i]n Gnostic mythology, the vital force that manifests itself as a plague-like spread of dissolution and devouring is associated with cosmogenesis and the composition of all life forms in the world of matter. Calling this force ‘cruelty,’ Artaud defines it as both immanent and transcendent, physical and substantial, unconscious and deliberate. It is the devouring principle at work in physical and metaphysical planes of operation and correlative in micro- and macrocosmic events” (123).

¹²³ Paul Taylor, “Famine,” *Independent*, Oct 9, 1993, *Famine*, Oct 6, 1993 [Press Cuttings], ATDA at NUIG, 0504_PC_0001, p.15.

Brechtian alienation. None clings to the contours, and the play is left shivering and bereft above all of emotion.”¹²⁴ Regarding the Brechtian techniques, David Lawlor similarly commented that the play “leaves the audience feeling distant and apart from the human tragedy which is taking place; we are almost clinical observers whose heart-strings, though willing, are left unpulled. [...] the stop-start style of the scenes tends to knock the wind out of much of the emotional progress.”¹²⁵ At the other extreme, Patsy McGarry stated that: “[i]t is a long time since I have been moved to such appalled pity. [...]. The play is a sustained howl of compassionate rage at the absurd suffering inflicted on an innocent humanity. [...]. It does so in an episodic fashion, which initially threatens the dramatic pulse, but ends up assisting it.”¹²⁶

Murphy’s unusual synthesis between the Brechtian and Artaudian theatre has many similarities with Peter Brook’s 1965 production of *Marat/Sade*; although seemingly contradictory, Brecht and Artaud are complementary. The playwright Peter Weiss himself has said that he wanted to combine in his play the two apparently contradictory forces of Brecht and Artaud. He was trying to write “a thinking play to be performed in a feeling way.”¹²⁷ Brook explains “the immediate theatre” through the notion of representation as re-presentation:

a representation is the occasion when something is re-presented, when something from the past is shown again – something that once was, now is. For representation is not an imitation or description of a past event, a representation denies time. It abolishes that difference between yesterday and today. It takes yesterday’s action and makes it live again in every one

¹²⁴ “Abbey: Famine,” *Sunday Independent*, Oct 10, 1993, *Famine*, Oct 6, 1993 [Press Cuttings], ATDA at NUIG, 0504_PC_0001, p.19.

¹²⁵ David Lawlor, “Famine Play Fails to Stir Our Emotions,” *Evening Press*, Oct 7, 1993, *Famine*, Oct 6, 1993 [Press Cuttings], ATDA at NUIG, 0504_PC_0001, p.9.

¹²⁶ Patsy McGarry, “Powerful Play From Murphy,” *Irish Press*, Oct 7, 1993, *Famine*, Oct 6, 1993 [Press Cuttings], ATDA at NUIG, 0504_PC_0001, p.7. The mixed response is even more noticeable in the 1968 reviews. Compared to older Famine plays such as Gerard Healy’s *The Black Stranger*, it was deemed “less emotionally involving”; however, it was mostly a congratulatory occasion. Director Tomás Mac Anna, having worked in Germany, was heavily influenced by Brecht, and the Peacock Theatre’s avant-garde status at the time, meant that *Famine* was a welcome break-through in Dublin. See Grene’s *Playwright Adventurer*, 8-10.

¹²⁷ J. L. Styan, *Modern Drama in Theory and Practice Vol. 2: Symbolism, Surrealism and the Absurd* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1983), 113.

of its aspects – including its immediacy. In other words, a representation is what it claims to be – a making present.¹²⁸

Re-presenting the past in effect ties to the notion of trauma being re-lived, an experience of double trauma; even though their approaches differ in many ways, both Brecht and Artaud intend to “make present” the conflicts and tragedy that lie beneath the diseases of history. Theatre should create an impact, an upheaval in the intellect, sense and nerves in the here and now. Murphy attempts to create a Brechtian distance while simultaneously transmitting Artaudian physical suffering and exaltation to the audience that go beyond words. This recalls Murphy’s note that theatre is not a “hospital,” that catharsis involves a “purgation of lethargy.” The combination of Brechtian and Artaudian attitudes and techniques is, like the traumatic Famine, “an impossibility” that resists order, comprehension, and sense of achievement.

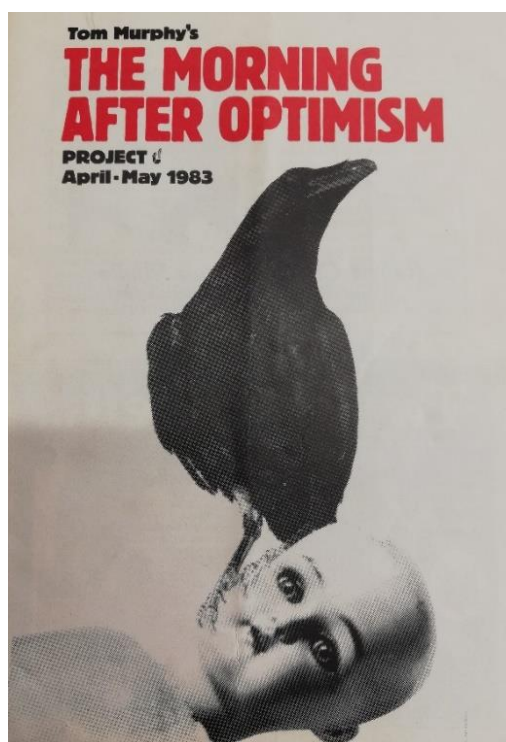
So far, Murphy has located these spaces of tragedy in specific contexts—the Irish diaspora in Britain, and the history of the Famine. Even in the most historic play, however, emotions and atmosphere remain central for Murphy. In another letter to Mac Anna, dated 18 January 1968, Murphy wrote: “Each scene in the play is an entity in its own right. There are developments and ‘finger-posts’ from scene to scene, but generally, it is atmosphere that binds the lot together. This atmosphere of waiting for death. And I think the creation of atmosphere is the most important thing in the play.”¹²⁹ In his allegorical tragedy, Murphy gives this atmosphere its fullest expression. He strips out the recognisable cultural and historical references, focusing instead on the core emotions of human existence, or the tragic sensibility and cruelty, restored and purged through theatrical expression.

Coda: Going Beyond Tragedy, *The Morning After Optimism* (1971)

¹²⁸ Brook, *The Empty Space*, 155.

¹²⁹ TCD MS11115/9/1/3/2/35.

In “Talking, Singing, Storytelling: Tom Murphy’s *After Tragedy*,” Nicholas Grene argues that Murphy exhibits, on the one hand, “an impatience with the representational which has led to a series of experiments with non-realistic forms. He, like Beckett, has sought images freed from the dependence on a mimetic counterpart in reality, to speak for basics, essentials in the human situation.” On the other hand, there “is an impulse equally strong in Murphy to tell it like it is, to expose truths and realities-particularly of the Irish situation.”¹³⁰ As the initial subtitle for the 1971 production—“Grief”—suggests, *Optimism* is a mourning for the loss of idealism and the suffering that comes with it. In the same letter to the director, Murphy emphasised the importance of this “mood” and “grief”: “the play started from a mood -- not from an idea I wished to propound or character I wished to explore -- and the mood, I think, was grief, or something to do with grief”; “James is in mourning for himself, for his life, the broken promise.”¹³¹ These impulses and moods have led to the birth of the allegorical mourning tragedy (a modern *Trauerspiel*).



[Programme, Project Arts Centre, 1983, TCD MS11115/7/2]

¹³⁰ Nicholas Grene, “Talking, Singing, Storytelling: Tom Murphy’s *After Tragedy*,” *Colby Quarterly* 27, no. 4 (1991): 211.

¹³¹ TCD MS11115/9/1/1/3/11-12.

Set in a fairy-tale forest, *Optimism* moves away from the social spaces to a metaphysical and absurdist space. As seen in these poster images for the 1983 production directed by Michael Scott, *Optimism* works in the realm of the surreal and symbolic: the crow is ominous, made all the bleaker when combined with the artificiality of the child-doll, representing innocence. It is an extreme example of the attempt to “speak for basics, essentials in the human situation.” Murphy gives the fullest expression to the mood, emotion and mindscape of the world built upon ideals, myths and illusion in *Optimism*. The bursting of the balloon—a metaphorical shattering of false hopes—is a literalised dramatisation of Schopenhauer’s and Nietzsche’s ideas of the tragic experience. *Optimism* is an aberration, an experiment which turned out to be a dead end in terms of Murphy’s dramaturgical development. It is an important venture, however, which encapsulates Murphy’s tragic vision, one that led Murphy to turn towards the actual everyday spaces of the pub and the ordinary dialogues in those spaces. The problem of language and form, which Murphy experiments laboriously in *Optimism* by creating this dystopian fairy-tale, seems to resolve itself when he engages with the liminal spaces of the everyday.

In the Irish context, the idealistic vision in *Optimism* harks back to the Gaelic Golden Age—the years after independence, up to the 1960s—with which, as Fintan O’Toole claims, “the Irish public world had been imbued” until “the abandonment of the dream of a Gaelic rustic paradise in favour of the more tangible dreams of the consumer world.”¹³² The “Morning After” of the title looks both backwards and forwards, evoking a profound hangover as well as the dawning of a new day, which sits well with the economic, political and social changes that Ireland underwent. Alexandra Poulain finds in the characters’ fable of initiation a “political critique,” pointing to the “state of drunken, delusive contentment—the illusion of a perfect world, a fairy-tale world, distilled by parents, and teachers, priests and politicians—‘the authorities’—as a means to keep the people happy and quiet.”¹³³ What is striking in *Optimism*, however, is the universality of the themes, the poetic language, and theatricality stripped down to its tragic essentials.

¹³² O’Toole, *Politics of Magic*, 96.

¹³³ Poulain, “Fable and Vision: *The Morning After Optimism* and *The Sanctuary Lamp*,” in *Talking About Tom Murphy*, ed. Nicholas Grene (Dublin: Carysfort, 2002), 43.

The fairy tale is an allegory, an internal battle between the idealised illusory self and the “real” self. In a note on the early drafts of *Optimism*, Murphy described the play as:

1. A man battling with his romantic nature – the romantic foolishness of his youth – trying to kill them.
2. A mourn for his idealisation not entirely dead.
3. His battle with good and evil.¹³⁴

In another description, Murphy wrote: “[a] man wants to stop living but his dreaming won’t let him. He throws a bomb at his dreams.”¹³⁵ The forest functions as the battleground for these different selves. The forest, akin to a playground where characters can switch roles, disguise and experiment, reveals the malleability and performativity of the different selves within a person. No matter how much James tries to be poetic like Edmund (*Optimism*, 52), it ends up being “Just another American ad now!” (53). Murphy’s linguistic inventiveness shows the contrast between the “street” language that James and Rosie speak and the artificial fairytale lyricism that Edmund and Anastasia employ. In addition to the language, the costume that Edmund wears—“a Robin Hood hat with a feather, an antique military tunic, jeans, high boots, a sword and a water-flask at his side” (20)—mark out the constructedness and distinctiveness of Edmund as opposed to James. The comic undertones and self-reflexive theatricality make the play meta-tragic; full of self-conscious awareness and mockery of its own tragedy.

Murphy’s forest, a special nod to the Forest of Arden in Shakespeare’s *As You Like It*, is a space apart from the city, marked by its charm and lyrical otherness. Working from these tropes of pastoral literature, Murphy’s forest becomes a place where there is no clock, where human logic is overturned, dreams are tested, and possibilities realised. Murphy’s forest in *Optimism* is anti-pastoral or, as the “after” in the title suggests, post-pastoral. In his note regarding the forest set, Murphy

¹³⁴ TCD MS11115/1/6/9.

¹³⁵ TCD MS11115/1/6/8.

explained: “When I direct that ‘the trees stretch up so high that we do not see the branches’ I want it to be felt that when James and Rosie walk on they are seen or felt to be victims. So whether flats, drapes or a simple wall, the set should dwarf actors.”¹³⁶ James and Rosie are the true everyday victims of the made-up world, and they are transformed into tragic hero and heroine by fighting against the ghost and myth of the past, the forces that have shaped their fate. The forest is a space of struggle and conflict between mutually incompatible worldviews. Gerard Stembridge, the director of the 2001 revival of Murphy’s *Optimism in the Peacock*, constructed a dome-shaped climbing frame. Brian Lavery described the forest set:

a geodesic dome of rope netting arches over the small stage, allowing for occasional acrobatics when James clammers up a tree, or when characters eavesdrop from above. A massive spiral covers the floor, dividing it into intertwining gold and black strands. It separates the characters from each other, so they circle each other – mere feet away, but worlds apart.¹³⁷

The two spirals, delineating separate but intertwining playing spaces, represent the clash between the fictional and real spaces that each couple inhabits. Strembridge explained: “I wanted the acting to move in different ways, to be above and below [...] I wanted the possibility of having people swinging out of trees, up and down and from above. The possibility is there in the text, waiting to be drawn out.”¹³⁸

¹³⁶ TCD MS11115/9/1/1/3/11-12.

¹³⁷ Brian Lavery, “*The Morning After Optimism* by Tom Murphy,” *Irish Independent*, Oct 9, 2001, *Optimism*, Oct 3, 2001 [Press Cuttings], ATDA at NUIG, 0677_PC_0001, p. 53.

¹³⁸ Ian Kilroy, “Making Music of the Spoken Word,” *Irish Times*, Sep 25, 2001, *Optimism*, Oct 3, 2001 [Press Cuttings], ATDA at NUIG, 0677_PC_0001, p. 10



[2001 Production NUIG Video Recording]

The playfulness and theatrical dexterity of the forest space comes from Murphy's own sense of restlessness. Murphy wanted to use Berlioz's *Symphonie Fantastique*, which serves to accentuate the dream-like and illusory quality of the play. The music is used extensively to convey the overall mood and set the nightmarish tone. Murphy saw the playscript as a musical score, explaining in an interview: "[i]f seeking to recreate a mood, obviously the rhythm of what is being said has to complement that, but the problem is that punctuation is so sparse—a semi-colon (for instance) is ridiculous in a play—as against musical notation."¹³⁹ His "nightmares" in writing revolve around two basic rhythms: "[o]ne is very slow and very circular. It is terrifying. The other is jagged, very fast, but not as terrifying. It is just a fact."¹⁴⁰ Murphy works with the primary rhythm and spatial energies drawn from his tragic sensibility and Dionysian vision.

The conflict leads to inevitable violence and death, the grand catastrophe of a tragedy. In the end, reality, which is permeated with the tragic terror of living, wins out over the illusions, as James

¹³⁹ Patsy McGarry, "A Holy Theatre of Hope," *Irish Times*, Sep 15, 2001, *Optimism*, Oct 3, 2001 [Press Cuttings], ATDA at NUIG, 0677_PC_0001, p. 8.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

and Rosie kill their alter-egos—Edmund and Anastasia—in a climactic swordfight. The ending operates as a cathartic release of the conflicts that have been building up through the multiple frustrations that James and Rosie experience. As Grene notes, the double murder at the end is the most radical change in the genetic development of the play.¹⁴¹ Instead of an anticlimactic coda where Edmund and Anastasia ride off happily into the sunset, as in the previous drafts, the murder here is a “theatrically satisfying conclusion”: “the ideal superego figures have been brutally dispatched and the antiphonal responses of the pair suggest a new reciprocity of feeling.”¹⁴² After the murder both James and Rosie exit crying, although they “might be laughing in a minute” (*Optimism*, 96), suggesting ambiguity and mixed emotions about this dramatic outcome.

In a review of the 1977 production, Peter Martin commented that “[t]he sword-fight at the finale is the castration of the central organ; it is the terrible terror of living with our true selves.”¹⁴³ It is uncertain where and how James and Rosie will proceed from here. They have, however, cleansed themselves of the hopes and dreams that have tormented them, enabling them to “mourn after.”

Christopher Griffin argues that the stageworld or mindscape of *Optimism* exists between those of Beckett’s and O’Casey’s plays.¹⁴⁴ This verdict comes despite Murphy’s avowed dislike of Beckett’s plays.¹⁴⁵ James and Rosie are a Beckettian couple, caught in “the poxy habit of time” (*Optimism*, 30) and yet inseparable in their mutual need for companionship in a Godot-less world.¹⁴⁶ Murphy capitalises on the idea of playing an elaborate game of life, the sense that life is made up of endless game-playing. In one of the very early drafts, Rosie’s name was initially “Nell (the whore, James’s wife),”¹⁴⁷ an unmistakable Beckettian echo. Even in the subsequent draft, the play starts with Rosie and James having arrived on the verge of a dead-end:

¹⁴¹ Grene, *Playwright Adventurer*, 116.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 117.

¹⁴³ Peter Martin, “‘Morning After’ Not Same as Before,” *Irish Press*, Jun 8, 1977, *Optimism*, Jun 7, 1977 [Press Cuttings], ATDA at NUIG, 2695_PC_0001, p. 6.

¹⁴⁴ Christopher Griffin, “‘Audacity of Despair’: *The Morning After Optimism*,” *Irish University Review* 17, no. 1 (1987): 63.

¹⁴⁵ Murphy confessed: “Beckett is my most unfavourite playwright and to the best of my knowledge I’m not influenced by him at all [...] I can’t stand his plays” (*Ibid.*, 68).

¹⁴⁶ Griffin interprets the word “optimism” as referring to Beckett’s *Proust/Three Dialogues*, where characters continue to stroll “in the haze of our smug will to live, of our pernicious and incurable optimism” (*Ibid.* 66).

¹⁴⁷ TCD MS11115/1/6/9.

R: (defiantly) Are you sure you have nothing?

J: Have you anything? And soon, you will be better off with less.

R: Your logic –

J: Oh God, my nerves! ... Now what are we going to do?

R: Suicide?

J: I often thought of it, but I never got a moment noble enough for it.

[...]

J: Attempted suicide is like getting your hair cut, hoping all will be different after a trim.

R: Well, what can we do?

J: Nothing Nothing. That's it. Nothing. We have nothing now. We agree at that.

Don't we? ... So, hump them all. We refuse to play the game any longer.¹⁴⁸

Even though the detail of attempted suicide and the emphasis on hopelessness did not make it into the final version, James and Rosie are weary of living and they consider informing Edmund and Anastasia of the dreariness of everyday life:

JAMES [...] the way we are, the way we live. [...] (*Vehemently.*) Think! What else can we tell them? But there are hundreds of horrible things! ... [...] millions of rotten things! [...]

ROSIE And how men get tired of one bed!

JAMES And women too – more often –

ROSIE I agree, I agree. And how hard it is to find friends –

JAMES That aren't enemies.

[...]

¹⁴⁸ TCD MS11115/1/6/8.

ROSIE And about getting old!

JAMES Yes! Get them with the obvious!

[...]

JAMES The surprise of the obvious.

[...]

JAMES And how they'll run out of conversation, hmm?

ROSIE That's a good one – (*Optimism, 71-2*)

James and Rosie have been straining under the “obvious” and “horrible” realities of life. Their attempts to reignite their past romance ends in vain:

ROSIE The thrill of a kiss!

They look at each other. They kiss nervously, shyly. Immediately there is a collapse.

(Forcing a laugh.) That was a laugh, James ... We could try again. My fault. I didn't understand ... Try again. I'll take one of my slimming pills.

JAMES Don't bother.

[...]

ROSIE We could try again –

JAMES I just want to stop!

ROSIE We could try again –

JAMES I was only trying for something, for anything.

ROSIE For both of us.

*Pause. (68)*¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁹ There is a parallel in this scene to Nagg and Nell from *Endgame*. “NAGG: Kiss me. / NELL: We can't. / NAGG: Try. / [*Their heads strain towards each other, fail to meet, fall apart again.*] / NELL: Why this farce, day after day? / NAGG: I've lost me tooth” (*The Complete Dramatic Works of Samuel Beckett* [London: Faber, 2006], 99). It is an echo of the debris of old age described by Jaques in *As You Like It*. Famously remarking that “All the world's a stage,” and “all the men and women merely players” (Act 2 Scene 7, Lines 139-140), he describes the seven stages of human life: infancy, childhood, and adulthood, experiencing love and honor. The final stage, however, is “second childishness and mere oblivion, / Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans

Eventually, all humans succumb to the debility of old age. By the end, “Rosie is sitting on the bed, a painted-up whore,” and she is “silent, dejected” (86). Murphy’s forest is Beckettian, then, presenting a world where dreaming and waiting are synonymous. The forest is a dream-space made abstract and absurd.

In the second-last manuscript draft, closely resembling the final published version, Murphy describes the state of the space exposed at the end of Scene Nine:

Rosie, no longer looking young and alluring, is sitting on the bed, a painted up whore. Both of them silent, dejected. The floral decorations are now exposed as arrangements of withered twigs: the lanterns have disappeared: the debris of the feast looks revolting. The Garden of Eden is a patch of ugly, barren ground.¹⁵⁰

The biblical paradise has become a waste land. Murphy subverts the pastoral construct of nature as expressing simplicity, innocence, joy and peace. The idyllic and unspoiled Arcadia is non-existent, false and erroneous.

Like Adam and Eve and the sinning human race, James and Rosie must live out the consequences of the fall from innocence to guilt. In the post-Edenic world, innocence is dangerous. James tells Edmund:

And let’s have done with the innocent shit. See, I’m a believer in honest, open ignorance, kid, not innocence. Don’t you confuse the two like the hypocrites like to do. They manured our honest open ignorance on moral crap and fairy snow, then sent us out as innocents to chew the ears off any man, wife, stranger, friend, and kick their hearts to death in the name of Santa Claus or Jesus Christ to boot. (*Optimism*, 53-4)

everything” (Lines 144-166).

¹⁵⁰ TCD MS11115/1/6/1.

James suggests “[i]f we can't get to their ridiculous level, they must be brought to ours” (77). James and Rosie are determined to confront their utopian selves bred from the world as “they”—God, church, authorities, establishment and family—like it, in order to truly see the world as they—James and Rosie—live it.

In *Optimism*, Murphy takes on the pastoral space of the forest only to ruthlessly deconstruct it. He imaginatively kills his own town. In an interview with John Waters regarding *Optimism*, Murphy mentioned his reasons for leaving Tuam:

I ran away from it in the sense that one has to flee the nest of one's home, in the way that, when I was young, whoever explained the universality of the fairytale – that the witch is one's mother and the dragon is one's father and you have to slay them both to win the heroine, who becomes your wife or your sweetheart. And I think in the same way, that one has to slay one's own town by getting away from it, distancing oneself from it so that one can become objective about it.¹⁵¹

There is an acute awareness here of space as confining the imaginative growth of the writer. If plays such as *On the Outside*, *On the Inside* and *Crucial Week* reveal the repression and frustration of that confinement, the tragic plays concerned in this chapter enact a necessary violence, that of “slaying one's town.” In this chapter, there is both the further expansion of space—from the local setting of the early plays to the diaspora in Britain, the mass-scale horror of *Famine*, and the abstracted fairy-tale—and a destruction of space. Murphy attempts to give shape to the inexpressible—the trauma of history and displacement, and the terror of everyday living. If the conventional form of a naturalistic tragedy in the domestic space was barely sustainable in *Whistle*, it is completely shattered in *Famine*, while *Optimism* metamorphoses into a strange dream-mindscape.

Albert Bermel outlines three outstanding features of Artaud's theatre of cruelty. First is the

¹⁵¹ Griffin, ““Audacity of Despair,”” 65.

“rigour or necessity or implacability of life.” Second,

this theatre draws on the individual dreams and the collective dreams, or the myths, of all men. It will furnish each spectator with ‘the truthful precipitates of dreams, in which his taste for crime, his erotic obsessions, his savagery, his chimeras, his utopian sense of life and matter, even his cannibalism, pour out, on a level not counterfeit and illusory, but interior’. Third, because it works on the nerves and senses, rather than on the intellect, and because it impinges on anxieties common to all men, the Theatre of Cruelty is aimed at a general public, not the usual run of theatregoers only.¹⁵²

Optimism brings to light the collective anxiety of modern man and woman in its extreme and theatrical form. The play exposes a bleak and fragile human vulnerability. The forest is one big expensive pretty balloon which can burst at the tiniest pinprick. The implacability of life drives the characters to enact the necessary violence in the end.

Steiner proposes three theories on the existence of tragedy: that it is “dead” in the age of scientific rationality; that it has altered in style remained intact all these years; finally, that it will be reborn.¹⁵³ The three plays examined in this chapter are formally disparate, yet the sense of confinement and the need to break free from physical, mental, and aesthetic constraints can be deeply felt in all of them. Murphy develops his own tragic vision, where Brecht’s “cry in silence” and “blind necessity” are synonyms with Artaudian “cruelty” and “life,” Dionysian force, and (Nietzschean) “will,” and “pathos.” In a broad sense, tragedy has always been alive, taking refuge in different guises and vocabularies. Murphy’s tragic theatre experiments with the immediate experience of space, in the form of spatial killing and spatial disintegration. The failure of language and place-making manifests as a volcanic eruption of violence in its extremity. After being swept away from this rupture, one is left with the ashes and remnants, to which Murphy turns. The discrepancy between different spaces

¹⁵² Albert Bermel, *Artaud’s Theatre of Cruelty* (London: Bloomsbury, 2001), 15.

¹⁵³ Steiner, *Death of Tragedy*, 350-354.

does not create tragicomic effects; neither is their clash mutually destructive as in the tragedies; the liminal spaces Murphy explores become a thoroughly intermingled space.

Chapter III. Liminal Spaces: Pubs, Clubs and the Underworld

In Murphy's collected diary entries and miscellaneous notes around 1979, a typescript outline of what might have become a play entitled "Hatch 22" tells the story of two teenage girls, Teresa and Dympna, living in an "Inner City Working Class Environment." Murphy sketched out their Joycean meanderings around the city, which end at a pub:

Scene 13: Pub

Essentially a mood, monologues of different lives cutting across each other, stories of losers, children, prison...Teresa throughout tries to get attention. They ignore, condone, try to appease her – anything but understanding. Pub erupts in fight. Teresa monologue of isolation, physical changes. By the end she lifts off her feet. Others notice something amiss, fight ceases. Teresa clasps her arms runs to Ladies confides in Dympna 'I think I can fly' The re [sic] elation and attempts to restrain and finally fly out the window very slapstick. Finally Dympna tells pub people. Reaction unexpected: stylized oohs and aahs, Teresa struts, uses her new power, frightens, flaunts etc. Finally attempts to lift off. Fails. Asks if they wouldn't just give her a push. The push staged like a birth scene. Teresa flies, is swirled off.

Scene 14: Clothesline women. A whoosh. What was that.. ah little Teresa (they look up very dead pan attitude) wave...We never had them opportunities in our young days, talk as they leave.....End.¹

While "Hatch 22" was never made into a play, the pub is an essential feature in Murphy's works. The

¹ TCD MS11115/5/1/5.

pub provides an apt setting for people to congregate, to tell their stories in a semi-private or semi-public setting. Teresa's aspirations and her expressive impulse are (metaphorically) realised in her Icarus-like attempt to fly. She impresses her community with her "new power" and her initial failure to fly is transformed into a success with the help of the pub people. They acknowledge Teresa's power and desire, giving her the "push," which resembles a birth scene. People ignore and fight one another in the pub, but the pub is equally a space of possibility and potential. Set in between the private and public, the pub is a quintessential liminal space, which constitutes the crux of Murphy's drama.

Murphy's liminal spaces exist in the aftermath of the tragic explosion, when the eruption has subsided and disillusionment prevails. The limited success of the dystopian fairy tale in *Optimism* led him to look instead to the actual everyday spaces of the pub, to move on from *Whistle and Famine* to an exploration of liminal spaces. Murphy's difficulties in finding a language for his fairy-tale characters in *Optimism* were resolved when he switched to the realistic dialogue of *Conversations*, which nonetheless allows for the performativity of the self. Liminal spaces offer the opportunity for the private to be performed in public, with this communal engagement providing a secular form of salvation for the characters, actors-as-characters, and the audience.

The idea of liminality is developed most notably by Victor Turner, drawing on Arnold Van Gennep's three phases of the rite of passage: *separation*, *transition*, and *incorporation*.² The first phase, which will be discussed further in the next chapter, involves demarcating the sacred space. The second phase of liminality, on which Turner primarily focuses, is a phase that defies the dichotomy between sacred and profane, order and disorder. He argues that "[l]iminality may involve a complex sequence of episodes in sacred space-time, and may also include subversive and ludic (or playful) events."³ In his introductory essay to the *Irish University Review* special issue on Murphy, Christopher Murray describes Murphy's theatre as "rough and holy," terminologies used by Peter Brook in *The Empty Space*.⁴ According to Brook, there is still a common "need for a true contact with

² Victor Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play* (New York: PAJ, 1982), 24.

³ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁴ Christopher Murray, "Introduction: The Rough and Holy Theatre of Thomas Murphy," *Irish University Review* 17, no. 1 (1987): 9-17.

a sacred invisibility through the theatre.”⁵ For Murphy’s characters, this desire manifests itself in a misguided obsession with the space—a tragic flaw of the modern every(wo)man—whether it be the club in *The Blue Macushla* (1980), the pub in *Conversations on a Homecoming* (1985) or the gentry house of de Burca in *The House* (2000). These spaces seem to encompass their ideals of fulfilment, belonging and hope. Murphy’s liminal space, with its transformative power, dramatises and fulfils the characters’ poetic yearnings through the medium of theatre, which redraws the boundary of the possibilities that underlie the everyday. It is only the confrontation with one’s tragic condition that paradoxically leads to a renewed sense of hope.

“Icon of the Everyday”: The Public-House as Liminal Space

Homi K. Bhabha has written that liminality “confound[s] our definitions of tradition and modernity; realign[s] the customary boundaries between the private and the public, high and low; and challenge[s] normative expectations of development and progress.”⁶ The Irish pub can be interpreted as the quintessential Irish liminal space. It is a dominant part of Irish social culture and has ambivalent characteristics that cannot be easily defined according to one fixed criterion. The very idea of a “public house” is in a sense an oxymoron. It combines contrary terms: public, defined as communal and open, and house, often concerning private, individual and exclusive habitation. Taking sociologist Ray Oldenburg’s idea, Perry Share describes the Irish pub as the “third place” that is “*not* work and *not* home”; such places are “typified by their open, democratic nature, informality and ubiquity.”⁷ Diane Watson discusses the pub as the “site of the everyday”—even as an “icon of the everyday,” where both

⁵ Brook, *The Empty Space*, 54.

⁶ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 2.

⁷ Perry Share, “A Genuine ‘Third Place’? Towards an Understanding of the Pub in Contemporary Irish Society,” *Institute of Technology, Sligo*, Cavan: SAI Annual Conference (2003): 3. “Third places” include coffee shops, hair salons, internet cafes, public libraries, amusement arcades and other similar but culturally specific locations. Other attributes of these places include neutral ground, regulars, conversation, accessibility, playfulness, and homeliness. Sociologists stress the importance of these places as being centres of social capital and community life. The pub can be seen as the “epicenter” and “true microcosm of social life, reflecting the socio-economic ethos of its host community” (Share 3-4).

work and leisure come together in the same social space.⁸ The pub is one of the most frequently visited leisure venues, where the majority of people may be “regulars” of their “locals.” According to figures provided by the Drinks Industry Group of Ireland (DIGI), there were 7,140 pubs in Ireland in 2017, 1,477 fewer than in 2005.⁹ What this 17.1 per cent drop indicates is another issue, but the sheer number of pubs and their significance in the local community is undeniable. Like a local church, the local pub functions as a pillar of the community in many parts of Ireland. While brewing practices go back to 4,000 BC, the iconic pub as we know it today was invented much later, in the seventeenth century. Drink shops had proliferated in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries in the wake of English settlement near port towns, and later as the result of industrialisation, where the canals and railway construction gave people access to a wider network of traffic and exchange. The origin of the pub is difficult to trace because its role was constantly evolving, but scholars note that the term emerged in the seventeenth century, when the distinctions between various drinking places became blurred. The inn, which developed after the arrival of the Normans in the twelfth century, was a place providing service for travellers, while the tavern, also from the Normans, was a place for wine merchants. Alehouses, also known as public alehouses, sold beer; however, the distinction disappeared as the inn began selling ales and both the tavern and alehouses offered lodging and various drinks. All these establishments were described in legal parlance and daily conversation as “public-house,” which was abbreviated into “pub” during the Victorian period.¹⁰ In the eighteenth century, homemade whiskey, or poteen, was very common in rural areas, and the Irish word “shebeen” was applied to a place where alcohol, particularly whiskey, was sold illegally.¹¹ The Irish pub originated from these different strands of drinking establishments and came to represent the presiding social culture of

⁸ Diane Watson, “‘Home From Home’: The Pub and Everyday Life,” in *Understanding Everyday Life*, eds. Tony Bennett and Diane Watson (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 183-228.

⁹ Caroline, O’Doherty, “Number of Pubs Down 1,500 in 12 years,” *Irish Examiner*, Aug 22, 2018.

¹⁰ Cian Molloy, *The Story of the Irish Pub: An Intoxicating History of the Licensed Trade in Ireland* (Dublin: Liffey, 2002), 27; Elizabeth Malcolm, “The Rise of the Pub: A Study in the Disciplining of Popular Culture,” in *Irish Popular Culture 1650-1850*, eds. James S. Donnelly and Kerby A. Miller (Dublin: Irish Academic, 1998), 55.

¹¹ Molloy, *Irish Pub*, 35; Malcolm, “The Rise,” 66. See also K. H. Connell, “Illicit Distillation,” in *Irish Peasant Society: Four Historical Essays* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1968), 1-50. Connell charts the history of illicit distillation in Ireland, explaining how the duty on Irish spirits put pressure on impoverished peasants in the eighteenth century, leading them to produce cheap drinks by illicit distillation to evade taxation.

Ireland.¹²

In the age of global capitalism, the pub is at the centre of Irish tourism and trade. It is associated with a friendly and fun atmosphere but has equally been regarded as a stereotypical label of Irish national identity. In his work on Irish-themed bars, Mark McGovern argues that the pub is an example of cultural commodification and consumption of an imagined ethnic identity drawn from a pool of pre-existent signs and symbols.¹³ The Irish Pub Company, cooperating with the Guinness Irish Pub Concept, designs and manufactures “authentic Irish Pubs and Bars globally.”¹⁴ It lists eight different styles—Modern Irish/Gastro, Gastro, Brewery, Shop, Country, Celtic, English and Victorian—to choose from, allowing potential CEOs to replicate them anywhere for business purposes. It is no longer a “traditional” pub, then, but a replication of it. This trend reveals how the pub has undergone significant changes in the present. The absurdity of stereotypes made consumable for tourists is evident in *The Blue Macushla* where the pub/nightclub sells green Guinness on Saint Patrick’s Day, an Irish-American invention of Irishness.

Historically, rural Irish pubs were often converted houses that provided lodging, alcohol, and entertainment. Elizabeth Malcolm explains that unlike English pubs, Irish pubs were not purpose-built and their fittings were strictly functional: guests rooms were non-existent and overnight customers would sleep in front of the kitchen fire. These pubs were named after the present or past publican, highlighting the fact that one individual ran the house. Entering the pub, therefore, entailed visiting someone’s home.¹⁵ The pub’s homeliness, which derives from its unique origin as a converted house,

¹² Sociologists Hilary Tovey and Perry Share outline the importance of pubs and drinking in the context of Irish society. As well as being targets for social control and regulation, pubs provide various types of freedom and support, functioning as the pillars of community. Hilary Tovey and Perry Share, *A Sociology of Ireland*, 2nd ed. (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 2003), 350-83. For British related research, see Tony Watson and Diane Watson, “Narratives in Society, Organizations and Individual Identities: An Ethnographic Study of Pubs, Identity Work and the Pursuit of ‘The Real,’” *Human Relations* 65, no. 6 (2012): 683-704; Paul Jennings’s *The Local: A History of the English Pub* (Stroud: Tempus, 2007); Peter Clark, *The English Alehouse: A Social History 1200-1850* (London: Longman, 1983); for modern European context (Russian, German), see Beat Kümin and B Ann Tlusty (eds) *The World of the Tavern: Public Houses in Early Modern Europe* (London: Routledge, 2002). For Australian context, see John Fiske, Bob Hodge and Graeme Turner, *Myths of Oz: Reading Australian Popular Culture* (London: Routledge, [1987] 2016). While differing in context, the pub in all modern industrial societies—English-speaking countries in particular—is strongly associated with oral culture and operates as a “home away from home” or as an extension of the workplace.

¹³ Mark McGovern, “The ‘Craic’ Market: Irish Theme Bars and the Commodification of Irishness in Contemporary Britain,” *Irish Journal of Sociology* 11, no. 2 (2002): 79.

¹⁴ “Irish Pub Company,” *Irish Pub Company*, 2019. <<https://irishpubcompany.com/>>.

¹⁵ Malcolm, “The Rise,” 59-71.

is a trait evident in *Conversations on a Homecoming* and *The House*. The pub as a mutation of the home reflects a different gender dynamic. Victoria Rosner's *Modernism and the Architecture of Private Life* (2005) and Nicholas Grene's *Home on the Stage* (2014) examine the home space as the familiar interior, where the central drama often revolved around the women of the house. These women challenged the idea that a home was their designated space by refusing to conform to the gender norms.

The pub is also, however, where the dominant position of men is reinforced in relation to women. In *Patriarchy and Pub Culture* (1986), feminist critic Valery Hey characterises the pub as a "female substitute" because it offers "plenitude, availability, warmth, food, and companionship, a servicing of male needs."¹⁶ Pubs were regarded as a second home for many men, and before the 1960s, they were exclusively for male clientele. As Molloy writes, some pubs had small rooms called "snugs" or upscale "lounges" for female customers, but the majority of premises did not allow women to consume alcohol.¹⁷ Moreover, the pub was a place of prostitution, as various laws forbidding "whoredom" reveal. Murphy's plays reflect the gender dynamics in the pub environment: women who have managed to escape the traditional confines of home and kitchen are discriminated against or are objects of desire in the male-dominated pub.¹⁸

The pub's meaning and function extends beyond the private to the public, as it is equally a political space. The pub was a venue for groups to gather for various political purposes and was often tied to the government as much as it resisted its control. During elections, pubs often served as party headquarters to "entice voters with promises of free drink," and "trade unions, young men's societies, and fenian circles all held meetings" in the pub.¹⁹ For the authorities, then, the pubs were viewed as

¹⁶ Valerie Hey, *Patriarchy and Pub Culture* (London: Tavistock, 1986), 30.

¹⁷ Molloy, *Irish Pub*, 80.

¹⁸ In *Ordinary Lives: Three Generations of Irish Middle Class Experience 1907, 1932, 1963* (Dublin: Gill & MacMillan, 1991), Tony Farnar criticises the deluded notion of classlessness in Irish society in the late '50s observed in remarks by Judge Barra O'Brien and author Ulick O'Connor (168). Farnar goes on to explain that perhaps the only exception was the pub: "[t]he only place in Ireland where this classlessness actually operated was the pub, that men-only haven from the rigours of life, where neither women nor priests penetrated to bring reminders of diurnal or eternal reality, and where consequently all sorts of comfortable myths could flourish. In Dublin there were some 640 pubs, each comfortably supported by an average of less than four hundred male drinkers. It was estimated that some 15 per cent of income was spent on drink" (168).

¹⁹ Malcolm, "The Rise," 51.

a potential centres of disaffection because conspirators would use them as their headquarters.²⁰ Pubs became targets of official censure, and numerous laws and acts prohibited or at times promoted alcoholism by regulating or liberating the alcohol trade. This tension between the pub as the site of political resistance versus authoritative control is what led to the pub's successful survival and transition from a traditional to commercial popular culture. The pub was a political battlefield; in *Macushla*, the pub/nightclub becomes the home base for a nationalist splinter-group, providing for subversive political activities.

The pub, which has a social function, is strongly tied to traditional ideas of community and nationalism, particularly in the Irish context.²¹ In the introduction to *The Invention of Tradition* (1983), Eric Hobsbawm argues that tradition is invented 1) to establish or symbolise social cohesion or membership of groups, real or artificial communities, or 2) to legitimise institutions, status or relations of authority, or 3) for the purpose of socialisation: to inculcate certain beliefs, value systems and conventions of behaviour.²² The pub can be situated in the "tradition" of Irish culture as a space that reinforced certain nationalistic ideals and communal values. In the Irish cultural context, however, "tradition" is not easily taken to be an established reality. Seamus Deane and Luke Gibbons argue that Irish history is a particularly apt example of the process of myth-making.²³ "The myth of tradition," embodied in the idea of the west of Ireland, is often considered backward-looking, hindering progress and modernisation, but Gibbons suggests that they are not opposites. "Irish culture" writes Gibbons, "derive[s] from its confounding of such neat polarities."²⁴ Furthermore, "[t]here is no genuine

²⁰ Malcolm, "The Rise," 61-62.

²¹ The pub differs from a conventional home in that it accommodates the public. Murphy's plays foreground the performative aspect of the pub through the communal acts of storytelling, singing, and re-enacting memories. Jürgen Habermas notes that in seventeenth-century France, *le public* meant *lecteurs*, *spectateurs* and *auditeurs*, outlining how the public grew out of early institutions such as coffee houses, salons and *Tischgesellschaften* (table societies), which were centers of literary and political criticisms. He also explains that the nature of the bourgeois public sphere was the "private coming together as a public." Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry Into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger and Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge: Polity Press, [1962] 2014), 31-51. The Irish pub can be seen as one of these institutions fostering "the public." The fact that "the public" implied spectators and listeners, an audience, emphasises the performativity of the pub and the other places that Habermas mentions.

²² Eric Hobsbawm, "Introduction: Inventing Traditions," in *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1983), 9.

²³ Seamus Deane, *Heroic Styles: The Tradition of an Idea* (Derry: Field Day Theatre Company, 1984); Luke Gibbons, *Transformations in Irish Culture* (Cork: Cork UP, 1996).

²⁴ Gibbons, *Transformations*, 3.

recrudescence of traditional values: rather ‘traditions’ are manipulated and selected from the past in order to establish new hierarchies in the present.”²⁵ The pub as a liminal space confounds dichotomies of tradition/modernity and private/public, as well as the rigidities of national identity.

Even though Hobsbawm’s idea of the *invention* of tradition is invaluable in examining the cultural constructions of national identity, his analysis overlooks the vernacular and the everyday. In *National Identity, Popular Culture and Everyday Life* (2002), Tim Edensor criticises Hobsbawm’s focus on “large-scale spectaculars and easily identifiable traditions,” which “ignores a host of other ‘traditions’ which are grounded in everyday life; in leisure pursuits, work practices, families and communities.”²⁶ This “top-down view of culture” “wholly ignore[s] popular and vernacular cultural forms and practices. There is little sense of contestation, alternative constructions and cultural dynamism.”²⁷ Edensor suggests Michael Billig’s concept of “banal nationalism” as an alternative to the reductive understanding of national identity and culture. In *Banal Nationalism* (1995), Billig explores the routine and mundane reproduction of national identity as against the historical scholarship which has overemphasised extreme and overt displays of nationalism such as war. Identity is continually reproduced, transgressed and negotiated in the everyday realm. The pub exemplifies one of the ways in which “national landscape ideologies and popular sites of assembly and activity can be merged.”²⁸ The pub can be easily tied to a narrative of nationalism, but one that serves as a site of competition and contestation of identities in people’s habitual and banal everyday lives. The pubs in Murphy’s plays not only represent aspects of everyday living, but also expose the performativity and theatricality deeply embedded in the fabric of the everyday in the Irish context.²⁹

²⁵ Gibbons, *Transformations*, 91.

²⁶ Tim Edensor, *National Identity, Popular Culture and Everyday Life* (Oxford: Berg, 2002), 6.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 11.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 49.

²⁹ See Kieran Keohane and Carmen Kuhling, *Collision Culture: Transformations in Everyday Life in Ireland* (Dublin: Liffey, 2004). In the Irish context, Kieran Keohane and Carmen Kuhling adapt Bauman’s metaphor of liquescence—“liquid modernity”—in describing the Irish experience of accelerated modernity and rapid social change. Keohane and Kuhling investigate Ireland’s road traffic accidents, suicides, celebrities, gift-giving and consumer culture to highlight the multifarious and non-linear collusion of time/space in the lived experience of ordinary people. Defined by sociologist Adrian Peace as “collectively produced performance,” the word “craic” refers to having fun at a pub, where people’s spontaneous performances and conversations would create much liveliness. See Bill Barich, *A Pint of Plain: Tradition, Change and the Fate of the Irish Pub* (London: Bloomsbury, 2009).

Nightclubs and Urban Nightlife Spaces

While the pub is at the epicentre of everyday social space in Ireland, the inflow of global capital and process of modernisation have brought about various entertainment venues competing in the leisure market. In a 2013 report on Ireland's nightclub industry, Anthony Friel traces the origin of the nightclub to the 1935 Dance Hall Act. He writes:

The nightclub industry emerged in Ireland in 1935 when the government introduced the Public Dance Hall Act in order to outlaw 'dance houses' or 'crossroad dances'. Anyone holding a 'crossroad dance' after this point was brought to court and fined. The clergy started to build parochial halls and the Government collected 25 per cent of the ticket tax. The nightclub was born.³⁰

The definition of nightclubs has been ambiguous, as there is no clear set of legislation and legal terms to guide it. Nigel Tynan points out that "the legal reality is that there are no nightclubs in Ireland. The reason is this, existing licensing legislation does not recognise the term nightclub. Rather nightclubs as we know them are licensed under the Public Dance Halls Act of 1935 – an antiquated Act that has little resonance in 2009 society."³¹ The confusion around the definition of the pub and club has led to the Irish Club Owners Association (ICOA) demanding the Government and policy makers should better demarcate night-time entertainment venues and issue fair laws that ensure clubs operate successfully within the competitive market.³² According to Mintel, a market research group, the nightclubs in Ireland "have come somewhat under siege since the Intoxicating Liquor Act 2000 was passed. The Act allows pubs to stay open later, giving the pub visitor the choice of staying in the bar at the expense of the club owners."³³ Lap dancing clubs operated under the Theatre Licensing Law as

³⁰ Anthony Friel, "A Reflection of a Sad Night-Time Economy," *Hospitality Ireland* 86 (2013): 80.

³¹ Nigel Tynan, "Nightclubs Seek to Exit Legal Limbo," *Licensing World* 53, no. 12 (2009): 11.

³² *Pubs and Clubs: Irish Series* (London: Mintel International Group, 2002), 20.

³³ *Ibid.*, 19.

they were considered to provide theatre entertainment and were allowed later opening hours.³⁴ Under the Intoxicating Liquor Act 2008, the Theatre Licensing Law was repealed and a Special Exemption Order for nightclubs was given.³⁵ Shane Butler and other researchers explore how the “super pub” format developed from the different licensing legislations and policies. Super pubs are “vast drinking emporia in urban areas,” which have the capacity to hold hundreds and thousands of customers, often with several bars and/or dance arenas.³⁶ In 2005, the Minister of Justice expressed public concerns over out-of-control binge drinking and violence caused by these super pubs.³⁷ The distinction between pubs and clubs has become blurry, as many pubs now tend to be like nightclubs, offering drinks, small dance floor areas, lighting, DJs and live music. As observed in several studies, the nature of the club is ambivalent, reflecting the changing times and increased movement of capital.

Mintel reports that “[t]he culture of clubs is generally dependent on the trends and fashions at any given period, whether it is disco in the 1970s, New Romantics in the 1980s or House music in the 1990s.”³⁸ One prominent club in the 1970s was Sloopy’s which operated as a restaurant, wine bar and live music venue; disco and electric music frequently featured, and the venue held “Miss Sloopy” beauty contests.³⁹ Michael Ryan and his associates, who ran Sloopy’s, also ran Pebbles, a city restaurant, and were involved in other property developments. An *Irish Times* article from that era reports F. K. Ltd.’s decision to expand on their business, whereby a hotel in Stillorgan was being reopened in the hands of a Mr Ryan.⁴⁰ It is clear how in the 1970s, in which Murphy’s *Macushla* is set, the owners of big companies could manage multiple entertainment venues and properties.

The night-time economy and the underworld have their own system of logic and rules, defying the norms and laws of society at large. In *Life After Dark: A History of British Nightclubs and Music Venues* (2015), Dave Haslam states:

³⁴ *Pubs and Clubs*, 19.

³⁵ Friel, “A Reflection,” 81.

³⁶ Shane Butler et al., *Alcohol, Power and Public Health: A Comparative Study of Alcohol Policy* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 86.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Pubs and Clubs*, 19.

³⁹ “Sloopy’s Night Club – Fleet St., Dublin, 1970s,” *Brand New Retro*, Mar 5, 2012. <<https://brandnewretro.ie/2012/03/05/sloopys-night-club-dublin-1970s/>>.

⁴⁰ “New Lease of Life for South County Hotel,” *Irish Times*, May 21, 1975, *ProQuest Historical Newspapers*, p. 20.

life after dark is underdocumented and often hidden, and occasionally it's on the edge of the law or in defiance of it: a tale of dark corners, gangland protection rackets, errant doormen, moral panics, ecstasy deaths. Actresses doing cocaine, cross-dressers, bare-necked girls getting off with sailors in Liverpool music saloons, we'll meet them all. [...] people for centuries have made or found their special nightlife spaces.⁴¹

A place of licensed transgression on the edge of the underworld, the nightclub is radically different from the more ordinary public/private interaction of the pub. The shadiness of the night-time economy allows for both corruption within and liberation from legal and moral strictures. In *Too Late for Logic*, Christopher descends into “the Abbey,” a Gothic building that has been converted into a nightclub, to find his suicidal brother Michael. The play opens with “J’ai Perdu Mon Eurydice” sung by Maria Callas, evoking the myth of Orpheus’s visit to Hades in order to bring his wife Eurydice back from the dead. Christopher is described as “a man entering a trap – hell: the red light – but can do nothing about it” (*Logic*, 17). The comparison of the club to hell represents the symbolic and concrete changes that these venues have undergone; Monica comments, “[w]ell, if banks and building societies can turn churches into – marketplaces? – might we not in dueness convert an abbey into a hotel-cum-place-of-relaxation, keeping as many of the old features as possible of course and, I can tell you, I can tell you, I am more than happy to sleep in the abbot’s cell down there” (19). From an abbey to a secular club, these spatial transformations signify a (meta)physical descent, a juncture at which Turner’s concept of liminality takes shape in Murphy’s drama. The characters embark on their metaphysical and literal “journeys into the night.” Although *Logic* will not be discussed in this chapter, since the pub/club is not as central there as in the other three plays—and because Christopher is not as fixated on the space as the other characters are—the play portrays the vibrant night-scene and changing landscape of Dublin, a place most radically and rapidly modernised, encapsulating the anomalies and cultural clashes people experienced as a consequence.

⁴¹ Dave Haslam, *Life After Dark: A History of British Nightclubs and Music Venues* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2015), 3-4.

The context of the club should be regarded as a distinctively urban phenomenon. In *Consciousness and the Urban Experience* (1985), David Harvey describes the image of the city as a “place of mystery, the site of the unexpected, full of agitations and ferments,” as opposed to “home” which is a space of familiarity, dullness and stasis.⁴² Theorists of modernity regard the longing for home as a regressive desire. Nevertheless, as Doreen Massey, Michel de Certeau and Rita Felski would argue, home is also an active practicing of place, shaped by broader social currents, attitudes and desires. It is a site of intergenerational conflicts, class distinctions and gender struggles. While the club in *Macushla* can be interpreted as a distinctively exotic and other—a non-everyday—space, for the people inhabiting the underworld, the pub/club is their home, a declaration of and struggle for the “self.” This is evident in their longing and in their attempt to appropriate the space to a home-place. The urban and complex underworld is equally composed of habit, repetition and familiarity. According to Felski, home is “any often visited place that is the object of cathexis, that in its very familiarity becomes a symbolic extension and confirmation of the self. [...] Such familiar location fulfils both affective and pragmatic needs.”⁴³ This echoes Tuan’s idea that space becomes place through memories, meaning, familiarity: “intimate places are places of nurture where our fundamental needs are heeded and cared for without fuss. Even the vigorous adult has fleeting moments of longing for the kind of cosiness he knew in childhood.”⁴⁴ It is from this broader and more nuanced definition of “home” that this chapter seeks to address the idea of liminal and everyday spaces.

In *Macushla*, *Conversations*, and *House*, all the characters are in search of (or cannot let go of) the ideals of home. The plays will be examined not in the order in which they were written and performed, but instead in the order of their chronological setting: *House* is set in 1950s rural Ireland, *Conversations* in early 1970s rural Ireland and *Macushla* is set in late 1970s Dublin. By exploring the plays in reverse chronological order, the chapter will demonstrate the socio-cultural changes at play as well as the performative possibilities and limits related to audience reception. Murphy refashions the pub and club into a liminal space firmly rooted in the everyday; binary divisions and classifications

⁴² David Harvey, *Consciousness and the Urban Experience* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985), 250.

⁴³ Rita Felski, “The Invention of Everyday Life,” in *Doing Time: Feminist Theory and Postmodern Culture* (New York: New York UP, [1999] 2000), 88.

⁴⁴ Yi Fun Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1977), 137.

are challenged, transcended and liquified, revealing a confused and lost sense of “Irishness.” At the same time, in their performative and theatrical interplay, the spaces are equally presented as a place of possibility and communion.

The House (2000): Home for Emigrants

Described by the *Irish Times* as “the most compelling indictment of emigration ever committed to the stage,”⁴⁵ *The House* focuses on the character of Christy Cavanagh, one of the many emigrant workers who come home to Ireland for the summer. Christy’s poor family background has led him to develop a bond with the well-to-do de Burca family. Christy’s mother used to work in their large house as a housekeeper and since her death when Christy was seven, he has considered the de Burca family as his ideal or foster home. The play starts with Christy’s return and visit to the widowed Mrs de Burca, who is a TB convalescent. He discovers that the house is up for auction, and desperately struggles to save it. The play alternates between Christy’s idealised de Burca house and the liminal space of the pub where the returned emigrants socialise.

In a typescript draft of the play written in prose form, Murphy goes into great detail about Christy’s psychological state regarding the de Burcas’s (referred to in this draft as Cavanaghs’s) house: “Christy was infected with the appeal of the Cavanaghs and their house. It was his one real link with childhood where fantasy was so important. It was asylum from the brutality of his domestic reality.”⁴⁶ He even compares his own house, where his brothers live, to that of the de Burcas:

He stood in the middle of the kitchen adjusting himself to the cavernous darkness into which he had plunged. The windows of that house were small and coated with years of grime. The walls and floors of that house were coated in grime. It was filthy.

⁴⁵ David Nowlan, “The Fine House that Tom Built,” *Irish Times*, April 14, 2000, *House*, April 12, 2000 [Press Cuttings], ATDA at NUIG, 0432_PC_0001, p. 21.

⁴⁶ TCD MS11115/1/24/6b.

[...] When he woke Christy shivered with disgust at the imagined lice and disease that lurked everywhere; in the walls, the floor, the furniture, the air. He was a man most certainly used to less than pristine conditions, but his brothers lived in the most uninhibited self-deprecating squalor. [...] The house was stifling, its modest size diminished both by the darkness and a state of mind.⁴⁷

The de Burcas's house is the complete opposite of what his house represents: "The contrast of this room to Christy's house need hardly be stated. Apart from its size it was bright. French doors opened onto the back lawn, an ample entrance for the sun. A large mahogany sideboard stood to attention, dressed with a modest selection of silver heirlooms."⁴⁸ The de Burcas's house is defined by security, childhood, fantasy, light, grandeur and warmth, whereas Christy's own house is associated with brutality, reality, filth, danger and darkness.

Christy becomes unsettled by his crumbling dream and ideal of home. He has started to notice cracks and blemishes in his private haven:

A section of the wall down from the gate pillar with the sign had collapsed on to the side of the road; the part of the drive visible to him showed pot-holes. He did not remember noticing these details last year. The 'for sale' sign overhead, betraying a family secret that should have remained private. [...] Most confusing. Strangely saddening. That family had always lived there [...] Now the place was available to any Tom, Dick or Harry who had the money to buy it.⁴⁹

Christy's feelings of confusion and melancholy derive from his obsessive impulse to keep his fantasy intact. The house was his secret possession. The changes that he now must face – the property being open to the public for sale, the family moving on and away from their old residence – betray his

⁴⁷ TCD MS11115/1/24/6b.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

childish ego and sense of self.

In adapting the play from an attempted feature film script, Murphy had to remove many of the cinematic features.⁵⁰ Many of the flashbacks and scenes featuring different locations of the town were cut. While the “Little Boy” character does not feature in the final version, it is evident that Murphy was struggling to retain the character as a theatrical and metaphorical device. In the drafts produced between June 1997 and July 1998, Christy’s childhood self—or a ghost in the form of “Little Boy” roams around the de Burcas’s, appearing intermittently whenever Christy interacts with their family at their house. In the handwritten “rough-rough” first draft, Murphy incorporated flashbacks in the opening scene, where the boy represents Christy’s past:

[Marie] leaves with her present, unopened, (It’s a silk handkerchief.)

~~Past and present are about to mingle. Merged~~

Little boy – I want to be this family please

Voices of the three children – ~~and the past~~ – fading. And the present returning with the sound of another car, this time arriving. [...]

Little Boy walks off, determined not to cry, though ~~not a successful one perhaps~~ he’s upset. A look back before he disappears.

And Christy has disappeared too.⁵¹

The boy not only signifies Christy’s childhood, but he also conveys Christy’s unresolved feelings. The boy is a separate character as he sometimes appears independent of Christy’s presence. Just after a heated debate between the de Burca women on whether the daughters were consulted enough in the decision to sell the house, “[t]he lights have been fading during the above. And Little Boy, with his

⁵⁰ Grene, *Playwright Adventurer*, 99-100.

⁵¹ TCD MS11115/1/24/1.

fixation of this family, walks through the scene (set change.) And disappears.”⁵² In the film version, the Little Boy never appears together with Christy. The boy is clearly Christy’s past memory; however, for the play, Murphy envisaged a separate stage figure to operate in the same realm as Christy.

The Little Boy represents Christy’s childish fixation and obsession, which eventually leads to the death of the youngest daughter Susanne, who tries to stop his plan to buy the house and mocks his naïve dream. Christy works as a pimp in London (a fact he is ashamed of), and it is implied that she has worked as a prostitute there herself. She makes sexual advances on him and Christy, offended and angry, hits her, which causes her to fall into the river. In the manuscript drafts, the accident is intensely realised in a separate scene.⁵³ In the published version, however, the story is revealed only through Christy’s confession to Mrs de Burca. Christy’s state of confusion and division is further explored in the drafts that incorporated the Little Boy. On the day that Susanne is buried, people come to pay their respects to the de Burca family:

Two figures – CHRISTY and BOY – side by side in the shadows, watching the house (as from the grounds outside). There is a car approaching and CHRISTY retreats from view, out of the headlights. BOY continues where he is... [...]

scene is dreamlike, nightmarish – as it might be to CHRISTY’s eyes: movement is slow to a point of stylisation: conversationally muted and sibilant.) [...]

Now that it has passed, CHRISTY emerges from the darkness. BOY’s wide-eyed concern expresses what CHRISTY is thinking: Isn’t CHRISTY going to go into the house to pay his respects? Does he dare to? The sound of another car and CHRISTY retreats again.

[...]

MOTHER I’d like to go to bed now.

⁵² TCD MS11115/1/24/2.

⁵³ TCD MS11115/1/24/1-11.

~~Outside, BOY watches in tears; Christy, beside him, grimly dispassionate.~~ ⁵⁴

The Boy figure acts as Christy's alter-ego. The contrast between the Boy who is in tears and Christy the dispassionate grown-up demonstrates Christy's complex and split inner/outer, young/old personality. The split correlates with the discrepancy between the house as material and the home as emotional.

Alexandra Poulain argues that “the lexes of myth and finance clash ominously” in the play: “[b]y clinging to the material house of the de Burcas Christy refuses to let go of his childish illusions and deprives himself of the possibility of inventing his own ‘heaven on earth.’”⁵⁵ “Heaven on earth” is the way Christy describes the de Burcas's place (*House*, 285). Using Tuan's and Bachelard's ideas of dwelling and place, Csilla Bertha claims that Christy's attachment to the house is an ontological question. Christy chose Mrs de Burca's place as the “cradling house,” and “The nostalgic desire to go back to childhood innocence and happiness—which, by its nature, remains always unattainable—becomes mixed with the longing for something that never was real, and therefore, all the more desirable.”⁵⁶ The house can never provide the security and protection that Christy imagines and so desires, and his obsession with this impossibility restrains him from building a genuine and lived space of home. It is worth noting that Murphy found correlations between Christy and Heathcliff. In one of Murphy's notes regarding the play, he writes that Heathcliff is another “eternal child” who is “driven by ... implacable infantile demand,” and dies in “unappeasable longing.”⁵⁷

Added to the cradle imagery, Christy is portrayed as the potential inheritor or successor of the deceased Mr de Burca's dream. When Susanne starts an argument with Mrs de Burca on the decision to sell the house, Mrs de Burca's angry outburst suggests her own struggle in trying to keep her dream of the house-as-home:

⁵⁴ TCD MS11115/1/24/5.

⁵⁵ Poulain, “‘My Heart Untravelled,’” 192. See also Poulain, *Homo famelicus*, 211-221.

⁵⁶ Csilla Bertha, “The House Image in Three Contemporary Irish Plays,” *New Hibernia Review* 8, no. 2 (2004): 80.

⁵⁷ TCD MS11115/2/25/8.

MOTHER: The strain, worry, effort it has been, to stop everything from falling down! To carry on! To keep it all standing! . . . Since your father was *taken* from me! [...] Life disappearing – How much can one take?! . . . And though we are selling, this house is not ‘a place’, and I will not have it referred to as such around your father’s table! It was his dream! And mine! . . . It was our home, once: Now it’s not . . . I’m sorry! (*House*, 235)

Unlike Christy who thinks “this place will never change. Absolutely!” (190), Mrs de Burca is acutely aware that “the past is the past” (218). When Christy tries to convince her not to sell the property, she replies half-jokingly: “Christy? No man about the place. Now, isn’t it a pity that *Marie* and I are not good enough for you?” (218). Her reproachful remark reveals that the hope of keeping the house-as-home could have been possible if Christy took on the role of Mr de Burca as the man of the place. The impossibility of identifying the material house with a spiritual home is further accentuated at the end of the play: Christy has purchased the house at auction but the series of events—the death of Susanne and Mrs de Burca, and Marie’s departure—have left him alone and empty.

In contrast to the idyllic and nostalgic representation of the house, the pub is more realistically presented in the play. In the programme note to the play, John McGahern described the return of the emigrants as follows: “[t]he men who did come home in summer flashed their money in the bars, showed their brown pay packets swollen with overtime, and boasted of the favours they enjoyed in their new freedom, which was, in reality, a kind of prison.”⁵⁸ The bars became platforms to share their stories and adventures abroad, to be acknowledged and welcomed for their heroic return. As McGahern points out, however, the reality the emigrants faced was “[a] kind of prison.” The men in *The House* all feel displaced and repressed both at home and abroad. Underlying their cheerful banter, singing, intellectual talk, and cynicism, is the anxiety and fear of rootlessness. Jimmy is “a local who has not gone home from work. [...] In drink he’s a know-all. His attitude to the returned emigrants is supercilious [...] and envious (because of his own situation and the rolls of money they flash)” (*House*, 194). Despite Peter who has “a simple soul” (194) declaring: “I love my country! Here,

⁵⁸ John McGahern, “The Fifties,” *House*, April 12, 2000 [Programme], ATDA at NUIG, 0432_MPG_01, p. 4.

mate! This land! And I do dream about it and all” (197), Jimmy dismisses his friends: “So where’s your anchor, where d’you belong? Lads, ye belong nowhere, ye belong to nobody” (204).

The locals and emigrants are in contrast with one another, creating a tension between them. In the film script, Murphy describes the characters in the following words:

By contrast with the “locals” the returned emigrants stand out: their suits, their comparative affluence (which will be squandered over the next few weeks), their bastard accents (English, Scottish, American). And really, there isn’t much for them to do but drink. They create an undefined tension in the town until they disappear again. During the day the Square is the meeting place, at night, it is outside the cinema.⁵⁹

The cinematic treatment dispersed this “undefined tension” around the town, as the emigrants go on a pub crawl; however, in the play, this tension manifests itself in the charged space of one pub. The men’s frustration and sense of deprivation is expressed in their passive-aggressive provocations and heated debates. When the situation escalates, violence erupts: “JIMMY on his last – ‘Jesu Christu!’ – moving to go out to the Gents, has staggered and a heavy drunken hand on GOLDFISH to steady himself. Big violence potential: for a moment it looks as if GOLDFISH is going to head-butt or hit JIMMY, but he contains himself” (*House*, 203). In another scene, “it’s very sudden and very violent (though not very loud): CHRISTY has JIMMY by the face, has him swept back against the wall – a stool is knocked over? – and is banging the back of JIMMY’s head against the wall” (225). The pub is not only a platform to share stories, but also a place of conflict and violence.

The imprisonment at home is mostly felt in the stifling morality of the Church. In Scene Five, the “church bell for Mass” penetrates Bunty’s bar where the men gather illegally. Bunty quotes ironically the prayers the priest reads out for the emigrants:

BUNTY (*quoting*): ‘Guide all our emigrants down the right path abroad, stop them from

⁵⁹ TCD MS11115/2/25/4.

ever straying, teach them abstinence and forbearance’ – did ye hear that? ‘Keep them in mind of the spiritual inheritance they took with them and the one true Church.’ [...] ‘And keep them in mind of the land of their birth so that they may be fit one day to return to the bosom of thy heavenly mansions yeh, amen.’ (*House*, 219)

Bunty points out the futility of these prayers, given that the “emigrants” are hanging out in the pub outside the licensing hours. Goldfish expresses his annoyance: “Holy Joes: they hate us. But with cunning. We is varmint, man, outcasts, white trash. (*Sips*.) And I hate them” (220). The problem with the stifling Church morality lies in its hypocrisy. Bunty the pub owner remarks, “I’m dependent on the goodwill and permission of Church and State for my living” (222) and is aware that if he broke the licensing law by serving drinks early to his friends, the Church would be “blackballing” him (221). Murphy took notes from Tony Farmar’s *Ordinary Lives*, one section of which discusses how attending mass is good business: “Business people (1950s): ‘If you aren’t a good Catholic here,’ said one, ‘you’d be blackballed by the hierarchy and you’d lose your shirt. There’s nothing like attending mass with your wife and kids, making sure to be seen of course, to help your business.’”⁶⁰ Even though the mass occurs offstage, people in the pub (and the pub itself) are thoroughly influenced by the forces of the Church.

As the men buy rounds of drinks for one another, conversing and voicing their opinions, the pub talk, and movement gain a language of their own. Just before Peter delivers a heartfelt monologue, the men “drink, ritualistically” (*House*, 224). Peter then starts to narrate his story of standing astray in John P. Hogan’s archway:

[...] I wakes up this morning. Was it early? Was and all, mate, was and all. And I’m lying there like I’m drowning. Like it happens (at) times, the other side, but does you expect it at home – ay? But my eyes is so open, like you’d see in a man doesn’t want to cry. [...] Up I gets, puts on the togs. [...] And I’m stood in John P. Hogan’s archway. Not much

⁶⁰ TCD MS11115/2/25/8.

stirring. Dog across, asleep in O’Grady’s doorway like. Nice bit of a setter in him. And I starts the walking. [...] Back to John P.’s archway. [...] Up I goes, in and all, to the church like, and I says my own few prayers. And that’s me kitted out for the week. Back to the Square. John P.’s archway. Stood there. Dog across, beginning to scratch the neck, stretch the back legs like. And I starts the walking *again* – Ay? [...] Back to – (*Thumbs it: John P. Hogan’s archway.*) A good one – Ay? [...]. (224)

Peter’s ontological displacement is strikingly captured in his spatial movement, his restlessness and repetitive return to the archway. The mass bell, which functioned as a reminder of the authoritarian Church, gains a different personal meaning for Peter. Goldfish later asks Peter what his “own few prayers” were, to which Peter answers, “[s]ome of God’s grace like . . . So that I’d understand” (228). Goldfish continues:

GOLDFISH: Understand? Understand what?

PETER: I don’t know like.

GOLDFISH *continues to look at him, his sincerity.*

JIMMY (*to no one*): Jesus Christ! (*Reaction to the experience he has had.*)

GOLDFISH (*to himself*): Jesus Christ. (228)

Comparable to a sacred moment in church, the story and experience shared in the ritualistic environment of the pub allows the men to bond. At the same time, the profanely repeated “Jesus Christ”—an antiphonal response of the liturgy—ironically emphasises the separateness of the men. Still shocked, Jimmy is reacting to Christy’s violent head-banging. On the other hand, Goldfish, who has rather enjoyed the violence, is sympathising with Peter’s desolate despair. Later, Peter “(*rises wearily, talking to himself*) Oh Christ...Sweet Christ...grant me the grace, to find a small hut, in a lonesome place...and make it my abode. *He goes out, staggering*” (251).⁶¹ The ordinary pub offers

⁶¹ Murphy used Frank O’Connor’s translation of an old monastic prayer attributed to St Machán of Offaly. See TCD MS 11115/1/24/6a and Grene, *Playwright Adventurer*, 224. Christy’s imagination of the de Burcas as

secular bonding, ritual and meaning to the ordinary pub-goers, when the Church could not.

Murphy employs ordinary pub language to capture the conflict, nuances and emotion between (and within) people. The characters mirroring and echoing one another and their use of repetition emphasises both the consensual and conflictual dynamic of their interaction, brought out in one of the drafts:

TARPEY What did you say? (*Coming to GOLDFISH*) I know who you are!

GOLDFISH *Fuck You!*

TARPEY What did you say?

PETER Ay?

KERRIGAN Dick, Dick, let it pass! Let ~~us~~ it pass... (*Ad libs, variations*) INSERT

GOLDFISH *Fuck You!*

TARPEY What did you say?!

PETER Ay?

JIMMY Ary, Goldfish, let it go and there'll be no more about it! (*Ad libs*) INSERT⁶²

Tarpey is a policeman and his companion, Kerrigan is a solicitor. Murphy's handwritten insertion of Tarpey's line, "what did you say" is repeated three times (the same as the published version). Tarpey's interrogative phrase becomes menacing in its repetition. Murphy crafts the rhythm of the escalating conflict, with repetition serving to convey hostility and declare one's power. Murphy captures the element of inclusion/exclusion in the group by exploring the men's language and forms of interaction within the pub.

The pub can also be a site of celebration and merriment. After Christy's successful purchase of Mrs de Burca's house at the auction, the emigrants gather again at Bunty's: "A sing-song. A celebration – Revelry. Christy is a hero and he's behaving like one. He is drunk, calling the tune,

"heaven on earth" suggests the need for a spiritual haven that the Church does not offer, a theme that will be discussed at length in chapter four, *The Sanctuary Lamp*.

⁶² TCD MS11115/2/25/7.

abandoned. He wants to become drunker. And there are extremes of mood swings. Other emigrants are present” (*House*, 266). This forced mood is necessary to cover his knowledge of the murder he has committed. Christy’s performative front, his charming “public” image is brought to the fore. As in Murphy’s character description: “We have been looking at him mostly in public. In private we see the loner, the dreamer who is calculating, romantic, dangerous. In public he suggests confidence; in private, a man who has done wrong, calculating the odds as to whether or not he has covered his tracks sufficiently.”⁶³ Christy sings a love song to Marie (“a little love, a little kiss”) and the night develops into a cacophony:

The cacophony grows through the above: from applause to calls for more, to a Christy shout ‘A-round the corner!’ to ‘Oo-oos!’ of replies and laughter, to four singers coming in on top of each other, progressively, with four different songs: Until, eventually, and to the end of the scene, four different songs are being sung simultaneously. Uproar. [...]

CHRISTY: ‘Here in my heart I’m alone and so lonely / Here in ...’ (*Etc.*) (*House*, 271)

The celebration does not last long. The tone of the celebratory pub scene changes drastically after the funeral. Christy has confessed to Mrs de Burca about hitting Susanne, inadvertently killing her. A few days later at Bunty’s, Peter and Goldfish are ready to depart again. Peter is being “sensitive – in his capacity – to Christy’s mood” (280) and Goldfish tries to convince Christy to come with him:

GOLDFISH: There’s something up with you. Fuck that aul fuckin’ house, fuck here! We’re bigger than here, we’re the energy! They’re all old – even the young ones! Fuckin’ place is dyin’ – Dead! Junior fuckin’ footballers – Fuck them and their prayers for emigrants. Hop on a train with me, now, take ourselves away out of here, we’ll spend a few days round Dublin, work out a plan for the two of us – Yeh! – something really interesting! Yeh? Yeh, Chris, yeh! . . . I’d die for yeh! (285)

⁶³ TCD MS11115/2/25/1.

Christy refuses his offer. Bunty delivers the news that “Mrs de Burca was taken to hospital? It’s worse than that. She’s gone, the creature” (286). Once everyone leaves, Christy is “alone, his back to us, head bowed, his shoulders shaking. (*He’s crying.*)” (286). The ending highlights the ephemerality of the experience at the pub, which also affects all other elements of the play—Christy’s childish dream, stability, happiness, and a sense of belonging; in other words, of being home.

Nicholas Grene discusses how Murphy explored Lacanian psychoanalysis in developing Christy’s character and his obsession with attaining the impossible object.⁶⁴ This object takes the place of what the subject is truly deprived of, and Christy projects it onto the de Burca women. He uses them (particularly Louise) to get access to the impossible home. In much the same way that the “nunnery” of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* really refers to a brothel,⁶⁵ in an earlier conception of the play as a film script, Murphy describes in detail how the pub becomes a brothel for Christy. Christy is having an affair with Louise, who is referred to as Margaret, in this manuscript version. Louise (or Margaret) is the youngest of the de Burca family and a wife of the publican Michael Burgess:

Next, he is in bed with Margaret, resuming an affair with her. [...] The affair is quite blatant. It is well known that while customers take their drinks downstairs, the publican weeps outside his own bedroom, while inside his wife writhes in violent sex with Christy. [...] her professions of love are too close to the sounds of sexual needs or sexual gratification; the rowdy and drunken noises emanating and ascending from the pub downstairs. Something sordid about it all. His dream will not be realised in another man’s bed, over a pub, in a place that is increasingly smelling and sounding like a brothel.⁶⁶

Margaret symbolises the unattainable home, the object of Christy’s desire. However, Murphy’s notes on Lacan also point out that, “a certain rupture” occurs “when the object (of desire) is attained.”⁶⁷ The

⁶⁴ Grene, *Playwright Adventurer*, 106-7.

⁶⁵ TCD MS11115/2/25/12.

⁶⁶ TCD MS11115/2/25/3.

⁶⁷ TCD MS11115/2/25/12.

rupture is juxtaposed and overlaid with the chaotic noise of the pub, transforming it into a brothel. The pub creates, satisfies and evades desire. Murphy embeds this psychic tension that lies beneath people's ordinary interaction in the pub.

Although set in the fifties, *The House* is one of Murphy's later works: it premiered in 2000, directed by Conall Morrison. Murphy discussed the reasons for this return to the past:

When I was thinking about the story, though, I instinctively felt that it should be pre-television, pre-*Late Late Show* Ireland. Sometimes you have to go into the past to better reflect the present: there's a kind of caginess, or sophistication in inverted commas, that Irish people have today, and that veneer can cover areas of emotion that I want to get at.⁶⁸

In another interview, Murphy explained: “[t]here is some great yearning within us all. It becomes latent, and then something can activate it, set it off again.”⁶⁹ The fifties recur throughout Murphy's plays, but as Emer O'Kelly wrote in her review of *The House*, “this time he takes us even further into the darkness of his pre-occupation with the terrible rage inculcated by [...] the hidden bitterness of the emigrants' lives,”⁷⁰ referring to John McGahern's programme note that “the real pain or emptiness for many exiles was that the places they had left were far more real to them than where their lives were taking place and where their children were growing up with alien accents.”⁷¹ In a similar vein, Deborah Ballard observed: “[m]any will quibble with this return to a well-trodden past, but it has resonances for the present: many emigrants are returning to the new, cosmopolitan Ireland only to find that corruption, resentment and hatred of change have not entirely gone away.”⁷² The emotions of shame, guilt and confusion, felt by the emigrants and those who remained, resonated with early 21st-century Ireland, where such changes and tensions were once again inevitable. The constant

⁶⁸ “Confronting Ireland,” *House*, April 12, 2000 [Press Cuttings], ATDA at NUIG, 0432_PC_0001, p. 3-5.

⁶⁹ Gerry McCarthy, “Murphy's Law Brings Out Home Truths,” *Sunday Times*, April 9, 2000, *House*, April 12, 2000 [Press Cuttings], ATDA at NUIG, 0432_PC_0001, p. 49.

⁷⁰ Emer O'Kelly, “A House of Destruction and Decay,” *Sunday Independent*, April 16, 2000, *House*, April 12, 2000 [Press Cuttings], ATDA at NUIG, 0432_PC_0001, p. 25.

⁷¹ McGahern, “The Fifties.”

⁷² Deborah Ballard, “Theatre: The House. Abbey Theatre, Dublin,” *The Independent*, April 17, 2000, *House*, April 12, 2000 [Press Cuttings], ATDA at NUIG, 0432_PC_0001, p.28.

questioning of social realities, the human need to belong—“the yearning” for home—is a universal theme that Murphy here traced back to the fifties.

The play alternates between the house and the pub (and occasionally Kerrigan’s place), and the 2000 and 2012 productions realised the changes in a different way. Both infused realistic house and pub with symbolic and atmospheric qualities; however, the 2000 production used a drop set, while the 2012 production used a turntable. David Nowlan described the set of the 2000 production in these words: “Francis O’Connor has provided an accurate and highly atmospheric setting, always dominated by the tall trees around Woodlawn House whose large reflective leaves constantly convey the impression of light and movement in the woods. Ben Ormerod’s lighting complements the changing moods perfectly and subtly.”⁷³



The House, 2000 [Photographs]. ATDA at NUIG, 0432_PH_0007, p.14

With the use of a drop set, however, this atmospheric setting was left in the background throughout the other scenes as well. The trees were visible behind the pub where the emigrants congregated, acting as a permanent imagery, a reminder of Christy’s dream of home and his persistent pursuit.

⁷³ Nowlan, “Fine House.”



[Drop Set, *The House*, 2000 NUIG Archive Video]

In a review of the 2012 production directed by Annabelle Comyn, Peter Crawley summarised the play as follows: “[a] house has been saved, but nobody will ever be at home.”⁷⁴ Presenting “competing visions of Ireland – its sentimentalised memory and its riven reality,”

Paul O’Mahony puts that tension into his fascinating set, shifting its locations with two unfussy turntables, using a severity of colour to keep nostalgia at bay and stretching pastoral photographs across a cyclorama so their details distend – like a memory. It underlines the play’s diasporic limbo: home is not an ever-fixed mark, change is inexorable, resistance is tragic.⁷⁵

Perhaps the turntables realised the spatial tension better, but whether dropping or shifting the sets, both productions highlighted the liminality of the space, capturing the in-betweenness of private/public, past/present, feminine/masculine, and fantasy/reality.

The House sets two focal points—the home and the pub—over a seasonal period, the summer. The shift between the two spaces shows the contrast even more distinctly: the home space is feminine/private/domestic occupied by the three women, and the pub space, while liminal, leans

⁷⁴ Peter Crawley, “*The House*,” *Irish Times*, June 15, 2012.

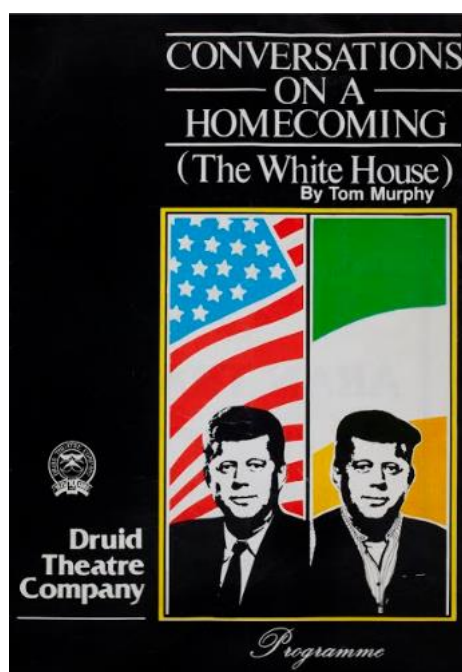
⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

towards the masculine/public/performative. In *Conversations*, the focus is further narrowed: the timespan is set to one evening, and the space is constrained to a single pub. The narrower focus further foregrounds the liminal quality of the pub.

***Conversations on a Homecoming* (1985): Cradle of a Nation**

Conversations on a Homecoming had “an unusually extended genesis”;⁷⁶ it began as *Snakes and Reptiles* (1968), a BBC television play, and in 1972, Murphy wrote a two-act play called *The White House*, whose first act was titled “Conversations on a Homecoming.” The first part of this earlier play is set in the present while the second, entitled “Speeches of Farewell,” takes place on the day of John F. Kennedy’s assassination in November 1963. Murphy uses the play to explore the changes that took place throughout the sixties and seventies. During this period, rural Ireland looked to the United States as a model of material success, progress, and modernity. John F. Kennedy, the first American president to visit Ireland in 1963, was revered during this time and was held up by many as a symbol of Irish achievement in the U.S. due to his Catholic Irish family background. JJ, the owner of the White House pub, who has similar facial features to John F. Kennedy, once dreamed of bringing change to his community; however, when JFK fell, JJ and the followers who depended on him fell too. As Druid’s programme cover explicitly suggests, the name of the pub as well as JJ’s association with Kennedy evokes a preoccupation with American ideology and the American dream.

⁷⁶ Grene, *Playwright Adventurer*, 69.



A sense of failure hangs over the play. Patrick Burke contends that the unconventional plot sequence of *The White House* presents “first the consequences of action and, secondly, its impetus,” and that what is “recalled in act one is presented in act two.”⁷⁷ The past and present are distinct and separate in this sequence. When the second act was criticised for its structure, Murphy integrated parts of it into the extended one-act *Conversations*.⁷⁸ In this revised play, both Burke and O’Toole explain, “pastness of the present and presentness of the past, are interwoven.”⁷⁹ According to O’Toole, “past and present are on stage simultaneously, gnawing away at each other, making the ironies constant and infinitely more effective in dramatic terms.”⁸⁰ *Conversations* is about this loss and disillusionment; when asked his reason for coming back, Michael mumbles vague expressions such as “Nos-talgia [...] something like that” (*Conversations*, 11) and “Lost horizons” (12).

One of the key words that can be used to describe the sentiment of the play is nostalgia. The word comes from *nostos*, returning home, and *algos*, meaning pain and distress. In *The Future of*

⁷⁷ Patrick Burke, “‘Camelot Lost’: The Death of the American Dream,” in *Alive in Time: The Enduring Drama of Tom Murphy: New Essays*, ed. Christopher Murray (Dublin: Carysfort, 2010), 91.

⁷⁸ In the 1972 production, Murphy reversed the order of the acts, so that “Speeches” played before “Conversations.” Then, in 1984, after many attempts to re-write *The White House* for a Druid production, he decided to cut “Speeches” altogether and largely left the earlier “Conversations” as it was, with a very few additions. TCD MS11115/1/7.

⁷⁹ Burke, “‘Camelot Lost,’” 94.

⁸⁰ O’Toole, *Politics of Magic*, 171.

Nostalgia (2001), Svetlana Boym defines it as “longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed” and designates nostalgia as a concept of complex time, more than space.⁸¹ She argues that “[n]ostalgia itself has a utopian dimension, only it is no longer directed toward the future. Sometimes nostalgia is not directed toward the past either, but rather sideways.”⁸² In other words, time is not linear, and nostalgia is a mixture of the fantasies of the past, the needs of the present and consideration of the future. Her analysis of nostalgia helps to explain Michael’s strong attachment to the pub and his feeling of disappointment. Michael’s home is an imagined home from home, a fantasy that never existed, and his disappointment derives from this realisation. The idea of a happy home is dubious to other characters as well: Tom is stuck in a home that is not his and has been engaged for ten years to a woman who offers him little chance of happiness, while Anne’s exit at the start of the play as she searches for her father suggests an unsettled notion of home. Considered as a second home to these characters, the pub cannot be a real alternative to their broken homes. It is a temporary escape that cannot resolve the characters’ problems: the longing for home continues, and so does the attendant suffering.

Michael, an aspiring actor, has returned home to Ireland after ten years of exile in the United States. His “homecoming” takes place in The White House, a run-down pub, and he feels nostalgic as he reflects upon JJ’s “inaugural speech”:

MICHAEL (*forces a laugh*): The White House, our refuge, our wellsprings of hope and aspiration. (*Mimicking JJ/Kennedy.*) [...] To seek new ideas. And some of us will remain, custodians of this, *our* White House, to keep the metaphorical doors of thought, hope, generosity, expression, aspiration open. So that all will find – the denizen of this hamlet, the traveler in his frequent returning – a place of fulfilment, or a refuge if need be. Something like that. (*Conversations*, 12-13)

⁸¹ Svetlana Boym, “Introduction: Taboo on Nostalgia?” in *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), XIII.

⁸² *Ibid.*, XIV.

The White House, of course, is the official residence and workplace of the president of the United States; symbolically, the colour white represents purity, and the house the ideal of an amenable home. To JJ and the locals, the White House pub represents past hopes and dreams; it is a place of refuge and return, comparable to one's home. Michael accentuates the pronoun "our," which—like "my house" or "my local"—suggests a sense of ownership, a physical centre or a rootedness. Michael, for example, channelling JJ, preaches that the pub "was our roots" and "our continuing cultural cradle" (38). Moreover, in the stage directions, Michael's friend Tom is in a foetal position (3), which alludes to the womb-like space of the pub. The pub for these men is a communal possession and, just as in a comfortable home, it is a place of regeneration and restoration where psychological needs can be met.

The projected warmth of the space is ironic, however. The play opens with a description of the pub: "[a] forgotten-looking place, a run-down pub. Faded printing on a window or on a panel over the door: The White House. The place is in need of decoration, the clock is stopped, stocks on the shelves are sparse, there is a picture of John F. Kennedy" (*Conversations*, 4). Michael's fantasy does not match the present condition, the reality of the pub. Just like the décor, the townspeople are equally worn-out. The pub is not a fixed place, but a constant time-bound and time-shifting site full of memories, ideals and metaphorical meanings attached to and projected by characters. This out-of-joint time is further accentuated by the stopped clock. Outside the pub, the town clock and the church clock also chime at different times, leading Tom to remark wryly, "[a]nother discrepancy between Church and State" (5). If the changed structure of *Conversations* from *White House* adds a further layer of ambivalence and multidirectional experience of time, the earlier drafts of "Speeches of Farewell"—provisionally titled, "Images," "The Death of Twins," "The Ballad of Tom J. Kilkelly," "No Shamrocks on Granny's Shillelagh,"—give a glimpse of what the materialised version of the characters' hopes looked like. The pub was a physical approximation, if not a realisation, of their shared utopia.

In a handwritten draft of "Speeches," the stage directions open with the description of the hotel-pub:

The play opens on a lot of activity. It is the evening prior to the opening night of the hotel.

The hotel has been done up, the finishing touches are being added [...]. In the course of the play the place is transformed: the finished product is different from the usual small-town hotel lounge; [...] it has an individuality; it is a sincere effort by those involved in its creation. There has been a change of mind about the colour scheme and Michael (Tom) has started repainting one complete wall in a different colour.⁸³

The place embodies the “sincere effort” by those involved, while the different colour scheme for the wall on which Michael draws out a map of Europe situates the small-town of the west of Ireland within “the world”; Michael encourages Tom to “Show us the route you’ll take on your grand world tour” and “STARTS TO PAINT REPRESENTATIVE SHAPES FOR IRELAND, ENGLAND, EUROPE ON THE WALL. THROUGH THE FOLLOWING HE PAINTS OUT THE SHAPES AGAIN, PICTORIALISING THE COURSE OF TOM’S PROPOSED TOUR.”⁸⁴ The place is not merely a local pub but a port from which the characters can envisage and experience the world, even for Tom, the pessimist twin to the romantic Michael.

Tom is the most sceptical and resistant to people’s optimism about the place. In the handwritten draft notes on “Speeches,” JJ tells Tom:

JJ I thought you’d be the very one to sense the different atmosphere about the place.

Tom (Loses his composure) About what place? – Where? – Tell me ! – Convince me!

JJ About – (He gesticulates meaning “about the whole world”)

Larry About this place! (Tom looks at Larry) This place. This company.⁸⁵

The pub possesses an expansiveness that allows the characters to think and feel beyond their local setting; however, Tom finds it difficult to subscribe to the general sentiment. Changing the appearance of the place by painting and decorating cannot cover up everything. Tom accuses JJ of trying to

⁸³ TCD MS11115/1/7/25.

⁸⁴ TCD MS11115/1/7/9.

⁸⁵ TCD MS11115/1/7/20.

whitewash Kennedy's involvement in the Cuban missile crisis. During their argument, "THEY LOOK AT EACH OTHER FOR A MOMENT. THEN TOM POINTS AT THE STAIN. I've tried three coats on it."⁸⁶ Even in "Speeches of Farewell," the supposedly hopeful act, the stain is a sinister reminder (or foreshadowing) of what "sincere efforts" cannot amend. The White House, for all its self-ascribed purity, is still flawed and corrupt. In his character description, Tom's

cynicism is not entirely true: part of it is the young graduates hard-man act. His own dreams are luke-warm (home life and academic interests smothering him) and he cannot quite understand or believe the commitment and more imaginative aspirations of others (J.Js.). But there is a suggestion in his arguing that his motive is to be convinced that the other person is right, and to be touched by the other person's romantic eagerness and extravagant [sic] faith. A bit tactless – about which he is aware, ~~but~~ about which he can do nothing.⁸⁷

While it seems that Michael is the prime inheritor of JJ's idealism, Tom, despite his cynicism, wants to believe in a better future. He is the one who wrote the speech for JJ; Tom's bitterness in *Conversations* thus further highlights the play's sense of disappointment. His anger towards JJ—" [h]e-fed-people's-fantasies. That all he did. Fed – people's – fantasies" (*Conversations*, 54)—stems from a sense of personal betrayal. Tom rebukes JJ: "[i]s, was, always will be. A slob. He's probably crying and slobbering on somebody's shoulder now this minute, somewhere around Galway. Missus in there treats him as if he were a child" (52).

Except as a romanticised memory, JJ is thoroughly absent in *Conversations*; he is offstage and nowhere to be seen. This absence is a radical cut from the original drafts, where JJ is the central focus. During the initial drafting stage, Murphy read much on JFK and on his era, taking notes from James MacGregor Burns's *John Kennedy: A Political Profile* (1960), Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr.'s *A Thousand Days* (1965), R. L. Bruckberger's *Image of America* (1958) and William Manchester's

⁸⁶ TCD MS11115/1/7/9.

⁸⁷ TCD MS11115/1/7/3.

Death of a President (1963). He used direct references—such as “an idealist without illusions,” quoting Jacqueline Kennedy—to describe J.F.K and incorporated commentaries such as the one from *Thousand Days*:

He voiced the disquietude of the postwar generation – the mistrust of rhetoric, the disdain for pomposity, the impatience with the postures and pieties of other days, the resignation to disappointment. And he also voiced the new generation’s longings – for fulfilment in experience, for the subordination of selfish impulses to higher ideals, for a link between past and future, for adventure and valor and honor.⁸⁸

The television version of *The White House* (Act One: Speeches, Act Two: Conversations), presumed to be the draft for the RTÉ production in 1977, is essentially a psychodrama about JJ; it gives a detailed account of JJ’s bedroom, his insecurities and mental state. In a handwritten draft of the TV script, in the opening scene, “JJ is lying on top of a big bed, his shoes off, asleep. The size of the bed dwarfing him and his almost foetal position suggesting a vulnerability. [...] In contrast with the ‘new image’ of the ground-floor public area, [...] this bedroom – and one imagines the other private quarters – retains its original dinginess.”⁸⁹ The scenes alternate between the pub and the bedroom:

10 Bedroom

JJ is waking up. His private insecurity showing up the more in the half world between sleep and wakefulness. He reaches out to the other side of the bed as if in fear of finding himself alone. He listens to the noises from downstairs: Michael singing, Missus laughing... [...] He turns on the radio and receives some lively music.

[...]

12 Bedroom

⁸⁸ TCD MS11115/1/7/17.

⁸⁹ TCD MS11115/1/7/20.

JJ gets up and looks is looking at himself in the mirror. Through the following, he washes, shaves (?), dresses, arranges his hair, etc., gradually bringing about in himself a transformation as he assumes what he considers to be the Kennedy image.

And so, my fellow Irishmen, ask not what your country can do for you – ask what you can do for our country. My fellow citizens – of the world – ask not what Ireland can do for you, but what together we can do for mankind. [...]

He continues in his dream, standing before the mirror.⁹⁰

The bedroom functions as the backstage, a place where JJ prepares for his performance on the public stage. This division and interconnectedness of the different spaces resembles the nature of JJ's personality: "JJ is not a wax-works reproduction of the American president. He can give a reasonable impersonation of Kennedy; [...] It is difficult to tell where performance leaves off and sincerity begins: He probably does not know himself."⁹¹ JJ's performance of JFK underscores Erving Goffman's theories on everyday life as a performance; any interaction with others involves a "presentation" of the self. In this version, JJ is another tragic victim, his flaw being "his source of strength: John F. Kennedy."⁹²

In the published version of *Conversations*, with the times interwoven, the pub becomes a place of competing performances both of the past and present, as characters re-enact their memories through storytelling and performance. Instead of JJ performing Kennedy's speech as he did in *The White House*, Michael in *Conversations* performs what JJ in the past did. Michael mimics JJ/Kennedy: "[l]et the word go forth from this time and place to friend and foe alike that the torch has been passed to a new generation!" (*Conversations*, 12). The performances contrast starkly with the dire condition of the present, and the irony comes from aligning these idealistic figures from different time periods—Kennedy, JJ, and Michael. The torch—their shared hopes—may have been passed down, but their failures have also come with it. Tom ridicules Michael for being another failed leader; his empty

⁹⁰ TCD MS11115/1/7/20.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid.

speeches have changed nothing.

Michael's story of shattered dreams and failures in the United States becomes a bewildering performance in the pub. When everyone expects Michael to tell a good story from America, he does so by giving an account of a man setting himself on fire:

MICHAEL: Well. He took off his clothes. (*He looks at them, unsure, his vulnerability showing; he is talking about himself.*) Well, he took off his clothes. Well, bollocks naked, jumping on tables and chairs, and then he started to shout 'No! No! This isn't it at all! This kind of – life – isn't it at all. Listen! Listen to me! Listen! I have something to tell you all!

[...]

MICHAEL: Whatever – message – he had, for the world. But the words wouldn't come for him anyway. And (*Moment's pause; then, simply.*) Well. Then he tried to set himself on fire (*He averts his eyes.*). (*Conversations, 28-29*)

Disguised as someone else's story, Michael can bring his private vulnerabilities to the public by performing them. His attempt to set himself on fire is hyperbolically dramatic, and his high-intensity re-enactment baffles his pub-mates. The repeated "[t]hat's a good one" underlines the unexpected and disturbing nature of the story. By contrast, the "chick and barmen" story that Michael tells again with excessive theatricality is not well received because it is a worn-out joke; in both cases, Michael fails to supply his audience with the merry traveller's tale that they were expecting. The performative aspects of the storytelling are further emphasised by the codas at the end of each story, which are marked by buying rounds. After Michael is finished with the story, Tom asks for the next round of drinks, and these rounds structure the rhythm of their competing performances.

Michael is not the only person performing; the performances are shared by multiple characters. When discussing the episode about Father Connolly's rebuke on the inappropriateness of the nude picture that JJ hung in the pub, Michael acts as JJ while Tom takes on Father Connolly's role:

MICHAEL: 'As far as you are concerned then, Father, art galleries all over the world are filled with dirty pictures?'

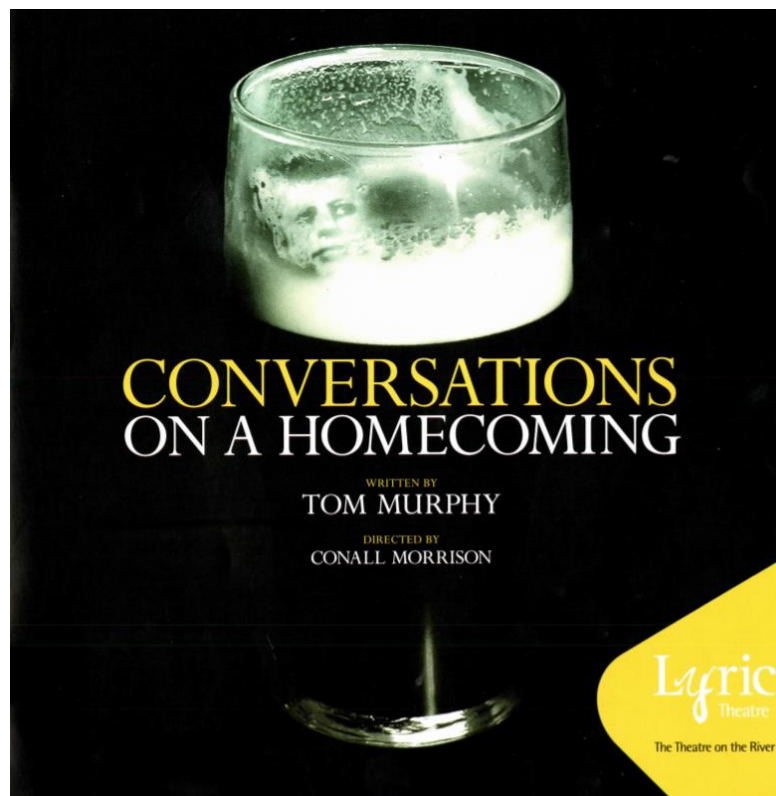
TOM (*playing Fr. Connolly*): Please, please – Boys! – please don't talk to me about art galleries. Holy Moses, I've visited hundreds of them. [...] I am a man who has travelled the world –'

MICHAEL: 'I heard you spent a few years in Nigeria, but remember you're not talking to the Blacks now!' (*Conversations*, 20-21)

After their little act, Michael and Tom, now back to performing their present selves, go on to discuss what had happened. The constant dialogue shows that the performance is not a one-man show but extends to multiple actors. These actors twist and reinterpret the scenes, such as when Tom points out that the "arrogance and condescension" that Michael "impute[s] to Fr. Connolly's remarks were only too evident in our swinging liberal JJ's statements" regarding "the Blacks" (21). Michael does not understand what Tom means and their dispute over JJ's encounter with Father Connolly continues; Michael continuing to idealise JJ while Tom "shakes his head" and "throws his head back at MICHAEL's romantic hope springing eternal" (23).

Conversations deals with the theme of the failed American dream in the rural west of Ireland, challenging the idealised myth of the west as the repository of tradition and as representative of the authentic Irish consciousness. Murphy reverses the traditional mystified view of the west of Ireland. The west had long been seen as the "real" Ireland, a reservoir of tradition, with its genuine contact with nature untainted by the immoral waves of modernity. Its idealisation as the true cradle of Gaelic culture can be credited to cultural revivalists such as Yeats and Lady Gregory. Murphy examines the external influences that created the Irish national consciousness, particularly those imported from the United States. Michael's broken dream is both personal and redolent of national disappointment, with the White House pub serving as a metaphor for Ireland. The pub "was more than a pub," Tom argues. "Our culture, as indeed our nationalism, has always had the profoundest connections with the pub" (*Conversations*, 39). The photos that hang in the pub likewise express the history and identity of the pub. A portrait of Kennedy accentuates his presence and significance, but it simultaneously highlights

his disappearance and what he no longer is. According to Susan Sontag, photography is “a pseudo-presence and a token of absence.”⁹³ It highlights the disappearance of the original referent as much as it is an *aide memoire* to preserve its past. It is a testament to loss, referred to by Sontag as a “memento mori.”⁹⁴ Kennedy serves as a ghostly imprint, a record of the past in the play.⁹⁵



[Linen Hall Library scan of Lyric programme cover for *Conversations*, 2002]

Tom scorns JJ for having “hopped up on that America-wrapped bandwagon of so-called idealism” (*Conversations*, 52). He continues by saying that JJ “had so little going for him and we are such a ridiculous race that even our choice of assumed images is quite arbitrary” (54). Tom as a cynic not only laughs and snorts at Michael’s romanticism but initiates a self-critique of how Irish people as a “ridiculous race” are easily deluded and quick to create myths. The ideas associated with modernity are now a thing of the past, as this misinterpretation of the American dream has come apart at the seams. Thus, not only does Murphy reverse ideas of tradition and modernity, but he also challenges

⁹³ Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (London: Penguin, 1979), 16.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁹⁵ The 2002 Lyric Theatre Production of *Conversations* used a disappearing face of JFK in the Guinness foam as their poster image, highlighting this ghostly imprint.

the nationalist myth of a pure and real west of Ireland by exposing the failures arising from the Americanisation of national consciousness.

In addition to the inappropriate adaptation of cultural images, Murphy poses a bigger question by pointing to what he perceived as a serious threat in society. Tom claims that

the real enemy – the big one! – that we shall overcome, is the country-and-western system itself. Unyielding, uncompromising, in its drive for total sentimentality. A sentimentality I say that would have us all an unholy herd of Sierra Sues, sad-eyed inquisitors, sentimental Nazis, fascists, sectarianists, black-and-blue shirted nationalists, with spurs a-jinglin', all ridin' down the trail to Oranmore. (*Conversations*, 66)

This speech went through multiple drafts; in a handwritten draft of “Speeches,” JJ reads out “The real enemy is the ultra conservative reactionary system itself, unyielding, uncompromising in its drive to maintain a rotten, outmoded, stuck-in-mud status quo.”⁹⁶ At another point it is Larry, the (nude) painter, who declares, “Great bloody job our cultural centre. Where would you find the likes of it, where?...No, the real enemy is the country-and-western, shamrocks-and-shillelaghs system itself, uncompromising, unyielding in its drive for total superstition and sentimentality.”⁹⁷ Murphy observes keenly the Americanisation of the West of Ireland and the erosion of culture that resulted from it. In a commentary for the Druid Theatre’s production of *Conversations*, he explains that “[w]hen I switched on the radio, it seemed to be predominantly there for the purpose of country western singing [...] I found that there was a great erosion of culture.”⁹⁸ Pointing out Liam’s comical performance of the cowboy song, Murphy remarks that the most basic aspect of one’s culture is its songs, and this “ridiculous song, to me, that people make in country western, let alone the sentimentality of most song, is hostile towards the idea of Irish culture.”⁹⁹ Various figures embody the cultural practices that have

⁹⁶ TCD MS11115/1/7/6.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ “Conversations on a Homecoming” by Tom Murphy [VHS recording, Commentary] 1986, DTCA, JHL, NUIG.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

influenced them, and Murphy questions the uncritical acceptance of these influences as well as the sentimentality that supports this unawareness.

The characters themselves dither between the conflicting values of tradition and modernity. Liam represents the modern man of the 70s who has adopted capitalist values; however, his economic success does not match his own traditional upbringing. In the stage directions, he is kitted out in the trappings of success:

LIAM entering; car keys swinging [...] well dressed and groomed: expensive, heavy pinstripe, double-breasted suit, a newspaper neatly folded sticking out [...] He is a farmer, an estate agent, a travel agent, he owns property [...] affects a slight American accent; a bit stupid and insensitive – seemingly the requisites of success. (*Conversations*, 4)

The characterisation of Liam as economically successful but mentally immature suggests the incompatible notions of tradition and modernity. He may seem to embody the American values of progress, but he constantly contradicts himself. He advocates for the rights of the “minority Catholic group being oppressed” by the “gerrymandering majority” in the North (47-48), calling for traditional values of “Hope and Faith and *Truth*” (48-49), while wishing to present an Americanised image of himself. Michael dismisses Liam’s opinion as “Back to the stuck-in-the-mud-festering ignorance” (48), and as Fintan O’Toole caustically remarks, Liam has not “advanced from the intellectual and emotional starvation of the nineteenth century. The Famine continues.”¹⁰⁰ Tom, too, lambasts Liam: “auctioneering and tax-collecting and travel-agenting and property dealing and general greedy unprincipled poncing, and Sunday night dancing – Mr successful-swinging-Ireland-In-The-Seventies! – and he’s still [...] – caught up in the few acres of bog around the house at home” (*Conversations*, 70). The binary of tradition and modernity is muddled by these contested and contradictory values adopted by various characters.

In Tom’s speech written on behalf of JJ in *The White House*, Tom praises the sanctity of the

¹⁰⁰ O’Toole, *Politics of Magic*, 173.

pub, half-mockingly and half-seriously:

JJ (Reading) It does not stretch the imagination to see this parched assembly here tonight as a holy one, in an environment of sacred tradition, for purposes profoundly related to the life and continuity of the nation. [...] From his charismatic cornucopia the publican feeds our flagging inspiration, he gives new life to broken dreams, and the horn of immortality – nightly – to mortal men.¹⁰¹

In this vision, it is the publican, not the priest, who “gives new life to broken dreams,” imbuing the pub with a sacred atmosphere. In a typescript draft of “Speeches,” titled, “Images,” Tom waxes even more lyrical:

So, let not the arrogance, insufferability, or human failings, of any individual, group, sect, [...] or party blind us – or our children – to the importance of the pub. If we can accept this tenet, what an incredible portrait of our country emerges! A portrait, hitherto, of a people chattering away irredeemable time, now become a spirited, invigorated [sic], dialectical company, discussing life’s purpose, spinning in meaningful motion. [...] let your [Ins. freedom, your] encouragement come from me and from Horace: [...] now is the time for drinking, now is the time to beat the earth with unfettered foot. Drinkers, your art is eternal, outlasting these bronzes, these paintings, the great pyramids – yea, outlasting even time itself.¹⁰²

The exaggeration and comical tone of the speech undermine both JJ’s sincerity and the “romantic eagerness” and “extravagant faith” people have in the pub. The utopian dimension ascribed to the pub as an alternative space for meaningful interaction accentuates the ridiculousness of the entire state of

¹⁰¹ TCD MS11115/1/7/6.

¹⁰² TCD MS11115/1/7/3.

the nation. Tom is boundlessly cynical about the “portrait” of the country, mocking JJ’s dreams relentlessly; yet, as the character description suggests, there is a part of Tom wanting to be convinced otherwise. His cynicism is not entirely authentic.

While this possibility of a sacred pub might at first appear far-fetched, spirituality in *Conversations* is indeed realised through the marginalised female characters, if only temporarily. The Irish pub, historically speaking, is a thoroughly masculine space where men confirm their masculinity and bond in the absence or silence of women. In such a position, men are free to criticise or ignore the women in their lives, and these acts of dismissal become bonding experiences. In *Conversations* for example, the male characters strengthen their ties by gossiping about the offstage bank clerk Josephine. Junior is excited about her sexual appeal: “Grrrrah, Josephine!”; “No bra,” (17) and “they say she wears no knickers either” (18). Tom describes her as “the most ridiculous whore of all times” and Liam calls her a “[d]irty aul’ thing” (17). Their remarks combine sexual excitement and moral disapproval of Josephine. Women in this pub are either topics of conversation or bar staff, such as Missus and Anne. Peggy, Tom’s forever fiancée, meanwhile is constantly ignored by the men; the stage directions overtly point to this exclusion: “[e]xcepting PEGGY they are laughing again,” “they have all but forgotten her,” and “[n]obody is listening to her” (73-74). Peggy herself says that “the women are always left out of the juicy things” (77). One of the key features of the pub is division and exclusion, a fact that is reaffirmed by the stage directions at the beginning: “[a] partition has been erected to divide the room in two, a public bar (not seen) and the lounge which is the main acting area” (4). Regardless of the scant space they are allotted in the pub, women have a significant role in the play.

After a failed attempt to sing “All in the April Evening” early in the play, Peggy sings again at a later time outside the lounge, “essentially for herself; quietly, looking out at the night, the sound representing her loneliness, the gentle desperation of her situation, and the memory of a decade ago. Her song creates a stillness over them all” (*Conversations*, 81). In contrast to all of the talking and shouting, the stillness fosters a momentary transcendence. The expressiveness of the song depends as much on pure sound and theatricality as on the meaning of its lyrics. Regarding the latter, O’Toole maintains that “the language of the song is religious, representing not a pious aspiration to Christian

salvation, but a shift into a metaphor of human redemption and the transcendence of the present” (180). Originally, Peggy was supposed to sing “Che faro senza Eurydice”; it was changed in the reading script for Druid Company in April 1984:

Junior: Look, we had the complimenting stage, let that be an end to the insulting stage, and well get on to the singing stage. (Singing mispronouncing the words:) “Che faro senza Eurydice” [Ins. – All in the April Evening]

Peggy: I don’t know when I sang last.

Junior: The German one or what was it, come on, Che faro.

~~Che faro~~—(Humming a bit of “What is life to me without Thee”) [Ins. All in the April Evening, April airs were –]

[...]

Peggy: “Che faro senza, Eurydice” Etc., to its conclusion, in Italian (What is life to me without thee”) At the conclusion of the song, Missus coming down the stairs. Peggy instinctively [sic] moving out of the doorway to stand outside the pub, still looking out at the night.¹⁰³

The choice of singing an aria from Gluck’s *Orpheus and Eurydice*, where Orpheus grieves and declares his life meaningless without his lover, stresses the fact that it is not so much the content and religiosity of the song as the act of singing that changes the spiritual temperature of the pub.

Similarly, Anne’s actions at the end of the play are reminiscent of the benevolent Madonna: “[s]he nods, she smiles, she knows. He [Michael] waits for another moment to admire her, then he walks off. ANNE continues in the window as at the beginning of the play, smiling her gentle hope out at the night” (*Conversations*, 87). Anne changes the pub into a church, as she occupies the centre stage with her hopeful smile, thereby offering a kind of secular spirituality. Her nod acknowledges Michael’s confessions made in the pub. Murphy inverts the common understanding of the pub as a site of hurly-

¹⁰³ TCD MS11115/1/7/30.

burly and degeneracy by portraying it as a site of performance where characters reveal individual vulnerabilities. He first posits the gender segregation within the pub, then subverts it: we see women excluded and marginalised in the male-dominated pub which, but the end of the play heralds a subtle change. While it is not a radical subversion—after all, Anne is smiling out at the night passively, and Peggy only lamenting—the warmth of these female characters conveys a semblance of humanity and transcendence.

The varied audience reception of *Conversations* helps to chronicle the changing social history of Ireland. Since the pub was associated with degeneracy, relating it to any Christian or patriotic values was liable to cause a severe backlash. For instance, when *The White House* was first performed, it received a critical response equivalent to that of the *Playboy* and *Plough and the Stars* (1926) riots.¹⁰⁴



[*The White House* (1972) TCD MS11115/1/7/27]

When screened by RTÉ in 1977, Murphy's play was condemned by the media and various councils as the "scandalous filth of RTÉ programmes," "scurrilous and filthy," "blasphemy," "a gross insult to

¹⁰⁴ O'Toole, *Politics of Magic*, 181.

Christian principles,” and “obscene.”¹⁰⁵ This negative reception is foreseen in the play itself, as when JJ hangs a nude in the pub, provoking Father Connolly to call it “dirty” and “bad” (*Conversations*, 20). Tom even mocks the neighbours who complained about the pub’s immoral and obscene influence on the people (22). Perhaps it is no coincidence that each of the three plays that aroused widespread hostility takes place in a pub, since their verisimilitude and familiarity threatened the public’s self-image, identity and values.

The Druid Theatre performed *Conversations* from 1985 to 1987 in various countries and venues, and the audience’s response to the play exemplifies how the workings of this “lived” space were achieved successfully despite different surroundings. The tour was received favourably at the Pepsico Summerfare in the United States and in Sydney, Australia. The most notable reception, however, came from prisons in Ireland: in Cork, Mountjoy, and Arbour Hill. In the comments and letters from the prisoners to the Druid Theatre in February 1987, an inmate, on behalf of all the prisoners, explained how the performance resonated with his own conception of pub life:

After about ten minutes [...] I felt myself really involved personally in the play. The pub scene was one that I am no stranger to, as I’m a man that likes the odd drink, and a chat. By that I mean there are such old pubs like the one portrayed in the set construction down where I come from. Similar conversations to that in the [play] are still going strong, and manys the night, I would sit by the fire and listen to all the stories and jokes.¹⁰⁶

The familiarity of the setting made it possible for the inmate to identify with the action of the play, drawing out his own personal memories.

¹⁰⁵ O’Toole, *Politics of Magic*, 182.

¹⁰⁶ “Comments of Prisoners,” T2/928, DTCA, JHL, NUIG.



[2013, *Conversations*, DruidMurphy]

What made the performance special was the prisoners' identification with the place-making of characters-as-actors, which consequently created a "lived" space. Reporting on the success of Druid's prison tours, *The Irish Times* and *Cork Examiner* described the atmosphere of the performances:

The chemistry between audience and actors was lively and, at times volatile [...] the characters drank from the start of the play to the end, encouraging occasional calls from the audience for a few pints to be sent their way. As things got hot and heavy in the pub, and characters wrangled and tangled, there was the hilarious cat-call 'You're barred.' [...] "I'm waiting for the right girl," one of the characters said, and [...] someone quip[ped] 'You won't find her in here,' [...] another character said he was driving home, there was a roar of 'Your car will have been robbed.'¹⁰⁷

The prisoners' active engagement with the play demonstrates how the space is "lived," and "shared" between all participants. Mary Leland, who went along to the Cork jail, also reports that "[w]hat was

¹⁰⁷ Liam Heylin, "Druid Dispel Prison Blues," *Cork Examiner*, Feb 11, 1987 [Press Cuttings] 1987, DTCA, JHL, NUIG.

real in the play was real to everyone watching it,” since they “had all sat through conversations like this or almost like this.”¹⁰⁸ The familiarity of the pub and the associated world that Druid brought to these inmates created a “real” experience for everyone. Druid’s successful production of *Conversations* spilled over into 2012-2013, when the DruidMurphy project included the play as part of the trilogy along with *Whistle* and *Famine*. Undoubtedly the highlight of the theatre scene at the time, the cycle won three Irish Times Theatre awards and was the biggest touring production in Ireland in 2012, reaching 100 performances in 12 venues across Ireland, the UK and the USA.¹⁰⁹

The success of the play is attributable to the familiarity and ordinariness of the space and the language. The pub in the play resembles actual pubs commonly seen around town, with props that recreate the historical nuances reminiscent of the time period and community. Murphy uses the type of vernacular spoken in the pub by ordinary people, making the characters real and relatable for the audience. In an interview with Colm Tóibín, Murphy explains that he tries to balance and adjust everyday conversational speech with the unspoken rules of theatrical language, in order to convey feelings that are not necessarily linear or logical and dramatise ordinary people who are inarticulate.¹¹⁰ *Conversations* is a realisation of ordinary language in which Murphy uses everyday pub-talk as a dramatic form. These authentic “conversations” in the pub stand in stark contrast to the “speeches,” “[p]uppetry, mimicry, and rhetoric!” (*Conversations*, 54) that the character Tom despises. The annotated published copy of *Conversations* for Druid in 1985 shows the detailed attention Murphy paid to the delivery and the rhythm of the dialogue, creating a vivid ensemble. For example, when Tom delivers his long speech about the “real enemies,” comparing their pub to Paddy Joe Daly’s, the stage direction “they laugh” is underlined and the handwritten pencilled note reads: “They must laugh to give Tom thrust into next para.”¹¹¹ In another instance, Tom is mimicking Kennedy: “‘that sincerity is always subject to proof.’ You all love speeches, rhetoric, crap, speeches. Right! ‘I know you all and will a while uphold the unyoked humour of your idleness.’ I was always a better actor than you” (*Conversations*, 80, emphasis added). The italicised part is underlined and the note says, “Keep up

¹⁰⁸ Mary Leland, “Druid Goes to Jail,” *Irish Times*, Feb 13, 1987 [Press Cuttings] 1987, DTCA, JHL, NUIG.

¹⁰⁹ “DruidMurphy: Press Coverage,” 2012-2013, <<http://archive.druid.ie/websites/2009-2017/druidmurphy/>>.

¹¹⁰ Colm Tóibín, “Interview with Tom Murphy,” *DruidMurphy Programme*, 2012, 5-6.

¹¹¹ TCD MS11115/1/7/40.

inexorability of it – energy of it.”¹¹² The language, enunciation, delivery and interaction all contribute to the dynamic theatrical pub-talk, allowing the energy of ordinary speech to be felt by the audience.

Sound as much as language is an important feature in *Conversations*. The sound of the double clock chimes in *Conversations* which ring every hour from eight to eleven in the play function as the sole reminder of time. In performance, the two chimes of the Town Hall and the church, commented on by Liam and Tom at the start, draw attention to the time. The clock chimes pierce through the space the characters occupy, structuring and interfering with the rhythm of the play. Time is a measure determined externally, while internally, as the stage directions indicate, the clock has stopped, and people in the pub gradually lose their sense of time. The clock is not in accordance with the real time of the theatre; it is a choreographed sound in the play that reminds the characters of the world that exists outside the pub, the external reality that they need to return to after a momentary forgetfulness inside. In an early handwritten draft of *White House*, the characters are reluctant to leave the pub at the end of the play. Missus tells the men to leave: “Come on now, boys, and haven’t ye all night tomorrow night?” and “Anne is clearing up. Outside, they are standing in a line on the street, reluctant as yet to go to the further reality of home.”¹¹³ The chime equally reminds the audience of the world outside the theatre: the reality they must return to after the night’s performance. The pub and the theatre both suspend our sense of time. When Tom Murphy was asked his definition of happiness, he responded that “‘happiness is when I look at the clock and it’s ten past seven, and when I look at the clock the next time, it’s ten till two.’ [...] It’s stepping out of this boring thing of time.”¹¹⁴ Murphy shows that the time inside the pub and consequently the theatre is stepping out of the “boring thing of time.”

According to Nicholas Grene, “[t]he cultural dependency on an imagined America is for Murphy one of the outstanding symptoms of the poverty of contemporary Irish culture, a sort of neo-colonial cringe.”¹¹⁵ *Conversations* shows the traditional myth of the west broken down by the imported American values in Ireland. At the same time, it deals with the need for the self to express

¹¹² TCD MS11115/1/7/40.

¹¹³ TCD MS11115/1/7/6.

¹¹⁴ Tóibín, “Interview,” 8.

¹¹⁵ Grene, *Playwright Adventurer*, 84.

itself and belong. In ordinary conversations within the liminal space of the pub, the ideals of nation and home are deconstructed and negotiated. The conversations in the pub aspire to the condition of music: Murphy puts a gentle spotlight on everyday interactions, presenting a theatrical performance—thus, a meta-theatrical experience—for the audience. It is at this point that a glimmer of secular spiritualism and authentic communal bonding, of hope, can be observed. If *Conversations* presents a nuanced picture of the undercurrents and the theatrical interplays between the spaces and characters in a single pub, *The Blue Macushla* takes the “neo-colonial cringe” to its full extent. Here, the pub/club becomes a theatrical spectacle, a comical embodiment of American glamour. Instead of the “pure” and untainted west of Ireland, the locus of the play is Dublin, an urban, ultra-modern space full of corruption, entertainment, action and allure.

***The Blue Macushla* (1980): Neon Images**

Influenced by American gangster movies,¹¹⁶ *The Blue Macushla* (1980) is often read as a “metaphor [...] about Ireland in the 1970s,”¹¹⁷ in Murphy’s own words. Fintan O’Toole eloquently captures the national mood of this period, marked by “disintegration of Irish nationalism and the rise of Americanisation” as well as urbanisation:

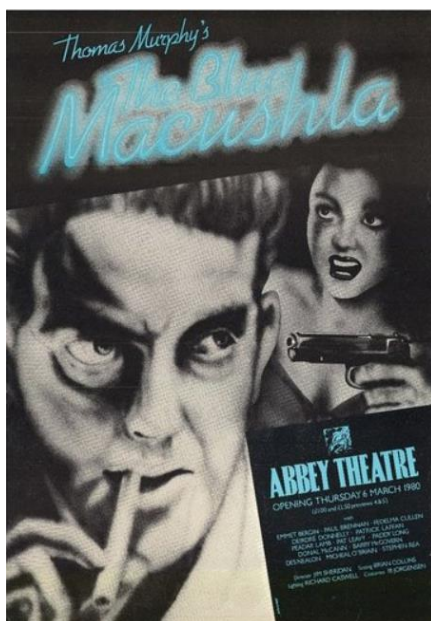
Throughout the sixties and into the seventies, rural Ireland in particular adapted its own self-image to American models, so that the thatched cottage was replaced by the hacienda-style bungalow and the popular music of the Irish countryside became a peculiar hybrid of sentimental Irish ballads and American country-and-western, often sung in lounge bars in a mock-American accent by bands dressed in cowboy suits.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁶ For more about the influence of gangster films such as *The Blue Dahlia* (1946), *Double Indemnity* (1944), and *Scarface* (1932) on the play, see Grene’s *Playwright Adventurer*, 65.

¹¹⁷ Murphy, *Plays: I*, xxi.

¹¹⁸ O’Toole, *Politics of Magic*, 144.

JFK is important in *Conversations*, but the question of Irish-American dependency—of borrowed styles and images—is even more central and explicit in *Macushla*. The poster for the play recreates those images: its blue neon title, man with a cigarette and woman in a revealing dress with a gun in hand, all seem to borrow the tropes and stereotypes of a classic Hollywood action movie.



Macushla, Mar 6, 1980 [Poster]. ATDA at NUIG, 0780_PO_0001, p1.

Murphy felt that he had “absorbed” the “national mood” of his time. In an interview with John Boland, Murphy commented:

I’ve a view of Ireland which I’ve absorbed and which I attempt to convey in ‘The Blue Macushla’. The Ireland I see around me is populated with gangsters, with robberies and murder and, most damagingly, with rumours about everyone in power. If the figureheads in our society are being whispered about, idealism really isn’t possible for the ordinary citizen. [...] I find it difficult to locate Radio Eireann on my set because the DJs have replaced their own voices

with that of a phony culture and it's impossible to distinguish them from those on any other station.¹¹⁹

The play works as a mirror, a satire on and critique of the time in which Murphy was living.

The play not only critiques the Irish political situation in the '70s, but also the nature of identity politics, in an attempt to reveal the universal theme of self-expression. Alexandra Poulain argues that *Macushla* is a reworking of Brendan Behan's *The Hostage* "which takes up both the political theme of the play (the critique of identity politics and of a purely destructive nationalism) and its hybridized aesthetics which challenges the tradition of Irish naturalistic drama."¹²⁰ According to Poulain, personal and national identities are "theatrical constructs," a truth which Murphy uses meta-theatricality to disclose.¹²¹ Identifying the characters' need for self-expression, Kathy McArdle writes:

The only path to self-realisation for them all is to learn an alternative language and to try and articulate the tangled mass of their lives through that language. Only by unifying and integrating the Irish consciousness with these deeply buried desires to use the images of American-gangster consciousness and by dovetailing them into each other so that they become present in the heart and mind of the actors will *The Blue Macushla* be allowed to speak to us. This involves allowing the Irishness of the characters and situations to find its own Americanness and to let the play find the unity of which it is capable.¹²²

McArdle was writing in the wake of the play's disastrous failure,¹²³ defending the play's thematic

¹¹⁹ Boland, "Broad Strokes."

¹²⁰ Alexandra Poulain, "The Politics of Performance in *The Hostage* and *The Blue Macushla*," in *Alive in Time: The Enduring Drama of Tom Murphy*, ed. Christopher Murray (Dublin: Carysfort, 2010), 135.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 132.

¹²² Kathy McArdle, "The Blue Macushla: Anatomy of Failure," *Irish University Review* 17, no. 1 (1987): 88-9.

¹²³ The play was taken off after a fortnight of its intended six-week run due to its disastrous box-office takings and hostile reviews. Murphy commented: "I don't apologise for 'The Blue Macushla', but I had lost momentum as a writer of plays. After 16 years in the business and as an Abbey board member, I felt the play should be taken off – it did 28 per cent business" (TCD MS11115/6/2/10). The play received a revival in 1983 by Red Rex (director: Garrett Keogh). Although it did not garner much commercial success or popularity, the

relevance and musing as to how it might best be realised on stage. In the way that the characters drawn on Americanised language and ideas to express themselves, the playwright himself adopts an American genre to express the emotions of dark times, whereby the historical, universal and personal consciousness merge to convey a distinctly fluid, vibrant and complex sense of self. The question is not so much to what extent Irish identity has been Americanised as how to come to terms with the whirlwind of rapid changes wrought on ordinary lives. The liminality of the space offers the possibility for characters to negotiate and navigate their identities, despite the disastrous consequences.

The Blue Macushla is the name of the pub/nightclub in the play. Various public and private spaces making up the club and demonstrate the intricacy of the club as a liminal space. As the stage directions indicate,

It always feels like night down here and, because of the gloom, *nothing is defined as yet*. But it is time to mention the set. The idea is that we are in the belly of a club, in a basement or semi-basement. The club proper is off. Perhaps a half-window lets in a bit of light from the street. The lay-out – theoretical – is that EDDIE’s office is one side and there is a bar on the other side (more properly, it is the back of the bar that serves the club); and there is access to the yard through the bar. And there is a piano somewhere at which one can rehearse a song. From the open space that is the middle, steps lead upstage to a landing; centre of the landing are swing-doors leading to the club. Turning right on the landing leads off to the ‘Hospitality Room’; turning left to other quarters off (like, say, Roscommon’s bedroom). The door to the exterior is a side-door; it probably leads to a lane: a staff-door. (*Macushla*, 159-60, emphasis added)

The space is multi-functional, undefined, ambiguous and dark, allowing for the mysterious plot to unfold. As the owner of the club, Eddie has robbed a bank to finance it, attributing the deed to Erin Go Brath—a nationalist splinter group. The group chases down Eddie and forces him to join them.

reviews of this revival were respectful, and it was felt to improve on the Abbey production.

They use the bar as a base from which to pursue their own political agenda, one that involves torturing and interrogating a suspected British Intelligence defector in the “hospitality room.” The “defector” turns out to be a young priest kidnapped by mistake, whom Eddie must shoot. Meanwhile, Eddie’s best friend Danny, who has served a prison sentence for the crimes they both committed, returns to the club asking for his share. Danny gets romantically involved with Eddie’s girlfriend, the singer Roscommon. She warns the newcomer Danny that “[p]eople aren’t always what they seem” (*Macushla*, 178)—and indeed, the Countess with a fake foreign accent turns out to be Erin Go Brath’s Northern Irish agent. No 1, the head of the group, is unveiled as an upper-class English woman. The young priest that Eddie appears to shoot in the opening scene is in fact the Countess who has been put in his place. Pete, the pianist, turns out to be an undercover Special Branch agent working with a government minister. He resolves the whole situation, allowing Danny and Roscommon to go free. The club is a space of transaction, exchange and capital where vested interests in their disguised form conflict with one another. The space itself is divided into different “splinters” to accommodate the different agendas. Beneath the façade of things, or at the most inner core, corruption and violence lie concealed in the hospitality room.

For Eddie, the club cannot be detached from his sense of self. The club defines his identity. Roscommon accuses Eddie of not truly loving her, and of being completely obsessed with the club instead:

ROSCOMMON. You don’t love no one – you never have. You’re even suspicious of that guy up there, your best’n’oldest buddy. You only love this – club – of yours, only it don’t appear to be yours no longer – *does it?*

EDDIE. (*deadly earnest*). Right, you got it, an’ that’s ’xactly what I’m gonna settle today. It can’t wait no longer. I love this place, I love it more’n anythin’ an’ I’ll do anythin’ for it!

ROSCOMMON. *Anything?*

EDDIE. (*not listening*). This was my hope, now it’s my dream an’ *I* made it.

[...] An’ ain’t sharin’ it with no splinter-boys organisation no longer nor with no new-

come ole buddy neither! [...]. (*Macushla*, 179)

Eddie is obsessed with the place because it is the hope and dream on which he has built his life. Poulain notes that the word “macushla” means “my darling” and “object of desire.”¹²⁴ *Macushla*, however, literally means “my pulse,” from the Irish “*mo chuisle*.”¹²⁵ Not only is the club an *object* of desire, then, but it can also be interpreted as the vein of Eddie’s *subjectivity*.

The spatial constitution of the club further reflects Eddie’s sense of self, one that is split between the public and the private. In a typescript draft of the play, Murphy wrote:

Eddie O’Hara, proprietor of The Blue Macushla pub/nite-club; a poor kid from the gutter, now likes to put on a show and play the big-shot; his public image is flashy and charming, his private image shows his growing desperation which will lead to murder which will lead to his own destruction.¹²⁶

In a later draft, Murphy noted that Eddie’s “private image shows his desperation – which is also manifested in his heavy drinking.”¹²⁷ The Blue Macushla, with all its flashy charms, is the materialised form of Eddie’s projected public image, one that does not match his upbringing (“poor kid from the gutter”). As a result, he privately feels deficient and anxious.

Managing the club is a way of life, allowing for no separation between work and leisure. In sociological terms, Eddie’s role as manager requires significant amount of “emotional labour”:

Emotional labour requires the worker ‘to display publicly an emotion that they may not necessarily feel privately’. For, not only do feelings and emotion ‘shape and lubricate social transactions’, but the work which one does also has significant implications for the ways in which we see ourselves and others see us. It has implications for our sense

¹²⁴ Poulain, “Politics of Performance,” 135.

¹²⁵ “Cuisle,” *New English-Irish Dictionary*, Jan 27, 2021 <<https://www.focloir.ie/en/dictionary/ei/chuisle>>.

¹²⁶ TCD MS11115/1/13/3.

¹²⁷ TCD MS11115/1/13/4.

of self and for our identities. Pub work is ‘service work’, which involves a whole range of emotional ‘performances’, a feature of many routine face-to-face jobs.¹²⁸

Eddie’s public/private split is a protective mechanism to deal with the stresses and pressures arising from all areas of his life. Eddie’s story, his manners and way of being exhibit the strategies and practices that occur in the everyday realm. Even though the performative aspect of the play satirises and deconstructs the national politics of 1970s Ireland, these everyday practices disrupt the identification of the self with the state of nation.

The public side of the play is given a twist or is ironically juxtaposed with other theatrical aspects, undercutting its own performativity. For example, when Roscommon sings “Macushla” (“That death is a dream and that love is for aye / Then awaken, Macushla, awake from thy dreaming / My blue-eyed Macushla, awaken to stay”), Eddie simultaneously recites:

I, number 19, division Dublin North-Central, do solemnly swear that while life is left me I will actively seek to establish and defend a united Ireland. That I will execute all orders coming from the proper authority to the best of my ability. That I will foster a spirit of unity, nationality and brotherly love among the entire people of Ireland. I swear that I take this obligation without reservation and that any violation thereof merits the severest punishment. (*Macushla*, 159)

Roscommon’s romantic performance of the song is juxtaposed with Eddie reciting the oath, one of the classic instances of an enforced nationalist inculcation of order. Danny asks Roscommon “people are talkin’ funny here: where did the Malones move to, Molly an’ her little brother Pa’? [...] [Eddie] likes yiz all to talk – American?” to which she replies, “[h]e likes us to *perform* all sorts o’ ways” (172). Pete playing jazz variations on Irish tunes is another example of the performative intersection of different cultures.

¹²⁸ Watson, “‘Home From Home,’” 210.

The multiple layering of performances is evident from the start. In Scene Three, the very beginning of the flashback, Pete is playing the piano, Mike is watching “them ’Merican girls” from the parade, while Eddie is reading the newspaper:

EDDIE. (*sharply*). How many guests we got comin’ tonight, I said! (*Picks up newspaper.*) ‘Cabinet Cabal Calls Secret Session.’ (*To himself.*) Ca’net Caballs, huh? ‘Heinous Crimes To Cause Feelings of Indignation And Rage.’ Listen to that rage ’n ’indignation out there. (*The bands in the distance.*)

There is a cry or groan from the Hospitality Room. EDDIE wondering could there be a link between what he is now reading and what is going on upstairs. (163)

The play is set on St. Patrick’s Day and brass bands are marching just outside the club, while the actions inside are grim. The national celebration of St. Patrick’s Day is another form of performance, and its occurrence outside the club (off stage) further accentuates the absurdity of the situation. Such simultaneous performances inside and outside the club serve to undermine nationalist discourses.

The opening monologue reveals the private side of Eddie. He is talking to the hooded figure, whom he thinks is the young priest. The identity of the figure is completely masked, as the hostage is hooded and gagged. Eddie has “an air of crazy detachment” and “he could be almost talking to himself” (153). Eddie begins the play with these words:

We become quite int’mates you’n’me, kid-priest, an’ lot in common. You is from big fam’ly too: I was readin’. Can’t remember ’xactly how many o’ us they was, but you wasn’t born in Lady O’Perpetual Succour Mansions. Why, with ’n address like that, even before unemployment become unemployment, an’ you ’proached a place lookin’ for work you was ’rested for all sorts o’intentions. So non o’ us workin’ ’cept Mom. Yeah. (153)

Eddie goes on to talk about his poor family background: his crazy brothers who had “legs sawed off” and were sent to rehab; his poor older sister Susie getting pregnant, stabbing her husband, and working for the “Bishopricks.” Eddie’s mother is in an institution. The O’Hara family, Eddie’s childhood, is scourged by drugs and unemployment. He ends the monologue by pulling the gun trigger.

O’Hara’s quite a name up there, cops in all hours hide’n’sseek about the place, maybe that’s what made him do it. Tim. A overdose o’ somethin’. Rat poison? Could be. An’ I figure that’s the straw at last broke our Mom’s back. Naaw, never went to see her. What for? Yeh, bishopricks. But only part o’ one family’s case history an’ I’m feelin’ kinda tired. (*Sighs at the gun.*) Always knew somehow’d hafta use one o’these. Thought was held fas’nation for me alright. Sorry, kid-priest, it had to be you but Jesus went out with the fairies. (*He shoots the figure in the chair.*) An’ then o’course they was me. I just wantedta, yeah, forget. I just wantedta become a person . . . But where did this story begin?

Special lighting effect for flashback: (154)

Beginning the play with the shooting is both a theatrical and popular cinematic device which immediately grabs the audience’s attention and arouses their curiosity. The flashback or framing device is a later addition in the development of the play. In the early drafts from MS11115/1/13/1-11, the prologue starts with Eddie entering the stage to introduce Roscommon for her performance. The addition of the Christmas day setting (later to become St. Patrick’s Day) and the frame device is observed in MS11115/1/13/12, which begins with Eddie’s monologue. The flashback structure further emphasises Eddie’s private side particularly when compared to the flashy entrance that Murphy originally envisaged. Eddie’s identification with the priest through their shared background, feeling as if they were “int’mates,” makes the killing resonate almost as a self-murder. Eddie’s cry—“I just wantedta become a person”—shows the search for rootedness and authentic identity among those inhabiting the underworld.

In his decision to revive the play, director Garrett Keogh wanted to pose the question: “if our

successful people are successful because they take seriously the gangsterism of the '30s and '40s movies (a motif of the play) then why shouldn't every poor kid in the city do the same?"¹²⁹ Unlike the original Abbey production, directed by Jim Sheridan, which used "an elaborate and expensive set – all chrome and velvet," the Red Rex production in 1983 kept the setting "basic: scaffolding draped in cloth."¹³⁰ It was designed by performance artist Nigel Rolfe, and the company transformed the Mansion House Round Room into tiered seating supplied by Fossett's circus. In his review of the original 1980 production, Colm Cronin described Brian Collins's set as follows:

A watering-hole of chromatic splendour (and mirrored opulence) it works on several levels and makes superb use of the huge stage area in every direction. As dressed it was an open-ended invitation to indolence in the company of ritzy birds and prohibition booze and its atmosphere smacked unashamedly of sins.¹³¹

Eddie's fancy night-club/pub is fully materialised in the spectacular space of the theatre. However superficial the glamorous illusion, theatre completes it, making the fantasy a reality. This emphasis perhaps missed the more dingy, shadowy, and poignant aspects of the play. As opposed to the Abbey production, which emphasised the charming public façade, Red Rex's decision to minimise the tone and focus on the private aspirations of the "poor kid in the city" resonated better with the audience.

¹²⁹ Ronan Farren, "A Second Chance for 'Macushla,'" *The Arts*, Aug 27, 1983, TCD MS11115/6/2/10.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*

¹³¹ Colm Cronin, "B-Movie Cutouts," *Hibernia*, March 13, 1980, TCD MS11115/6/2/10.



Macushla, Mar 6, 1980 [Photographs]. ATDA at NUIG, 0780_PH_0001, p.1

In the programme note for *Macushla*, Brian Friel famously praised Murphy for his “theatrical language and the pure theatricality of that language. It is as close as one can get, or should wish to get, to poetry in drama.” He wrote:

The most distinctive, the most restless, the most obsessive imagination at work in the Irish theatre today is Tom Murphy’s. It is essentially a Gaelic imagination – antic, bleak, agitated, bewildered, capable of great cruelty and great compassion. It is the kind of imagination that in a different culture would probably find its voice in music or painting. In Ireland it inclines intuitively to the service of theatre – or religion. Both seem to offer it passing release, public consolation, and the illusion of completion. [...] The only constant in life is the yearning for something that must be better than what is. The only certainty is that that yearning can never be satisfied. [...] Again and again Murphy’s work grapples with those fears and worries and angers that all of us share.¹³²

The pub and club in the three plays function as both theatre and sanctuary. According to Tuan, “[h]uman places become vividly real through dramatization. Identity of place is achieved by

¹³² Brian Friel, “Exiles,” March 6, 1980, *Macushla*, Mar 6, 1980 [Programme], ATDA at NUIG, 0780_MPG_01, p. 9.

dramatizing the aspirations, needs, and functional rhythms of personal and group life.”¹³³ The characters’ private yearnings and public recognition join together in the liminal space of the pub, which comes to form its own theatrical underworld. This private/public dynamic not only deconstructs national discourse and politics, but also addresses the universal human need for self-realisation and belonging.

Macushla is, despite its box office disappointment, an important theatrical experiment for Murphy. The exaggerated performances and the changing structures of the everyday underworld in a modernising Ireland expose the comic mismatch in form, in experience and in sensibility. As one of the provisional titles for *Conversations*, “Images,” hints at, the borrowed American neon signs on an Irish pub in *Macushla* present a ridiculous veneer. It is therefore a play which further enriches our understanding of liminal spaces—particularly when read alongside *Conversations* and *House*—in seeing the movements and clashes of cultures and the ways they are blurred, transposed, and felt in people’s everyday lives. As Friel puts it, Murphy “grapples with those fears and worries and angers that all of us share” in a society that is in constant flux, in a state of liminality.

Conversations was included as part of Murphy’s *After Tragedy* collection.¹³⁴ Nicholas Grene argues that in choosing the title *After Tragedy*, Murphy “tacitly accepts that he works, like Beckett, in a post-tragic period of drama: *Conversations*, *Gigli*, *Bailegangaire* are not remotely like conventional tragedies.” Yet,

there is also an acknowledgement that he is in pursuit of some equivalent of tragic form, that he is trying for it as well as subsequent to it. [...] The despair, suffering, and anguish with which his characters live cannot simply be talked through to resolution. But they can be voiced in the pure gestures of singing, in the archaic mode of storytelling. [...] the three plays [...] enact the human ability through the fictive to give lives an unironic shape and meaning to which we, the audience in the theatre, can assent.¹³⁵

¹³³ Tuan, *Space and Place*, 178.

¹³⁴ Tom Murphy, *After Tragedy: Conversations on a Homecoming, The Gigli Concert, Bailegangaire* (London and New York: Methuen, 1988).

¹³⁵ Grene, “Talking, Singing,” 223–4.

Tragedy is not “dead” for Murphy; instead, it has seeped through into our ordinary lives and can be expressed by “talking, singing and storytelling.” Liminal spaces enable lives—their “despair, suffering and anguish”—to be given shape and meaning in a post-tragic world. The church in *Sanctuary* and the therapist home-office in *Gigli*, themselves liminal, are specialised places for deeper philosophical, spiritual, and emotional debates. Strangers find refuge in shared storytelling and come to terms with their traumatic pasts. Sacred spaces offer the opportunity for magic and “healing,” ideas which seem to have become demystified and obsolete in the modern world.

Murphy resuscitates those ideas in this disenchanted world, perceiving the possibility in a desolate church and quack therapist’s home. It is in the gaps and cracks in orthodoxy and traditional structure that Murphy finds new means to achieve human transcendence. Considering that the ’70s and ’80s were Murphy’s most prolific and defining years as a playwright, chapters 3 and 4 (as well as *Bailegangaire* in chapter 5) display many overlaps. The liminal is the sacred and the sacred, liminal. Nonetheless, the way characters interact with the space around them differs in the respective chapters. Chapter 3 emphasised the characters’ attachment to and obsession with “home,” while *Sanctuary* and *Gigli* explore the crisis in faith and existence in a society whose people are estranged from one another, and where spaces (and their functions) have become more divided and specialised. The two plays demonstrate, even more clearly, Murphy’s attempt to integrate and transmute liminality into the sacred realm.

Chapter IV. Sacred Spaces: A Spiritual Quest

In *The Empty Space*, Peter Brook writes:

All the forms of sacred art have certainly been destroyed by bourgeois values, but this sort of observation does not help our problem. It is foolish to allow a revulsion from bourgeois forms to turn into a revulsion from needs that are common to all men: if the need for a true contact with a sacred invisibility through the theatre still exists, then all possible vehicles must be re-examined.¹

Brook defines “The Holy Theatre” as “The Theatre of the Invisible-Made-Visible,”² where the stage is a place in which the invisible is realised, one that fulfils inherent human needs. In Tom Murphy’s *The Sanctuary Lamp* and *The Gigli Concert* the characters’ longing to achieve a kind of self-transcendence manifests and materialises in the sacred space of the theatre. Brook posits that “we are re-discovering that a holy theatre is still what we need,” ending the chapter with a question: “[s]o where should we look for it? In the clouds or on the ground?”³ In an interview with Mária Kurdi, Murphy opined that “there is no deus ex machina in our times, in modern drama, to descend and resolve our problems; all the Gods can provide is a venue.”⁴ Thus, Murphy sets *Sanctuary* in an empty church, where characters, in their spiritual quest, must figure out the meaning of life for themselves. The church in *Sanctuary* has been stripped of its sacredness in the conventional sense, and the shabby office in *Gigli* is sordidly secular, psychoanalysis having replaced God and traditional religion. Both spaces are set aside for a ritual which involves “confessions” and the salvation of the soul. In the process of storytelling and performance, the theatre space becomes sacred in a renewed way. The characters in *Gigli*, in their artistic and philosophical quest, transform the shabby dwelling into an

¹ Brook, *The Empty Space*, 54.

² Ibid., 47.

³ Ibid., 72.

⁴ Mária Kurdi, “An Interview with Tom Murphy,” *Irish Studies Review* 12, no. 2 (2004): 237.

opera house. Instead of looking for the sacred “in the clouds,” Murphy’s theatre fixes its gaze “on the ground,” inviting the audience to join the abyssal journey the characters undertake, and to find some form of redemption and hope in the end.

The term “abyssal journey” is taken from Alexandra Poulain’s reading of four Murphy plays—*Optimism, Sanctuary, Gigli* and *Too Late for Logic* (1989)—situating them within the context of initiation rituals. In going through the initiation process, she explains, neophytes attain another mode of being.⁵ Poulain uses Arnold van Gennep’s rite of passage and Victor Turner’s liminality to show how Murphy’s characters undergo different initiation rites; they descend into the underworld, plunge into the abyss, undergo physical torture and experience symbolic death and resurrection.⁶ As mentioned in the previous chapter on liminal spaces, it is in the first phase of separation—demarcating the sacred—that is distinctive of the settings in this chapter. Unlike Poulain’s analysis, this chapter focuses on two plays—*Sanctuary* and *Gigli*—because both are anchored in one specialised space: a space clearly separated for the ritual, whereby theatrical transformation occurs when *strangers* form a “spontaneous communitas.” Spontaneous communitas, in Turner’s words, is formed when people

obtain a flash of lucid mutual understanding on the existential level, when they feel that all problems, not just their problems, could be resolved, whether emotional or cognitive, if only the group which is felt (in the first person) as ‘essentially us’ could sustain its intersubjective illumination. This illumination may succumb to the dry light of next day’s disjunction, the application of singular and personal reason to the ‘glory’ of communal understanding. But when the mood, style, or “fit” of spontaneous communitas is upon us, we place a high value on personal honesty, openness, and lack of pretensions and pretentiousness. We feel that it is important to relate directly to another person as he presents himself in the here-and-now, to understand him in a sympathetic [...] way, free from the culturally defined encumbrances of his role, status,

⁵ The concept of initiation which entails an “ontological mutation of the existential regime,” is developed by Mircea Eliade. *Ibid.*, 69. See Mircea Eliade’s *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans., W. R. Trask (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1959).

⁶ Poulain, *Homo Famelicus*, 70.

reputation, class, caste, sex or other structural niche. Individuals who interact with one another in the mode of spontaneous *communitas* become totally absorbed into a single synchronized, fluid event.⁷

Turner argues that there is something “magical,” a “feeling of endless power,” in the personal interactions within the spontaneous *communitas*. Murphy’s bringing together of strangers differs from his other plays of homecoming and family dynamics. The temporary bonding of strangers in the shared ritual space comes closest to the experience of theatre. Murphy’s painful dramatisation of spontaneous *communitas* thus functions as an affirmation of theatre and its possibility.

Murphy rebuilds the magical and imaginative world of childhood—the sacred everyday—in theatre. In “The Sacred in Everyday Life,” Michel Leiris recounts the games he played and adventures he had with his brother as a child. In the eyes of a child, certain everyday spaces, such as the bathroom, appeared sacred:

compared to the parlour [...] the bathroom can be looked on as a cavern, a cave where one comes to be inspired by contacting the deepest, darkest subterranean powers. There, opposite the right-hand sacred of parental majesty, *the sinister magic of a left-hand sacred* took shape. There it was, also, that we felt the most cut off, the *most separate from everyone else, but also the closest to each other; the most shoulder to shoulder; the most in harmony, in this embryonic secret society* that we two brothers formed. All in all, for us it was that something eminently sacred that any sort of pact is.⁸

As Leiris defines it, the sacred in the everyday is something “prestigious, unusual, exotic, dangerous, ambiguous, forbidden, secret, breathtaking.”⁹ Murphy finds the sacred not in the conventional and institutionalised realm, but in the theatrical space where the everyday and ritual merge. By continuing

⁷ Turner, *Ritual to Theatre*, 47-8.

⁸ Michel Leiris, “The Sacred in Everyday Life,” in *Everyday Life: Critical Concepts in Media and Cultural Studies* vol. 1, ed. Ben Highmore (London: Routledge, 2012), 58, emphasis added.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 62.

everyday habits, language and rhythms with this separated secularised space, Murphy creates a new theatrical sacred that is at once banal and spiritual. If in the dancehalls and the pubs—the more recognisably everyday spaces—Murphy found the potential for bonding in the inherent theatricality and liminality of the space, in the sacred spaces set apart for special rituals, the characters' everyday habits, routines and desires creatively subvert and re-make the space into their own personal and spiritual refuge.

The Sanctuary Lamp (1975): Restoring Faith

In 1970, the Advisory Committee for the International Commission for the English on Liturgy (ICEL) saw Murphy's *Crucial Week* at the Abbey Theatre. Moved by the play, they asked Murphy to join their work overseeing the translations of liturgical texts and common prayers used by many Catholic churches. In a typescript letter written on November 2, 1970, Father John M. Shea, the Executive Secretary of ICEL, outlined the reasons for this request:

Father Sigler [...] has been working recently in the area of the relationship of drama and ritual, especially in the processes involved in the creation of good drama and good ritual. [...] the group tends to be somewhat 'ecclesiastical', and we realize that it would be to our advantage to have some fresh, young blood transfused into the committee. [...] we feel the need to have the Irish point of view represented and the talent of the Irish working for us.¹⁰

Accepting the invitation in his response on December 5, 1970, Murphy made it clear from the outset that he is “not a convinced Catholic” and “would not wish the brand of Catholicism [he] received on anyone”; he did “not accept Catholicism as ‘the one true church,’ particularly in these ecumenical

¹⁰ TCD MS 11115/9/1/13/4/18.

days.”¹¹ Despite his atheism or ambivalence toward Catholicism, the idea of words carrying a spiritual essence—of seeing drama as ritual and ritual as drama—excited Murphy. It is often said that Murphy’s Catholic childhood shaped *Sanctuary*; however, his four-year involvement with ICEL forms another important pillar in his artistic imagination and theatrical practice.

Murphy’s honesty and literary sensibility are manifested in his engagement with the liturgy; his preference for more simple and direct translations of Latin and insistence on cutting out embellishment, as well as on using singular instead of communal pronouns for silent prayers, all show his own truthful consideration of and contribution to ICEL’s work. For instance, Murphy criticised and suggested revisions to some of the sample prayers in a letter written on April 6, 1971:

Generally, I found the prayers too cold, impersonal and formal. I think that prayers tend too much towards the form of the Creed, the manifesto type of prayer; and I find that there is little that caters for the spiritual in a declaration. The words are not simple enough, and they do not suggest the spiritual privacy, or encourage a meditative basis that, I think, prayers should have. [...] I have tried to put an emphasis on the spirit of man – God’s spirit in man. I have tried to simplify them and make them more direct: Simple words with which one can identify; and I have avoided the “communal plural” (Grant us....fill our hearts...) for more personal singular (Help me.....fill my heart...) This, by its directness and personal aspect, encourages reflection, and lends a greater responsibility and dignity to the person who is praying.¹²

Murphy opposed sentimentality in prayers: in a letter written on February 1, 1972, Murphy rebuked one of the translators for playing the “seeking-for-an-affect-game”; the translator, he believed, was “trying too hard to be poetic, and very often the result is pedantic or archaic.”¹³ Murphy instead suggested that the translator should “think in terms of speaking rhythms (balanced prose style), to

¹¹ TCD MS11115/9/1/13/4/21.

¹² TCD MS 11115/9/1/13/4/23.

¹³ TCD MS 11115/9/1/13/4/3-4.

leave the prayer-as-spiritual-experience up to the congregation (not to try to do the lot).”¹⁴ In a handwritten note on November 26, 1973, Murphy rejected the translation of Psalm Prayers: “they are exceedingly dull, infertile of anything and smack of a slavish job of work done in a prayer factory.”¹⁵ On May 12, 1974, Murphy made his final comment regarding antiphons:

One of the things still missing is the quality I would call a ‘generosity’ [*sic*] in the language. So many of these antiphons suggest man’s exultation in feeling himself as part of god; there is an unspoken alleluia in them and – to me, at any rate – there should be a suggestion of spontaneity about them. They need the rounder and more generous sound of proclamation. [...] The antiphons will have to say something other than the boring business of searching out the gratuitous and incomprehensible from among the antiphons and doing something about them.¹⁶

Murphy’s engagement with the liturgy demonstrates his struggle with language as a medium of expressing authentic religious experience and of contemplation, one that comes from and speaks to the heart. Striving for directness while rejecting formality dovetails with his conviction about the organic spontaneity of language.

Even though Murphy attempted to maintain his integrity while serving the Advisory Committee, he eventually no longer felt qualified for the role. In his resignation letter on March 27, 1974, Murphy explained:

My reason for resigning is the personal one of ‘unbelief’; too often, I have found that I could not accept the content of prayers, rites and texts that ICEL must necessarily deal in. I do not think that unbelief is a bad thing; but I now consider that nothing is contributed to Truth by my helping to fashion prayers, which I do not believe in myself, for others.¹⁷

¹⁴ TCD MS 11115/9/1/13/4/3-4.

¹⁵ TCD MS 11115/9/1/13/4/5.

¹⁶ TCD MS 11115/9/1/13/4/16.

¹⁷ TCD MS11115/9/1/13/4/27.

Murphy's honesty was appreciated by the committee. As Reverend Harold Winstone's response on April 2, 1974 to Murphy's resignation reveals, he was regarded by the committee as "the voice of honest-to-goodness common sense."¹⁸ The experience of grappling with the words for prayers in ICEL shaped Murphy's conviction that spirituality cannot be found in the traditional religious setting, but only in secular transcendence.

Many critics discuss Murphy's anti-Catholic viewpoints as a "demolition of orthodoxies" simultaneously exemplifies "a common human need for belief."¹⁹ Joseph O'Leary perceptively concludes that "[f]ar from suggesting a replacement of God by man, this gesture [renewing the candle light] seems rather to call on Christians to renew with human substance the emblems of faith, freeing them from clerical disfigurement, and to create a culture in which a sense of the Presence can be more effectively communicated."²⁰ Csilla Bertha argues that, by transcending belief and unbelief, "Murphy uses the sacred place and objects together with scraps of the liturgical structure and language so that everything lends itself to a reading of a renouncing of Christianity but, at the same time also to that of an embracing of a faith in divinely animated interhuman relations."²¹ Fintan O'Toole's reading of the play focuses on drawing parallels with the Greek trilogy *Oresteia*, pointing to a renewed political order as well as the transmutation of "the tragic into the apocalyptic"—going, that is, "beyond tragedy."²² While differing in their conclusions, the critics' interpretations all point towards an encounter with a transformed and renewed sense of spirituality in the play.

Murphy's *Sanctuary* is set in a desolate space – a church that has lost its function in serving people's spiritual needs. "The S. Lamp, with its b.g. of a dying institutional church," writes Murphy in an early notebook comment,

¹⁸ TCD MS 11115/9/1/13/4/26.

¹⁹ Desmond Maxwell, "New Lamps for Old: The Theatre of Tom Murphy," *Theatre Research International* 15, no. 1 (1990): 61.

²⁰ Joseph O'Leary, "Looping the Loop with Tom Murphy: Anticlericalism as Double Bind," *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review* 81, no. 321 (1992): 48.

²¹ Csilla Bertha, "'Rituals of a Lost Faith?': Murphy's Theatre of the Possible," in *Alive in Time: The Enduring Drama of Tom Murphy: New Essays*, ed. Christopher Murray (Dublin: Carysfort, 2010), 278.

²² O'Toole, *Politics of Magic*, 188-201.

is an abstraction from life of the human condition in terms of isolation and loneliness, being intensified by grief to such an extent, that the recreation of the cry for help, in terms of desperate feeling, pushes man inexorably towards the finding of the divine within himself, by his bestowing of forgiveness upon others, and towards the realisation of the efficacy of the 2nd of the 2 great commandments, love thy neighbour, in the human expression – thereof!²³

The lamp symbolises hope in a secular world driven by individualism. As Nicholas Grene puts it: “[t]he play dismantles the church, reveals it as an irrelevant obsolete institution, a disused space; the sanctuary lamp, however, remains as an image of transcendence, man’s capacity for redemption through forgiveness in a de-deified Christianity.”²⁴ The stage offers a sacred space for Murphy’s humanist spirituality or spiritual humanism. The “lamp” is indeed an important symbol of the play; however, it is in the shared re-making of the “sanctuary” by the characters that they can temporarily overcome their literal and metaphysical homelessness. As Murphy emphasises, it was humankind who lit the lamp. The characters’ shared engagement and storytelling form a ritual that creates a new meaning in theatre. More than the characters, perhaps, it is the act of lighting, the most humane gesture, that becomes central in the play.

Harry, a circus strongman who has left his team and has resorted to begging, is offered a job in the church as caretaker by the disillusioned yet kind Monsignor. Once in the church, Harry first familiarises himself with the lamp. In his monologue, he converses with the lamp as if talking to a friend:

(Addressing the lamp again.) I won’t be staying here for nothing! . . . You get nothing for nothing, that’s business, isn’t it? [...] And we’re all God’s children, whatever religion . . .
(He begins to feel he may have misinterpreted the lamp.) [...] Time passing . . . My spirit is unwell too. They’ve been trying to crush my life. [...] So, supposing we can come to

²³ TCD MS11115/1/10/2.

²⁴ Grene, *Playwright Adventurer*, 128.

some arrangement, I have every confidence I can get well here. Supposing in exchange for the accommodation I engage to make good conversation – break the back of night for you? (*To himself.*) Alleviate the holy loneliness. (*To the lamp.*) But there would be a time limit. (*Sanctuary*, 110)

In the play, Harry's acquaintance with the lamp occurs within this one monologue. He feels out of place and frightened in the church, but gradually familiarises himself with the space and the lamp. He identifies with and projects his own loneliness onto the lamp.

Between the first draft of the play—written in 1974, and titled “The Trinity of Jesus Freaks”—and the next full draft in 1975, Murphy further elaborated the details of the character in prose format (“A Couple of Jesus Freaks”). The prose captures the mood of the earlier scenes in greater detail, with Harry's emotional change occurring subtly over a few days:

At first he hated his new job. [...] The silence of the place was cold and frightening, and Harry kept to the carpeted areas as far as possible as he went about his chores. Stranger still was the feeling he had of being watched. [...] The first time he had plunged the church into darkness on his own, the back of his neck froze and his hair stood on end. He was not alone. In his temporary blindness light breezes touched him, carrying strange and sickly odours to chill the marrow of a strong man who had taken for granted the vital smells of sawdust, sweat and dung. [...] On subsequent evenings things were only marginally better. [...] At a moment when there was nothing but fear in his mind, he stopped, turned fully to the red lamp and said, quite simply, “Goodnight Jesus”. Without further ado he left the church, unhurriedly, though smartly. On that simple civil basis things improved. From then on, Harry could look at the red lamp any time of the day or night.²⁵

²⁵ TCD MS11115/1/10/6.

Harry's psychological state of unsettlement and agitation makes the silence and darkness in the church frightening. Nevertheless, in his acceptance of fear and simple acknowledgement of the lamp, he begins to feel more at ease. After a long process of familiarising himself with the lamp, Harry shares his own story of his contortionist wife Olga conducting an affair with his juggler friend Francisco. In the final text, much of the backstory is compressed into a single night, to synchronise with the audience, who meet the actors-as-characters for the first time in the evening. We learn from the story that Harry and Olga's daughter Teresa had died, and to "punish" his fellow performers, Harry has left the circus just before an important event.

In the play, the casual and confessional pouring out of words to the lamp and the sense that these confessions have been heard, imbue the cold church space with warmth. Harry's monologue addresses not only the lamp, but also the audience. Like the lamp, the audience is a silent presence in the theatre space. Harry's gradual familiarisation with the lamp and the space flows together with the audience's gradual immersion in and involvement with the characters and the play. The shared experience and the shared sense of place are crucial in forming Turner's "spontaneous communitas," both in the fictional world of the play and in the lived experience of the audience.

Having poured out his own emotions and thoughts to the lamp, Harry in turn assumes the position of the lamp by becoming a non-judgmental listener to Maudie: a sixteen-year-old girl who has been abused by her grandparents and has suffered the loss of both her mother and her baby Stephen, born after an unwanted pregnancy. Harry, remembering his own daughter, offers Maudie food, comfort and care. Maudie shares her traumatic story with Harry, recounting "dreams" in which her dead mother would visit her. By sharing the story, Maudie comes to terms with the forgiveness that her mother showed in her declaration that "Oh, by the way, Maudie, I'm very happy now" (*Sanctuary*, 119). Maudie "smiles her personal triumph and Harry complements [*sic*]" (119). Harry tries to comfort her by making her laugh and sing. He refers to Maudie's fondness for climbing lampposts in search of the feeling at the top, where everything seems to make sense:

HARRY (*indicates a pillar, jocosely inviting her to climb it*). Would you?

MAUDIE (*then laughing, drying her tears.*) It's too fat.

HARRY. Do you know any songs? Hmm? [...]

MAUDIE (sings). 'Put your head upon my pillow; hold your warm and tender body close to mine; hear the whistle of the raindrops blowing up against my window; and make believe you love me one more time; for the good times, for the good times, for the good times.'

HARRY. That was very nice. Hmm? (121-2)

After this shared moment, they change the church into their own secret shelter:

HARRY. [...] We can be getting it ready. (*He starts to remove the brooms etc. from the confessional.*) The horizontal gives better protection against the breezes. So, we'll lay it on the floor. I think we're safe now against the Monsignor showing up.

MAUDIE. And there are plenty of cushions and things about.

HARRY. [...] We can get in a little store of tea, sugar, brown bread and butter tomorrow. And jam. Actually, the most thing we need – it crossed my mind today – a little extractor fan for in there. (*The sacristy.*) With a little extractor fan no odours of cooking about in the morning. Would you like a drink of water? (*She nods.*) [...]

MAUDIE. We could stay here forever!

HARRY (*lowering the confessional to a horizontal position on the floor*). Hup! Hup! Voilà! (*They laugh at their confessional-bed. They are delighted with themselves*). (122-3)

They rearrange the confessional box into a bed, think of ways to cook and make themselves a temporary home. Unlike the house in which her grandparents mistreat her, Maudie feels safe and happy in this makeshift home to the extent that she wants to “stay here forever.” The bond that has been formed between Harry and Maudie is the true foundation of home. It is closer to the meaning of congregation within the church, which Francisco criticises as “the great middle-man industry,” populated by “predators that have been mass-produced out of the loneliness and isolation of people”

(154). It is not in formal gathering but in personal interaction that the space becomes sacred and meaningful.

The characters' personal interactions, habits and rituals of homemaking form a space that is at the intersection between the everyday and the sacred. For instance, just as Maudie is talking to Francisco, Harry arrives with their fish and chips: "HARRY has taken out his penknife to divide the fish between himself and MAUDIE; he excludes FRANCISCO. Though feigning casualness and affecting to ignore FRANCISCO, his movements are tense and deliberate" (*Sanctuary*, 135). While attempting to ignore Francisco, he tells Maudie: "I took the liberty, Maudie, of getting some fish and chips. Not enough money for two pieces and they were actually sold out of cod. But never mind, haddock's very nice too" (135). Francisco's sarcastic remarks and snide comments about religion are interrupted by Harry asking Maudie, "[n]ot too much vinegar I hope, Maudie?" (135) and "[n]ot too much salt, I hope, Maudie?" (136). The meal is evocative of the biblical story of the loaves and the fishes (though unlike the indefinite supply Harry is limited to one haddock here). The ordinariness of the food and conversation brings a new dimension to the church space, which is otherwise used primarily for mass and religious congregation. The everyday moment interrupts the "sacred" space. The profanely natural way the characters interact in the space adds to the formation of the "spontaneous communitas," an antidote to vaguely absurd formality of the congregation within the church.²⁶

Maudie shares a story with Francisco—this time of her baby Stephen's death and being taken care of by the nuns. Francisco's insistence on calling Maudie "Maud" has sexual undertones. Maud is what the "bigger boys" used to call her. Maudie does not understand this element of the exchange. Francisco's foul-mouthed language only makes her laugh. Francisco shares his theories and thoughts on religion:

God made the world, right? and fair play to him. What has he done since? Tell me.

²⁶ In the 1975 version, there is a scene showing the mass service, with the congregation praying together and a young priest giving a long sermon (TCD MS11115/1/10/11-13). When staged, this would have served as a stark contrast to the way the three "freaks" relate to one another.

Right, I'll tell you. Evaporated himself. When they painted his toe-nails and turned him into a church he lost his ambition, gave up learning, stagnated for a while, then gave up even that, said fuck it, forget it, and became a vague pain in his own and everybody else's arse. (*MAUDIE laughs at the four letter words.*) [...] Who's going to forgive the Gods, hmm? (*Laughs.*) [...] There's no such thing as forgiveness. (*Sanctuary*, 128-9)

Francisco's vulgar and ordinary language, punctuating an inadvertently profound religious reflection, gives us an insight into his personal anguish and authentic human self. His blasphemous statements continue throughout the play: when Maudie asks what a Jesuit is, Francisco replies "[i]t is a distortion of a Jesus with sex in the head and tendencies towards violence!" (136). He dismisses Maudie's belief in forgiveness; however, despite his cynicism, Francisco is quietly reconciled with Harry as the play progresses. Although it is not made explicit, there is a sense that Francisco has forgiven Harry and has been forgiven in return by the end of the play.

Harry feels betrayed because Francisco had an affair with his wife; however, as Francisco relates his version of the story, the scene becomes more complicated. Prior to embarking on the affair, Francisco felt abandoned by Harry, believing that he had betrayed their friendship by indulging in "middle-class values" (138):

We must have been the first pair of Bohemians around these parts. The laughs we had, Har. [...] Remember the little yellow plastic bucket? [...] always laughing, we'd wash a few cars and we had enough to get by until tomorrow. [...] But of course, that had to end. My best friend deserted me. Got married, middle-class values, the lot, a little woman [...] Respectability, new shoes – (138)

Harry defends himself: "I always believed in things. And when you have nothing and you believe in nothing, you have nothing at all!" (142). In the published text, Francisco reacts to the statement merely by saying that he has a few things. In the manuscript draft, however, he explains himself further: "[a] few things I keep proudly to myself. Like I can be proud of not being like others pretending they

believe in ridiculous things. Like, I'm not impressed by this big shell (CHURCH) or by television or by – Like I can be proud of my loathing. I believe in my loathing for crap.”²⁷ Francisco then delivers a fervent speech that is the culmination of his anarchic vision of Christianity:

FRANCISCO. I have a dream, I have a dream! The day is coming, the second coming, the final judgment, the not too distant future, before that simple light of man: when Jesus, Man, total man, will call to his side the goats – ‘Come ye blessed!’ Yea, call to his side all those rakish, dissolute, suicidal, fornicating goats, taken in adultery and what-have-you. And proclaim to the coonics, blush for shame, you blackguards, be off with you, you wretches, depart from ye accursed complicated affliction! And that, my dear brother and sister, is my dream, my hope, my vision and my belief. (*He comes down from the pulpit and kneels on one knee before HARRY.*) Your blessing, Har.

HARRY (*knife in his hand*). Would you – would you die for your belief?

FRANCISCO (*indicates that he is already kneeling.*) You kill for yours? (*Short pause. Rising.*) Then put away your sword. (*Sanctuary, 154-5*)

Francisco ends the speech with a Christ-like offering of himself as a scapegoat and when that gesture is refused by Harry, some form of reconciliation follows. Harry reassesses his conviction and “compulsion to do this – terrible thing” (102), which he mentioned to Monsignor at the very beginning of the play: “(*Reconsiders.*) [...] She’s gone and left him. Olga – y’know? [...] That’s all . . . (*He is near tears.*) Are you dumb? . . . I believe . . . Help” (156). Francisco’s story enables Harry to grieve for Teresa and for Olga, when it is revealed that she has died from a drugs overdose. The scene is poignant as Harry, the strongman, accepts his human limitations and shows his most vulnerable emotions, crying out for help.

The play has a circular structure, shaped around the passing on of stories among the “Trinity”

²⁷ TCD MS11115/1/10/4.

constructed of Harry, Maudie and Francisco. The lamp's warmth, once ignited, can be passed around and live on in other human hearts. As the stage directions in the last scene illustrate, "HARRY replaces the candle in the sanctuary lamp. A touch of ceremony about it all. He returns and sits on a corner of the confessional. They have talked themselves sober" (158). Harry has a verbal tic, "y'know?"; Francisco, too, repeats "[k]now what I mean?" throughout his speech. Grene suggests that the characters, with their recurrent phrases, are gesturing "towards the individual worlds in which they are locked, reaching out ineffectually towards the possibility of shared knowledge. Communication can never be more than partial."²⁸ Yet their meeting in the church, "in all its fractious dissonance, achieves some sort of solace for all of them."²⁹ The play ends with Harry's "y'know?" When presented as the final line, the phrase carries a different weight. As Murphy explained in his notes, "For H, that final 'y'know?' is saying: 'that's the story; that's the nightmare I've been through' y'know?"³⁰ In this instance, Harry is not only reaching out to Francisco, but also to the audience. The story is shared with the theatre audience, and it is up to the audience to carry the lamp and its sanctuary home with them.

In the programme note for the 1985 production, Gerard Stembridge encouraged the audience to "listen to the rhythms, and feel the meaning" of the characters:

The simple phrase 'Y'know?' begins and ends the play. As both question and statement it is enough for the writer to reach out to his audience and for actor to find whatever meanings his voice can express. [...] [Murphy] asks a great deal of his audience not in terms of intellectual understanding, but of emotional participation. There is a myth that his work is difficult, but in fact it is as simple as 'Y'know?'³¹

He continued: "the play as a whole can be taken as screams, or cries changing to sighs. Of people

²⁸ Grene, *Playwright Adventurer*, 123.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ TCD MS11115/1/10/2.

³¹ Gerard Stembridge, "The Sanctuary Lamp," *Sanctuary*, Oct 29, 1985 [Programme]. ATDA at NUIG, 0730_MPG_01, p. 18.

trying to explain what cannot be explained but who hope that somewhere through all the words, something of their truth might emerge.”³² The church space is comparable to the theatre in that they both require an “audience”—listeners—to engage emotionally with the people communicating.

The play thus draws parallels between three spaces: the theatre, the church and the circus. In Murphy’s ideal vision, these spaces are magical, mysterious and sacred. In their worst form – as the play uncompromisingly insists – they are merely dying institutions. Murphy wishes to tear the veil of pretence and hypocrisy from these institutions, only to transform and restore their true nature and power. In the early brainstorming stages of the play, Murphy envisaged Harry still being in the circus: “1st scene: the circus: in the wings. Harry waiting for the grand finale. But he’s lost his strength. Whatever he’s doing in the circus he feels it as degrading to him. (Circus a dying institution = Church).”³³ Harry is the magician who has lost his power to enchant. The circus has become an obsolete institution, comparable to a church which has lost its spiritual power. In the first draft of the play, Harry reminisces about going on tours with his father:

It seems an age since I and my father used to tour the towns. [...] Mind you, I never got to know him though we spent a lot of time together. Only conscious of the black trouser legs, walking along beside him, always walking fast, legs looking for another country. *He was a magician.* I knew all the tricks of his trade, of course, *but still he was a real magician to me.* And he’d produced me! I used to see him looking at me, even while doing his tricks at a fair, wondering where I’d come from, that he was my dad, that where was I going, that what had I to do with him, and where was he going I suppose.³⁴

Harry projects his personal uncertainty and wonder about his father onto the circus as a space of mystery. His father is not simply performing magic but embodies it for young Harry. Life for Harry was a living magic.

³² Stembridge, “Sanctuary Lamp.”

³³ TCD MS11115/1/10/2.

³⁴ TCD MS11115/1/10/4, emphasis added.

In *Circus as Multimodal Discourse* (2012), Paul Bouissac argues that the circus qualifies as a form of secular ritual:

What counts as ritual is the formal accomplishment of stereotyped actions as exactly as possible as traditions prescribe them. They cause awe in as much as they are framed by transcendent narratives [...]. They must be set apart, remain unquestioned, and require a radical suspension of disbelief.³⁵

Ritual carries a religious meaning. The circus and the church as rituals require a kind of radical faith; however, the description of what the young Harry felt is in stark contrast with his current reality where no magic can be conjured. Instead, only money-driven compromises are made, culminating in the private “shows”—“post-striptease”—put on by Francisco, Sam and Olga, where Olga is prostituted to members of the audience.

The circus is a space of profane entertainment, a polar opposite to the sacred space of the church. Nevertheless, in bringing these extremes together in the theatrical space, the space is rendered liminal. Regarding “entertainment,” Victor Turner writes:

But supposedly “entertainment” genres of industrial society are often subversive, satirizing, lampooning, burlesquing, or subtly putting down the central values of the basic, work-sphere society, or at least of selected sectors of that society. The word “entertain,” incidentally, is derived from O.F. *entretenir*, to “hold apart,” that is, to create a liminal or liminoid space in which performances may take place. Some of these entertainment genres, such as the “legitimate” or “classical” theatre, are historically continuous with ritual, [...] and possess something of the sacred seriousness [...].³⁶

³⁵ Paul Bouissac, *Circus as Multimodal Discourse: Performance, Meaning and Ritual* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), 24.

³⁶ Turner, *Ritual to Theatre*, 41.

Although the circus space does not appear in the final version, the correlation between the circus and the church is telling. Moreover, the fact that Murphy would have set the action in the “wings” of the circus before the show, rather than in the main circus space, corresponds to his use of the sacristy—a room where the priest prepares for a service. The use of these side-lined preparatory spaces accentuates their liminal and ritualistic qualities. Murphy displaces the space of performance away from the actual circus and church, side-lining their usual rituals, offering instead an alternative form of theatre.

Murphy omitted the introductory scenes in the circus and additional characters, Olga being one. In the same first draft, Olga elaborates on her view of life as a circus:

OLGA: (SINGING, DANCING) The whole world is a circus. / I see the whole world as a circus. / They're all performing animals. / Haven't you seen them riding bicycles? / People riding bicycles! / Funnier than performing bears. / It's all too ridiculous / Peddling buttocks shanks and trotters; / Next time just look at them: / People!³⁷

In subsequent drafts, Murphy tried to incorporate Olga's speech into Harry's monologue.³⁸ However, in the published version, her spiel that expresses her disgust at “people!” is only briefly mentioned by Harry (*Sanctuary*, 111) and Francisco (148). As an objectified circus woman, Olga carries the sexualised energy of the circus ring. Harry and Francisco are complicit in the “demands of the world” to exploit her sexuality because of their “senseless desire [...] to please” people (*Sanctuary*, 145). As Francisco puts it: “why not, in answer to the calls of a world in search of sensation shouldn't a good-natured husband and a philosophical best man allow her to strip?” (144-5). Olga's omitted speech is a howl against the idolised, eroticised, objectified and victimised female body: rather than being the passive “circused” object of the world's (male) gaze, Olga sees the world itself as a circus. She is “circusing” the world, to borrow Eleanor Lybeck's coinage. Lybeck shows how an individual, an event and even an entire nation can be transposed into the conceptual space of the circus. In her analysis of the representation of the circus in contemporary Irish writing, she argues that there is a “recurrent,

³⁷ TCD MS11115/1/10/4.

³⁸ TCD MS11115/1/10/11.

peculiarly specific means of dealing with sexual development and maturity displayed by male authors raised in, but dislocated from, the Irish Catholic faith.”³⁹ The approach she identifies “conflates sexual, sacred and circus images in the imagination of the young male narrator or principal actor.”⁴⁰ Although Lybeck does not include Murphy in her discussion of the circus in Irish literature, her theories are relevant to *Sanctuary Lamp*. Focusing on the female performer, Murphy uses iconographies characteristic of both the circus and the church. It is not only Olga who is “circused”; even young Maudie is asked by Francisco, “Do you do the trick for him?” (*Sanctuary*, 130) during their first encounter. Olga’s speech in presenting the circus as a means of viewing the world at large raises question about the relationship between art and life. It points to the artificiality of theatre and the theatricality of life. Murphy’s sense that theatre is both set apart and side-lined shows the absurdity, the self-defeating ridiculousness of the theatrical paradox. Although Murphy omits Olga’s speech in order to keep the focus on the present, where characters must deal with the consequences of their past, Olga’s angry voice later resurfaces in the character of Vera, a sex worker who rebels against her family in *The Wake* (1998).

Harry and Francisco, meanwhile, move on to hypothesising about the afterlife in spatial terms. Harry envisions the soul as a silhouette:

The soul – y’know? – like a silhouette. And when you die it moves out into . . . slow-moving mists of space and time. Awake in oblivion actually. And it moves out from the world to take its place in the silent outer wall of eternity. The wall that keeps all those moving mists of time and space together [...] Loved ones. That’s it. And one is implanted on the other. And the merging – y’know? Merging – merging of the silhouettes is true union. Union forever of loved ones, actually. (*Sanctuary*, 158-9)

These words make up Harry’s personal prayer. As opposed to the formal Latin translations Murphy revised for ICEL, the fictional character’s words come closer to Murphy’s vision of language as that

³⁹ Eleanor Lybeck, *All On Show: the Circus in Irish Literature and Culture* (Cork: Cork UP, 2019), 135.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

which encourages contemplation and expresses genuine desire and yearning, in spontaneous and organic terms. Again, Murphy uses Harry's verbal tic, "y'know," in a repetitive, ritualistic pattern, an interrogative sound reaching out for understanding. Francisco meanwhile thinks of "Limbo" as the ideal space to go to: "Oh but Limbo, Har, Limbo! With just enough light rain to keep the place lush green, the sunshine and red flowers, and the thousands and thousands of other fat babies sitting under the trees, gurgling and laughing and eating bananas" (160). Limbo, the space of the unbaptised, is quite different from purgatory, where dead Christians work out the sins of their lifetime before reaching heaven. Francisco rejects the purgatorial idea of progress to union with God. Both his and Harry's personal Utopias are based on human connection as the whole principle of transcendence, denying any form of a governing deity. In sharing their images of the hereafter, the characters rekindle their bond and affection for one another.

The production of the play provoked criticism for its "profanities" and attack on the Roman Catholic Church in Ireland. When the play premiered in 1975, the set fully actualised a church on stage. It was described as "a gloomy realistic set."⁴¹ On opening night, the applause was reportedly "spasmodic [...] because of the situation facing patrons – *almost feeling themselves present in a church* (so detailed and effective was Bronwen Casson's design) and hearing profanities and anti-clerical diatribes emanating therefrom."⁴²

⁴¹ *Variety*, Nov 5, 1975, *Sanctuary*, Oct 7, 1975 [Press Cuttings], ATDA at NUIG, 2544_PC_0001, p. 1.

⁴² *Westmeath Examiner*, Oct 23, 1975, *Sanctuary*, Oct 7, 1975 [Press Cuttings], ATDA at NUIG, p. 2, emphasis added.



Bronwen Casson's realistic set. *Sanctuary*, Oct 7, 1975 [Photographs]. ATDA at NUIG, 2544_PH_0001, p.1

In a letter to the *Irish Independent*, Matt J. Doolan criticised the play as “an insult to the mass”: “[i]t is not really necessary to shoot a priest or burn a church to start or maintain an anti-Mass campaign.”⁴³ However, then-president Cearbhall Ó Dálaigh praised the play, counting it among the three greatest in the Abbey theatre’s history, alongside *Playboy of the Western World* and *Juno and the Paycock*.⁴⁴ Against the backlash *Sanctuary* faced, Murphy’s advocates such as Michael Sheridan claimed: “[t]he offended bell ringers will cry ‘unclean’ but there is nothing obscene about the play other than the naked truth of the author’s tortured imagination. Murphy’s savage indignation is unbearably true.”⁴⁵ The verisimilitude of the play’s setting to Ireland’s socio-cultural context and the negative reception that ensued reflects what Ireland and its theatrical scene were like in the ’70s.

The 1985 revival of the play was a different story: rather than controversy, the play was met with apathy. The play closed after a week and a half of a planned three-week run. The *Evening Herald*

⁴³ Matt J. Doolan, “An Insult to the Mass,” *Irish Independent*, Oct 15, 1975, *Sanctuary*, Oct 7, 1975 [Press Cuttings], ATDA at NUIG, 2544_PC_0001, p. 8.

⁴⁴ “President’s Praise for Tom Murphy’s Play,” *Sunday Press*, Oct 12, 1975, *Sanctuary*, Oct 7, 1975 [Press Cuttings], ATDA at NUIG, 2544_PC_0001, p. 25.

⁴⁵ Michael Sheridan, “Red Light Area in Sanctuary,” *Irish Press*, Oct 8, 1975, *Sanctuary*, Oct 7, 1975 [Press Cuttings], ATDA at NUIG, 2544_PC_0001, p. 15.

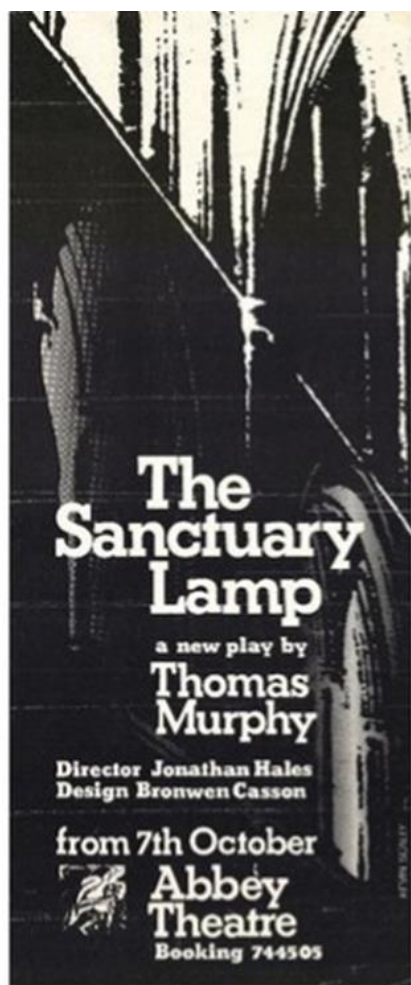
reported: “[t]he play once branded a “blasphemy” has been taken off the boards of the Abbey because of lack of audience interest.”⁴⁶ Despite having been edited and revised, critics argued that the play was “unclear and over-static,”⁴⁷ that it “has lost some of its acerbic impact.”⁴⁸ David Nowlan blamed the director, asserting that “Ray Yeat[e]s does not do full justice to the play’s text.”⁴⁹ Rather than showing an actual mass onstage (as in the ’70s version), Murphy’s focus on the three main characters and their storytelling highlighted the metaphysical and metaphorical quality of the play. Nowlan’s assessment questions the nature (and authority) of Murphy’s play as a “text” and whether it “works” in theatre. The posters from 1975 and 1985 indicate the shift in emphasis: the former shows the wall of a church, whereas the latter focuses on a male figure. The church carries the weight of its religious associations. The red man at the centre of a flame, as Murphy reiterated, is a symbol of hope: it is humankind who kindled and carried the flame. The posters and the performances, like the play’s theme, represent the shift from organised religion and its failures to the individual search for refuge and salvation.

⁴⁶ Steve Brennan, “Play Flops in Rerun at Abbey,” *Evening Herald*, Nov 5, 1985, *Sanctuary*, Oct 29, 1985 [Press cuttings], ATDA at NUIG, 0730_PC_0001, p. 7.

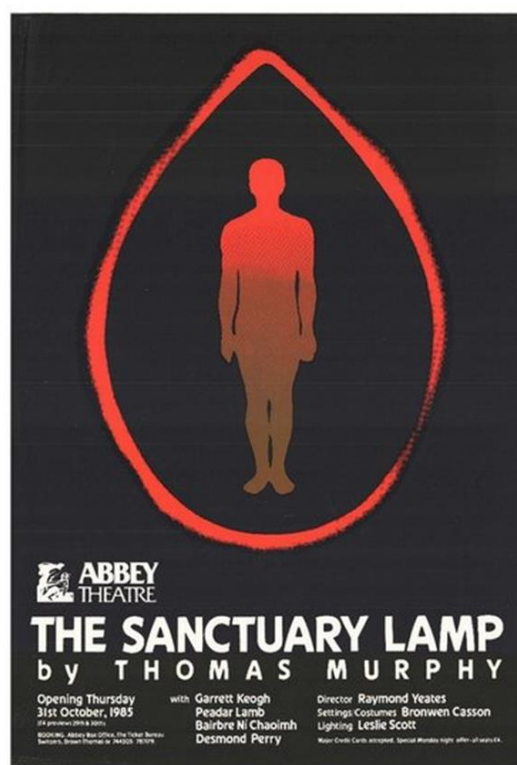
⁴⁷ Tim Harding, “The Lamp Goes Out,” *Sunday Press*, Nov 10, 1985, *Sanctuary*, Oct 29, 1985 [Press Cuttings], ATDA at NUIG, 0730_PC_0001, p. 2.

⁴⁸ Michael Sheridan, “Murphy’s Pen Dims His Lamp,” *Irish Press*, Nov 1, 1985, *Sanctuary*, Oct 29, 1985 [Press Cuttings], ATDA at NUIG, 0730_PC_0001, p. 3.

⁴⁹ David Nowlan, “‘The Sanctuary Lamp’ at the Abbey Theatre,” *Irish Times*, Nov 1, 1985, *Sanctuary*, Oct 29, 1985 [Press Cuttings], ATDA at NUIG, 0730_PC_0001, p. 4.



Sanctuary, Oct 7, 1975 [Poster]. ATDA at NUIG, 2544_PO_0001, p1.



Sanctuary, Oct 29, 1985 [Poster]. ATDA at NUIG, 0730_PO_0001, p1.

The 1975 production realised perhaps too much of the church's actuality. By contrast, the 2001 production directed by Lynne Parker, forced the audience to engage by playing in traverse with minimal indication of the church space. The production offered a balanced depiction of the cold silent church and the individual torment expressed by the characters. It was performed on the Peacock stage with the audience on both sides of the playing area. The *Sunday Independent* noted that “[i]t’s played in traverse form, but the limited space in no way restricts the sensation of the empty coldness of a great church ([...] use of echo in the sound contributes significantly to this).”⁵⁰ The *Irish Independent* also pointed to the production’s use of music: “[t]hroughout, the audience sit in the silent sides of the church, eavesdropping on three confused and impassioned confessionals. Director Lynne Parker

⁵⁰ *Sunday Independent*, Oct 7, 2001, *Sanctuary*, Oct 1, 2001 [Press Cuttings], ATDA at NUIG, 0676_PC_0001, p. 71.

wisely added sparse, beautiful music by clarinet and piano as a complementary soundtrack to the action.”⁵¹ According to the *Sunday Tribune*, Parker’s decision to place the audience on both sides of the stage, and to use echoes and live music “heighten[ed] the atmosphere of intimacy in a technically excellent and deeply affecting production.”⁵²

Just as Harry and Francisco’s utopian vision in the text must stay on an imaginative level, the productions remain atmospheric, evocative and abstract to varying degrees; if the 1975 production emphasised the social realism of the church, the 2001 production was geared more towards expressionism. In both instances, the de-deified church becomes a temporary refuge for the three outcasts, and they in turn form a “spontaneous communitas” with the audience within the shared space of the theatre. Their acts of storytelling in the segregated church space gain a new ritual meaning in the theatre space. *Gigli* shares some of these characteristics of storytelling, but instead of the church, the specialised space of psychotherapy has replaced the function of religious confession. Rather than the priest, therapists have become the authority figures to be relied on. *Gigli* satirises this change by employing a character who is a quack therapist, but who nonetheless possesses the ability to heal and transcend human limitation. *Gigli* goes beyond words; the play actualises the theatrical ritual to its full potential with its use of music and operatic performance.

The Gigli Concert (1983): The Politics of Magic

In an interview before the premiere of *Gigli*, Murphy commented that the play is an “apprehension of something extraordinary and mysterious and heroic inside ourselves. It is I suppose an apprehension of the divine.”⁵³ Much like the soul-searching characters of *Sanctuary*, whose religion in the conventional sense did not offer an answer, the characters in *Gigli* attempt to find the

⁵¹ “The Sanctuary Lamp by Tom Murphy at Peacock,” *Irish Independent*, Oct 3, 2001, *Sanctuary*, Oct 1, 2001 [Press Cuttings], ATDA at NUIG, 0676_PC_0001, p. 69.

⁵² Rachel Andrews, “Dublin Theatre Festival,” *Sunday Tribune*, Oct 7, 2001, *Sanctuary*, Oct 1, 2001 [Press Cuttings], ATDA at NUIG, 0676_PC_0001, p. 70.

⁵³ *Inside Tribune*, May 1, 1983, *Gigli*, Sep 29, 1983 [Press Cuttings], ATDA at NUIG, 0751_PC_0001, p. 30-31.

divine in the deepest recesses of the human psyche. Murphy added: “[t]he soul of the singer is the subconscious self.”⁵⁴ In the era of post-Catholicism, psychologists and psychiatrists have replaced priests; however, the setting for *Gigli* is in a particularly abandoned space, a degraded and fraudulent version of the therapist’s office. The divine can be found neither in the conventional Church nor in scientific approaches to the psyche.

Murphy’s search for the soul incorporates music. If hope is symbolised by the absent presence of the lamp in *Sanctuary*, in *Gigli* it is expressed in music. Although all art is to a certain extent utopian, music is perhaps the most utopian form of all. In *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theatre* (2005), Jill Dolan describes what she terms as “utopian performatives”: the ways in which theatre performatively enacts, however fleetingly, the imagination of a better world.⁵⁵ The desired space, the “no-place” of the impossible, is temporarily revealed through the affect-driven medium of theatre. Fintan O’Toole defines Murphy’s “politics of magic” as the ability “to imagine a different world,” “a theatrical ritualization of optimism.”⁵⁶ Chris Morash, too, contends that “whether realized or anticipated, every moment of the theatrical performance is weighted with the recognition that things can become other than what they are—which, in other words, is magic.”⁵⁷ The moment of transformation—of one character becoming a different self, a space becoming another space, a jump from one reality to another—marks *Gigli* as a quintessential play of magic.

Music, magic and utopia are synonymous in *Gigli* in that they realise imaginations and what is not-yet-actual. Declan Kiberd draws on Ernst Bloch’s philosophy, developed in *The Spirit of Utopia* (1918) and *The Principle of Hope* (1954), to show how Murphy’s theatre follows a paradoxical principle: that pure possibility—hope—is glimpsed on the darkest side of despair.⁵⁸ JPW King is a “dynamatologist,” a self-help therapist in Dublin. Richard Kearney coined the word “dynamatology” for the purposes of Murphy’s play and later refers to this in his book *The God Who May Be* (2001). The word comes from the Greek word *dunamis*, meaning possibility. In his workbook, Murphy took

⁵⁴ *Inside Tribune*, 30-31.

⁵⁵ Jill Dolan, *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theatre* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2005), 6.

⁵⁶ O’Toole, *Politics of Magic*, 209.

⁵⁷ Morash, “Murphy, History,” 19.

⁵⁸ Declan Kiberd, “Theatre as Opera: *The Gigli Concert*,” in *Theatre Stuff: Critical Essays on Contemporary Irish Theatre* (Dublin: Carysfort, 2000), 145-58.

notes from *Life After Life* (1975) by Raymond Moody:

Atoms consist of particles and these particles are not made of any material stuff when we observe them we never see any substance; what we observe are dynamic patterns continually changing into one another – a continuous dance of energy. [...] Mind is the dynamics of self-organisation and the brain is the biological structure through which the dynamics is carried out.⁵⁹

These words are used by JPW when he first meets the Irish Man to explain his therapeutic philosophy: “mind is the essence of being alive. Steve our founder and leader. [...] what is the brain? Biological matter, meat. Mind is the essence. [...] Atoms, my friend. Atoms consist of whirlings [...] dancing with each other” (*Gigli*, 168-9). Later in the play, he further expands on this philosophy:

We understand our existential guilt, our definition of ourselves is right from the start – I am who may be – and, meanwhile, our paradoxical key, despair, is rising, rising in our pool to total despair. That state achieved, two choices. One, okay, I give in, I wait for the next world. Or, two, what have I to lose, and I take the leap, the plunge into the abyss of darkness to achieve that state of primordial being, not in any muddled theocentric sense but as the point of origin in the here-and-now where anything becomes possible. (211-12)

“I am who may be” is JPW’s reinterpretation of the Old Testament. JPW declares that God’s pronouncement of “I am who am” to Adam is wrong because it is “limiting”; “I am who may be” makes more sense “both for us and for God,” as it can mean both “I am the possible” and “I am the impossible” (211). In his self-absorbed state, JPW explains the possibility only in theory; however, as he builds a rapport with the Irish Man, and as the play progresses, the possibility becomes an actuality.

⁵⁹ TCD MS11115/1/16/1.

Possibility is found in the gaps, cracks, and misery of the characters. The characters in *Gigli* are all in a desperate state. JPW is an upper-middle-class Englishman, abandoned and forgotten by his organisation. He also has an unrealised relationship with a woman named Helen and is engaged in an affair with Mona, a married woman who he later recognises as his real love upon the revelation that she has cancer. JPW is randomly visited by the Irish Man, a tough property developer who has garnered quick money through backhanded practices. He is suffering a breakdown which is affecting his family. In the desire to sing like Gigli, a famous Italian opera singer, the Irish Man undertakes therapy sessions with JPW. At the beginning of the play both men cry out independently of one another, “[h]ow am I going to get through today?” (*Gigli*, 166, 173). For JPW and the Irish Man, life is a matter of survival. As the vodkas in the stage directions show, they are dependent on alcohol to cope with their harsh reality. All the characters in the play are in deep pain of one kind or another.

JPW’s office space for therapy doubles as his living quarters; it is situated between the private and public, between the personal and professional, like the liminal spaces explored in the third chapter. As against the more recognisable pubs and clubs, however, the spaces in both *Sanctuary* and *Gigli* are marginalised and abandoned; they have lost their special quality and capacity to heal souls. JPW’s office dwelling is an odd, unexpected, scruffy, and forgotten place, one that differs from other everyday spaces. As the stage directions indicate, “[t]he office is dingy, cluttered. A bed that converts into a couch, a desk – hugely cluttered – with a telephone, a kettle; filing cabinet, clothes about the place, books, dusty charts on a wall and a photograph of ‘Steve’ [the organisation leader]” (166) and JPW’s “appearance complements his dingy surroundings (not yet clearly defined)” (165). In the play, JPW makes a visit to an actual psychiatrist pretending to be the Irish Man. The exorbitant cost and the doctor’s unsympathetic reaction—with JPW finding himself on the verge of being put in a straitjacket—mark a stark contrast to JPW’s informal approach. The line between fraud and magician, between the absurd and the momentous, is deliberately blurred by Murphy. JPW shouts, “[i]t is a pigsty, I am a charlatan and a quack, and I have *never* achieved anything in my life!” (228). Nevertheless, it is precisely in his smelly pig-sty space, with his vulnerability and emotions, that the transformative effect is achieved.

In his first workbook, before the birth of the character JPW King, Murphy began drafting a

conversation between a psychotherapist and a man:

Psy ushers him in.

Man: I have come about my soul

Psy: (Reading report) Just a moment ... Sit down ...Any chair you like...Your doctors report...(Finishes reading) That's fine. Well now. Yes?

Man I don't know what I'm doing here.

Psy You have come about your soul.⁶⁰

The scene is at once clinical and mythical – the psychotherapist reads the report while the Man speaks about his “soul.” Murphy then changes the psychotherapist into “JPR King Scientologist,” a movement that JPR defines as a type of applied psychology and philosophy. The changes track how the therapist/quack/magician character developed from a more clinical to a less conventional (even suspiciously cultish sounding) figure.

The Church of Scientology was founded in the 1950s by the American science-fiction writer L. Ron Hubbard. In the Church's own definition, Scientology comes from *Scio* (Latin) to know, and *logos* (Greek), “the word or outward form by which the inward thought is expressed and made known.”⁶¹ Thus,

Scientology means knowing about knowing. [...] It comprises a vast body of knowledge extending from certain fundamental truths, and prime among those truths: *Man is a spiritual being endowed with abilities well beyond those which he normally envisions.* He is not only able to solve his own problems, accomplish his goals and gain lasting happiness, but he *can achieve new states of awareness he may never have*

⁶⁰ TCD MS11115/1/16/1.

⁶¹ Ron L. Hubbard, *What is Scientology?* (Los Angeles: Bridge, 1992), 61.

*dreamed possible.*⁶²

Hubbard's Scientology and JPW's Dynamatology share a belief in humankind's spiritual power and potential for self-transcendence. In the published version of *Gigli*, JPW mentions the relationship between the auditor and the subject only in passing. In the early drafts, the significance of these terms is elaborated in greater detail. When asked about fees, JPR the scientologist replies:

J. P. R. Oh, my, fees. Fees! Fees can wait. My approach, my belief, the priority: the creation of a good relationship between auditor – you see? Auditor: our word for psychologist, psychiatrist – a good relationship of trust, mutual feed of energy between auditor and – Auditor from the Latin audio – to hear, listen, listener – a good relationship between auditor and subject. Never use the word patient. Subject. Who is the patient? Relationship: number one.⁶³

The word “auditor” is central in Scientology. Hubbard's self-help book, *Dianetics: The Modern Science of Mental Health* (1950), which became the basis for the core principles of Scientology, defines the “auditor” as the “enabler” who can “clear” the “engrams.”⁶⁴ *Dianetics*, Hubbard writes, comes from the Greek word *dia*, meaning “through,” and *nous*, meaning “mind or soul.”⁶⁵ “Engrams,” meanwhile, are negative mental records (image pictures) caused by an unconscious reactive mind, a kind of wrong awareness that causes ill effects such as irrational fear, anxiety and self-defeating acts.⁶⁶ An auditor is one who is trained to listen and qualified as “a minister or minister-in-training of the Church of Scientology.”⁶⁷ When one achieves Clear, the highest state of existence called “Operating

⁶² Hubbard, *What is Scientology*, 61, emphasis added.

⁶³ TCD MS11115/1/16/1.

⁶⁴ Ron L. Hubbard, *Dianetics: The Modern Science of Mental Health* (Copenhagen: New Era, 1950). “The auditor is not there as the patient's driver or advisor. [...] The word auditor is used, not ‘operator’ or ‘therapist,’ because it is a cooperative effort between the auditor and the patient, and the law of affinity is at work” (214-5).

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, i.

⁶⁶ Hubbard, *Dianetics*, v-vi.

⁶⁷ Hubbard, *What is Scientology*, 82.

Thetan” (OT) through “processing,”⁶⁸ it is believed that he or she can “handle things and exist without having to use a body or physical means.”⁶⁹ It is a way of attaining magical power, but “it does not mean one becomes God. It means one becomes wholly oneself. [...] it is here a person achieves the ultimate realization of his own nature and his relationship to life and all the dynamics.”⁷⁰ Murphy’s early drafts reveal how JPW and his philosophy came to be; his character is born out of existing religious practices and wider concerns in society that emerged in the late 1950s. Religious cults like Scientology reflect the modern phenomenon of turning away from traditional religion and creating one’s own belief system based on what is claimed as science and technology. There is a kind of madness and self-driven interest in this struggle to maximise human capacity and knowledge. The consideration of religious cults also poses important questions for the legitimacy and the status of theatre. Murphy reinvents his own theatrical principles, using these different strands of philosophy, (pseudo)-religion, and psychology.

In *Gigli*, Murphy borrows ideas from conventional psychiatry, blending them with the pseudoscience of scientology and the invented hocus-pocus of dynamatology. The auditor-subject relationship is comparable to that between audience and actor. In *Theatre and Therapy* (2013), Fintan Walsh gestures towards theatre’s therapeutic effects and affects:

Theatre, like therapy, can prompt us to reflect upon our own thoughts, feelings and behaviours in the presence of others, within a specific time frame. [...] theatre can illuminate and stimulate mental and emotional activity, those primary targets of therapeutic intervention. In the arousal of emotion, theatre can cause us to empathically identify with others. [...] Encounters with performance can deepen our awareness of behavioural patterns in a way that might even spur change.⁷¹

⁶⁸ Hubbard, *What is Scientology*, 82. Processing includes exercises and auditing “assisted by use of a religious artifact” known as “E-Meter” or the “Electropsychometer,” which “measures the mental state or change of state of a person, helping the auditor and preclear locate areas of spiritual distress or travail so they can be addressed and handled” (83-5).

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 167.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ Fintan Walsh, *Theatre and Therapy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 1.

Walsh incorporates Winnicott's argument that the "positive experience of theatre can produce an 'ego orgasm' among spectators, and that this feeling might also occur through friendship."⁷² Friendship is synonymous with "ego-relatedness, or more simply, intimacy and engagement."⁷³ Just as the characters in *Sanctuary* develop a bond by listening to one another, JPW and the Irish Man form a rapport through their talk-therapy. The audience engages in the characters' stories and problems, a theatrical experience that carries the potential to spur a therapeutic reaction.

Long monologues and the interaction between characters is what leads to self-realisation and magic in *Gigli*. The Irish Man releases his pain and suffering through articulating his story to JPW. When JPW asks the Irish Man to talk about his first sexual experience, the Irish Man gradually digresses into telling the miserable childhood story of his tyrannical brother Mick:

Mick was in a black mood. And he'd beaten Danny that day too for something . . . Oh yes, the flowers. And. I still had this little bunch of flowers . . . And it was the only thing I could think of. (*He is only just managing to hold back his tears.*) And. And. I took the fuckin' flowers to our Danny . . . What use is nicest? Of what use is beauty, Mr King? (*Gigli*, 216-7)

The Irish Man feeling helpless and was picking flowers while Mick was beating Danny, the younger brother. The guilt and pain that the Irish Man has been withholding is released through the "dry sobbing" at the end of the speech: "[a] few whimpers escape . . . fixed, rooted in his position, he starts to shout, savage, inarticulate roars of impotent hatred at the doorway . . . developing into sobs which he cannot stop . . . He is on his hands and knees. Terrible dry sobbing, and rhythmic, as if from the bowels of the earth" (218). JPW responds, "Yes . . . Yes . . . that's it, Benimillo . . . Let it come out . . . Take my hand . . ." (218). He comforts the Irish Man with tea and gestures of affection, while also giving an account of his own sexual experience and family stories. Both men allow themselves to be vulnerable and their past traumas are gradually revealed.

⁷² Walsh, *Theatre and Therapy*, 14.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

At the centre of the play is the voice of Gigli, whose constant presence intensifies the exchange and allows for emotional release. As David Grindley, the director of the 2015 Gate production points out, “[o]n the page there are three characters, but on stage there are four: Gigli. Gigli’s voice changes the emotional temperature, ushering the possibility of magic on stage.”⁷⁴ The play begins with “Beniamino Gigli’s voice, distorted, hanging in the air, waiting (to be discovered?), singing ‘O Paradiso’, mingling with the traffic noise that rises from the street outside” (*Gigli*, 165). Gigli’s singing represents the Irish Man’s longing and desire, which cannot be conveyed with words alone. “Singing,” he says, “d’yeh know? The only way to tell people. [...] who you are?” (179). In his workbook, Murphy took notes from Colin Wilson’s *The Brandy of the Damned: Discoveries of a Musical Eclectic* (1964), interspersing them with his own ideas for the dialogue between the psychiatrist and man.⁷⁵ Some passages that caught Murphy’s interest include: “[w]orks of art give us brief flashes of ‘being’ or ‘is-ness,’ which is nothing to do with our minds; our perceptions keep it out rather than let it in”;⁷⁶ “I find music a release into an intense form of existence”;⁷⁷ and “[t]he essence of the work of art is that it is the expression of the artist’s personal truth.”⁷⁸ Wilson offers the anecdote of Peter Warlock (Philip Heseltine’s pseudonym) discovering the music of Delius at fifteen. Warlock heard *On Craig Dhu* in 1910, and in 1914 wrote: “I am sure there is no music more beautiful in all the world; it haunts me day and night – it is always with me and seems, by its continual presence, to intensify the beauty of everything for me.”⁷⁹ Warlock’s words are echoed in those of Irish Man: “[w]hen I listen to him – I-can’t-stop-listening-to-him! Fills me! The – things – inside. Tense, everything more intense. And I listen carefully. And it’s beautiful – But it’s screaming, it’s longing! Longing for what? I don’t know whether it’s keeping me sane or driving me crazy” (*Gigli*, 184). Gigli’s

⁷⁴ David Grindley, “Programme Note to *The Gigli Concert*,” in *Programme* (Dublin: Gate Theatre, 2015), 7.

⁷⁵ TCD MS11115/1/16/1. Although they appear on the same page, the notes and ideas are distinguishable because Murphy put page numbers in front of the notes, while he inscribed T.M. next to the lines he came up with for the play. The phrase “Brandy of the Damned” comes from Bernard Shaw’s *Man and Superman* (1903), where Don Juan converses with the Devil in Act III: “DON JUAN: [...] Hell is full of amateur musicians: music is the brandy of the damned. May not one lost soul be permitted to abstain? / THE DEVIL: You dare blaspheme against the sublimest of the arts!” (*Man and Superman: A Comedy and a Philosophy* [Redditch: Read Books, 2013], 133).

⁷⁶ TCD MS11115/1/16/1.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid. Colin Wilson, *The Brandy of the Damned: Discoveries of a Musical Eclectic* (London: John Baker, 1964), 129.

voice becomes the medium that expresses emotions on behalf of the Irish Man, who finds it difficult to give voice to them in real life. He can neither deal with the drudgery of facts, nor communicate his feelings in a controlled manner to his family.

The Irish Man complains that “There’s too many facts in the world! Them houses were built out of facts: corruption, brutality, backhanding, fronthanding, backstabbing, lump labour and a bit of technology” (173). The Irish Man’s reality as a building developer is based on these facts. He has become economically successful through “dishonesty and [the] criminality he has had to rub shoulders with to reach a place of wealth and influence.”⁸⁰ This version of success feels empty to the Irish Man, and his desire to sing like the opera singer Gigli emphasises his struggle to create a different kind of reality for himself. At one point, the Irish Man gives an autobiographical account of Gigli and his failed love affair with Ida, adopting Gigli’s biography as his own. It may be a “bullshit” story, as JPW remarks, but it shows that the Irish Man’s memory focuses on what he wants to be rather than what he is. Just as JPW would die to have “one sweet hour” with Helen, the Irish Man’s longing and aspiration is projected onto Gigli, who like himself came from an impoverished background. O’Toole suggests that the “[p]ast has value only as an invention which suggests what the future will be [...] Because the past is a fabrication, and the future has not yet occurred, the present in the play expands almost to infinity.”⁸¹ The creative blend of memories in the play, meanwhile, demonstrates an engagement with the act of storytelling and a move toward transformation through fiction.

Fiction-making is an essential part of the process of transformation as well, as a means of resisting dismal realities. Facts are replaced by creative fantasies and fictional narratives. Memories are not reliable or credible but serve the purpose of storytelling and identity-building. Memories are thus creative sources for art. In *Inventing Ireland*, Declan Kiberd, too, posits that art is an attempt to create a different order from what is given:

Art might be seen as man’s constant effort to create for himself a different order of

⁸⁰ Ben Barnes, “The Fell of Dark: *The Gigli Concert*,” in *Alive in Time: The Enduring Drama of Tom Murphy: New Essays*, ed. Christopher Murray (Dublin: Carysfort, 2010), 156.

⁸¹ O’Toole, *Politics of Magic*, 223-4.

reality from what is given to him: against the ability to imagine things as they are, it counterpoises the capacity to imagine things as they might be. Fictions [...] help people to make sense of the world around them.⁸²

Murphy's characters struggle to create a "different order of reality" through distorting, refashioning, and re-inventing memories. More light can be shed on the Irish Man's fiction-blending by Bolla's interpretation of the patient as the performer and the clinic as theatre: "hysterical patients theatricalise themselves, 'transforming self into an event,'" and the transformation captures "the fundamental performativity of expression and communication at the heart of theatre and therapy."⁸³

It is not only the Irish Man who finds self-expression in theatricalising himself with Gigli's tale; JPW, too, has been transformed by the Irish Man's longing to sing. When told of Mona's cancer, JPW finds himself in a state of complete hopelessness and contemplates suicide. In a manic mode, JPW makes the final leap to sing. He begins by expounding on his theories of magic: "what is magic. In a nutshell, the rearrangement and redirection of the orbits and trajectories of dynamatological whirlings, i.e., simply new mind over old matter" (*Gigli*, 238). JPW then declares: "[t]his night I'll conjure. If man can bend a spoon with beady steadfast eye, I'll sing like Gigli or I'll die" (238); a reference to the figure of Faustus, with his determination to resort to magic in a life-and-death matter.⁸⁴ Belief in magic is a recognition and a rejection of "facts": "[c]hecklist. Too many facts in the world. Addiction to those lies arrested. Rationalisations recognised" (238). Unlike Faustus's magical power granted by Mephistopheles, JPW's resembles a hallucination on the brink of suicide:

(To the floor.) You, down there! Assist please. [...] *(Another square of bread and jam with pill into his mouth and washes it down with vodka. Faintly – and as an echo, from a distance – orchestral introduction for the aria 'Tu che a Dio spiegasti l'ali'. Whispers:)* What? Yesss! Thank you. But just a mo. *(Gestures, cueing out music, takes another pill,*

⁸² Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of Modern Ireland* (London: Vintage, 1996), 118.

⁸³ Walsh, *Theatre and Therapy*, 15.

⁸⁴ Murphy worked with both Marlowe's *Dr Faustus* and Goethe's *Faust* for his play (TCD MS11115/1/16/1). For more on how the Faust legend is incorporated into the play, see Grene's *Playwright Adventurer*, 140-1.

and decides against further vodka.) [...] diminishing fears of unknown future, resolution fixed in mind for possibilising it, increase in control to achieve it. (Orchestral introduction begins again.) Abyss sighted! All my worldly goods I leave to nuns. Leep! (*Leap.*) pluh-unngel! (*Plunge. And a sigh of relief.*) Aah! Rebirth of ideals, return of self-esteem, future known. (*Gigli*, 238-9)

Calling to the floor for assistance is metatheatrical, a type of magic possible in theatre. The theatre becomes a “here-and-now” place, where the audience witnesses the concert that JPW mimes to Gigli’s voice. Fintan O’Toole notes that “[t]here are always two worlds on stage in a Murphy play—a social landscape and a psychological dreamscape—and the dramatic thrill is in the daring, breathtaking, impossible leap from one to the other.”⁸⁵ There is a leap from the perceived, known, physical, social space to the conceived, unknown, mythical, and mental space. These leaps create, again, the “lived” space. The perceived office space of JPW’s room transforms into a psychological dreamscape where “anything is possible” (168, 212). JPW has unplugged the record player, so it is impossible to hear anything. But when the music still plays and JPW sings, the theatre transforms into a concert hall with a proper audience, allowing the actor-character to realise his dreams through performance.

The vivid lighting effects clearly mark the different landscapes, ushering in a magical space of the mind. The stage directions indicate: “[h]e looks out of the window for a moment, then draws the blind . . . Through the following, a red glow, as if emanating from the reading lamp with the red shade, suffuses the room, and the shaft of yellow light from the washroom becoming more intense” (*Gigli*, 238). The red glow, combined with the yellow light, is an artificial light which changes the atmosphere of the naturalistic setting into a mysterious colourful zone. This artificial lighting helps to realise the magic of the play, a magic enacted through the deliberate misrepresentation and reconfiguration of reality. Directed by Patrick Mason, the 1983 production stayed faithful to the stage directions and blacked out all lights except the red reading lamp. A spotlight was then shone on Tom Hickey as JPW, who mimed along to the music, giving the effect of an operatic performance on stage.

⁸⁵ O’Toole, “Programme Note to *The Gigli Concert*,” in *Programme* (Dublin: Gate Theatre, 2015), 19.



[1983 Production Video]



[1991 Production Video]

The 1991 production mixed red and blue light, giving a more psychedelic and colourful effect. During Hickey's mime, in addition to the spotlight, the background displayed a night view of the city. As Helen Lucy Burke's review describes: "[t]he apogee was the opening out of the back on to a balustraded cityscape with a starry dawn sky, which brought back memories of Tosca and Castel Sant' Angelo done at the Berlin opera."⁸⁶

⁸⁶ Helen Lucy Burke, "Emperor With No Clothes," *Sunday Tribune*, Mar 24, 1991, *Gigli*, Mar 19, 1991 [Press

During the performance, the audience is fully aware that the actor is miming to the recorded voice of Gigli. This, as Grene asserts, “is a very special case of the willing suspension of disbelief that makes theatre possible.”⁸⁷ Music and the act of miming are central to JPW’s “leap,” as music is a form of expression that transcends the intellectual limitation of words. Gigli’s voice prompts the characters to release their pent-up emotions, which his soaring voice pulling the characters upwards from despair. The actor-character’s physical movement, sweat, and dramatic gestures are real enough to move the audience.

According to the stage directions, JPW “sings the aria to its conclusion and collapses” (*Gigli*, 239). This collapse suggests death. JPW’s cry of “Mama” and the prolonged silence that follows make the audience assume that JPW is dead. In the draft versions, JPW actually dies.⁸⁸ His rising the next morning is thus a symbolic resurrection. JPW exits triumphantly; he conducts the music to carry on outside the window, into the future infinitely: “[d]o not mind the pig-sty, Benimillo ... mankind still has a delicate ear ... That’s it ... that’s it ... sing on forever ... that’s it” (240). The ending is an affirmation of theatre and its expressive value. Despite the despondent reality of his situation, music offers an expressive voice to the actor-character and thus offers consolation and hope to the audience. The audience in *Gigli* is transformed through the sharing of space. During the last scene, the stage directions indicate: “[e]arly morning light filtering into the room” (239). The natural sunlight contrasts with the red and purple light used before. The sunlight is representative of the grounded outside world and signals JPW’s metaphorical rebirth. It is the light which comes at the end of the darkest tunnel.

Cuttings], ATDA at NUIG, 0526_PC_0001, p. 22.

⁸⁷ Grene, *Playwright Adventurer*, 148.

⁸⁸ Even after the play was finalised to keep JPW alive the next day, in subsequent adaptations (BBC Radio Belfast), Murphy considered revising the ending. In a correspondence with the BBC, Murphy wrote: “[t]he adaptation could finish as it stands: but this means that JPW is dead (!); also we lose last speech (“sing on forever”) which I’m reluctant to lose. [...] I just don’t want to write a long drawn-out ending after JPW has sung his aria” (TCD MS11115/1/16/15).



[2001 Production Video]

Before writing the last magical (or suicidal) scene, Murphy consulted *Living with Suicide* (1967) by Eustace Chesser and *Realms of the Human Unconscious* (1975) by Stanislav Grof. From Chesser's book, Murphy took note of the following:

All thro' life we experience this partial destruction for the sake of a new creation. [...] Most cases of attempted suicide are disguised expression of a will to live. The gamble with death is sometimes reminiscent of a symbolised act to destroy the old and give birth to the new (the symbolism of Christian baptism. Adam dies, and we are said to be born again. Magic is rooted in make-believe, and a make-believe suicide is often tinged with magic).⁸⁹

In Grof's book, meanwhile, Murphy identified with the "transpersonal experiences," which are "experiences involving an expansion or extension beyond the usual ego boundaries and beyond the limitations of time and/or space."⁹⁰ Murphy remarked of the book:

⁸⁹ TCD MS11115/1/16/1.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

Returning with this Grof's book. I find it fascinating, thrilling and frightening. Also, the surprise of the coincidence of symbols and some descriptions of experiences which people have encountered (~~using LSD~~), which I have had less intense forms: my father's hand in my bed after his death, the ceasing-to-live and starting-to-be "cosmic unity" experience I had in 1962, the recurring dream of swimming struggling for life. In a pool of dung.⁹¹

The nightmare of "struggling for life in a pool of dung" manifests in the way Murphy's characters struggle with their difficult situation. JPW's attempted suicide is an attempt to "destroy the old," a desire born out of total impasse. Complete despair is the paradoxical key to ascension.

On his way out for an evening with his wife, the Irish Man stops by JPW's office to thank him and bid farewell. Things seem to be back to "normal." Of the celebration, JPW warns: "[t]hese little ceremonies can be pleasantly tranquillising. You have taken yourself captive again, but dread still lies nesting, Benimillo" (*Gigli*, 237). He goes on to say: "I longed to take myself captive too and root myself, but you came in that door with the audacity of despair, wild with the idea of wanting to soar, and I was the most pitiful of spiritless things" (238). These words are taken from Kierkegaard's writings on depressive psychosis.⁹² Influenced by Kierkegaard's theories, JPW sets up a dichotomy between the "poxy, boring anchor of this everyday world" and the "soul" (203). In the early sketches of the play, when JPW was still JPR the Scientologist, JPR elaborates further on this dichotomy:

[...] Truth for you is an ensemble of ceremonies. Washing your car, going to church, mowing the grass, regular as schoolwork to work, and eventually you will present yourself before the throne of God, you know already how many times to bow, you know

⁹¹ TCD MS11115/1/16/1.

⁹² In his notebooks, Murphy recorded two quotes from Kierkegaard: 1) "The loss of possibility signifies: either that everything becomes necessary to man or that everything has become trivial." 2) "For with the audacity of despair that man soared aloft who ran wild in possibility; but crushed down by despair that man straws himself against existence to whom everything has become necessary. But philistinism celebrates its triumph...imagines itself to be the master, does not take note that precisely thereby it has taken itself captive to be the slave of spiritlessness and to be the most pitiful of things" K. (TCD MS11115/1/16/1, *The Denial of Death* by Ernest Becker; originally from Kierkegaard's *The Sickness Unto Death*).

everything as a pupil does demonstrating a mathematical proposition with the letters, ABC but not when they are changed to DEF. You have arrived at DEF

Man: All is unintelligible to me.⁹³

“ABC” denotes the everyday routine, the ceremonies that mask the dread of existence. “DEF” is a different state of being, the so-called “fantastic,” where one loses her or his sanity:

JPR: Dread – not longing. You are in dread whenever you hear or see things not arranged in the same order as before. From childhood you’ve been telling yourself defensive lies, frightened to discover yourself and your life world. ~~That psychosis is neurosis pushed to its extreme.~~ Your so-called mental derangement is a clumsy attempt at this late stage to come to terms with the basic problems of life. [...] if you now start flaunting your ABC of your hitherto secure routine activity and go off into DEF which is the fantastic, you may never come back, my friend, and that’s the truth. Bananas, Schizophrenia, my friend, if you go too far from the boring fucking anchor of the everyday world you have been used to. [...] The misfortune is that such a man did not amount to anything in the world – afterall 1000 houses – the misfortune is that the man did not become aware of himself, aware that the self he is, is a perfectly definite something, and so is the necessary. [...] (Exiting) Excuse me. And that is it in a nutshell.

*Man perplexed. Then looking at record player. After a few moments turns up volume, a few moments later toilet flushing off, JPR returning, Man turns down volume reluctantly, JPR entering.*⁹⁴

Murphy ironically undercuts JPR’s didactic ramble with the Man’s response (“all is unintelligible”) as well as the flushing of the toilet—one of the mundane necessities that JPR dismisses.

The gap between ideals and reality here corresponds to JPW’s idealisation of Helen and

⁹³ TCD MS11115/1/16/1.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, emphasis added.

neglect of Mona. Mona represents the love and support that comes from “trivial” activities such as darning socks and bringing him shavers. Faced with JPW’s self-absorption, she displays a life-force and courage. To JPW’s question, “[w]hat-is-life?” Mona responds: “Life, my friend, is bouncing back” (*Gigli*, 192). In the BBC (Belfast) radio drama version directed by Pam Brighton in 1993, she elaborates on this view:

MONA: [...] But the way I look at things, if life is, as they say, just a preparation for heaven, then what’s the big deal about life about? [...] But if there is no heaven, what’s the big deal about heaven about? So, I say, make the most of what’s available now, grab what you can. [...] Yes, pleasure too, but I mean even more. All that energy about. Why are people moping? All that energy in the world, to be enjoyed, to kill pain, to give to the children.⁹⁵

Mona’s philosophy, then, is JPW’s “here-and-now” speech put in plain words. Her words carry more weight as her anticipation of death from cancer is a living fact. Mona is the embodiment of the everyday life-force: she carries out practical duties, provides JPW with bodily (including sexual) comfort and demonstrates down-to-earth sanity.

JPW’s belated realisation of what Mona offered and represents reflects Murphy’s own struggle as an artist and how his private life suffered as a result. Murphy had long suffered from depression and saw a psychiatrist, his friend Dr Ivor Browne.⁹⁶ Murphy’s reaction to the reception of the performance shows the extent of his emotional investment in the play. When it was first performed, reviewers criticised the length of the play (three hours and fifteen minutes); Michael Sheridan wrote: “take out the scissors, Tom, and this will be the absolute triumph that you have for so long deserved.”⁹⁷ This sentiment is echoed by Con Houlihan—“in short, the play is far too long”⁹⁸—and Desmond

⁹⁵ TCD MS11115/1/16/20.

⁹⁶ Grene, *Playwright Adventurer*, 140.

⁹⁷ Michael Sheridan, “Gigli Play Takes Too Long to Excel,” *Irish Press*, Sep 30, 1983, *Gigli*, Sep 23, 1983 [Press Cuttings], ATDA at NUIG, 0751_PC_0001, p. 2.

⁹⁸ Con Houlihan, “Concert Goes on Too Long,” *Evening Press*, Sep 30, 1983, *Gigli*, Sep 29, 1983 [Press Cuttings], ATDA at NUIG, 0751_PC_0001, p. 3.

Rushe: “its main fault is that it is too long.”⁹⁹ Murphy attacked these critics at a press conference for their “begrudging, condescending and at best paternalistic” reviews.¹⁰⁰ Murphy’s verdict was based on his sense that the critics were disrespectful of the effort that had gone into writing and staging the play; it took Murphy two years to write *Gigli*, while it took the critics only twenty minutes to write their reviews.¹⁰¹ As Michael Billington put it,

Mr Murphy pursues too many hares and charts too many memories. Yet his play has something of the overpowering confessional quality of Eugene O’Neill: you are moved because of what it cost the author to write it and because it provides (through the liberal use of music) an unbudgeable image of the conflict between our cramping civilisation and our private dreams.¹⁰²

Billington’s acknowledgement of the “overpowering confessional quality” of the play and “what is cost the author to write” best summarises the personal offence Murphy felt at that time. When *Gigli* travelled to Australia, Lenny Ann Low remarked: “[w]atching King struggle within his desperate self-delusion is like watching an unfunny clown trying to elicit a laugh from a firing squad. He pulls out every bell, whistle and complicated flow-chart to elicit the healing, affirmational powers.”¹⁰³ The sense that the artist and actor-as-therapist are both trying so hard, so desperately, is captured in this image of self-conscious quack-clown-ness.

The 1991 production foregrounded the artist’s hardship with the help of Monica Frawley’s set. Mary O’Donnell described the set as an “irregular six-sided shell which is the colour of raw flesh, inscribed with signs, circles and arrows pointing in various directions.”¹⁰⁴ Maureen Charlton observed:

⁹⁹ Desmond Rushe, “The Pain of Human Existence,” *Irish Independent*, Sep 30, 1983, *Gigli*, Sep 29, 1983 [Press Cuttings], ATDA at NUIG, 0751_PC_0001, p. 4.

¹⁰⁰ “Condemns Critics,” *Evening Press*, Sep 30, 1983, *Gigli*, Sep 29, 1983 [Press Cuttings], ATDA at NUIG, 0751_PC_0001, p. 24.

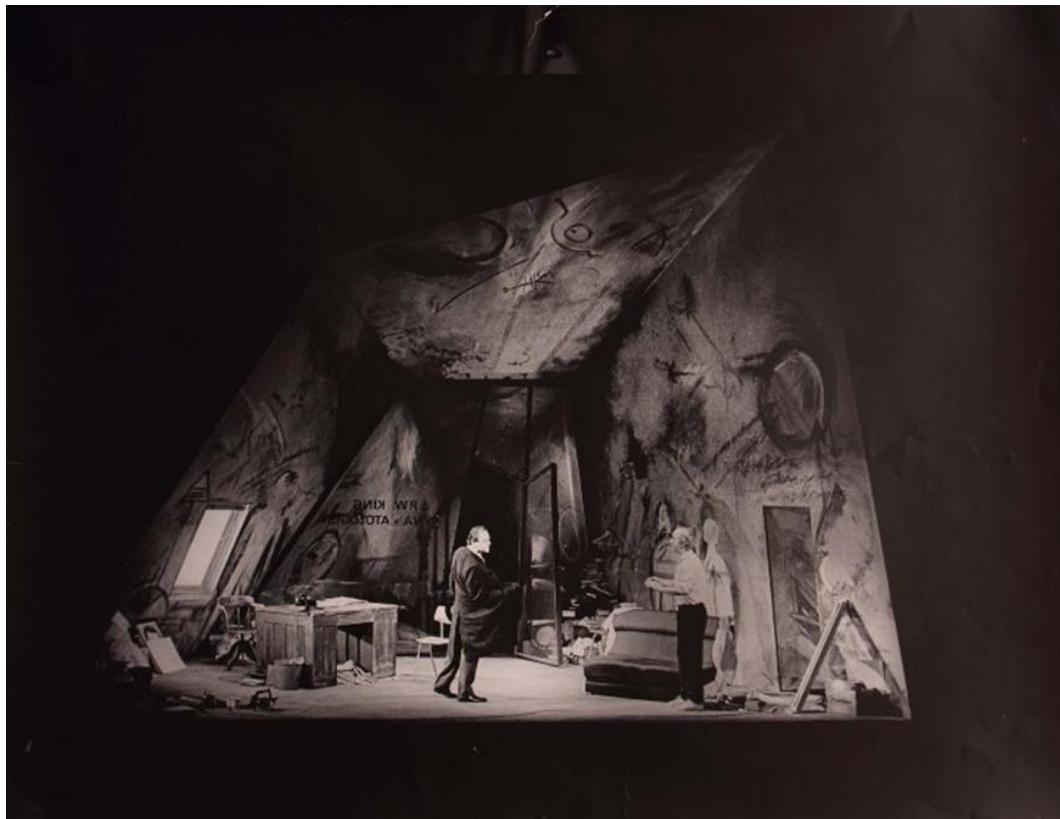
¹⁰¹ “My Play is Not Long and Boring, Says Angry Author,” *Irish Independent*, Oct 1, 1983, *Gigli*, Sep 29, 1983 [Press Cuttings], ATDA at NUIG, 0751_PC_0001, p. 10.

¹⁰² Michael Billington, “Dublin’s Vital Ingredients,” *Guardian*, Oct 3, 1983, *Gigli*, Sep 29, 1983 [Press Cuttings], ATDA at NUIG, 0751_PC_0001, p. 35.

¹⁰³ Lenny Ann Low, “*The Gigli Concert*, Abbey Theatre,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, Sep 14, 2004, *Gigli*, Sep 4, 2004 [Press Cuttings], ATDA at NUIG, 4866_PC_0001, p. 11-12.

¹⁰⁴ Mary O’Donnell, “Genius Shines in *Gigli* Jewel,” *Sunday Business*, Mar 24, 1991, *Gigli*, Mar 19, 1991

“[i]t’s like an artist’s studio, an artist who’s gone berserk and painted the walls of his room. [...] The shape of it reminded me of [...] an extraordinary little opticians up in Kelly’s Corner.”¹⁰⁵



Gigli, Mar 19, 1991 [Photographs]. ATDA at NUIG, 0526_PH_0008, p.1

The attic studio with its glass back wall leaves a strong impression of the strange, primordial and deluded mindscape of the artist-philosopher. The cave-like form of the set also caused the characters to cast long shadows. Whenever the actors climbed the stairs, the lighting produced shadows of the respective figures, giving a ghostly texture to the performance. Before entering JPW’s office, the Irish Man appeared in a way that seemed to haunt the space. Mona’s shadow as she knocks on JPW’s office door when he is completely self-absorbed equally accentuated her status as mere shadow to JPW. It also calls into question the reality of the interaction between the characters. Whatever it is that happened in JPW’s office (that is, on the stage), was it merely, a dream, an illusion, a trick of the light? The cave set seemed to invite the audience into the illusory world of theatre.

Just as the characters’ difficulties reflect the artist’s own venture, the actors also attested to

[Press Cuttings], ATDA at NUIG, 0526_PC_0001, p. 51.

¹⁰⁵ Maureen Charlton and Mike Murphy, “MC Reviews *Gigli*,” *RTE Radio 1: The Arts Show*, Mar 20, 1991, *Gigli*, Mar 19, 1991 [Press Cuttings], ATDA at NUIG, 0526_PC_0001, p. 26-32.

the painful process of putting the show onstage. In the programme note for the Abbey's centenary celebrations in 2004, Tom Hickey recalled his involvement in the original production of the play:

It was now becoming clear to me that – life or death – I was facing the situation that JPW himself was facing in the play – a monumental leap into the unknown. My daily routine for the next four weeks was as follows: 6 am Rise and learn lines / 9:45 am Travel to Abbey / 10:30 am Rehearsal / 1 pm Sandwiches and tea with Godfrey while going over script / 2 pm Rehearsal / 5:45 pm Go home and eat main meal of the day / 7:30 pm Resume learning lines / 11 pm Go to bed and try to sleep. As JPW and The Man say in the play: ‘Christ how am I going to get through today?’ And then I woke up one morning and realised we were opening that night. I remember two things about that event. We got a standing ovation. And later that night when the fuss died down, Godfrey said to me ‘dear heart we have climbed the mountain.’ Yes Godfrey, yes indeed.¹⁰⁶

JPW and the Irish Man's therapy sessions are, for Tom Hickey and Godfrey Quigley, rehearsals repeated over and over. The characters' longing for magic is for Hickey and Quigley live performance in theatre. One is not only moved by “what it cost the author to write,” but also by what it costs the actors to perform. The characters' struggle in *Gigli* is multifaceted; its meaning is arguably even more remarkable when embodied in the labour of the actors and considered in the theatrical realm.

The two plays thus trace Murphy's journey to find the sacred in the post-Catholic secular world. In *Sanctuary*, Murphy directly portrays a church as a desolate space deprived of its sacredness. *Gigli* shows how the sacred has been replaced by capitalist values and therapy culture: the men have sold their souls for money, while psychoanalysis and clinical treatments are being used as a remedy for the soul in the guise of “mental illness.” Murphy takes things even further, suggesting that these scientific developments and modernising processes cannot accommodate the human longing for self-transcendence. In both *Sanctuary* and *Gigli*, there is a kind of “freakishness” to the stories. In

¹⁰⁶ Tom Hickey, *Gigli*, Oct 1, 2004 [Programme], ATDA at NUIG, 4869_MPG_01, p. 8.

Murphy's theatre, itself an alternative to mainstream drama, the sacred can only be re-discovered in the least likely spaces, in a travesty of standard places of ritual. The spaces in both *Sanctuary* and *Gigli* are disused or downgraded versions of conventional spaces. Straying further from the tragic world where characters are entrapped in their fate and environment—as discussed in the second chapter—in *Sanctuary* and *Gigli*, Murphy looks for a way of staging a sacred space where gods have abandoned their creations, but where transcendence remains possible.

Compared to the dancehall and the pub, where the characters' interactions took place in a more common social setting, the spaces in this chapter centre on two or three people who contrive to find one another and form a refuge, when washed up in an odd and marginal space. The downsizing of characters demonstrates Murphy's focused attention to the individual spiritual journey within these settings. The limitations of conventional forms of belief led to Murphy's reinvention of the sacred by borrowing and blending ideas and language from Catholic prayers (as seen in his involvement with the liturgy), Continental philosophy, pseudo-religion (Scientology), psychology, and therapy, which in turn becomes his own "dynamatology" of theatre. Albeit not to the extent of Yeats's speculative religion and systematic ritual knowledge in *A Vision* (1925), Murphy does attempt to construct a vision of his own: he sanctifies the everyday, whereby the everyday is not something to transcend but the very means by which the sacred can be accessed. The everyday and the sacred are not in opposition; rather the everyday becomes a form of theatrical ritual. In both *Sanctuary* and *Gigli*, it is the characters, in their sharing of space and stories, who form a "spontaneous communitas," a sacred community within the theatre. In turn, the audience identifying in the "place-making" of the actor-as-characters become part of the real, live spontaneous community. This formation of community is not antithetical to Murphy's emphasis on self-transcendence and individual experience of religion. Instead, as in Rancière's "emancipated community," it is in the recognition of one's individuality and differences—in heightened self-awareness—that a genuine community can take shape. The presence of others enables self-transformation. As Rancière puts it, the "shared power of the equality of intelligence links individuals": "the power everyone has to plot her own path."¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁷ Rancière, *Emancipated Spectator*, 17.

Bachelard argues that “[s]acred properties” are often “attributed to the threshold.”¹⁰⁸ He refers to Porphyry in the third century, who wrote: “[a] threshold is a sacred thing.”¹⁰⁹ It is by this token that the liminal becomes sacred. Murphy looks into the far margins, as seen in the draft versions of *Sanctuary* and the sacristy as the offstage part of the church, and his choice of quack, con-artist home-cum-opera-stage-office in lieu of an authorised clinic or a qualified therapist’s office. It seems fitting then, that Murphy would come to dedicate more plays to marginalised female characters, bringing their spaces into the centre. In the thoroughly masculine space of the pub, Peggy and Anne in *Conversations* sing and smile to evoke hope; Mona, who is fighting cancer in *Gigli*, teaches the self-engrossed JPW King courage and love in her unconditional support for him; Maudie in *Sanctuary* looks for forgiveness. If the women were marginalised in these plays, in *Bailegangaire*, *The Wake* and *Alice Trilogy*, their stories are given full scope. The “circused” Olga in *Sanctuary*—whose speech remains only in the manuscript drafts—becomes Vera’s outraged revolt against her family in *The Wake*, where Vera, the objectified sex worker, embarks on a journey to reclaim her body and self. Lefebvre points out that women bear the heaviest burdens of everyday life with their “child-bearing and child-rearing, basic preoccupations with bare necessities, [...] health, desire, spontaneity, vitality [...] recurrence, hardship.”¹¹⁰ At the same time, however, “the power of woman, crushed and overwhelmed, ‘object’ of history and society” is also “the inevitable ‘subject’ and foundation; creation from recurrent gestures of a world of sensory experience [...] the ability to create in terms of everyday life from its solids and its spaces.”¹¹¹

¹⁰⁸ Bachelard, *Poetics of Space*, 238.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁰ Lefebvre, *Everyday Life in the Modern World*, trans. Sacha Rabinovitch (London: Bloomsbury, [1971] 2016), 35.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 30.

Chapter V. Women's Spaces: Voices and Bodies

Bailegangaire (1985) was partly a response to the violent hypermasculine world Murphy explored in *A Whistle in the Dark*. As Murphy recalled: in London 1962, the first night of *Whistle*,

A woman came up to me after the play, and she said it was very good, and so on, but 'if you don't mind, Tom, you know nothing about women'. So I wanted to write a play for three women, not just based on that incident of the first night, but it did contribute to it.¹

The characters in Murphy's plays are all alienated, marginalised, confined and paralysed both outside and within society; for women, the restraints are far more severe. In an interview in 1985 regarding the premiere of *Bailegangaire*, Murphy shared another story, later recounted by Ciaran Carty:

'Why can't you Irish sign even the simplest contract without questioning it over and over again?' exclaimed an exasperated London agent. 'There's a simple answer,' Tom Murphy told him. 'During centuries of occupation, we had to become masters of double think.' At which point a secretary interrupted them. 'Women have to behave the same way because they've always been dominated by men,' she pointed out. Perhaps this is what has prompted Murphy to write a play only with women. [...] 'My generation was brought up with the idea that a woman belonged either on a pedestal or on her back.' Getting beyond this conditioning – which is by no means peculiar to Irish drama – hasn't been easy. [...] '*Bailegangaire* comes from listening to the way women talk [...] I had absorbed them.'²

¹ Anthony Roche, "Bailegangaire: Storytelling into Drama," *Irish University Review* 17, no. 1 (1987): 117.

² Ciaran Carty, "'My Generation Was Brought Up with the Idea that a Woman Belonged Either on a Pedestal or on Her Back,'" *Sunday Tribune*, Dec 1, 1985, T2/2/8/447 [Press Cuttings] Dec 1985, DTCA, JHL, NUIG.

Murphy observes and creates characters who are victims of social conditioning and came to recognise how women are further victimised and repressed. Doreen Massey argues that spaces and places are not themselves gendered but reflect and affect the ways in which gender is constructed and understood. She writes:

The limitation of women's mobility, in terms both of identity and space, has been in some cultural contexts a crucial means of subordination. Moreover, the two things – the limitation on mobility in space, the attempted consignment/confinement to particular places on the one hand, and the limitation on identity on the other – have been crucially related.³

The most common and dominant separation of spaces was that between home and workplace, between the private and the public. In the modern period, at least since the beginning of the nineteenth century in middle-class culture, the domestic space has been considered women's designated sphere, a practice that has functioned as a means of control. Everyday practice sets the standard of "normativity," and failure to abide by these norms divides who and what is "in" or "out" of place. For instance, women were regarded as being "out of place" in the pub, a predominantly male-centred social space. Similarly, sexuality is expected to be expressed only in private; Philip Hubbard's research on heterosexual prostitution in British cities reveals that prostitution is acceptable and visible in certain public places (i.e. red-light districts), often on the margins of a city, but is otherwise regarded as "unnatural" and "deviant," causing a good deal of moral panic.⁴ The changes in legislation and tolerance toward the LGBTQ+ community in some places are another example of the geographies of sexuality. The division between the "high-class" prostitution that occurs in private spaces and the "lower-class" prostitution seen on the street also demonstrates the spatial politics of sexuality and its intersection with class. The three women in *Bailegangaire* are trapped in their private space and in the past; Mommo, the

³ Massey, *Place and Gender*, 179.

⁴ Cresswell, *Place: An Introduction*, 171.

grandmother, is bedbound and immobile. Vera, the protagonist in *The Wake* (1998) is ostracised by her family, marginalised and objectified due to her status as an émigrée and a sex worker. As a housewife and a mother, Alice in *Alice Trilogy* (2005) equally lives in a stultifying environment.

Feminist geographers challenge the idealisation of “home” as a warm and caring place. Yi Fu Tuan defines the home space as “an intimately lived place,”⁵ “a unit of space organized mentally and materially to satisfy people’s real and perceived basic biosocial needs and beyond that their higher aesthetic and political aspirations.”⁶ Gillian Rose opposes Tuan’s and other theorists’ view of home as fulfilling and nurturing. For many, home can be a terrifying place, a space of oppression and confinement, especially for abused women and children:

Although it was often noted that home need not necessarily be a family house, images of the domestic recur [...] as universal, even biological, experiences. [...] This enthusiasm for home and for what is associated with the domestic, in the context of the erasure of women from humanistic studies, suggests to me that humanistic geographers are working with a masculinist notion of home/place.⁷

Rose clarifies that the notion of home as a universal “essence” fails to consider difference. Other feminist scholars have disagreed with Rose’s view; for instance, black feminist author bell hooks sees home as an empowering place, a “place of resistance.”⁸ The theme of homecoming occurs throughout Murphy’s oeuvre, but it resonates differently in his plays about women. This chapter investigates women’s voices, bodies, and their experience of space, which Murphy revisits and develops as a theatrical mode. As opposed to the social world and the male-dominated pub, in *Bailegangaire* Murphy fully explores, expands, and transforms the domestic space of the cottage kitchen—which has been conventionally defined as the designated women’s area—into theatre history. Vera in *The Wake*

⁵ Yi Fu Tuan, “A View of Geography,” *Geographical Review* 81, no. 1 (1991): 105.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 102.

⁷ Gillian Rose, *Feminism and Geography: The Limits of Geographical Knowledge* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1993), 53.

⁸ bell hooks, “Homeplace (A Site of Resistance),” in *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Boston: South End, 1990), 41-49.

confounds the boundaries of private and public by performing her sexual activities—her private affairs—in public. The theatricality of her performance highlights the performativity of sex and gender. In *Alice Trilogy*, Murphy portrays the psychological landscape of Alice, who experiences multiple realities. The private and public are intertwined and filtered through Alice’s viewpoint, as Murphy experiments with the form to encompass the nuance and complexity of her emotions.

Bodies in the Modern World: Heterotopias and Non-Places

What emerges in exploring women’s space is the foregrounding of the body and their complicated relations with “it”; their mode of being frequently entails a creative resistance to the conventional linearity of time and order of space. Maurice Merleau-Ponty asserts that the body is not an entity to which meaning is ascribed, but a “body-subject.” As he puts it, “the union of body and soul is not an amalgamation between two mutually external terms, subject and object, brought about by arbitrary decree”; rather, “it is enacted at every instant in the movement of existence.”⁹ Such lived experience and corporeal knowledge are central to feminist scholarship. Elizabeth Grosz and Iris Marion Young note how female bodies are limited by being made mere objects, while at the same time, as free subjects, they challenge cultural norms.¹⁰ Judith Butler regards the body as a process that stabilises and materialises over time,¹¹ and stresses the importance of considering the body in relation to gender, challenging all dualisms: not only of the mind and body, but also of “inner” and “outer,” and subject and object. “Just as bodily surfaces are enacted as the natural,” writes Butler, “so these surfaces can become the site of dissonant and denaturalized performance that reveals the performative status of the natural itself.”¹² While Butler’s example pertains to the performance of drag as a way to create dissonance in gender binaries, Murphy’s appropriation and dramatisation of female characters

⁹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge, 1962), 102.

¹⁰ See Elizabeth Grosz’s *Volatile Bodies* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1994); Iris Marion Young’s *On Female Body Experience: “Throwing Like a Girl” and Other Essays* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2005).

¹¹ Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (New York: Routledge, 1993). Butler claims that “to be material means to materialize, where the principle of that materialization is precisely what ‘matters’ about that body, its very intelligibility” (7).

¹² Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 146.

raises questions both about their “feminine” bodies—in their immobility, oppression, abuse, mistreatment, commodification and dissociation—and their individual identities.

In Irish theatre, the prominence of “literary” texts resulted in the relative neglect of bodies in general and female bodies in particular. Shonagh Hill posits that “the elision of female experience and of female bodies have been perpetuated by Irish theatre, and the study of it, as a predominantly literary theatre tradition.”¹³ Murphy, whose works stand within the Irish literary theatre tradition, is thus an important case study; although a male playwright himself, Murphy explores the same issues—of the feminine body and spaces—that can serve to expose and condemn the mechanisms by which women are alienated and marginalised. By representing their voices and bodies in the fictional and theatrical world, Murphy himself performs sex/gender by adopting “feminine” constructs—words, acts, gestures and desires—in effect revealing the performativity of gender and the “profound unnaturalness” of bodies embedded in the materialisation process. Butler points out:

As the effects of a subtle and politically enforced performativity, gender is an “act,” as it were, that is open to splittings, self-parody, self-criticism, and those hyperbolic exhibitions of “the natural” that, in their very exaggeration, reveal its fundamentally phantasmatic status.¹⁴

The Wake presents the phantasmatic status of the body in its theatricality and in its staged performance. In *The Wake* and *Alice Trilogy*, the theatre provides the space for the characters’ complex relation to their bodies and sense of self to materialise in the process (and presence) of the actors-as-characters (inter)acting on stage. Theatre as a commercial institution can be both complicit in and resistant to the commodification of bodies.

Against the fixity of bodies and the compartmentalisation of space, Murphy relocates the characters in a heterotopic world. The hotel, cemetery and offstage psychiatric hospital in *The Wake*, and the strange mirror-world of *Alice Trilogy*, are examples of heterotopia as described in Michel

¹³ Shonagh Hill, *Women and Embodied Mythmaking in Irish Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2019), 7.

¹⁴ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 147.

Foucault's "Of Other Spaces." For Foucault, "heterotopology" denotes the "simultaneously mythic and real contestation of the spaces in which we live."¹⁵ One of the functions of heterotopia is to be "capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible."¹⁶ Theatre, Foucault reminds us, is an important example. In its contest between real and illusory spaces, between different "slices in time" (termed "heterochronies"),¹⁷ Murphy's heterotopias create spaces of liminality and "otherness," thereby challenging the fixity of identity and the narratives of both womanhood and nationalism.

The heterotopia in Murphy's plays is not only a theatrical device underpinning his use of spaces, but also a reflection of the social realities and changes he experienced and absorbed. In an interview with Anthony Roche in 1986, Murphy remarked:

You can still hear the sound of the sheep on the hillside and the sound of seabirds in their accents and voices, and yet you see a man with a bag of turf on his back and he's got a Walkman on his head, and he's listening to music. [...] you'll have two fellas mad drunk at 11 in the morning on some illicit brew and they're speaking in a language that the English or any English-speaking race couldn't possibly recognize. And you go a hundred yards further and there's a hotel where a woman is speaking in the most posh voice, saying 'Your table is laid over here,' and the menu is in French. These extraordinary anomalies that abound in this country today – transition doesn't cover it.¹⁸

Ireland's rapid and uneven "transition" into a modern society—or, as Fintan O'Toole would argue, from pre-modern to postmodern without ever having been "modern"¹⁹—is pinpointed by Murphy in these "extraordinary anomalies." The "transition" can be read in terms of Marc Augé's idea of "non-

¹⁵ Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias," trans. Jay Miskowicz, *Diacritics* 16, no.1 ([1984] 1986): 24.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 25.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 26.

¹⁸ Anthony Roche, "Murphy and the Druid," *Irish Literary Supplement*, March 1986, T2/2/9/450 [Press Cuttings] March 1986, DTCA, JHL, NUIG.

¹⁹ See Fintan O'Toole's *The Lie of the Land: Irish Identities* (London: Verso, 1997), *After the Ball: Ireland After the Boom* (Dublin: New Island, 2003) and *Ship of Fools: How Stupidity and Corruption Sank the Celtic Tiger* (London: Faber, 2009).

place,” which is a product of “supermodernity.” Augé defines supermodernity as having “three figures of excess: overabundance of events, spatial overabundance and the individualization of references”²⁰ and “makes the old (history) into a specific spectacle, as it does with all exoticism and all local particularity.”²¹ Murphy’s plays about the increasing phenomenon of “non-places,” culminating in Alice at the very end of *Alice Trilogy* being “At the Airport,” a quintessential non-place.

Augé claims that “the word ‘non-place’ designates two complementary but distinct realities: spaces formed in relation to certain ends (transport, transit, commerce, leisure), and the relations that individuals have with these spaces,” and goes on to argue that as “anthropological places create the organically social, so non-places create solitary contractuality.”²² “Solitary contractuality” leads to greater individualisation and solitude, replacing genuine communal bonds. The alienation and loneliness felt by the characters are symptomatic of the “anomalies” continued in the confusing co-existence of pre-, post- and super- modernities. Within the bleak environment where non-places pervade, where community and organic anthropological places break down, Murphy finds hope in the women’s capacity for “place-making” in *Bailegangaire*, *The Wake* and *Alice Trilogy*. As in many of his works, the three plays demonstrate that moments of true “place” are hard-earned, short-lived, and often unpredictable—but like the magical experience of theatre, are possible nonetheless.

***Bailegangaire* (1985): Restoring Place**

In a handwritten note to the first draft of *Bailegangaire*, Murphy imagines “3 women at war and dependent upon one another. Their lives are in chaos. [...] Each night, every night she [Mommo] sets off to tell the same story. There is both a compulsion in her to tell it, at the same time a fear to finish.”²³ Set in the kitchen of a thatched house, the women are caught in the repetitive cycle of

²⁰ Marc Augé, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, trans. John Howe (London: Verso, 1995), 109.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 110.

²² *Ibid.*, 94.

²³ TCD MS11115/1/17/1.

Mommo's story, which is at the core of their existence. Home is the space of the everyday, and its modality is repetition. Repetition can be enslaving, but can also be creative, signalling resistance and innovation. In her discussion of the everyday, Rita Felski contends that “[w]hile much paid work is equally repetitive, only the domestic sphere is deemed to exist outside the dynamic of history and change.”²⁴ Murphy sets *Bailegangaire* in the domestic sphere—yet here, the tyranny of repetition becomes the very means to perform “the dynamic of history and change.” Murphy merges different temporalities and rhythms of the everyday in the play. Felski claims that

The temporality of everyday life is internally complex: it combines repetition and linearity, recurrence with forward movement. [...] Repetition, understood as ritual, provides a connection to ancestry and tradition; it situates the individual in an imagined community that spans historical time. It is thus not opposed to transcendence, but is the means of transcending one's historically limited existence [...] The everyday cannot be opposed to the realm of history, but is rather the very means by which history is actualised and made real.²⁵

Bailegangaire presents repetition as both oppressive and ritualistic. Murphy critiques and elevates women's repetitive practice in the kitchen by dramatising this tension, reconstructing the domestic sphere as the place where history is actualised.

If *Bailegangaire* was written partly as a response to the remark that Murphy “knew nothing about women” when *Whistle* premiered,²⁶ the manuscript drafts also reveal how much Murphy was considering “old age” at the time. Murphy's mother, always a powerful presence, had been suffering from Alzheimer's disease. He returned to Tuam as often as he could, and these visits came to inform

²⁴ Felski, “Invention of Everyday,” 19. Felski asks: “[w]hy are women so persistently linked to repetition?” suggesting three reasons: firstly, that women are regarded as being closely linked to their biological nature; with the biorhythms of pregnancy and menstruation constituting a “human subordination” to natural time that goes against civilization; secondly, that women are primarily responsible for cleaning, preparing meals and caring for children, “the repetitive tasks of social reproduction”; and thirdly, that “women are identified with repetition via consumption” (19).

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 21-22.

²⁶ Roche, “Storytelling into Drama,” 117.

the play.²⁷ In a hardback diary, on November 13, 1983, Murphy, while writing *Conversations*, was brainstorming ideas for “The Challenge,” the laughing competition involving Seamus Costello.²⁸ Murphy took the following notes from Ronald Blythe’s *The View in Winter: Reflections on Old Age* (1979):

[...] a compulsion to piece together a true self from all the fragments.....“so you see, I was quite a boy” says the old man with satisfaction. The old do not feel themselves to be loved...So much indifference and lack of contact by others. [...] Unable to love them we approach the old via sentiment, duty and an eye to our own decline. [...] Yeats’ poem: “why should not old men be mad – or they have strange remembrance such as gravediggers “who thrust their buried men back in the human mind again.”²⁹

Murphy was interested in the way the old reflect on their past, in the attempt of old people to piece a story together in order to come to terms with themselves. Another note entry begins with an extract from Rousseau’s “Confessions”: “memory often failed me or furnished but imperfect recollections, I filled in the space by details supplied by imagination to supplement these recollections....I said things I had forgotten as it seemed to me they ought to have been, and as perhaps they were...I sometimes lent strange charms to truth.”³⁰ The reversal of power between parent and child in old age is noted by Blythe: “[y]our authority is taken away from you, though you still feel your authority even when it isn’t there.” Blythe describes parental care as an “imprisonment” for some, but a pleasurable and fulfilling experience for those who are especially committed and devoted; these sons and daughters might even “dread the day of release.”³¹ Murphy combines these details with his own family experience to create the paradigmatic old person, Mommo, and her relationship with her granddaughters. Murphy added his own notes to Blythe’s, laying out the key terms that drive

²⁷ Gilsean, *Sing on Forever*, Part 4: 3:45.

²⁸ TCD MS11115/1/7/28.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

Bailegangaire: “Senility/Hallucinations/the bizarre: the real rational when the brain ceases to be rational.”³²

Mommo is one incarnation of an indelible figure in the history of Irish theatre. She is the old hag (*cailleach* from Irish mythology) and storyteller (*seanchai*), who, as critics such as Grene and Roche argue, belongs to the same lineage as the old woman in Yeats and Gregory’s *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* (1902), Maurya in Synge’s *Riders to the Sea* (1904) and even Mouth in Beckett’s *Not I* (1973). Mommo can also be interpreted as Mother Ireland herself, with freedom and liberation being central themes of the play. As Mother Ireland, Mommo’s inability to finish her story—her state of being stuck in the past—is often compared to Irish history, a nightmare the nation is still struggling to awake from.³³

While much attention has been paid to the storytelling aspect of *Bailegangaire*, there has been less emphasis on how Murphy’s deliberate configuration of female characters, as “a play for three women,” relate to the corporeality and spatial dynamic of the play. This spatial element features prominently in Mommo’s description of her story: “how the place called Bochtán [...] came to its new appellation, Bailegangaire, the place without laughter” (*Bailegangaire*, 92). Roche’s reading of *Bailegangaire* through the lens of Beckett’s *Endgame* (1957) compares the mutual dependence of Hamm and Clov—arising from their disabilities—to that of Mommo and her granddaughter Mary. Nevertheless, it is in Nell’s dustbin-bound insight—reminiscent of the bedbound Mommo—that the two plays thematically merge:

NELL: Nothing is funnier than unhappiness, I grant you that. [...] Yes, yes, it’s the most comical thing in the world. And we laugh, we laugh, with a will, in the beginning. But it’s always the same thing. Yes, it’s like the funny story we have heard too often, we still

³² TCD MS11115/1/7/28.

³³ Fintan O’Toole argues that *Bailegangaire* is “a play which encapsulates all the grief of history, expressed in a language of peasant Catholicism and exorcised in a final moment of extraordinary theatrical grace” (*Politics*, 229). Moving away from other critics’ state-of-the-nation framework, Alexandra Poulain applies Lyotard’s ideas of the “Survivant” (1988), arguing that the play takes a stand for “a child-like commitment to attend to life, *as if* it really mattered”; the play “speaks to us beyond the boundaries of Ireland precisely because it reflects so lucidly and honestly on specific traditions, on the value and potential dangers of these traditions, and on the need to keep them alive, rather than enshrined in immutable forms (“About Survival,” 208).

find it funny, but we don't laugh any more.³⁴

In the laughing contest between the “stranger” (Mommo’s husband Seamus, as it transpires) and Costello, Mommo supplies the topic of “misfortunes” that “would keep them laughing near forever” (*Bailegangaire*, 156). There is a strange inversion here of Marx’s dictum that “history repeats itself, first as tragedy, second as farce,” or of common axiom: “comedy equals tragedy plus time.” Murphy repeats comedy, the comic retelling of the laughing competition, to the extent that in its depletion it becomes a tragedy. Although the challenge could have been called off earlier, Mommo insisted on seeing it through:

They could have got home. (*Brooding, growls; then.*) Costello could decree. All others could decree. But what about the things had been vexin’ *her* for years? No, a woman isn’t stick or stone. They forty years an’ more in the one bed together (*and*) he to rise in the mornin’ (*and*) not to give her a glance. An’ so long it had been he had called her by first name, she’d near forgot it herself . . . Brigit . . . [...] ‘Hona ho gus hah-haa!’ – she hated him too. (*Bailegangaire*, 135)

Mommo does not participate in the actual contest: the male-centric fight. As a form of revenge for being treated like “stick or stone,” she is the one who suggests comical unhappinesses in order to sustain the dangerous challenge. With the death of Costello and the beating of Seamus, Bochtán—which means “pauper” or “poor person” in Irish³⁵—becomes *Bailegangaire*, where “they don’t laugh [...] anymore” (*Bailegangaire*, 159). Laughter ceases in the village because of this encounter with misfortune, and it ceases in the house because Mary has heard Mommo’s story too often. It is only at the very end when the house becomes a “valley of tears,” (161) that the three women unite. In *Endgame*, when Clov observes that Nagg is crying, Hamm replies, “[t]hen he’s living.”³⁶ Building on

³⁴ Samuel Beckett, “*Endgame*,” in *Samuel Beckett: The Complete Dramatic Works* (London: Faber, 2006), 101.

³⁵ “Bochtán,” *e-DIL-Electronic Dictionary of the Irish Language*, Aug 6, 2021, <http://www.dil.ie/6258>.

³⁶ Beckett, “*Endgame*,” 123.

the dualities of laughter and tears, comedy and tragedy, and space and place, Murphy refashions the ordinary home into a space where the women can reclaim and reconcile their damaged selves.

Back to the Kitchen

The play opens with the description of the “kitchen of a thatched house”: “[d]usk is setting in on a room, a country kitchen. There are some modern conveniences: a cooker, a radio (which is switched on), electric light – a single pendant. Photographs on the walls, brown photographs” (*Bailegangaire*, 91). The setting establishes at once a sense of ending in the falling darkness and beginning (in the electric light), as Mommo settles in to tell a story to her “imagined children.” There is a hinge of modernity marked by a cooker and the radio alongside old traces of the brown photographs. While Mary is making tea and laying the table, Mommo is “driving imagined hens from the house” (55). The space is thrown together, with clashing temporalities and boundaries; it is a mixture of tradition and modernity, past and present, and fiction and reality. In the handwritten early drafts of the play—labelled as “Draft Two”—Murphy goes into greater detail to explain the elaborate ritual of Mary’s household chores:

Mary, dressed simply, but a successful attempt at elegance in her simple dress, is having her tea. The table is layed as best she can manage it: table-cloth – a good one – cutlery, cup saucer and side plate – cheap china – and the only pieces remaining of a set – and a silver tea pot. [...] Mary’s delicate dining is a mixture of fantasy about her circumstances and what they might have been. The radio is switched on: a Hyden [sic] Symphony – No 45 – moving into a slow movement as twilight stretches its shadows across the room.³⁷

As with many of Murphy’s other plays, beneath the plain realism of the kitchen set lie the fantasy and the symbolic gestures that can change the temperature of the drama. The choice of Haydn’s “Farewell”

³⁷ TCD MS11115/1/17/5.

symphony (rather than Schubert's "Notturmo" in the later version) functioned as an apt metaphor for the women's longing to return home: the famous story goes that Haydn arranged the final adagio with the musicians gradually disappearing—exiting one by one—until only two muted violins remained, in order to persuade Haydn's patron to let the musicians go home.³⁸

In the same draft, Mommo, who is simply named "Old Woman," sees ghosts from her past:

The Old Woman pausing, glancing suspiciously and fearfully at the shadows: she begins to discern the outlines of other figures present; they are only distinguishable to her. [...] An old woman – the Crone – with oil-cloth shipping bag. [...] As Mary gets the other lamp and prepares it for lighting, and the cup of water, two figures are becoming discernible at the dark end of the room; phantom figures from Old Woman's past. [...] The Figures, like a tableau in a primitive pub, consist of Crone, Brian, Josie and Costello. All, except Josie, wearing a lot of clothes; [...] Josie is in shabby jacket, threadbare trousers and open-neck shirt.³⁹

This is another classic example of Murphy including detailed novelistic sketches that end up being removed from the final version; in this case, the note powerfully demonstrates how the Old Woman occupies a time-space that exists between past and present. She exists between the pub-world of her past and the bedbound domestic sphere of her present. The Crone is the mirror figure of Mommo. Mommo is a complex embodiment of fluctuation and fearful potential; as Murphy suggests in the first draft of the play, "the old [...] have the power to bless or to curse."⁴⁰ The matriarchal lineage and principle established by the idea of the pre-Christian Crone that Murphy had in mind further complicates the interpretation of *Bailegangaire* as a reworking of Judeo-Christian narratives. For instance, seeing the play as a "comedy of redemption," Richard Rankin Russell argues that "if Murphy had given up on institutional Christianity, he was still committed to reworking its truths into something

³⁸ See James Webster, *Haydn's "Farewell" Symphony and the Idea of Classical Style* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991).

³⁹ TCD MS11115/1/17/5.

⁴⁰ TCD MS11115/1/17/1.

he felt would be more constructive [...] His narrative interest in the Bible's orality, coupled with his lingering fascination with confession, enabled him to write [...] *Bailegangaire*.⁴¹

As much as *Bailegangaire* deals with the idea of a post-Christian redemption, the play also conveys the power of pagan defiance and acceptance of Life. In the first draft of the play handwritten in February 1984, Murphy noted:

An Old Woman in her eighties in bed, eating and drinking something from a mug. The Old Woman is senile: the senility a mixture of humour, suspicion, abstraction, venom, incomprehension, pride; the dominating feature is defiance (defiance of what? Perhaps life) She is a good Mimic.⁴²

Against the stereotyped image of saintly nuns in the Christian context stands the wilful and wolfish Mommo. The clash of Christian values and paganism is embodied in Mommo's character and her name, Brigit. This connection is further explored in *Brigit* (2014), a reworking of Murphy's television play that deals with Mommo and her relationship with her husband Séamus. In the play, Séamus, despite (or because of) his revolt against the Church, is commissioned to make a statue of St Brigid. As Grene summarises, "Séamus struggles to express in his sculpture both the pagan deity associated with the onset of spring who presides over poetry, and the self-denying wilfully celibate nun, founder of the church of Kildare."⁴³ In *Bailegangaire*, everything is related and in flux; Mommo's incomprehension, venom and senility unsettle the fixed norms of what an old woman should and could be.

Rather than viewing Mommo and her narrative as switching in and out of different frames in the single space of the kitchen,⁴⁴ the space can be interpreted as a heterotopia, where multiple past

⁴¹ Richard Rankin Russell, "Tom Murphy's *Bailegangaire* as Comedy of Redemption," *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* 21, no. 2 (2007): 80-1.

⁴² TCD MS11115/1/17/1.

⁴³ Nicholas Grene, "Introduction: The Full Story," *Mommo Plays* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), ii.

⁴⁴ In Grene's *Playwright Adventurer*, Lucy McDiarmid uses ideas from Erving Goffman's *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience* (1972) to demonstrate the narrative strategy and formal structure of the play. According to McDiarmid, the play is divided between the inner (past) and outer (present) frame, and merges at the very end ("Misfortunes," 198-9). Roche similarly points to the various "narrative breaks," where Mommo is unable to continue her story due to the experience of trauma. Thus, the third-person and first-

and present selves co-exist. Surrounding the personal, present reality of Mary and Dolly is a wider geographical and sociological reality. Amidst their talk, “another car passes by outside” and Dolly remarks: “[t]raffic. The weekend-long meeting at the computer plant place” (*Bailegangaire*, 137). The Japanese factory serves as a reminder of modernity while Mommo’s all-consuming past evokes a sense of remote timelessness. The identities of Mary and Dolly are closely linked to Mommo’s story; their meaning and purpose circle around the place-making and homecoming of Mommo. Within this juxtaposition of spaces, Mommo is struggling to navigate her way “home” through her narration. Mary, too, longs for home. She has been working as a nurse in England, but she has returned to Ireland to take care of Mommo:

MARY. I wanted to come home.

DOLLY. What?

MARY. I had to come home.

[...]

MARY. This is our home.

DOLLY. I know, I know.

MARY. This is *home*?

DOLLY. I know, I know. (*Bailegangaire*, 125-6)

Meanwhile, Dolly has tried her whole life to escape the place: “I had ten! – I had a lifetime! – A lifetime! –here with herself, doin’ her every bidding, listenin’ to her seafóid (*rambling*) getting’ worse till I didn’t know where I was! Pissin’ in the bed beside me – I had a lifetime!” (144). Although she met Stephen, who she hoped might rescue her from the situation, she “[n]ever once felt any – real – warmth from him” (144). It is a toxic relationship and Stephen beats Dolly in their house: “he struck an’ struck an’ kicked an’ kicked an’ pulled me round the house by the hair of the head. Jesus, men! (*Indicating the outdoors where she had sex.*) You-think-I-enjoy? I-use-*them*! Jesus, hypocrisy! An’

person split in Mommo is a double movement: she is “facing up to personal events by talking of them in a story, but fleeing them by recourse to fictional concealment” (“Storytelling into Drama,” 121).

then, me left with my face like a balloon (144). Dolly's wilful, promiscuous outdoor sex, much like that of Vera in *The Wake*, is a protest against the falsity of her supposedly respectable marriage and the abuse concealed behind closed doors. Homecoming is a recurring theme in Murphy's plays. For the three women in *Bailegangaire*, home is even more problematic and complicated: it is both a horrifying reality and an impossible fantasy. As the early drafts show, the second provisional title for *Bailegangaire* was "I Want To Go Home."⁴⁵ Dolly exclaims: "I'm fightin' all the battles. Still fightin' the battles" (*Bailegangaire*, 144). Just as Mommo is battling to come to terms with her past and herself, Dolly and Mary are battling to find their true home.

In the radio version written between November and December of 1986, and revised in 1987, Murphy omitted the character of Dolly. Focusing on the relationship between Mommo and Mary, the radio script uses Mary's interior voice to add a new layer to the play: the "interior voice is not simply a train of thought or a commentary; it is a quarrel going on with the self; it has the sound of a wounded spirit whispering to itself, screaming, laughing in bereft contralto, rhythms in jagged staccato and, more frightening, weaving slow circular patterns."⁴⁶ The multitude of sounds highlights the confluence of different times and spaces for all the characters. The simultaneity of sound, whether a cacophony or harmony, is further revealed in the opening sequence for the radio version:

Schubert's "Notturmo" introduces the piece. Faint noises, not yet distinguishable. Now the sound of a car approaching on the road outside, (taking over from the music) drowning the faint noises, passing the house with a swoosh, leaving a vacuum in its wake: like leaving another world behind. The faint noises now beginning to declare themselves: the news in Irish on a slightly crackly radio, someone (Mary) preparing a meal on a stove, someone else (Mommo) muttering – her words are indistinguishable: they are just sounds intermingling with other sounds; perhaps she is saying "And isn't life a strange thing too. Tis. An' if we could live it again. Would we? In harmony?" Then, suddenly, Mommo's

⁴⁵ TCD MS11115/1/17/4.

⁴⁶ TCD MS11115/1/17/16.

voice dominating: Mommo: Shkoth! Shcoh caoc! Shkoth!⁴⁷

“Notturmo” evokes the impending night-time. The passing of the car transports the listener from one world to another, while the radio sound is indicative of technology and mass communication. Meanwhile, the cooking sounds root the listener in the characters’ homeplace. Mommo’s philosophical and hallucinatory mutterings intermingle and co-exist with the soundscape of the home.

Reviewers of the stage premiere remarked on the juxtaposition of different elements onstage that captured both the mythical and the modern. As Cathy Halloran described it, “[t]he set is constructed on a slant, and appears to be suspended and apart from Mommo’s big bed, is dominated by a crude electricity pole at the edge of the stage. [...] reminding the audience that this play is happening in 1984 and not rural Ireland twenty years ago.”⁴⁸ Michael Radcliffe wrote: “Frank Conway designs a cutaway cottage in front of telephone wires and a distant segment of the rosy planet Earth from which the three women seem somehow detached and timelessly suspended. A common feeling, no doubt, in parts of the west of Ireland.”⁴⁹



[T2 Druid Theatre Company/18/1 VHS Recordings (1980s)]

⁴⁷ TCD MS11115/1/17/9.

⁴⁸ Cathy Halloran, “Review,” *Connaught Sentinel*, Dec 10, 1985, T2/2/8/447 [Press Cuttings] Dec 1985, DTCA, JHL, NUIG.

⁴⁹ Michael Radcliffe, “The Trubba with Riddley,” *Observer*, Feb 23, 1986, T2/2/9/449 [Press Cuttings] Feb 1986, DTCA, JHL, NUIG.

The remoteness and timelessness within the socially specific setting comes from Murphy's own observation of the changing society around him. The "anomalies" Murphy had noted are reflected onstage with the electricity pole and telephone wires clashing with the traditional kitchen set.

In *Bailegangaire*, home is constitutive of both the ordinary and the otherworldly. The notion that home comprises these two elements is further echoed in Mary's reflection on the shared intimacy she experienced when working as a nurse with one of her patients—"a terminal, an elderly woman" (*Bailegangaire*, 154). The woman left Mary her brushes, teapot, and book, and gave her "a promised blessing"—a simple remark that she's "going to be alright" (154). In the published text, the exchange is only briefly mentioned, and is omitted altogether in Murphy's last published revision of the play.⁵⁰ The book this elderly woman gave to Mary was Thomas Hardy's *Winter Words* (1928), a poetry collection that had been referred to in Blythe's book, since it constitutes a reflection on old age.⁵¹ In the early drafts, the meaning of the ordinary objects and Mary's relationship with the patient is further revealed:

MARY: [...] I don't know what she saw in me. We used to talk. She asked me about home. I told her. Not everything. Though now I think she knew. And she told me about hers. Home. She used to talk to me about books. [...] She used to read to me. And we used to listen to the radio. Sometimes maybe for an hour in silence. And religion. She was a believer. [...] And I felt great peace with her. [...] she taught me...so much. I don't mean – (gestures: ordinary things) things. I mean she opened my eyes. Maybe it was simply friendship between us. Or companionship. She taught me about wild flowers. I grew up among wild flowers and I never looked at one. [...] She was a Greek. Eleane. She gave a glimpse, somehow, of another world. Elegance? Or – (shrugs: she doesn't know.) Love?

⁵⁰ See *The Mommo Plays: Brigit, Bailegangaire, A Thief of Christmas* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 114. In the final edit, Mary simply brushes Dolly's coat without mentioning the elderly woman.

⁵¹ Murphy jotted down in his notebook, "Finally 'he resolves to say no more'...he has spent a long time revealing past and future, now he will be silent. The silence of old age is unnerving" (TCD MS11115/1/7/28). In the play, Mary quotes Hardy's poem "Silences" in Act One, expressing the loneliness she feels: "But the silence of an empty house/ Where oneself was born,/ Dwelt, held carouse . . . [...] It seems no power can waken it,/ Or rouse its rooms,/ Or the past permit/ The present to stir a torpor like a tomb's" (*Bailegangaire*, 119).

She left me these (the brushes) – I didn’t want to take them. I wanted to tell her she had given me so much. And the teapot and the book. “These are for you, Mary.” And she said – the same fine eyes on me: no questioning them – fine – eyes.⁵²

Like Mary, Eleane is an outsider. Even though they are strangers to one another, Eleane is Mary’s spiritual mother. Mary’s acquired habit of delicate dining stems from an expression of affection through object-relations. Mary learns elegance, love and acceptance from Eleane. Eleane’s blessing gives Mary hope, as well as the urgency to return “home.” Mary attempts to recreate the encounter by brushing Dolly’s hair with Eleane’s brush; despite their frustrations and fights, she offers Dolly acceptance, giving her the same blessing: “[y]ou’re going to be alright, Dolly. Roll in under the blanket” (*Bailegangaire*, 159). This interaction through everyday objects invokes a historical lineage—through the idea of inheritance and passing of knowledge—that in a traditional framework might have gone unnoticed. Their interaction accentuates Luce Giard’s point about women’s practices of everyday life. In “Doing-Cooking,” Giard celebrates women’s “art of cooking”: its inventiveness, its underrecognised “know-hows” and tenacity.⁵³ Here, domestic objects and practices form resistant, creative and inclusive rituals for women.

Bailegangaire is a distillation and culmination of multiple and multi-layered back stories. Along with *Brigit, A Thief of Christmas*—a more immediate presentation of the laughing contest, written as a companion piece in 1985—combines with the original play to make up the Mommo triptych.⁵⁴ *Thief* provides a fuller picture of the misery and poverty of Bochtán, a village resembling that of *Famine*. *Brigit*, meanwhile, fills the gap in the personal family history and the religious culture surrounding the characters. *Bailegangaire*, then, is a folktale that brings together the micro- and macro- worlds. O’Toole notes that in the play a “[p]recisely-delineated social world is contained within a timeless mythic structure.”⁵⁵ He goes on to argue that “[w]hile myth trades in a heroic world, the

⁵² TCD MS11115/1/17/4.

⁵³ Luce Giard, “Doing Cooking,” in *The Practice of Everyday Life Volume 2: Living Cooking*, eds. Michel de Certeau et al, trans. Timothy J. Tomasik (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1998), 152-9.

⁵⁴ The back and full story of Mommo make up the collection of *The Mommo plays* (2014). For a detailed account of how the three plays are linked together, see Shaun Richards’s “From Brigit to Bailegangaire: The Development of Tom Murphy’s Mommo Trilogy” in *Irish University Review* 46.2 (2016): 324–339.

⁵⁵ O’Toole, *Politics of Magic*, 240.

folk tale stems from the everyday struggle of ordinary people and constitutes a secret history of the fears and desires of the poor.”⁵⁶ *Bailegangaire* is dense with sub-plots, back-stories and omissions. It requires the reader or audience to encounter the full difficulty of the text or performance. In order to understand the story, the reader must re-visit, re-read and re-encounter the text in the way that the characters and actors struggle to do. After its premiere in 1985, *Bailegangaire* travelled to London in 1986; Ciaran Carty summed up “the general English reaction” as “not quite understanding, but tremendously impressed,” adding that Mommo “casts an hypnotic spell over an audience straining to discover what she is on about.”⁵⁷ The characters, reader and audience all labour together to discover what *Bailegangaire* is about.

Mary and Dolly can access the past only through their childhood recollections and ultimately, through Mommo’s frustrated and fragmented narrative. Mommo’s ability to finish the story and Mary’s reward of recognition are both hard-earned:

MOMMO. [...] Mourning and weeping in this valley of tears. (*She is handing the cup back to MARY.*) And sure a tear isn’t such a bad thing, Mary, and haven’t we everything we need here, the two of us. (*And she settles down to sleep.*)

MARY (*tears of gratitude brim to her eyes.*) Oh we have, Mommo.

She gets into the bed beside MOMMO. DOLLY is on the other side of MOMMO.

MARY. . . . To conclude. It’s a strange old place alright, in whatever wisdom He has to have made it this way. But in whatever wisdom there is, in the year 1984, it was decided to give that – fambly . . . of strangers another chance, and a brand new baby to gladden their home. (*Bailegangaire*, 161-2)

The ending has often been interpreted as a variation of the Hail Holy Queen prayer, with its suggestion that the people are excluded (“banished”) from paradise but can still find hope of redemption. Instead

⁵⁶ O’Toole, *Politics of Magic*, 241.

⁵⁷ Ciaran Carty, “Druid Magic Bewitches London,” *Sunday Tribune*, Feb 23, 1986, T2/2/9/449 [Press Cuttings] Feb 1986, DTCA, JHL, NUIG.

of using the prayer to fix and dictate their lives, Mary reshapes and canonises their lives by borrowing its form. Mommo confronts her trauma and the family grieves together, their acceptance of one another creating a home space that can momentarily satisfy Mary's longing. The discrepancy between Mary's home as physical space and "*home*" as ideological and imagined space has disappeared. Home is neither the tyrannical trap of the past nor the drudgery of daily routine. It is the intimate here-and-now, a ritual that at once encompasses and transcends the past and the everyday.

The here-and-now is a theatrical encounter in which Mommo's imaginary audience becomes one with the theatre audience. Each night of the performance is "an odyssey"—as described by Siobhan McKenna, who first performed Mommo in 1985—and an ascent of "Mount Everest," in the words of Pauline Flanagan who performed Mommo in 2001. Relating her experience in interviews, McKenna said: "[e]motionally it is like an odyssey. I live my whole life in one night. The trouble with this kind of role is that one really has to rest up. I didn't find myself going to parties or anything, it's too enormous a role for that."⁵⁸ Of McKenna's performance, Kay Hingerty commented that "from this unlovely woman comes all truth which you will think could come out of even a singular human being just once in a lifetime, such was the force, its impact. But she had been playing for nine weeks, and witnesses from all over Ireland testify as to the degree of depth every night."⁵⁹

Mommo is the central storyteller both in fiction and in theatre. Like McKenna, Flanagan stressed the difficulty of acting as Mommo:

What is difficult is that when you first read this play, you realise that all the tools you would normally use as an actress will be taken away from you. Movement (Flanagan's character Mommo is in bed for almost all of the play), interplay with other actors (Mommo is senile and largely oblivious to her surroundings), laughter and tears – any normal expression of emotion.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ John McEntee, "Lying in Bed Hard Work for Siobhan," *Evening Press*, Feb 26, 1986, T2/2/9/449 [Press Cuttings] Feb 1986, DTCA, JHL, NUIG.

⁵⁹ Kay Hingerty, "For Siobhan It's Mind Over Matter," *Cork Examiner*, Feb 7, 1986, T2/2/9/449 [Press Cuttings] Feb 1986, DTCA, JHL, NUIG.

⁶⁰ Mary Kate O'Flanagan, "Capturing the Character," *Sunday Business Post*, Oct 21, 2001, *Bailegangaire*, Oct 5, 2001 [Press Cuttings], ATDA at NUIG, 0675_PC_0001, p. 66.

The task of almost single-handedly telling a good story that captivates the audience and immerses them in the fictional world—all without the actor’s usual room for manoeuvre—is supremely daunting.

In another interview, Flanagan explained:

You are out there on a limb and have to engage the audience and it’s up to me to make them listen. [...] there was too much of me translating me into Mommo. I have decided to distance myself from the storyteller who is Mommo, and only become subjective when I [as Mommo] refer to myself. [...] the scene where Mommo wakes up laughing, as the two girls are laughing, that the laughter of the girls had entered her subconscious and what you have got there is her laughing at this terrible life she has had.⁶¹

Flanagan’s remark reveals the interconnectedness of the different worlds. There is Mommo the storyteller, on the one hand, and Mommo the character in her own story on the other. In the way that Mommo distances herself by referring to herself in the third-person, Flanagan separates herself as the actor from Mommo as both character and storyteller. At the same time, Flanagan recognises how the emotions and experiences spill over and influence Mommo’s navigation within the limbo world of past and present.⁶²

The encounter with Mommo is necessarily bodily and raises the spectre of body ethics. In *The Wounded Storyteller: Body, Illness and Ethics* (1995), Arthur Frank contends that narrative ethics are embodied ethics in that an illness story implicates others in what they witness; the audience, then, needs to stay with the embodied teller and be physically present in their listening, a state which Frank terms “other-relatedness.” He writes:

⁶¹ Patsy McGarry, “Actress For All Seasons,” *Irish Times*, June 15, 2002, *Bailegangaire*, Jun 14, 2002 [Press Cuttings], ATDA at NUIG, 4212_PC_0001, p. 2.

⁶² For McKenna personally, acting the role in Galway was important because of her own identification with Mommo; both are country women of the West: “[...] the sound of Galway, walking around the Claddagh, at the sea – it all steeped me in the atmosphere. I kept recalling characters of my past there, part of me, of them, drifted into Mommo. People have their own Mommos” (Hingerty, “For Siobhan”).

One of our most difficult duties as human beings is to listen to the voices of those who suffer. [...] These voices bespeak conditions of embodiment that most of us would rather forget our own vulnerability to. Listening [...] is also a fundamental moral act; [...] The moment of witness in the story crystallizes a mutuality of need, when each is *for* the other.⁶³

This analysis builds on Walter Benjamin's 1936 essay "The Storyteller," which raises concerns about "the art of storytelling" coming to an end with "fewer people know[ing] how to tell a tale properly."⁶⁴ Frank finds hope in the capacity of stories to preserve and release energy even after a long time in the "communicative body," which "*communes* its story with others." The story, he continues, "invites others to recognize themselves in it. Thus the communicative body tells itself explicitly in stories. Reciprocally, stories are the medium of bodies seeking to approximate the communicative type."⁶⁵ Murphy, then, not only restores the "art of storytelling" by crafting a character who can "tell a tale properly," but also probes the ethics of storytelling in the theatrical and embodied presence of the "wounded": the aging, senile and bedbound Mommo.

In the 2001 production, directed by Murphy himself, the kitchen set was minimalised, and the focus was on conveying the emotional tension in the play. Rachel Andrews pointed out that "this intimacy is further exposed by the audience arrangement at three sides about the stage. In the already concentrated space that is the small Peacock Theatre, this thrusts the uneasy tensions in the face, making them impossible to avoid."⁶⁶ Rather than placing Mommo's bed and the table side by side on the same playing area, Blaithe Sheerin's set placed Mommo's bed at the very back and placed the small round kitchen table and shelves in the front. The table and shelves functioned as a wall—a fortress of Mommo's castle.

⁶³ Arthur Frank, *The Wounded Storyteller: Body, Illness and Ethics* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1995), 25.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 189.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 50.

⁶⁶ Rachel Andrews, "Bailegangaire: Peacock Theatre," *Sunday Tribune*, Oct 14, 2001, *Bailegangaire*, Oct 5, 2001 [Press Cuttings], ATDA at NUIG, 0675_PC_0001, p. 61.



[*Bailegangaire*, Oct, 5, 2001, Video]

Reviewing the production, Susan Conley wrote:

This fragmented, female family travel through their history together, and all end up in Mommo's bed; this seems hopelessly sentimental, wedded as it is with Mary's final speech regarding the new hope of Dolly's unborn child; however, Mary's speech has a sinister underbelly: one hopes fervently that the child will not be male, as no male of their line seemed to have the resiliency of the women. And one realises that Mary has just begun the construction of a new family narrative, and that someday she herself will be alone in that bed, senile and bitter, clinging to a handful of words and phrases that define a life that was never truly lived.⁶⁷

The sentimental and sinister ending of *Bailegangaire*—the generational renewal of the narrative—is the perpetual cycle of life itself. Murphy portrays the tenacious and harsh lives of women in their private spaces, transforming the conventional “his”-story into an oral “her”-itage of everyday practice. It is at once a celebratory and cautionary tale. In the ending of Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865), Alice wakes up from a dream and recounts her adventures to her sister. The sister reflects on the story she has been told:

⁶⁷ Susan Conley, “*Bailegangaire: At the Peacock Theatre*,” *In Dublin* 17, no. 3 (2002), *Bailegangaire*, Jun 14, 2002 [Press Cuttings], ATDA at NUIG, 4212_PC_0001, p. 13.

Lastly, she pictured to herself how this same little sister of hers would, in the after-time, be herself a grown woman; and how she would keep, through all her riper years, the simple and loving heart of her childhood: and how she would gather about her other little children, and make *their* eyes bright and eager with many a strange tale, perhaps even with the dream of Wonderland of long ago: and how she would feel with all their simple sorrows, and find a pleasure in all their simple joys, remembering her own child-life, and the happy summer days.⁶⁸

Bailegangaire, then, is an Irish wonderland inhabited by the ghosts of the past and the belated children of the present. The fictional and theatrical experience of heterotopia reveals the anomalies and absurdity of our modernising world. The strange tale of *Bailegangaire* is not one of “happy summer days,” but of tearful winter nights remembered and repeated ad infinitum by these fragile and resilient women.

***The Wake* (1998): Materialism and the Female Body**

In Murphy’s notebook written between November 1990 and September 1993—the time when he was drafting ideas for his only novel, *The Seduction of Morality* (1994), the playwright recorded comments on *Bailegangaire*: “The recitation of misfortunes that bind this family, viewers/audience, this world together in the common name of humanity.”⁶⁹ In *Bailegangaire*, the women’s crafting of and interaction in their home place restores their identity and purpose; the characters find meaning in their present by coming to terms with their past. The “non-place” that has begun to seep in—indicated by the recurring references to computer plants, high-speed roads, and railways—is kept at bay. The

⁶⁸ Lewis Carroll, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) and *Through the Looking Glass and What Alice Found There* (1872), ed. Peter Hunt (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009), 111.

⁶⁹ TCD MS11115/3/4/5.

central stage, however, is an anthropological “place,” where the inhabitants create a shared identity in relation to their personal history. This bond is created through the shared ritual of storytelling. By contrast, in *The Wake* (1998)—a reworking of *Seduction*—Murphy destabilises the notion of place and family. From the outset, the female protagonist Vera O’Toole is rendered “out-of-place” by being sent to live with her grandmother: “[t]he system of fostering-out was not unusual in the past. And, in this case, Mom had a farm” (*Seduction*, 1). As in *Bailegangaire*, the grandmother-granddaughter relationship is central. Vera forms a strong bond with her grandmother but becomes a stranger within her immediate family. Moreover, Vera’s status as a call-girl in New York, a sex worker and an émigrée, further marginalises her within the small-town setting.

Vera returns to her home in the West of Ireland for what she believes is to be a funeral, to pay her respects to her grandmother Mom. Upon her arrival, Vera finds out that Mom died many months ago and that her family kept the news from her. Adding to Vera’s anguish is the fact that Mom has not been given a proper wake. A series of examples of her family’s brutality and deliberate neglect of Mom is revealed: not only did the family pressure Mom into signing over the farm, withdrawing young Vera from her care when she refused to do so many years ago, but they also forbade her neighbours from visiting Mom, hastening her death. The O’Tooles are only interested in acquiring the hotel that Vera has inherited. They justify their greed in moral terms as Vera’s unchaste behaviour offends and threatens their “respectability.” Feeling shattered, Vera in turn completely shatters the family’s veneer of morality. If the characters in *Bailegangaire* succeed in creating a home by the end, then Vera’s journey is one of gradually realising and accepting her complete isolation and loneliness.

In *Seduction*, Murphy chronicles the small-town life and mentality of the O’Toole family in the 1970s. In an interview with Alice Freeman, Murphy explained the novel’s title and what “Irish morality” entails:

If you take anyone and ask them what the first thing is that they associate with seduction, it’s sex. [...] In Ireland if you mention the word morality, it means sex. [...] There is more to life and behaviour than just sex. I am playing on the two words, [...] You have people who will be seduced by the idea of respectability, the type of so-called moral values which

allow them to say they never tell a lie in their life, though in fact their lives may be complete lies.⁷⁰

Murphy reverses the connotation behind the terms, “seduction” and “morality”; “morality”, as its own idea, seduces and deceives, while “sex” speaks its own truth. Vera challenges the Irish morality of custom. She becomes unbearable to the family when she performs a public drunken orgy at the hotel with Finbar, her former boyfriend, and Henry, her brother-in-law. She makes a spectacle out of her sexualised body, inverting the established social order. This leads to her being kidnapped and incarcerated in a mental hospital.

In the Irish context, the Catholic authorities, as pillars of morality, were intricately involved in the violent repression and control of people. Finbar, who went to an Industrial School, is an extreme case of such Catholic repression. In the drunken orgy conversation with Vera and Henry, Finbar angrily exclaims:

Sex! [...] And fuckin’ incest! Driving round the country, screwing young ones in their Volkswagens, then going home (*and*) doing their housekeepers – Sex! Christian Brothers in the schools – (*Intensely, to himself:*) Faaack! Beating the children, Henry, then bugging them: I was ‘in care’, Henry, them establishments, [...] And young ones and aul’ ones getting pregnant and praying to fuckin’ statues about it. Country is rotten with it. [...] But what else was the country taught to think about? (*Wake*, 140)

In a handwritten early draft of the novel, Murphy describes the effects of Catholic sexual repression on the characters. Vera muses that she was able to equate sex with love in the past; now, this seems an impossibility:

If possible, Vera wanted to be present at the moment of conception, to be part of the act,

⁷⁰ TCD MS11115/6/2/19/1.

flesh and flesh together, united in the pleasure of loving creation, not be miles away just coping with flesh and bones on top of her, with someone ~~simply~~ relieving himself of his bag. [...] Finbar now, as a man, was incapable, dealing with affection, receiving it. He was incapable of having a relationship with anyone. It was as if something forbade it, some law that he had taken too seriously and was now part of him. ~~Perhaps it was the Church. The Church did not want people to have any relationship, they wanted babies. It was on the front page of her newspaper. [...]~~ ~~The church wanted babies, not relationships. [...]~~ ~~Perhaps it was the government.~~ Perhaps it was the church, perhaps it was the Government. It was in the papers on the front page. “Parties Deadlocked Over Contraception” “Deadlock Over Birth-Control.”⁷¹

Vera fantasises about conception as an act of “love-making,” and “love-creating” while Finbar cannot maintain a proper relationship with anyone, having internalised a fear of the authorities. In a notebook entry on May 2, 1995, Murphy began redrafting the novel into a play. He outlined the play’s structure as follows:

Title: Whoresplay

Action: Revenge of the disillusioned

Form of revenge chosen is drink & sex + bequeathing inheritance to a scavenger.

[...]

Form of play. Tragedy-modern Sequential? Memory? Interrogating?

[...]

Conflict: Vera (Henry & F) are fighting hypocrisy, aiming a good and fighting a whole culture. They are fighting the accepted norms: the institution of family, church and state (police). An unbeatable enemy?

[...]

⁷¹ TCD MS11115/3/2/2.

Meaning/Thought: Blood is thinner than water when it comes to cutting the cloth. Irish-Catholic morality is a sham. Vera is gullible and believes in “family” and morality. (Guilty about being a pro; hopes, prays to be worthy of her family)⁷²

Vera’s incarceration in a mental asylum by her family is grimly representative of the deep historical “culture of confinement” in Ireland.⁷³

Various social institutions, including family, school, and the church—identified by Louis Althusser as the ideological state apparatuses—uses discipline and labour as key tools to tame the body for subjugation. When Vera stays with Finbar for a few days, she does not wash or brush her hair, and her slip is dirty. This behaviour can be interpreted as an act of retaliation. Finbar complains, “[w]ouldn’t you think she’d get up! Wouldn’t you think she’d! Get dressed! Wash herself!” (*Wake*, 112). Vera bluntly replies that since Finbar still had sex with her twenty minutes ago, there is nothing for him to complain about. Vera’s unwillingness to groom herself goes against ideological pressure to discipline the body and uphold “respectability.” According to Finbar, after all, the “nice clean people” are the ones “at one another’s throats after [...] the hotel over all their heads” (113), referring to Vera’s family. The characters’ daily routines and rituals—of getting up, washing, dressing—are disciplinary measures, bourgeois manners unconsciously accepted as life’s necessities. Vera’s refusal to manage her appearance liberates her from these oppressive norms. Moreover, signifiers relating to “unclean” creatures—woodlice, rats, cockroaches—allude above all to the greedy deeds of the O’Tooles and even Finbar, who resents his poverty. Vera shouts, “[w]oodlice! The place is infested with them!” and “waddling their lives in the dark in the damp!” (114). When Finbar tells Vera that her brother Tom will be bidding on the hotel at the auction, Vera retorts that “there’s a rat about the place” (115). These (symbolic) rodents are described as “tawny, yellow, almost see-through, fast-moving strings of evil-

⁷² TCD MS11115/1/23/9.

⁷³ Henry McDonald, “‘Endemic’ Rape and Abuse of Irish Children in Catholic Care, Inquiry Finds,” *Guardian*, May 20, 2009. For more information, see *Coercive Confinement in Ireland: Patients, Prisoners and Penitents*, eds. Eoin O’Sullivan and Ian O’Donnell (Manchester, Manchester UP, 2012) and James Smith’s *Ireland’s Magdalen Laundries and the Nation’s Architecture of Containment* (Notre Dame, U of Notre Dame P, 2007). Smith argues that the “architecture of containment” has been constructed in both concrete and abstract ways: in addition to an array of different but interdependent institutions such as the industrial schools and reformatory institutions, which had an executive function, a series of legislative acts and official discourse functioned to render these embodied “culprits” invisible.

looking fucking things that move in and out precisely” (115), with this final aspect also bearing sordid sexual connotations. Finbar, who is described as “a frightened scavenger” (85), steals money from Vera’s wallet just as she is complaining about the cockroaches in New York. Throughout *The Wake*, the insidious woodlice, rats, and cockroaches serve as metaphors for the dirty materialistic deeds of humans.

Materialism totally supplants familial values in the play, with economic greed replacing affection so completely that the family can put Vera in a mental hospital. Everything becomes part of a deal, where while Vera herself is a tradeable commodity. Vera labels these deals part of the “game of family” (*Wake*, 125), a kind of “life-size monopoly.”⁷⁴ The monopolisation of various properties by the O’Toole family is unmistakable: they own the Odeon Cinema, the Wool Store, the farm, and—in the end—the hotel. Vera questions whether the financial game that the family is playing is more honourable than prostitution. When Finbar hits Vera, calling her a “cunt,” she responds:

Fuck me, screw me, rook me – if-you-are-able! – but don’t anyone of you insult me like this! Okay? . . . I’m someone, amn’t I? . . . Who-what *am* I? A hole between my legs? . . . I’m not a cunt . . . (*I’m*) Someone. [...] on my own then – [...] *Who* is the whore? – Quem, cunt, ghee, box, slash, gash, cock-sucking, grandmother-fucking piece of shit, daff, crap, excrement? [...] All dirt and lies [...] There: buy a child for a dollar, cheaper than a chicken. (*Wake*, 119)

Vera rebukes Finbar with the rhetorical question “[w]ho is the whore?” multiple times over, her rage subverting their respective positions. Prostitution is a form of objectification of the body, usually regarding bodies as soulless “lumps of natural stuff,” to borrow Eagleton’s words. In *Materialism* (2016), Eagleton writes that bodies are

chunks of matter of a highly specific kind – a specificity which mind-language or soul-

⁷⁴ Alexandra Poulain, “‘My Heart Untravelled’: Tom Murphy’s Plays of Homecoming,” *Études Anglaises* 56, no. 2 (2003): 190.

language seeks rather misleadingly to pin down. They are not lumps of natural stuff with some ghostly appendage attached to them, but mounds of material which are inherently active, creative, communicative, relational, self-expressive, self-realising, world-transforming and self-transcendent (which is to say, historical).⁷⁵

Human bodies are not only passive objects but also expressive subjects. Eagleton argues that humans are rational, social and historical beings in a “peculiarly animal way”; in other words, that history, culture and society are “specific modes of creatureliness.”⁷⁶ The logic of capitalism relies on the mind-body dualism, which allows for the process of abstraction and the erasure of the sensuousness of the body. The danger of viewing the self as a disembodied soul is that one may treat others and oneself as a spiritless body. The body is exposed to maltreatment and exploitation. Social objectification (“hole between my legs”) dehumanises Vera and deprives her of an identity. Her existence, her body, is reduced to the “abstract status of commodities.”⁷⁷ Vera openly criticises this process of objectification, one that she has long since internalised. Vera’s relationship to her own body displays a type of self-estrangement: she feels that her body is an alien appendage to her identity, dissociated from her soul. Her angry outburst becomes a step towards self-realisation and the search for an integrated selfhood.

In the novel, the biblical phrase that Mom recites to Vera (“Naked we came into our world,” an allusion to the Book of Job) is repeated throughout the story to draw attention to the hypocrisy of the O’Toole’s supposedly Christian beliefs. The most pious in this society neither adhere to their own teaching—that having no possessions is a virtue—nor are they comfortable with “nakedness,” with its implications of the sacredness and sensuality of the body.

[Mom] was a midwife. Vera watched her ministering. The foot movements, the large round body swaying, hands weaving to find deliberation, the eyes appearing as if not to

⁷⁵ Terry Eagleton, *Materialism* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2016), 39.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 44-5.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 59.

as much as even blink before the new-born arrived. Then all would be still for a moment in frowning wonder, and then she would say: ‘Now! Naked we came into the world!’ [...] And when Vera would strip and stand two feet in the basin on the kitchen floor, to wash in the way that Mom had shown her, she would hold her breath at her own nakedness. And Mom, seated by the hearth, would nod solemnly her understanding and respect. (*Seduction*, 2)

This affirmative tone is very different from the play. In the novel, Vera’s awareness of the “nakedness” of her body at a young age is experienced again when she stays at Finbar’s place: “[c]ome in, flesh, merciful sleep! [...] was she still ready? Let’s see, heigh-ho, and touched herself again, put her fingers into the hole, the everything, the nothing, the reality! Naked came I out of my mother’s womb and naked shall I return thither. Blessed be the name of the Lord” (*Seduction*, 52). In addition to providing a detailed description of Vera and Finbar’s sexual encounter (in a separate chapter titled “Sex”), Murphy inverts the Christian “nakedness” into a hedonistic appraisal of the body. As Vera touches herself, she glorifies “the hole, the everything, the nothing, the reality.” Considering that the play cannot expose Vera’s thought process in such detail, many of the celebratory aspects have been elided to emphasise the dark and sinister family dynamic onstage.

Vera’s decision to partake in the orgy is intended to flaunt her sexuality to provoke and upset her family. At the same time, it is an occasion where Vera wants to celebrate her birthday. In the play, Finbar wishes Vera a happy birthday, to which she replies: “[l]et’s *start* the party” (*Wake*, 141-2). That it is her birthday (or so she claims) shows her need for human recognition, to be acknowledged and congratulated for being born and alive—not by denying her past but by affirming it. From the state of depressed confusion to wild celebration, Vera goes through a subtle but progressive change.⁷⁸ She finds her identity and freedom in the state of nakedness. Compared to

⁷⁸ The significance of marking her birthday with an orgy is further elaborated in the novel, in the chapter titled “There is Nothing so Futile as Planning for Pleasure”: “[i]t was her thirty-eighth birthday and she was enjoying it [...]. She was celebrating her sexuality, nourishing it. But it was not only a matter of her sexuality. [...] She felt different. She felt loose. [...] In the day that had passed she had shed some illusions, slipped out of the folds of the past and, at home, she was tasting the lightness and freedom of becoming herself. She had moved out to a new place. [...] She was on her own. [...] she was exhilarated. In a way, she felt naked. She was laughing again: at what, she was not sure; but she could hear the ring of truth in the sound of her voice”

her prostitution in New York, Vera's sexual orgy in her hometown in which no monetary exchange is required is, to a certain extent, a hedonistic and purifying act to reclaim her body's materiality. Although she cannot erase her sense of self-degradation and shame totally through this single occasion, it marks a change in the way she regards herself and her body: as an individual self to celebrate and not a thing to sell.

Vera's body can also be read in the light of Julia Kristeva's notion of the "abject" and Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of a "grotesque" or "carnavalesque" body. Vera's presence disturbs the family—and by extension the audience—as their own sense of identity is confronted by the abject, which defies bodily boundaries, orders and systems. Vera shares her experience as a call-girl, telling Finbar in no uncertain terms to stop making statements about her family:

My family keep me going. I've been in situations you cannot even imagine. That *I* cannot even imagine. Up there, down there. (*Highs and lows*.) Did anyone ever tell you to eat shit? Human excrement, shit. No? But I survived [...] My Xanadus I call them. These can ease things. Human excrement, shit, shits, become more palatable with these. Working girls, friends of mine, use them on themselves. I don't use them on myself. I prefer to use them more for the purpose of taming a difficult client, anaesthetizing an animal. (*Wake*, 118)

Her experience of consuming human excrement upsets bodily boundaries—between the pure inside and the filth outside—and identity, which is formed by distinguishing oneself as subject from the excremental object. On another level, using drugs to tame an "animal" client destabilises the notion of what makes one "human." It is also a reminder of Alasdair MacIntyre's point that "our whole initial bodily comportment to the world is originally an animal comportment."⁷⁹ Moreover, Vera does not use the drugs on herself to anaesthetise the ghastly experience as a purely passive suffering but to turn her clients into objects. Her presence becomes more harrowing and proves that she has agency despite

(*Seduction*, 142-3).

⁷⁹ Alasdair MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals* (London: Duckworth, 1999), 49.

the limits imposed by her circumstances. Fraser and Greco use Bakhtin's concept of the carnival and grotesque to exemplify how in occasions where social hierarchies are transgressed and inverted, the body serves as a powerful revolutionary tool.⁸⁰ In these social occasions—the carnival, fair, festival, masquerade and spectacle—where the customary rules of social conduct are suspended, “the body invade[s] the social scene as its most conspicuous actor, unrivalled in performing distortion and exaggeration—in other words, in the task of turning the world upside-down.”⁸¹ The grotesque body in Bakhtin's definition is that which is uncertain and fluid, “open, protruding, bulging, extending and secreting; wet, bloody, sweaty and odorous.”⁸² By exhibiting the abject, grotesque and carnivalesque female body, with the main actor-as-character performing her sexuality in public, *The Wake* resists and critiques the capitalist drive for abstraction and commodification, alerting the audience to the realities of bodily consciousness.

The hotel space functions as an arena for Vera to make a spectacle out of her abject body, one that resists being made palatable and consumable for the viewers. The hotel is a space of commercial hospitality where privacy is guarded, hidden in plain view of the public. Compared to other lodgings that can accommodate travellers, hotels reflect the changing milieu of greater commercialisation and modernisation; they proliferated in the early 19th century in western Europe to accommodate richer customers.⁸³ The name of the hotel, “The Imperial Hotel,” based on the actual hotel in Tuam, is richly suggestive.⁸⁴ Henry regards “The Imperial Hotel” as “this jewel in the crown of the family fortunes” (*Wake*, 109). A Georgian building and once a family residence, the hotel can easily be linked to the Big Houses in Ireland. From the early 1920s until the 1980s, Big Houses were sold off or destroyed, leading to the decline of the “Big House era” which had marked the political dominance of the Anglo-Irish class since the late 16th century. In the present day, the Big House has undergone such profound

⁸⁰ Mariam Fraser and Monica Greco, “Bodies and Social Dis(Ordery),” in *The Body: A Reader*, eds. Mariam Fraser and Monica Greco (London: Routledge, 2005), 67-71. See Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1984).

⁸¹ Fraser and Greco, “Bodies,” 69-70.

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ See Elaine Denby's *Grand Hotels: Reality and Illusion; An Architectural and Social History* (London: Reaktion, 1998) and Nikolaus Pevsner's *A History of Building Types* (New Jersey, Princeton UP, 1976).

⁸⁴ It is worth noting that “The Imperial Hotel” was in fact the name of the hotel in Murphy's hometown of Tuam, on which he based the play. It is situated in the Square, the town centre of Tuam. In the *Irish Historic Towns Atlas* (IHTA) Tuam, it was Daly's hotel in 1832, 1846, and 1856; Daly's Royal Mail Hotel in 1878, and Daly's Royal Hotel in 1881. It then changed to Guy's Imperial Hotel from 1892-1894 and Corralea Court Hotel in 2009.

changes not only in ownership but in social function that its lineage and history often no longer matter. The O'Tooles are Catholic and none of them are interested in the history of the building. Tom, for instance, only wants to resell the hotel for profit. Neither "Imperial" nor "crown" resonates with the O'Tooles. Their language is the language of capitalism whose grammar is structured around commodity and profit. In an "independent" Ireland, capitalism has become another form of imperialism. The hotel as an embodied form of capital shows the shift towards "non-place," where anonymity and transience are defining features. In *The Wake*, however, the tide of modernisation clashes with the moral sensibilities of the small town. In one of the letter exchanges detailed in the novel and included in the first draft of the play, Tom, taking "the opportunity of her [Vera's] absence to wax moral," tells Vera:

have you forgotten what it is like to live in a small town? – And the pride we take in it. New York indeed and I am sure is New York, but a name means something here. We have a sense of place. We have a sense of responsibility – we aspire to become moral agents without apologies to anyone, because that is our greatest desire, Vera.⁸⁵

Although extreme, Vera's public display of her sexuality challenges the family's hypocritical "sense of place." Vera uses the hotel's liminal quality to disclose the private in public. In effect, her spectacle reveals the absurdity of both the dehumanising "non-place" of the hotel and the family's insistence on reputation and "place."

Later, when Vera is released from the hospital, she makes a deal with her family and gathers them at the hotel for a wake. The play reaches its climax in the eponymous wake for Mom, completing the imagery of the O'Toole family as "whores," "playing up to Vera for the property they crave."⁸⁶ The deceased is, significantly, neither present nor mentioned throughout the whole wake. The wake assumes its real purpose not in remembering or paying respects to Mom, but in bringing embittered family members together in one place. Each family member performs a party piece in their preferred

⁸⁵ TCD MS11115/1/23/2.

⁸⁶ Grene, *Playwright Adventurer*, 95.

genre, from jazz, operetta, to Irish poetry. As Grene notes, the 2016 production made the wake seem like a “grotesque parody”, especially when Lorcan Cranitch as Tom and Pat Nolan as Father Billy sang “The Moon Hath Raised Her Lamp” in duet, “milk[ing it] for every possible laugh.”⁸⁷ Grene argues that this misses the ambiguous tone of the scene, in which the family “redeem their innocence” (*Wake*, 167) through their own songs.⁸⁸ Indeed, at one of the performances, during the climactic action of the wake, the audience began to clap along with the other characters on stage after each individual party piece.⁸⁹ While the audience’s laughter and applause testified to the parodic and ironic elements of the wake scene, it equally showed how the audience were made complicit in the whole performance, not necessarily laughing “at” but “with” the family members onstage. It could be argued, therefore, that the multiple performances within the wake scene made the audience engage with and acknowledge the wake ritual as a temporary bonding experience that brought together the actors-as-characters and the audience. On this view, it is again the theatrical moment that transforms Augé’s “non-place” into the anthropological “place,” forming an organic theatrical community. It is not traditional family values but theatrical temporality that offers the possibility, however flickering, of communal bonding.

In this case, however, the communal ritual, does not affirm the myth of family and community, but deconstructs it. The wake is a form of collective mourning but in Murphy’s play, it is only in isolation that one can achieve any meaningful understanding of the self. In the last scene, Vera is able to truly grieve:

now she is crying. Tears that she cannot stop, that she has been suppressing throughout. She begins to sob. Her sobbing continues, becoming dry and rhythmical: grief for her grandmother, for the family that she perhaps never had, and for herself and her fear at this, her first acceptance of her isolation. (*Wake*, 180)

⁸⁷ Grene, *Playwright Adventurer*, 95.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ Date of performance attended: June 27, 2016.

This cry is resonant of the traditional practice of keening, an intrinsic part of the wake ritual: from the Irish word *caoine* or *caoineadh*, meaning “vocalised cry”, keening is “a sacred improvised chant that evolved over many centuries [...] traditionally sung over a corpse” and is “a descriptor for the instinctive raw cry that is often the first reaction of the bereaved to death.”⁹⁰ Transcending the limits of lyrics and language, the rhythmical sobbing becomes pure sound. This grieving in solo presents a contrast to the ending in *Bailegangaire* where the understanding is, at least partially, achieved by the three women together. Vera’s is a one-person wake truer to its meaning of grief for her grandmother, her family, herself and for the impossibility of a communal wake. In an interview with Eileen Battersby, Murphy explained that “Vera’s life is really the mirror image of her grandmother’s. She just has the advantage of having lived in a later time. And she comes to understand her grandmother’s suffering.”⁹¹

The play has a frame structure: it begins with Vera meeting Mrs Conneeley in the openness of the countryside and ends with their meeting in the graveyard. Scene One begins in “an open space: the country. Night” (*Wake*, 77). While Vera’s emigrant status highlights how alien she is, Mrs Conneeley is a grounded “native” figure. In the stage directions, Murphy describes her as ‘an unassuming woman; she has a lot of integrity, a lot of what used to be called “nature”’ (77), which also means, in Irish parlance, good nature: she is a good-natured woman as well as a nature-bound one. By contrast, as Murphy put it in the draft of the play, the O’Tooles are “people starved of ‘nature’ being withered by greed and materialism.”⁹² Mrs Conneeley is set apart from the other characters. Her presence in the graveyard seems fitting, as she is closest to nature and death; however, this association masks the true ambivalence of the graveyard space. Graves, after all, are a human phenomenon, while funeral rituals, tombs and headstones all belong to the realm of “culture” and not “nature.” Graves are another way of marking territory and displaying wealth. Mrs Conneeley points out that the graveyard where her husband is buried is getting crowded, remarking: “I never bothered

⁹⁰ Mary McLaughlin, “Keening the Dead: Ancient History or a Ritual of Today?”, *Religions* 10, no. 4 (2019): 235. More recently, the tradition of keening has been given renewed prominence by Doireann Ní Ghríofa’s *A Ghost in the Throat* (Dublin: Tramp, 2020) which draws on Eibhlín Dubh Ní Chonaill’s *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoighaire* (The Lament for Art O’Leary), a well-known 18th century Irish poem.

⁹¹ Eileen Battersby, “How to Direct Your Own Novel,” *Observer*, June 19, 1994, TCD MS11115/6/2/19/1.

⁹² Grene, *Playwright Adventurer*, 91.

to mark it. (*Dismissive:*) Ah, headstones! What is it but an aul' hole in the ground!" (*Wake*, 180). She also complains half-jokingly: "there's many's the widow-woman knocking about, waiting to get in here. And what at all in the next world would I do if they put another woman down on top of him before me?" (180). Mrs Conneeley claims to have no interest in territorial demarcation, yet her own joke about her husband's posthumous extramarital affair underground appears to arouse a twinge of jealousy in her, a decidedly human projection of the concerns of the living onto the dead. Nevertheless, Mrs Conneeley's act of weeding and minding the grave "like someone preparing a bed" (180) shows her poised acceptance of death as part of life.

When redrafting the novel into the play, Murphy initially had Vera's grandmother (named "Mommo" in the draft) appear as a ghost or as Vera's recollection during her meeting with Mrs Conneeley⁹³—an explicit juxtaposition of Mrs Conneeley with Mommo. Although Mommo did not make the final act, her sentiments are echoed in Mrs Conneeley, as evidenced by a passage in *Seduction* which finds Vera at the graveyard: "[t]his was the place to be, it was wonderful to be alive. [...] just as Mom had done it, she set [the block] upright on the grave, to mark the end of something, life returned to an aul' hole. 'Now! Naked we came into the world'" (*Seduction*, 203). In his discussion of cemeteries as heterotopias, Foucault outlines the shift from the 18th century, when cemeteries constituted the sacred and immortal heart of the city, in the 19th century cemeteries were located outside the borders of cities: "[i]n correlation with the individualization of death and bourgeois appropriation of the cemetery, there arises an obsession with death as an 'illness.'"⁹⁴ It was believed, Foucault surmises, that proximity to death "propagates death itself."⁹⁵ In both the novel and the play, the "othered" space of the graveyard is brought into the centre. This heterotopia blurs the boundaries of life and death, creating a space that is at once liminal and sacred. Combined with the central drama of the play, it revives the idea of ritual and the significance of the wake in Irish society.

Towards the end of the play, Vera hands over the hotel to the family and leaves her home place for good, accepting her loneliness as inexorable. As her lines indicate, Vera's desire to belong

⁹³ TCD MS11115/1/23/2.

⁹⁴ Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," 25.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

has always eluded her: she feels “[o]ut there in the space like a fucking astronaut with his tube cut [...] Lifelong fear of just going to sleep, afraid to let go” (*Wake*, 117). In the end, however, Vera embraces loneliness, having cut her ties with the family. Henry, meanwhile, whose last name Locke-Browne is an indicator of his “mixed-blood” heritage, is a Catholic but also a Protestant with “protesting genes: my mother’s side, the Lockes” (131). As the last, decadent heir, he is the only figure who connects with the past. Despite his partial alliance with Vera, however, he is unable to sever his tribal ties: “[c]ulture has defeated him” (97) and he is trapped in his role as husband to Marcia and father to Norman. When Marcia asks at the end of the wake: “Henry, I’m your wife. Are you coming home?”, he surrenders: “(to himself) Lovely, lovely ... (He is crying.) [...] He steps aside for MARCIA and NORMAN to precede him. MARCIA, bridleing her shoulders in some private triumph she considers she is having, leaves with NORMAN. HENRY bows to the room and follows” (177). His awareness of the family’s wrongdoing leads only to guilt and defeat. In an interview with Michael Ross in 1998 regarding *The Wake*, Murphy commented:

We all deny our isolation. We prop ourselves up with ideas of family, marriage and so on. The other characters in the play try to deny their sense of isolation in the same way that people deny their sense of mortality by a mania for accumulating things.⁹⁶

Denial of one’s isolation results in dependency on various illusory myths and ideologies, in much the same way that the seedy materialism of the O’Tooles can be read as an attempt to fill an existential void.

The 1998 production directed by Patrick Mason, emphasised the elliptical narrative and structure of the play with the help of Francis O’Connor’s minimal set design, “composed almost entirely of flown-in flats.”⁹⁷ According to Joycelyn Clarke, the set was framed

⁹⁶ Michael Ross, “Prozac? No Thanks: Depression is Tom Murphy’s Propelling Force,” *Sunday Times*, Jan 25, 1998.

⁹⁷ Emer O’Kelly, “A Spectacular Tale of Small Town Desolation,” *Sunday Independent*, Feb 1, 1998, TCD MS11115/6/2/1.

with the towering blue green walls of Francis O'Connor's minimal set – windows and furniture emerge and disappear for each successive scene – and the warm painterly shafts of colour of Ben Ormerod's lighting, each shaft falling through windows and doors in gorgeous angles. The effect is to heighten individual details of each of the character's worlds – the griminess of Finbar's shop or the Laura Ashley ennui of Tom's home – and to amplify their emotional and psychological isolation from one another: Vera's arrival is less a return than an intrusion.⁹⁸

After its premiere in the Abbey, the play toured abroad in 1999. In a review of the 1999 Edinburgh Festival production, Paul Taylor wrote that the stage exhibited a “stark ghostly dreamscape, framed by high walls. Minimalist props evoke everything from the faded splendour of the Queen Anne hotel to the frowsty domestic squalor.”⁹⁹ The “ever-changing design gives Mason's production a fluid feel that reflects the central character's desire to transcend the confines of past and place.”¹⁰⁰ The production conveyed both the confining aspects and the vast, fluid, and complex psychology of the characters' places.

The 2016 performance, unlike the 1998 production, did not frame the hotel space with high walls but left it open, accentuating its liminal quality. The distinction between the interior and exterior—between private and public—was blurred to show the hotel as a space of commercial hospitality. Anthony Roche has argued that Murphy's female characters are socially marginalised and can assert themselves only in closed spaces; in the wider world, they are physically and psychologically offered as a “sexual commodity to that masculine milieu.”¹⁰¹ By deciding not to demarcate the interior space with walls, leaving it exposed to the public, the production broke down the normative space of this “masculine milieu”: the “marginal” women became the centre, asserting themselves openly. As Vera re-inscribes herself in the world by reclaiming her body, her sexualised

⁹⁸ Jocelyn Clarke, “Porcupine's Complaint,” *Tribune Magazine*, Feb 1, 1998, TCD MS11115/6/2/1.

⁹⁹ Paul Taylor, “Edinburgh Festival '99: Theatre Review ‘The Wake,’” *Independent*, Aug 19, 1999. TCD MS11115/6/2/1.

¹⁰⁰ Andrew Aldridge, “Edinburgh International Festival: King's *The Wake*,” *The Stage*, Aug 20, 1999, TCD MS11115/6/2/1.

¹⁰¹ Roche, “Murphy's Drama,” 124.

body, which before was “out of place” is gradually made “in place.” By foregrounding the hotel as an open performative space, the production encouraged the audience to engage with the characters’ private affairs. The openness throughout the play was enhanced by the use of the scrim; allowing the orgy scene to remain dimly visible throughout the family colloquy scene that followed. The audience became complicit voyeurs to the scene that was so scandalously burning itself into the consciousness of the O’Tooles. The changes in setting, meanwhile, matched Vera’s own search for her identity.

In a review of the 2016 Abbey production, Peter Crawley charts the progression—or regression—of the backdrop, noting that “[a]s Vera tries to find her place in this world, we begin with a vast backdrop of the cosmos, slowly stiffening into a monochrome map of Tuam, resolving, finally, with a hole in the ground.”¹⁰²



[2016, *The Wake*, *Irish Times*]

A monochrome (ordnance survey) map of Tuam was featured in the background, adding to the liminal quality of the play. The screen, when not lit, was hard to discern but when it was illuminated in the play’s climax, place names of the townland were revealed. The narrative of the play is rooted in a specific time and place, and the map highlighted the fact that the characters are a “product of a

¹⁰² Peter Crawley, “*The Wake*: Performance and Design as Pure Poetry,” *Irish Times*, June 29, 2016.

culture” (*Wake*, 85). The history of the ordnance survey—whose function was to assist armies with the movement of heavy artillery as well as land valuations for land taxation purposes—stretches back to the early 19th century, with the establishment of the Ordnance Survey office in 1824. From imperial history to a postcolonial Ireland, land has been appropriated and expropriated as a commodity in the flow of capitalism. The map pointed to the ways people continuously use such instruments to measure and justify their avarice.

The hidden horrors of Irish history were brought to light by the set design; yet one particular set device was deployed to suggest that the specificity of the Irish experience does not exclude its universal significance. The vastness of the blue screen expanded to the mythic world. Even though the place names appeared on the screen, the enlarged size of the map made the lines form geometrical shapes. The lines and shapes, which are not confined to Irish history, appeared to be a side of the earth as seen from outer space. The magnification of the map to the extent of sur-reality had the effect of undermining the human practice that subjects land to instrumental rationality, with mapping being a quintessential example of such practice. When the audience were faced with a familiar map in an unfamiliar fashion, they were transported into the realm of the uncanny. By using a vast surreal ordnance map, the set managed to point to a specific history as well as a universal aspect of humankind. Conducted at the foreground of the map, the wake became a powerful ritual of grieving for the victims of these brutal exploitations. The sense of a ritual of grieving for the victims of exploitation in Irish history is further highlighted by the recitation of James Clarence Mangan’s poem, “A Vision of Connaught in the Thirteenth Century.” And yet, of course, the scene is made ironic by its travesty of a wake, most of the participants being the descendants of this exploitation, and themselves now members of a ruthlessly exploiting class.

The Wake deconstructs the ideologies and realities of capitalism and redraws the ethical and emotional contours of people’s everyday lives. Theatre, by its materiality, is uniquely positioned to resist and critique the capitalist drive for abstraction and commodification both through the bodily presence of the actors-as-characters and by awakening our own bodily consciousness. At the same time, the descriptive and nuanced psychology explored in the novel was not and could not be fully transposed onto the stage. The “Hangover Square” chapter, a stream-of-consciousness account of

Vera's "family-sized" hangover, is at the heart of the novel, and underwent significant revisions. In the rough drafts of "Hangover Square," Murphy considered alternative titles such as "Mental Process of the Amateur Anarchist. Thoughts and Dreams of an Amateur Anarchist [...] Distant Voices. Vera's Mental Process."¹⁰³ One section of the final published version reads:

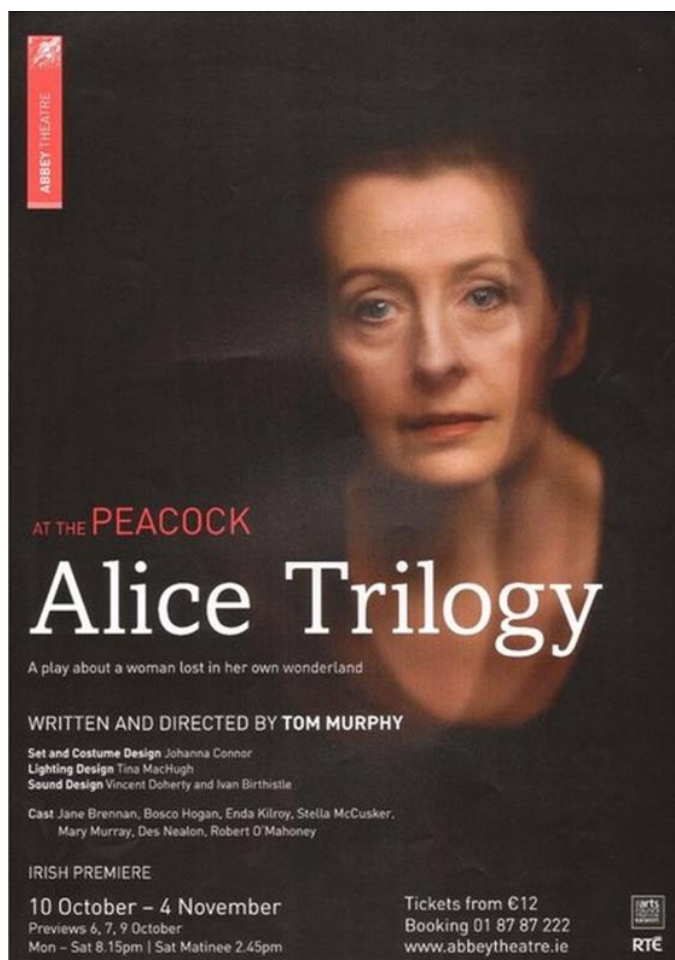
Where was she, oh where was she? What pool or lake or was it the sea? She has come up for another badly needed gulp of air and the surface that had broken was still shattering like glass on steel about her head. She was a long way out because the voices came from far off [...]. There were times, she found, when it was preferable to submit to the terrors of her imagination, to encourage them to punish her, than to face the reality of her situation. (*Seduction*, 106-7)

If *The Wake* ultimately had to pare back its exploration of Vera's psyche, balancing it against the small-town family ensemble, Murphy would have another chance to focus solely on the female protagonist's psychological landscape in his later play *Alice Trilogy*.

***Alice Trilogy* (2006): A Super Wonderland**

The poster text for *Alice Trilogy*, performed at the Peacock Theatre, reads: "[a] play about a woman lost in her own wonderland." The photographic portrait of Alice, played by Jane Brennan, is deliberately blurred, as if reflected by a distorted mirror. She does not gaze at the camera, giving the impression that she is looking elsewhere, dreaming away.

¹⁰³ TCD MS11115/3/4/8.



Alice, Oct 10, 2006 [Poster]. ATDA at NUIG, 4896_PO_0001, p.1

In the programme note, assistant director Wayne Jordan introduced the play as follows:

Alice suffers an arrested development. Her growth has been stunted. Social mores and ideological strictures lead her effortlessly into a labyrinthine half life. Marriage, housewifery and motherhood have been incurred upon her somehow, as, seemingly, has her torturous fantasy life. We find ourselves dropped (through a rabbit hole thrice) into the life of the eponymous Alice.¹⁰⁴

In the same way that the childlike thirty-three-year-old John Joe in *Crucial Week* experiences his

¹⁰⁴ Wayne Jordan, “Through the Keyhole/Through a Glass Darkly,” *Alice*, Oct 10, 2006 [Programme], ATDA at NUIG, 4896_MPG_01, p. 1. For more Alice connections, see Peter James Harris, “*Alice Trilogy*: Seen Through the Looking-Glass of the London Critics,” in *Alive in Time: The Enduring Drama of Tom Murphy*, ed. Christopher Murray (Dublin: Carysfort, 2010), 189-202.

provincial town as a suffocating nightmare, Alice suffers from gendered constraints, and her dreams do not provide an escapist alternative. In the handwritten manuscript notes for “In the Apiary,” dated September 1994, Murphy wrote: “Passion for un-lived life. [...] A judgmental religion that fears and hates all sides of the feminine but one. Patriarchal mandates: how they can lead to a woman’s self-hatred for her own being...and can operate with lethal intent on her creativity.”¹⁰⁵ Murphy draws on the Jungian psychological terms “animus/anima” to explain Alice’s alter-ego Al:

The animas...prone to wishful or magical thinking than to realistic thinking.

Recurrent compulsive brooding that can become a form of self-torture

Animus: masculine part of woman’s personality, activating spirit.

Anima: fem. part of man’s personality; inner personality (opp persona)

[...] men still expect women to live men’s femininity.

This cause average men’s anima to appear infantile and mother-bound.

Negative animus (in women) act on ego to produce ‘brutality, recklessness, empty talk, and silent, obstinate evil ideas.’¹⁰⁶

The words in quotation marks stem from Jung’s collaborator Marie-Louise von Franz. In her chapter “The Process of Individuation” in Jung’s *Man and his Symbols* (1964), she explains how the unconscious can increasingly take possession of all one’s thoughts and feelings, whereby one becomes “the prey of an alien psychic factor.”¹⁰⁷ She outlines her theory of “negative animus,” which can cause women to nurse secret destructive attitudes: as observed, for instance, in Al’s encouragement to Alice: “she cannot think what it is exactly – *semmmashhh (smash) something!* – is upsetting her at the moment” (*Alice*, 307). Negative animus also causes “a strange passivity and paralysis of all feeling, or a deep insecurity that can lead almost to a sense of nullity,”¹⁰⁸ which “may sometimes be the result

¹⁰⁵ TCD MS11115/1/22/3.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ Marie-Louise von Franz, “The Process of Individuation,” in *Man and His Symbols*, ed. Carl G. Jung. (New York: Anchor, 1964), 193.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 191.

of an unconscious animus opinion. In the depths of the woman's being, the animus whispers: 'You are hopeless, What's the use of trying? There is no point in doing anything. Life will never change for the better.'"¹⁰⁹ Murphy uses aspects of these psychological concepts to fully explore the "feminine" psyche; Al is not only an interlocutor and "an echo" (*Alice*, 299), but also a personified unconscious, an animus/anima that further complicates the categorisation of the "divided self" into private and public.

Unlike *Crucial Week*, in which we see John Joe's everyday social life nightmarishly overlaid within a nightmarish dream-space, *Alice Trilogy* takes place largely in Alice's inner landscape and the interaction she has with other characters serve to explore her psychology even further. Alice mutters:

What I want has to be . . . 'O' (*She's unaware that she has not found the word, or words, but she is smiling, inhaling an 'O', slowly sucking in the air; and again:*) 'O' . . . (*Her free hand describing a wide gesture. She wants to breathe; she wants the freedom to develop/discover/explore her mind and spirit.*) Yeh know? Find out. Because there's a strange, savage, beautiful and mysterious country inside me. Otherwise, give me . . . a bucking bronco to deal with then. Because this is slow death. Otherwise . . . lobotomy. (*Dreamily.*) Yeh know? (*Alice*, 319)

Like Mommo, Alice is immobilised and confined to the domestic sphere. Just as the kitchen space in *Bailegangaire* is enmeshed with Mommo's traumatic past and arid present, Alice's wondering takes place in the attic room or a "roof space, accessed through the hatch" (*Alice*, 299), which parallels her inner "strange, savage, beautiful and mysterious country." The roof space in *Alice* suggests the ultimate female confinement: that of "the madwoman in the attic." Murphy, however, recreates the space as an escape, a haven of fantasy and introspection. In *Bailegangaire*, the familiar traditional cottage is simultaneously the imagined space of Mommo's storytelling. In both plays, Murphy dramatises women's space in ways that expand the conventional female imageries and tropes.

¹⁰⁹ Franz, "Process of Individuation," 191.

The trilogy starts with Alice “In the Apiary.” The opening stage directions set the ambivalent tone, like that of *Bailegangaire* where various temporalities and spaces co-mingle:

A shaft of sunlight cuts downwards through the murk, as it might coming from a dormer window or skylight. A few objects of broken furniture – maybe just an old trunk and a piece of old carpet. [...] A burst of birdsong from outside, [...]. From down below the thump-thump, thump-thump of a washing machine engaging with the sounds of a radio.

(*Alice*, 299)

The birds in the aviary (which Alice chooses to call apiary) recall an Edenic garden—the remoteness of nature—while the washing machine and radio encapsulate modernity. This incongruity is emphasised again at the end of the play when “the budgies are singing all together like a hacksaw cutting through wire” (320). On top of the co-existence of different time-spaces in the attic room, the idea of Al as “Image” and mirror, accentuates the sense of Foucauldian heterotopia even further:

The mirror is, after all, a utopia, since it is a placeless place. In the mirror, I see myself there where I am not, in an unreal, virtual space that opens up behind the surface; [...] But it is also a heterotopia in so far as the mirror does exist in reality, where it exerts a sort of counteraction on the position that I occupy. [...] it makes this place that I occupy at the moment when I look at myself in the glass at once absolutely real, connected with all the space that surrounds it, and absolutely unreal, since in order to be perceived it has to pass through this virtual point which is over there.¹¹⁰

In first drafts of “In the Apiary,” Al is denoted as an “Image,” stepping out of a mirror. Alice

stoops, produces a bottle of whiskey from its hiding place, the darkness of the floor;

¹¹⁰ Foucault, “Of Other Spaces,” 4.

looks at her watch while carefully lacing her coffee.

While she does this, her Image appears out of the darkness. (Perhaps out of the darkness to stand framed in the cheval mirror, to, eventually, step out of the mirror. Perhaps.)

Alice does not acknowledge her.¹¹¹

As Al emerges from the mirror, the two characters occupy a heterotopic space—both real and unreal, and absent and present. Lewis Carroll’s Alice, too, jumps lightly into the Looking-glass room where “the old room was quite common and uninteresting, but that all the rest was as different as possible.”¹¹² At the end of *Through the Looking-Glass*, she asks Kitty to “consider who it was that dreamed it all. [...] it must have been either me or the Red King. He was part of my dream, of course – but then I was part of his dream, too!”¹¹³ The distinction between life, the dream and the dreaming subject(s) begins to blur. On stage, the audience witnesses Alice’s dreamscape; however, the theatrical experience equally becomes the audience’s dream.

Al disappears in subsequent episodes of the completed play. In “By the Gasworks Wall,” Alice meets Jimmy—an old love of hers, now a TV celebrity—but rejects his suggestion of rekindling their lost innocence and authenticity, which she views as an impossible fairy tale. She tells him:

Alice, I’m Alice: ‘Let’s pretend we’re kings and queens’ is the scatty, stupid, silly side of me. I’ve wondered, for a long time, will this fantasising ever end, or will a fantasy ever come true? Both have happened tonight. All I am looking for from here on in – I promise – is reality. We go? (*Alice*, 342)

Alice’s clear capacity for fantasising, then, does not end in mere fantasy; she goes beyond to achieve a firm sense of reality. In the 2006 interview with Michael Ross, Murphy advocated for the importance of fantasy:

¹¹¹ TCD MS11115/1/22/1.

¹¹² Carroll, *Alice’s Adventures*, 129.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 244.

One of my favourite films is *Belle de Jour*, the Bunuel film [...] Is the woman a prostitute or is she caught up in a fantasy? I enjoyed finding out about the mental state of the main character in the plays [...] Even if it's a lie from start to finish, which is more important: reality as we pretend to know it or the fantasy that the mind is capable of?¹¹⁴

Fantatising allows Alice to reach a reality that is beyond pretence. Unlike Murphy's early plays, which express the anger from disillusionment—often through (masculine) violence—his plays about women foreground the mind's capacity for clarity and insight, and if needs be, re-illusion. Moments of illusion often present the only time “when it all made sense. [...] when everything seemed possible. And *was* possible? ...Dreaming” (*Alice*, 352). “By the Gasworks Wall” points to the relative sanity of Alice, who can delve into both the world of fantasy and reality without conflating the two. This wisdom, experience and maturity stand in contrasts to Jimmy, who appears almost deranged in his inability to recognise that difference.

If “In the Apiary” saw Alice using her capacity for fantasy to oscillate between performing everyday duties and exploring her rich interiority, the tone changes again in “At the Airport.” Set in 2005, the episode finds Alice in her fifties. The stage directions indicate that “[t]he strangeness (stylisation) can be put down to the idea that we are encountering this place through Alice's odd mental state. [...] She now, is like someone suspended in a forgotten purpose (of, for example, unwrapping her knife and fork from the coloured, paper napkin)” (348). The oddness comes from the discrepancy between the natural reaction to her son's death and her automaton-like narration of her thoughts. Her monologue sets the mood from the start:

Looking at it rationally the worst has happened. The worst? Has it? And it is conceivable that her heart is breaking. Is it? Because if it is, it is bearable. More's the pity. More's the pity that it is not what is believed to be the standard reaction to a breaking heart.

¹¹⁴ Michael Ross, “Tom Murphy: Through the Glass Darkly,” *Sunday Times*, Oct 8, 2006, *Alice*, Oct 10, 2006 [Press Cuttings], ATDA at NUIG, 4896_PC_0001, p.17.

Preferable that it should get on with it, break, conclude its business, that there should be some kind of crack, perhaps, then the rush of chill air in through the crack, perhaps, that would bring numbness. Yes. Or that some kind of cloud, darkness, should descend to take care of everything. But that is unlikely, that is nonsense, this is the way it is, this is how it goes, goes, continues, goes, dully aching, no cure for it, slow, tedious, grey and, of course, bearable. (*Alice*, 348)

Alice's constant self-questioning heightens her sense of "unreality" and incapacity to grasp the actuality of "the worst." Alice is not avoidant or defiant of life's tragedy like Mommo, but rather numbed and nullified by deadening everyday. It is a tragedy of the "death of tragedy"—that what should be a tragedy is no longer made tragedy. Life goes on amidst the "dull aching." Alice looks around the airport and exclaims: "coloured tables, coloured chairs, coloured tiles on the floor, what kind of place is this? Why not balloons too? So many colours, yet colourless, elevated out of the ground floor on steel columns, accessed by an escalator" (349).

According to Marc Augé, the airport is a quintessential "non-place." Airports give individuals an anonymous identity, and social interactions take place in a contractual rather than intimate manner. As Augé suggests, "a person entering the space of non-place is relieved of his usual determinants. He becomes no more than what he does or experiences in the role of passenger, customer or driver. [...] The space of non-place creates neither singular identity nor relations; only solitude, and similitude."¹¹⁵ Although people occupy the same space, they do not constitute a community: "[n]on-place is the opposite of utopia: it exists, and it does not contain any organic society."¹¹⁶ The alienation Alice experiences in the airport is symptomatic not only of a personal crisis, but also the nature by which a (super)modern every(wo)man experiences a non-place. Unlike the "spontaneous communitas" forged over the course of a shared ritual ("talking, singing and storytelling") between strangers, non-places further estrange people from one another and from themselves.

At the airport, Alice's wonderland becomes a modern-day standardised non-place.

¹¹⁵ Augé, *Non-Places*, 103.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 111-2.

Dissociated from her surroundings, Alice comments on the workings of the airport as if obscuring her own life from the outside. She watches young men, who are “[i]n transit from somewhere” (*Alice*, 351). Meanwhile, she knows exactly how her interaction with the waiter will unfold: “[h]e ambles because he is in charge. The dicky bow must prove something. ‘Alright, alright, everything alright?’ Every diner’s friend, and becomes (over)familiar, if allowed. Everything’s alright” (351). Every monologue and interaction is punctuated by “[a]n announcement for the delay of an airline flight over a tannoy system. (The sound is recognisable rather than the message being distinguishable)” (349). In her semiotic analysis of the airport, Gillian Fuller argues that airport signage, with its ubiquitous arrows, “turns place into passage, striates space into controlled flows, and urges the traveller to ‘move on’. It is a point sign that leads the way to a consideration of the technologies, both semiotic and a-semiotic, that provide the navigational and behavioural guidance.”¹¹⁷ The airport as a transitory place encompasses Alice’s sense of self: floating but not free. As Alice clearly articulates, “[I]f life is inescapably harsh, cruel, self-centred, ugly, sordid, mean. It is tediously suffocating and stubbornly bearable” (*Alice*, 352).

Alice’s automatised outpouring of words further exemplifies her dissociation from her body. She narrates both the unfolding events and her feelings in the third-person:

She has a sip of water, dabs her lips with the napkin and watches her husband eat.

She looks across the table at her husband who is eating a. Who looks across the table? She looks across the table. Who? She-she-her-she, this woman, me, looks across the table at that man, her husband, who is eating a meal of fish and chips in the manner of someone performing a duty and who is he, she wonders. [...] And as he will finish that meal in front of him, he will, in that occupational way of his of finishing things, go on finishing other things. [...] But he sees himself as some kind of stoic. Men, a lot of them, are like that. Whereas, emotionality, they believe, would you believe in this post-post feminist day and age, emotionality is women’s territory. Women weep – yes, and they sometimes

¹¹⁷ Gillian Fuller, “The Arrow—Directional Semiotics: Wayfinding in Transit,” *Social Semiotics* 12, no. 3 (2002): 231.

wail, howl, moan, shriek, squawk, screech! – when a thing falls out, goes wrong, and thereby somehow in the process, men believe, women cure themselves. No such luck for men. [...] It would nearly make a person cry. (*Alice*, 350)

Despite her underlying awareness that the “she” of her monologue is “this woman, me,” her detachment from herself manifests in language that describes her from an observer’s point of view. Moreover, she ironises the normative view of “emotionality” as “women’s territory,” gesturing towards the absurdity of gendered binaries and the separation of spaces.

Within this grim world, however, the exchange between two non-individualised women (*Alice* and the Waitress) seems to offer a moment of human connection. The waitress tells *Alice* “in a familiar way, and smiling gently” (*Alice*, 361) about her daughter-in-law killing her own baby. The waitress and her husband have been taking care of the baby for over a year. The short exchange of information prompts something in *Alice*:

ALICE inhales a long silent ‘O’. Perhaps it is not silent. And perhaps it is the first satisfactory breath she has taken in a long, long time.

ALICE And the woman does not know what further to say, but she is crying. [...] she loves the waitress, Stella, and clings to her for a moment in sympathy and in gratitude for releasing this power within her.

She goes to WAITRESS. They take each other’s hand, then embrace for a couple of moments. And as ALICE leaves, WAITRESS, too, is leaving to attend someone requiring her. (Alice, 362)

In the end, for a moment, the non-place becomes a place. Many critics objected to the “waitress-ex-machina,” pointing out that their exchange seems forced. In her review of the 2006 production, Sara Keating commented: “[t]he moment of transcendence is a forced and brief intrusion of the external world into *Alice*’s self-contained inner life. And as *Alice* remains estranged from herself at the

Trilogy's end, so she remains unknown and unloved by her audience."¹¹⁸ Compared to other Murphy plays, where the protagonists must work through their pain onstage to achieve a hard-earned resolution, in the critics' view, Alice's "self-indulgently self-pitying" attitude does not build up to a well-deserved release. Nevertheless, it is not easy sympathy that Alice asks of the audience. By staging Alice's detachment from her real trauma and suffering, and by focusing on the effects of everyday modernity on the individual, Murphy shows that emotions will be experienced even in random encounters if they can find no other outlet. Although he dramatises the lack of individuality and community within non-places, Murphy equally observes that somewhere in their own estranged arbitrariness, non-places can become places again.

In the 2006 production, the strangeness of Alice's wonderland was realised by Johanna Connor's set design, which used a curved architecture and mixed the concrete grey colour of the walls with blue lighting. As Peter Crawley described, "Alice, aware that it is a fable, insists instead on pursuing reality, but the sequence is still shrouded in fantasy – a point nicely accentuated by designer Johanna Connor, whose set has the solid texture of concrete but the curling contours of a dream."¹¹⁹



[*Alice*, Oct 10, 2006, Video]

¹¹⁸ Sara Keating, "Alice Trilogy," *Sunday Business Post*, Oct 15, 2006, *Alice*, Oct 10, 2006 [Press Cuttings], ATDA at NUIG, 4896_PC_0001, p. 31.

¹¹⁹ Peter Crawley, "Dublin Theatre Festival Reviews," *Irish Times*, Oct 12, 2006.

The arc itself is a feature of Dublin Airport's Terminal 1, designed by a young team of architects headed by Desmond Fitzgerald in 1937-41. John Olley describes the site as follows:

The building describes an arc in order to establish the threshold between arrival and departure. The concavity of the landward side gathers the passengers to prepare them for [...] air travel. It was one of the first airports to establish that functional logic, soon to become the accepted standard, according to which the smallest possible plan serves the maximum number of aircraft lined up along its curving perimeter. [...] The curving arms of the plan now become wings swept back with tips of open, curving, cantilevered viewing platforms and terraces. All this makes the building much more expressive of flight than the ponderous block-like or tendril airports of today.¹²⁰

The expressiveness of the airport building coincides with Alice's threshold state and dissociated emotions struggling to emerge. The set reflects the dull concreteness of reality as well as the strange fluidity of Alice's dream. Ironically, then, the airport building expresses Alice's inner landscape and experience better than she herself can. The fluidity and complexity of her emotional landscape within this space presents a challenge to conventional discourses and restraints on women.

Unlike female playwrights such as Marina Carr—who relies on ancient mythology and supernatural figures like witches and cat-woman to convey the mysterious, metaphysical and profound interiority of women—Murphy's exploration of women's space-time and their psychic terrain is firmly rooted in the everyday. In these three plays—*Bailegangaire*, *The Wake* and *Alice Trilogy*—women are the force disrupting and reinventing an everyday world that has been colonised by heterosexual, normative and patriarchal spatial structures. As opposed to the binaries of private and public and the neat ordering of time, the women transform their experience into a multitude of heterotopias. Vera in *The Wake* confounds the boundaries of normativity, engaging in a public display of sex in her family hotel at the centre of the town. Situated between the private and public, the hotel space serves as a

¹²⁰ John Olley, Annette Becker and Wilfried Wang (eds), *Twentieth Century Architecture: Ireland* (Munich: Prestel, 1997), 111.

platform to critique the materialistic society around her and its hypocritical morality regarding sexuality. In *Alice Trilogy*, Murphy presents Alice's real-and-imagined world, both separate from and connected to the tribulations of her everyday life. Presented in chronological order, we can trace the movement from the socially anchored space of the cottage in *Bailegangaire* through the liminal space of the hotel in *The Wake* to the final non-place of the airport in *Alice Trilogy*. In tracking these changes, Murphy critiques the "supermodern" world, where the transactional buying and selling of place has destroyed any anthropological meaning of or genuine encounter with place—symbolised in the characters' continuous desire for "home." The move toward "non-places" exposes the ways women's bodies have been erased and have been further subjected to commodification and disconnection.

Murphy dramatises women's lived spaces. The three plays for women foreground their experience of space: the characters must navigate between place as confinement and place as genuine home, in order to find meaning and regain agency in their lives. There exists the same discrepancy between the perceived and conceived space discussed in the second chapter; however, unlike the social spaces which do not attempt to mend this widening gap, in women's spaces, Murphy creates a heterotopic landscape where different temporalities are thrown together to expose a complex experience of space. "To experience in the active sense," writes Tuan, "requires that one venture forth into the unfamiliar and experiment with the elusive and the uncertain."¹²¹ For the phenomenologists and humanist geographers, places acquire meaning through the body-subject's sensory experiences, memories, repeated action, and personality imparted on an abstracted empty space. The act of staging women's spaces so extensively thus helps to show that "[l]ife is lived not a pageant from which we stand aside and observe. The real is the familiar daily round, unobtrusive like breathing. The real involves our whole being, all our senses."¹²²

What emerges from this thorough exploration of women's spaces resembles, on the one hand, the temporary bonding achieved in theatre, as seen in the "sacred spaces." Here, however, the sharing of space entails an even more acute awareness of objectified, "communicative" and suffering bodies. The frail and vulnerable bodies in *Bailegangaire*, through their ritualistic everyday repetition of

¹²¹ Tuan, *Space and Place*, 9.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 147.

storytelling, restore a sense of heritage and anthropological place, re-appropriating the confining home space. *The Wake* presents the impossibility of traditional community and genuine grieving, which have been corrupted by capitalist greed. The burlesque wake becomes a reminder that tragedy is, indeed, dead. Murphy's ruthless indictment of modern Ireland and by extension the "Western-system-itself" is neither nihilistic nor defeatist; in its total exposition, paradoxically, Murphy signals towards the possibility of wholeness, community and sanity. While the future of these fictional women remains ambivalent in the face of grim reality—it is difficult to imagine a "happy-ever-after" for any of them—the experience of random encounters, temporary recognition and heightened awareness of the "other" in theatre, is unexpectedly, life-affirming and life-enhancing. In moments of connection like that between Vera and Mrs Conneeley, or between Alice and the Waitress, female solidarity can carve out a redemptive space for itself. These experiences offer the audience a form of catharsis that is beyond and outside traditional tragedy.

Conclusion

Reviewing the DruidMurphy cycle, which consists of *Conversations*, *Whistle* and *Famine*, Fintan O'Toole remarks that the three plays explore the legacy of mass emigration and famine in Ireland, offering “an inner history of modern Ireland.”¹ In his review of the cycle as performed at the Lincoln Centre Festival in 2012, O'Toole outlines how

[...] the cycle moves backward from the early 1970s to 1846. Hynes has fashioned it into an Irish *Inferno*, a slow descent through the circles of Hell. It works by a kind of psychic archaeology, digging down through layers of self-hatred and violence in search of an answer: How did this world become the way it is? How did its generosity of spirit get squeezed out?²

In O'Toole's view, Murphy's plays chronicle the emotional history of Ireland in the 20th and 21st centuries. The spaces in Murphy's plays chart the socio-cultural changes that occurred in Ireland, laying out the hidden world and stories that were often neglected in shaping the national narrative and consciousness. In this sense, Murphy's plays hold a “mirror up to [the] nation.”³ However, there is more to this mapping and excavation of Irish history and nation. The digging and descent, as O'Toole alludes to in his review, attest to the spatial motions—the practice of space—that Murphy adapts for his theatre.

Murphy's theatre presents the workings of everyday space: Chapter 1 shows how repetition produces place from space, one that suffocates the inhabitants; moreover, the gap between the perceived and conceived space reveals the tragicomedy of life and intensifies the lived experience of confinement that is at once physical and ideological. To escape these trappings of social space and

¹ Fintan O'Toole, “Tom Murphy Documented Inner History of Modern Ireland,” *Irish Times*, May 15, 2018.

² Fintan O'Toole, “An Irish Genius in New York,” *New York Review of Books*, Aug 16, 2012.

³ Christopher Murray, *Twentieth-Century Irish Drama: Mirror Up to Nation* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1997).

narrowly defined sense of place, Murphy's tragic theatre, explored in Chapter 2, attempts to shatter imposed structures by "killing space." The spatial disintegration in the plays can be defined as the tragedy of place-making; in staging this failure of place-making, Murphy's tragedies convey the lived experience of terror and fear of average (wo)men, who are victims of modernity rather than the heroes of antiquity. Instead of directly confronting spatial confinement through violence, Murphy seeks to mould, transform, and transcend space; this process is explored from Chapter 3 onwards. Returning to the more recognisably everyday spaces of the pub and club, we see the possibilities Murphy finds in their liminality and performativity. In being able to perform the private in public, ordinary characters are able to reevaluate their notions of home, their self-image, dreams and failed aspirations, and in so doing feel a temporary sense of belonging and comfort in the shared space of the pub and club. Chapter 4 goes further, making the liminal space a sacred one. A sense of secular spirituality is restored in the abandoned and marginalised space of the church and a quack therapist's home-office. The strangers in the plays form a "spontaneous communitas" that bestows sacredness on the sidelined everyday spaces. The practice of place-remaking introduced in Chapters 3 and 4 culminates in Chapter 5, when the three women in *Bailegangaire* restore an anthropological place in the confined domestic space of the kitchen, traditionally designated as a quintessential women's everyday space. In his venture into women's spaces, Murphy presents a heterotopic world where the liminal spaces analysed in Chapters 3 and 4 acquire new and different dimensions of time-space. The liminal space of the hotel is interfused with the dead, while the ritual of the wake and the graveyard not only merge the material world with that of the immaterial, but also further diversify and complicate the experience of space in the here-and-now. It is at once immediate and haunted, a strange wonderland that is heterochronic and heterotopic. This strangeness is most vividly realised in *Alice Trilogy*, a play produced very late in Murphy's career, when "supermodernity" had already begun to cause dramatic shifts in the landscape of our everyday life.

These spatial motions are not necessarily disparate; they operate simultaneously and are always in dialogue with one another. It is precisely the realism of the social spaces thrown together with other, "non-realist" spaces that constitute the heterotopia of the everyday. The blend of "the mythic and the real," even in the most social of settings, characterises the experience of everyday life

throughout Murphy's work. In the dancehalls and the small town, incompatible impulses—the forward impulse towards freedom and success, contained in the myth of romance, and the backward impulse that suffocates and represses—are juxtaposed to convey the anomalies and anxieties of everyday living. This coexistence of several sites informs our tragic experience, where the sense of inevitability of our social condition, of fate, is both banal (in the everyday realm) and ancient (stretching back to antiquity). In this regard, tragedy is both a theatrical form and the form of everyday life. The same heterotopic principles apply when characters consume fish and chips while sharing stories in the sacred space of the church, or when everyday talk becomes therapeutic or operatic. Murphy's most significant contribution to theatre is that he recasts the everyday of the object-world, understood in the traditional phenomenological sense as “natural attitude,” into a heterotopic life-world, where the deepest emotions can be felt. Murphy's theatre redefines the boundaries of everyday existence.

Murphy's value, then, lies in having broken new ground for theatre by giving the everyday its full dramatic stature and consciousness. Commitment to this ethos also entails a risk of being marginalised or overlooked in an industry that calls for constant spectacles, innovation, and adaptation. This hunger for the new obscures the innovative aspect of the everyday itself, which is considered a deadener, a habit to break away from. Within Murphy's naturalism, there exists his “semi” theatre—his semi-expressionistic *Crucial*; his semi-Brechtian and semi-Artaudian tragedies; his semi-operatic *Gigli*; his semi-Chekhovian *House*; semi-melodramatic (semi-Tennessee Williams), semi-Beckettian, semi-Lorcan and semi-Nietzschean work, render him a categorical anomaly. In this way, too, he sits uneasily between the radical and outworn; the two terms put together, “radically outworn,” present an oxymoron (like the “archaic avant-garde”) but link back to the liminal and heterotopic textures of the everyday spaces. The everyday is a thrown-together space of clashing temporalities and boundaries, a mixture of tradition and modernity, past and present, fiction and reality. The everyday is boring, repetitive, and banal, but when staged amidst the spectacularised and hyperdramatic world, becomes revolutionary.

This mapping of everyday space in Murphy's works changes our understanding of modern drama's geography. The barren, tragic and absurd often make up the landscape of American theatre: Eugene O'Neill's *The Iceman Cometh* (1946) takes place in Harry Hope's Greenwich Village Saloon,

where the hopelessly deluded, over the course of their drunken conversations, are confronted with their “pipe dreams” and the harsh facts of life; Tennessee Williams’s *The Night of the Iguana* (1959) takes place in the Costa Verde Hotel in Puerto Barrio, the west coast of Mexico, where misfits suffer from nervous breakdowns and their attempts to escape the trap of life (symbolised by the “iguana at the end of its rope”) end in heightened awareness of it; Edward Albee’s *The Zoo Story* (1959) takes place on a bench in New York City’s Central Park, where a lonely and desperate man, in his effort to tell his “zoo story” to a wealthy publishing executive, impales himself on a knife; the backyard farm that is supposed to yield corn and carrots instead leaves the bones of a child’s corpse in the hands of its father-brother in Sam Shepard’s *Buried Child* (1978). These heterotopias that develop from everyday social places are defining features of modern theatre. Linked but not limited to the domestic sphere, in the British context, Harold Pinter transmutes the genre of the Kitchen Sink drama of the 1950s, adding to the everyday the sense of menace and terror in plays like *The Birthday Party* (1958) and *The Homecoming* (1965). The social structures in place have thoroughly colonised people’s everyday life, so that the desire to understand the chaos and alienation of modern life is inevitably frustrated, causing disappointment. As Ella in Shepard’s *Curse of the Starving Class* (1977) declares, “It’s a curse. [...] It’s invisible but it’s there. It’s always there. [...] Every day I can feel it. [...] Repeats itself. [...] We pass it on. We inherit it and pass it down, and then pass it down again. It goes on and on like that without us.”⁴

These cycles of violence are represented by the breakdown of the “blood-knot” that is the family. Families fall apart and this is realised in the destruction of the domestic space. Home is a trap that can only be inhabited once it is torn apart. In a letter to the director of Manhattan Theatre in 1974 regarding *Morning After*, Murphy wrote:

one of the things I wanted to say in my play is that things are really what they seem and not what they are supposed to be. [...] Christianity is as big a myth as Santa Claus – bigger – [...] And it is unnecessary that we should be such victims of so many lies and so much

⁴ Sam Shepard, “*Curse of the Starving Class*,” in *Sam Shepard: Plays 2* (London: Faber, 1997), 173-4.

resultant disillusionment. I think that the things-are-really-what-they-seem philosophy isn't such a bad one at all – even if we are kicking the shite out of each other – it's reality, it's a basis. The myth isn't a basis for anything.⁵

The notion, “things-are-really-what-they seem,” ties in again with the nonsense word “ding-a-dong,” a twist on the idea of something beyond phenomena, the *Ding an sich*. For Murphy, people are victims of various myths, including that of family, nation, and religion. Only by coming to terms with the reality of myth-less-ness can the possibility of rebuilding take place.

Our modern era of science and technology is, paradoxically, preoccupied with myths. Modern playwrights are faced with the challenge of rehabilitating the ritual and the mythic in an anti-mythical yet myth-dependent society. A parallel can be drawn to other cultural contexts, such as that of Québécois dramas. Michel Tremblay's works are situated against the backdrop of Roman Catholicism and a society aspiring to become a sovereign nation.⁶ For Craig Stewart Walker, this constitutes “a paradox: Tremblay's responses to the church and other elements of Quebec society are often adversarial, but they are so comprehensive as to form a kind of alternative mythology – an anti-mythology.”⁷ Murphy similarly uses (anti)-mythology to overcome a sense of alienation from orthodox beliefs—a mythology born of and bred by the social realities he inhabited. In a letter to Arvin Brown on March 30, 1976, a few months after the premiere of *Sanctuary*, Murphy wrote: “I do believe that religion is ‘Feeling’, an apprehension of being alive in Time, without understanding it.”⁸ Irrational and primordial feelings persist, and Murphy's theatre could be read as exemplary in alchemising the interaction between the real and surreal—between the social and mystical. José Lanfers compares Murphy and Federico García Lorca in their use of music and magic, along with the child as a symbol for creativity and hope.⁹ Lorca, also influenced by Synge, “celebrates the life of

⁵ TCD MS11115/9/1/1/3/11-12.

⁶ See Anne-Marie Leclerc's M. Litt. thesis, “Drama of Ireland and Québec: Shared Histories. A Comparative Analysis of Works by the Irish Playwright Tom Murphy and Québécois Michel Tremblay” (Dublin: Trinity College Dublin, 2006).

⁷ Craig Stewart Walker, *The Buried Astrolabe: Canadian Dramatic Imagination and Western Tradition* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's UP, 2001), 202.

⁸ TCD MS11115/9/1/1/2/42.

⁹ José Lanfers, “The Theatre of Thomas Murphy and Federico García Lorca,” *Modern Drama* 36, no. 4 (1993): 483.

instinct,” bringing to stage “the ancient spirit of the magician”; this poetic language is notable in Murphy as well.¹⁰ Various trinities—social, existential and emotional—make up Murphy’s theatre. This in turn helps to form an everyday onstage, which is the crux of Murphy’s mythopoeia.

Alan Read posits that “[t]o value theatre is to value life, not to escape from it. The everyday is at once the most habitual and demanding dimension of life which theatre has most responsibility to.”¹¹ For Murphy, too, the role of theatre is not to take us out of the everyday, but to place us back into it. Murphy takes on this impossible task, often with ruthless iconoclasm, but at all times with the utmost compassion. His plays remind us to retaliate but still sing, to “slay our own town” but still lend “a delicate ear.” Faced with the paradox of locating the everyday, Murphy’s theatre holds the answers: it finds them in the humdrum realities all around us, but also in the unrealised possibilities within. The everyday, for Murphy, is “what may be.”

¹⁰ Lanters, “Theatre of Tom Murphy,” 481-2.

¹¹ Read, *Theatre and Everyday*, 103.

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