

Innovation Meets Evocation: Tom Mac Intyre's Plays at the Peacock Theatre

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Over the course of the last four decades, playwright, poet and novelist Tom Mac Intyre (1931–) has contributed a diverse and challenging collection of plays to the repertoire of the Abbey Theatre, most of which have been staged at the Abbey's smaller theatre space, the Peacock Theatre. In close collaboration with director Patrick Mason and other theatre artists in the 1980s, Mac Intyre's plays shocked audiences at the Peacock with a non-naturalistic form of theatre in which highly visceral stage images mocked the patriarchal pillars of Church and State, challenged idealised perceptions of women, family, and rural life, and tested sensibilities surrounding sexuality and the body. With a dramaturgy designed to animate Jungian archetypes and Freudian desires within the contours of dream and nightmare, these plays are mainly situated in the unconscious worlds of significant male characters from the literary or political past. Largely unpublished, with the exception of the acclaimed reworking of Patrick Kavanagh's *The Great Hunger* (1983, 1988), Mac Intyre's plays of the 1980s tapped into the physical, experiential, and visual to an extent that no others on the Irish stage had done before. In the

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range of Mac Intyre's plays post-1990, however, innovation meets with evocation where the power of verbal image has significantly increased. This essay looks at this dramaturgical shift as it relates to theatre and the politics of identity on the contemporary stage in Ireland, the positioning of Mac Intyre's plays within the repertoire of the Abbey Theatre, and the relation between this and the increased publication of Mac Intyre's plays over the last number of decades.

INNOVATION AND THE STAGE IMAGE: PLAYS OF THE 1980s

Moving away from the secular and the real, Tom Mac Intyre's plays of the 1980s sought a gap for the transcendental in a dramaturgy most appropriately described as fragmented and postmodern. In the difficult decades of the 1980s, both the form and content of these plays offered a means of expression that went beyond words. Physical stage action spoke to feelings and emotions, and opened avenues for investigating the immediacy of experience which dialogue and plot rendered inaccessible. In the form of Mac Intyre's five plays staged during this period, the conventions of linear narrative, cause and effect, and verisimilitude are set aside in favour of montaged stage images. Through these stage images, *The Great Hunger* (1983), *The Bearded Lady* (1984), *Rise Up Lovely Sweeney* (1985), *Dance for Your Daddy* (1987), and *Snow White* (1988) encapsulated the mood of a society still suffering from the legacy of colonial rule, restrained under the strict dominance of the Church, and rocked by the turbulent violence of the troubles in Northern Ireland. In equal shades of light and dark, absurdity and humour, heartache and terror, joy and sadness, these plays brought the depths of hidden rage and suppressed sexuality onto the stage through the theme of 'the hurt mind'. According to Dermot Healy's programme note for the 1986 revival of *The Great Hunger*:

[The Hurt Mind] can be construed as National Paranoia. Words in capital letters that shouldn't be. Something emanating from people who conceptualise in one language and relinquish their ideas in another. Yet there is a certain satisfaction in that back-log of bitterness; for everything is not as it appears. In the Aran Islands they say—'ta dearc im dearmad'—there's hurt in my memory [...] For hurt mind you can also read "the joyous senses", or at another remove, 'The Great Hunger'. (n.p.)

Mac Intyre's *The Great Hunger* deals with the physical and emotional impact of oppression and rural isolation by using the stage as a lens to capture the moment-to-moment experiences of Patrick Maguire, the tragic male figure at the centre of Kavanagh's poem. In Beckettian style, the play's dramaturgy conflates form and content and makes moves to democratise all elements of the stage; textual, material and human. Combining postmodern techniques of fragmentation (with particular influences coming from Theatre of the Image), the symbolism of W. B. Yeats and higher realism of J. M. Synge, *The Great Hunger* gave shape to the full scale of Maguire's existence—his external and internal world, his thoughts, dreams, and nightmares.¹ In performances of the play, repeated words and lines from Kavanagh's poem created an atmosphere of disconnected isolation as well as being carriers of meaning. Actors' bodies held equal significance to properties and setting. Objects were treated as human beings and by turn human beings became objects at poignant moments in the play. Characters shape-shifted and morphed from human to animal. In tandem with the words of the text, mostly extrapolated from Kavanagh's poem, this metamorphosis between object, human and animal energised the politics of the stage and its radical iconoclasm. A wooden effigy cast in the role of The Mother, for example, signified the silencing of women within the domestic sphere and the absence of communication in the family home; actors froze movement to transform into scarecrows or automatons, thus implying their obedience as instruments of Church and State. In one arresting moment, the central character knelt before the audience with a pair of bellows gesturing masturbation. In another, the stronghold of the Church was ridiculed when the priest hilariously turned card trick entertainer in the process of giving Mass and fell asleep during confession. Meanwhile, his congregation's response was '*an orchestrated din of coughing*' which turned '*to a chorale of farmyard noises, animal and fowl*' (21).

In spite of such moves to democratise the stage, however, Mac Intyre's plays of the 1980s are predominantly masculine in their outlook. Along with the male-centred version of Kavanagh's poem, for example, *The Bearded Lady* (1984) puts Jonathan Swift centre stage where he falls into a dream in which he becomes his own fictional character, Lemuel Gulliver; *Rise Up Lovely Sweeney* (1985) brings the audience into the thick of the psychotic world of an ex-IRA man on the run, a post-modern version of the folkloric Mad Sweeney from the twelfth-century Suibhne Geilt; *Dance for Your Daddy* (1987) explores the paternal

nightmares of a man contemplating his daughter's coming of age; *Snow White* (1988) enters the consciousness of the Seventh Dwarf as Snow White moves from child into adulthood. To put it bluntly, then, there are no women in Mac Intyre's plays of this era. Women may appear as constructs of the patriarchal imagination, but they do not exist autonomously or in their own right. In the male-centred dreams and imaginings of these plays, however, the silencing, idealising, and objectification of the female figure is equally exposed and perpetuated. As discussed by Bernadette Sweeney in *Performing the Body in Irish Theatre*, this points to an imbalance in Irish theatre where the body, the actor, and in particular the female actor, has been subordinated by a history marked by sexual repression and the elevation of the status of the writer.

In terms of process, this theatre form called for practices that were just beginning to emerge in Ireland at the time. Both Mac Intyre and Mason had acquired experience of collaborative practice and theatre movement as an outcome of their work abroad.² Amongst their cast—including Tom Hickey, Vincent O'Neill, Conal Kearney, Michele Forbes, Olwen Fouéré, Bríd Ní Neachtain, Fiona Mac Anna, Dermot Moore, Martina Stanley, Joan Sheehy, Joan O'Hara—there was a mix of training from international practitioners such as Konstantin Stanislavski, Michael Chekhov and Marcel Marceau. At the intersection of creative exchanges was designer Bronwen Casson whose interest in environmental theatre design aimed 'to create an atmosphere of authenticity [involving] the use of natural objects and material' (Barrett 89). As John Barrett describes Casson's set design of *The Great Hunger*,

the cast are walking on clay and lying on damp patches of mud. [This] is a most interesting set; upstage centre a wooden five-barred gate, beyond that a red and rusted barn structure, to the right potato drills, in the foreground loose soil and the set is supported by props—buckets, baskets, potatoes, rope etc. Certainly it gives rise to some highly effective moments. One such would be where the characters reject the pleas and threats of religion and, all in a row, prostrate themselves on the ground, scooping up the soil reverently in their hands and kissing it, while the priest intones the first line of [Kavanagh's] poem, 'Clay is the word and clay is the flesh'. (92)

Although recollections of the rehearsal process point to the boundaries of creative roles being breached, a triumvirate of writer, director and lead-actor (Tom Hickey) drove the collaborative project.³ In the

rehearsal room Mac Intyre was open to the ensemble playing with text in order to arrive at a montage of overlapping scenes, each of which carried its own title or theme. A system developed in which the text was divided into two scores: one which plotted movement and action, and the other entirely verbal.⁴ With this predominance of stage direction the published text of *The Great Hunger* testifies to the extent to which the movement score controlled the process. This published text also reveals the reach of Mac Intyre's voice as a poet of words which seep beyond the parameters of dialogue between characters into the finer details of stage direction. As a consequence the published text of *The Great Hunger* is more poetic movement score than dramatic text in the conventional sense. A stage direction at end of Scene 4 gives a flavour of Mac Intyre's craft in this regard:

Maguire and Malone stir themselves. Maguire takes out a cigarette and lights up. Malone—gasping for a drag—cadges a cigarette. The pair puff contentedly. The summer evening light yields to night. Glow of the cigarettes by the gate, glow of one cigarette answering the other, that conversation. The two make for home. (19)

The Great Hunger is the most acclaimed of Mac Intyre's five plays staged in the 1980s and the only text to be published and toured.⁵ Initial media reactions to the premiere were negative and uncomplimentary. As described by one reviewer in the *Sunday Independent*, "Great Hunger" fails as drama'. The experimental practices employed by Mac Intyre, Mason, and the ensemble were not unanimously praised either. Within the walls of the Abbey as Tom Hickey recalled it, 'we were regarded by many [...] as "the lunatics in the basement"' (56). On tour around the world the play was equally loved and hated. As actor Dermot Moore remembers it:

Then, we go on tour, across the world, our insanity on display for all to see, *that* dirty laundry. The Moscow Art Theatre [...] The formal reverence of the Parisians, the giddiness of being the hot ticket at the Edinburgh Festival. The American audiences are insulted, affronted, disgusted at our refusal to give in one inch to American-Irish sentimentality or nostalgia—the brutality of the piece alienates, and truth be told, we are misunderstood. [...] In London, we have an astonishing experience, more than once: we leave the stage to a desultory round of applause,

which is followed by a weird silence—no one leaves their seat. Then, to goose-bumps, in our dressing rooms, we hear them start applauding again, having allowed the experience to sink in, and we come back, dazed and delighted, to take a last bow. (142)

Despite initial negative reactions, key critics and scholars voiced strong support for the work. In *The Irish Times* Augustine Martin wrote that ‘full justice ha[d] not been done’ by the critics in their response to the play: ‘This is one of the best things the Abbey has done in recent years,’ he asserted, ‘the sort of play Synge might have written’ (9).

INNOVATION MEETS EVOCATION: PLAYS FROM THE 1990s

Moving into the 1990s, Mac Intyre began to pay renewed attention to the textual concerns of his stagecraft. In this regard, it is the prolifically rich lyricism of the characters’ spoken words that stands out in the six texts published on foot of performances staged by the Abbey Theatre in this period.⁶ This later work is also marked by form and content which continues to delve deeply into the unconscious, but which pays renewed attention to death, the afterlife, the spiritual and transcendental. As described by Marina Carr in her 1995 programme note ‘The Bandit Pen’, Mac Intyre’s ‘territory is the crossroads between worlds. [...] He chats up ghosts and records for us what they’ve said to him’ (n.p.).

It is within these parameters, then, that we meet the central figures of Mac Intyre’s plays post-1990. The eponymous character in *Kitty O’Shea* (directed by Ben Barnes, 1990) is the ghost of Katherine Wood, the woman in the life of Charles Stuart Parnell. In *Sheep’s Milk on the Boil* (directed by Tom Hickey, 1994) a couple bearing resemblances to Synge’s Pegeen Mike and Christy Mahon confront the physical manifestation of their carnal desires. *Good Evening, Mr Collins* (directed by Kathy McArdle 1995, revived and toured in 1996) is described by Mac Intyre as a ‘Ghost Sonata’ in which the living and the dead Michael Collins interacts with the women in his life.⁷ In *The Chirpaun* (directed by Kathy McArdle, 1997) Jacinta Concannon and her father John Joe Concannon are ‘betwixt and between two worlds’ haunted by the paternity of Jacinta’s unborn child, her ‘chirpaun’ (O’Kelly 47). In the two Irish language plays toured by the Abbey during the 1990s—*Caoinéadh Airt Uí Laoghaire*, a version of *The Lament of Art O’Leary* (directed by

Kathy McArdle, 1998) and *Cúirt an Mheán Oíche*, a bilingual version of Brian Merriman's *The Midnight Court* (directed by Michael Harding, 1999)—texts are resurrected from the literary past in order to explore characters who pay the price for love. Moving into the 2000s, the critically acclaimed Peacock Theatre production and national tour of *What Happened Bridgie Cleary* (directed by Alan Gilsenan, 2005) presents the tragic figure of Bridget Cleary, a real woman who was tortured and burned to death because it was believed that she was both promiscuous and in league with the fairies. Lastly, in *Only an Apple* (directed by Selina Cartmell, 2009) the ghosts of the legendary Irish pirate Grace O'Malley and the English Queen, Elizabeth I, are presented as seductresses in the fantastical world of a Taoiseach (Irish Prime Minister) on the brink of a heave.⁸

To evoke such worlds dramaturgically the ongoing development of Mac Intyre's form celebrated the rich textures of spoken language whilst at the same time staying true to the power of physicality, viscosity, and the stage image. As David Nowlan remarked in *The Irish Times* on the opening of *Kitty O'Shea* at the Peacock Theatre in 1991: 'For the first time, Mac Intyre has wed the word (of which he here proves himself a master) to the image (on which much of his previous canon has concentrated) to achieve a rich dramatic statement' (10). A written form and theatrical language unique to Mac Intyre thus evolved post-1990. With its renewed interest in the power of poetic text Mac Intyre's emerging style carried forward some of the earlier influences of theatre of the image and dance theatre but simultaneously matched the aesthetics of theatre in Ireland of the 1990s and onwards. Fintan O'Toole describes this theatre as having,

more similarities with the theatre of Synge than [...] a decade earlier [...] It is strongly marked by a concern with language for its own sake. It is primarily poetic rather than naturalistic. It has an angular rather than direct relationship to Irish society. It works [...] through evocation rather than dramatization. (*Theatre Stuff* 47)

The setting, plot, characters, and language of *Sheep's Milk on the Boil* (directed by Tom Hickey, 1994), for example, are recognisably similar to Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World*. Both plays are set in remote/rural West of Ireland locations before the onset of modernisation; both

plays were premiered at historical moments on the cusp of major social and political change; and both deal with confrontations with otherness and the transformation of the self in consequence of their central characters' interactions with the Jungian shadow self.

In *The Playboy* the feisty Pegeen Mike falls in love with a stranger (Christy Mahon) who regales her and her village community with a story he tells about brutally murdering his father. Over the course of the play's three acts, Christy is transformed from submissive weakling to autonomous hero on foot of reactions to this story, but he is eventually cast out by the entire village when it turns out that this murderous act is untrue. At the end of the play Christy departs having gained authority over his father and with a new sense of conviction in himself. As Declan Kiberd argues, Pegeen represents Christy's anima, which Christy integrates and accepts in the Jungian order of transformation (181). Pegeen, however, remains chained to animus, the shebeen and the rules and regulations of her tribe. In pre-revolutionary Ireland, according to Kiberd, *The Playboy* invested optimism in the potential of a transformed patriarchal order but, through the containment of Pegeen's movement in the concluding moments of its action, the play warned of societal barriers which withheld opportunities to those oppressed by class, gender or access to material independence (183).

As distinct from the montaged scenes of Mac Intyre's plays of the 1980s, *Sheep's Milk on the Boil* adheres to a conventional two-act structure, and its densely poetic text plays a pivotal role in propelling the action in as much as stage image. In a cottage kitchen on an island off the West coast of Ireland, a young married couple with similar dispositions to Synge's Christy and Pegeen have their safe insular world turned upside down through the abrupt intrusion of the materialised appearance of the archetypes of their unconscious. In a series of highly theatrical interactions between archetypes and characters, directed by Tom Hickey, the carnal sensibilities of the timid Matt (Pat Kinevane) and his spirited wife Biddy (Deirdre Molloy) are tested to their utmost limits. In modern-day costumes (designed by Monica Frawley), the glamorous appearance of these archetypal characters—The Inspector of Wrack (Olwen Fouéré), a seductive Hollywood *femme fatale* and The Visitor (Owen Roe), an exotic Don Juan figure—counteracts the homely plainness of the appearance of Matt and his wife. The Inspector and Visitor tempt and terrify the two latter characters in scenes of escalating debauchment until, in a reversal of Synge's denouement, Biddy departs following

her Visitor off the stage leaving Matt behind alone with a disappointed Inspector of Wrack whose advances he has ultimately rejected.

This phantasmagoria is set in motion when Matt returns from the mainland at the beginning of the play with two significant objects which trigger the appearance of the archetypes: for Biddy there is an alarm clock, which is alien to both characters and which sparks only mild curiosity; for Matt there is a looking-glass with which he is obsessively enthralled. The characters' reaction to the clock points to the novelty of clock-time in Matt's and Biddy's world; the ringing alarm bell registers a shift in the action from a temporal to non-temporal, non-secular, non-realist frame. Referencing the clock that Synge famously brought to the Aran Islands in the late 1800s, the appearance of the clock in *Sheep's Milk* signals the characters' positioning—and hence the play's positioning—at the point of a potential new beginning, an ending, a moment of change or a transition.⁹

Matt's conversation with the mirror demonstrates the full extent of Mac Intyre's developing poetic style as well as the play's reference to that significant moment in Synge's *Playboy* when Christy looks into Pegeen's mirror and sees himself for the first time in a new heroic light:

I'd hardly know ye ... But I *do* know ye ... I *will* know ye ... we'll know each other comin' or goin', sleep or wakin' over the work or busy idlin'. I'll learn all your bountiful tricks ... till, no time, you'll *squeal* when ye find me comin' ... won't ye, won't ye? O me sweet, and o me swanky! Like steppin outa the March shadda and being blinded by the glare ... We're like the pair o'dancers just brought toe to toe. The best dancer's the one dances with the eyes. (*Sheep's Milk on the Boil* 75)

The chaos brought about by the introduction of the two exotic objects in *Sheep's Milk* precipitates the male character's enslavement to the anima, and the female character's liberation through her integration with the animus. Matt, however, will forever look narcissistically into the mirror not engaging with nor accepting the full extent of himself or the wider world around him. By contrast, Biddy will enter into a process of transformation which involves complete integration between persona and shadow self. According to Brian Singleton, contemporary dramatists, reflecting radical social change in Irish society from the 1990s onwards, have attempted to replace the 'essentialized iconic and mythical women of the early nation's male imagination' with a 'new Irish woman' who

has emerged from the country kitchen on to the street. As he says, in the reconfiguration of gender-relations ‘a new surreal set of conceptual values borne out of consumerism has replaced the authority of the Catholic Church’ (Singleton, qtd. in Sihra 18). Leaving aside essentialist terminology the question as to whether this ‘new Irish woman’ is embraced or elided in the later Mac Intyre plays is an interesting one. Women certainly have a powerful presence in the more recent dramatic texts as does the concern for their struggle against the patriarchal order. In choosing the story of the real woman Bridget Cleary for his 2005 play *What Happened Bridgie Cleary*, for instance, Mac Intyre wanted to engage with ‘an ancient story in the battle of patriarchy against the occasionally fragile and—in this case—feisty, bold brave lassie.’ As he explained in advance of the opening of the play, ‘[i]f you make a wrong move in your brave endeavour to free yourself of the collective, they may very well extract savage punishment’ (Mac Intyre, qtd in Heaney 16). In contrast to Biddy’s liberation at the conclusion of *Sheep’s Milk on the Boil*, Bridgie remains prisoner at the end of *What Happened Bridgie Cleary*. As expressed by the eponymous character: ‘I cudden stir. No wan te hobble me, I’m in chains. An’ worse, worst of all, knew te the far ends o’ me bones the cost o’ this ‘prisonment—I wasn’t spared that afflickshin, an’ rightly so’ (*What Happened Bridgie Cleary* 99).

Whilst the implication that Bridgie may have had any freedom to choose her destiny is highly problematic—‘I tuk fright’ (98) she says—this play poses a question about human nature on the precipice between conformity and non-conformity, between everyday existence and the desire for heightened experience. In this respect the play issues a call to embrace the transcendental as an alternative to the rigid world of secularity and patriarchal dominance.

Shifting from the hurt, damaged, and oppressed mind of the 1980s, then, Mac Intyre’s plays of the 1990s and onwards focus on the transcendental through the theme of ‘sex and death’.¹⁰ Mac Intyre speaks of the latter in terms of ‘the hunger many of us have for intense living—and the reluctance many of us have to pay the price for that elusive goal’ (Mac Intyre, qtd in Weiskind 10). Akin to George Bataille’s outlook in *Eroticism: Death and Sensuality*, Mac Intyre’s ‘intense living’ refers to the sacred quality of the transcendental. In Bataille’s view this is:

[t]he desire to go keeling helplessly over, that assails the innermost depths of every human being. [This] may well be a desire to die, but it is at the

same time a desire to live to the limits of the possible and the impossible with ever-increasing intensity. It is the desire to live while ceasing to live, or to die without ceasing to live, the desire of an extreme state. (239–240)

Although the ambiguity surrounding the treatment of the female figure lingers in Mac Intyre's later plays, and although male concerns continue to dominate this drama, these male figures are consistently represented in a negative light. Vain, sheepish, and ineffectual, these male figures sit metaphorically on the edge of a cliff facing the prospect of their desires 'to go keeling helplessly over', but their fear continually arrests their ability to take a leap of faith. The highly comic and by turns darkly tragic *Only an Apple* (2009), for example, deals with a corrupt Taoiseach (Irish Prime Minister) and political cohorts as they consider the risk of taking 'leave of the mundane world' (25). The Taoiseach (Don Wycherley) is clearly a version of the disgraced Fianna Fáil leader, Charles J. Haughey, and the setting (designed for the Peacock Theatre by Dick Bird) is an obvious replica of Abbeville, Haughey's mansion in North Dublin. The superbly humorous opening action of the play (directed by Selina Cartmell) expresses the Taoiseach's dissatisfaction with the humdrum business of political life. Like Biddy and Matt in *Sheep's Milk*, he holds no reverence for the organisation of time:

Someone said to me once—young deputy up from the bogs—first term in the house—'You never wear a watch, Taoiseach?' 'No,' I told him, 'I never was. But I've known lots who *were* and battalions who *are*. All they do is tick, and when they're not ticking they're alarming, when they're not alarming they're bloodless gadgets falling to bits at forty—and then *insisting* on a State funeral!' (5)

Moving away from clock-time and into the unreal, the play follows the Taoiseach into the wild antics of fantasy in which he (and his political staff) are seduced by the ghosts of Queen Elizabeth I (Fiona Bell) and pirate Grace O'Malley (Cathy Belton). The seduction culminates in a bizarre show-stopping '*showpiece chorale—with dance element*' which ends with a '*turn towards the troubling, the menacing, the chasm*' (46). This 'chasm' involves the Taoiseach facing down his shadow self and contemplating his desire to 'go keeling helplessly over' to borrow Bataille's words again. As the Taoiseach says towards the end of the play:

Tell you something, and for free: I'm minded to gamble—just go for it—y'know, like closin' your eyes and walking over a cliff. Donegal. Or Clare. Aran Islands. Am I going mad? I feel in balance. I think. [...] I want the trip. Am I ready to pay the price? Will there be a price? Always a price. For coming. Going. (98)

In similar fashion to Synge's *Playboy*, Mac Intyre's later plays operate in tangential fashion to political and social contexts, working conceptually whilst avoiding direct engagement with contemporary events. Across the action of several of these plays this is the prospect of one world breaking down in order to make way for the new. In *Sheep's Milk*, the walls of Matt's and Biddy's cottage kitchen (designed by Monica Frawley) gradually disintegrate until in Act II the '*entire back wall [is] now gone*' (92). On the surface these disintegrating walls reflect the deteriorating relationship between Matt and Biddy and the opening of the characters' world to other realities. More implicitly this demise of the cottage kitchen signals an end to the perceived stability of the domestic zone and its designation as a purely feminine space. Equally this demise suggests the tearing apart of old familiar traditions and conventions of Irish theatre, those steeped in anxieties surrounding identity, home and land.

In the same decade as the onset of the Peace Process in Northern Ireland and the fall of the Berlin Wall, these crumbling kitchen walls in *Sheep's Milk on the Boil* carry powerful signifiers of borders coming down both at home and abroad. They also mark the moment when global consumerist culture and EU and US investment in Ireland was to have an increasing impact on the authority of the Irish State. As Fintan O'Toole wrote in the 1990s, the notion of 'national independence is underwritten by transnational corporations and by a supra-national European Union' (*The Lie of the Land* xvi). Along with the two significant objects in the play, then, these collapsing walls anticipated Patrick Lonergan's argument that, by the late 2000s, 'globalisation—rather than the "national question" [had become] the dominant paradigm in Irish theatre' (*Theatre and Globalization* 27).

In this regard it is no surprise to find crumbling walls or portals to other worlds as prominent features in all of Mac Intyre's later plays. In *Good-Evening, Mr Collins* (designed by Barbara Bradshaw) the gaping hole in the wall of the interior of the period room occupied by Michael Collins and the ghosts of his unconscious mind point to openings beyond post-revolutionary Ireland. In *The Chirpaun* (designed by

Barbara Bradshaw) great chunks missing from the walls of the setting expose the fragile frame of the domestic home as Jacinta rails against her father's belligerent inability to accept the unknown paternity of her unborn child. The fragile frame thus carries connotations of the breakdown of family structures and exposes anxieties surrounding the erosion of identity at the onset of globalisation.

In exploring Irish theatre from the 1990s onwards, Eamonn Jordan writes about an evolvement of form within a specific cultural context rather than a radical rupture from one tradition to the next. As he suggests, this commonality across the organic development of Irish theatre in this period speaks of 'the shared attractions and repulsions towards the Irish dream' (10) and exposes a dual dynamic, driven on the one hand by the unsustainability between text and context and, on the other, by the contextual pressures of actual events. Whilst not pinpointing Mac Intyre specifically, Jordan recognises that the plays of Marina Carr, Martin McDonagh, Frank McGuinness, Marie Jones, and Mark O'Rowe 'do not bear much relation' (10) to the realities of contemporary Ireland. He argues that these plays have emerged in a culturally and politically specific moment and stretch across national boundaries (10). Enabling this stretch across boundaries are dramaturgies configured around the language of poetry which opens the stage to worlds beyond the quotidian. Thus, in an *Irish Times* review of *What Happened Bridgie Cleary* (2005), O'Toole observes:

In its densely poetic language, its use of the stage as a sacred space and its air of repeated ritual, this is perhaps the most Yeatsian play the Abbey has staged since its co-founder's death. [...] MacIntyre's [sic] dialogue is a strange but forceful confection of archaic rural speech and angular, modernist sounds [...] the drama is in the lift and swoop of this language [...]. (14)

Since this is the world of the unreal, the lift and swoop of Mac Intyre's language moves freely in the zone of the uncensored, moving from the seriousness of sacred spaces to the absurdity and flamboyance of the scathingly comic. Whilst 'things' and 'bodies' on stage provided shock factor in the 1980s, it is Mac Intyre's 'words' within the other-worldly positioning of his later dramaturgy that stops audiences in their tracks. In *Only an Apple*, for instance, comic words scupper accepted views and misconceptions inasmuch as physical action. At one point in the play the Taoiseach asks the audience, 'Have you ever had the experience of

opening your passport, glancing at your photo, and discovering that the name under it is Paddy Shite?’ (96). Thus, Lonergan’s review sees the play as,

vacuous, crude, and infantile. It is consistently sexist and occasionally homophobic. It is incoherent and self-regarding. And because it is all of those things, it is a stunningly appropriate and stimulating portrait of our political system—one that allows us to imagine what the world looks like from the perspective of a mediocre man with serious responsibilities. (*Irish Theatre Magazine* 19–20)

Although Mac Intyre’s later plays place a renewed emphasis on ‘words’ it is important to point out that marked differences between rehearsal texts and their published versions indicate a significant level of commitment to experimentation with text post ‘lunatics in the basement’. Having an impact on these developments of Mac Intyre’s form was the fact that from 1990 onwards Mac Intyre was engaged by the Abbey on a play-to-play basis with entirely different creative teams for each new play. Although the ‘lunatics in the basement’ had disbanded in 1988, Mac Intyre continued to commit to collaboration through an open approach to the reworking of his texts during rehearsal processes, and a close working relationship with actor Tom Hickey. As well as extending his collaboration with Tom Hickey, Mac Intyre was learning from and sharing his previous practical experience with a range of other directors, designers, and actors working for the national stage. At this time, Mac Intyre also brought other new plays to the stage outside of the Abbey, with companies such as Punchbag Theatre Company (Galway), Red Kettle (Waterford), Project Arts Centre (Dublin).¹¹ Thus the creative expertise of a range of freelance artists contributed to developments in Mac Intyre’s form, which moved from having an aesthetically distinct style in the 1980s to being much more diverse and varied in accordance with the range of ideas to which he was exposed. Likewise, Mac Intyre’s mode of working fed into the theatre practices of these other artists and theatre companies in existence at the time.

Along with these creative exchanges, there were structural changes at the Abbey which nourished the development of Mac Intyre’s dramaturgical form from the 1990s onwards. The continued staging of his work on the Peacock stage coincided with a new period of artistic vision at the Abbey Theatre when Mac Intyre’s once close collaborator Mason

became Artistic Director in 1994, holding tenure throughout the remainder of the decade. On taking up the post, Mason released a policy document—‘A High Ambition: The Work of the National Theatre Society’—which revived the manifesto set out by the founders of the Irish Literary Theatre, later to become the Abbey Theatre under the banner of the National Theatre Society Limited.¹² In so doing Mason reinforced the Abbey’s status as a writers’ theatre as well as a national theatre, and invested in the promotion of plays from the repertoire:

The National Theatre Society was founded to promote and develop new Irish plays, and thus build up an ‘Irish School of Dramatic Literature’. This still remains the primary purpose of the Society. [...] The National Theatre Society is both the maker and shaper of the Irish Theatre Repertoire. After nearly a century of work there does exist a varied and remarkable ‘School’ of Irish drama, and it is the secondary purpose of the Society to ensure that these plays and playwrights of the past are not forgotten. [...] The National Theatre Society has a rich repertoire of plays built up over the last 90 years. This repertoire has been largely neglected in recent years. Unjustly so. The works of Gregory, Synge, Shiels, McNamara, Murray, Colum, Ervine, and Deevy are a vital part of the dialogue of the past, and it is high time that these voices were heard again. (Mason 2, 3, 10)

The emergence of the revisited Abbey Theatre manifesto in the mid-1990s supports the notion of evocation described by O’Toole and Jordan in their retrospective look across the decades.

It should also be noted that whilst Mason supported Mac Intyre’s work through the programming of his plays at the Peacock and on national tour during the 1990s, he did not enter the rehearsal room as a director with Mac Intyre after 1988. Although Mason’s career had begun in theatre experimentation, movement, and image, his profile as a practitioner had begun to move in other directions from the mid-1980s onwards, and by the early to mid-1990s he had worked steadily with a range of other writers including Tom Murphy, Thomas Kilroy, Frank McGuinness, Hugh Leonard and the late Brian Friel. Whether the trajectory of Mason’s career as a theatre director and his leadership of the Abbey had any direct influence on the transition in Mac Intyre’s dramaturgy in the 1990s is a matter of debate. Mason, however, has stated that the forging of a new theatrical vocabulary in the late 1980s with his fellow lunatics in the basement, ‘affected all of us in terms of our general

work' (qtd in Mulrooney 188). In this context it is not difficult to imagine the extent to which Mason's later work as a theatre director was influenced by his collaboration with Mac Intyre, and how this may have fed into the work of the playwrights with whom he worked. It is also not difficult to imagine the impact on Mason's programming of plays for the Abbey and Peacock Theatre's during his tenure there as Artistic Director.

Mac Intyre's style can clearly be seen in the work of significant writers who followed after him on the national stage, the most obvious of these being Marina Carr, Michael Harding and Vincent Woods who made dramatic entrances on to the national stage in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Other writers are also vocal in their appreciation of the experimentation of Mac Intyre, Mason, Hickey and their creative counterparts in the 1980s. For instance, Frank McGuinness refers to *The Great Hunger* and *Rise Up Lovely Sweeney* as experiences that changed his way of looking at theatre (Mulrooney 192).

Tom Mac Intyre's idiosyncratic poetic style of writing for the theatre from the 1990s onwards is synonymous with and deconstructive of the historical and contemporary voice and style of the Abbey Theatre. Where the form of his plays pre-1990 lent itself to postmodern fragmentation of the self and the eschewal of character as a dominant feature of the performance, it is poetry of the word that strikes home in the plays in the 1990s and 2000s. Fiach Mac Conghail, the outgoing Artistic Director at the Abbey Theatre, has described Mac Intyre's legacy as 'a benchmark against which Irish theatre has defined itself' (xxvi). Moving from innovation to evocation, Mac Intyre's plays have not only populated but enriched the repertoire of the contemporary stage in Ireland with their legacy of experimentation, their persistent search for the transcendental, and their deep exploration of the strange and not always flattering reaches of the unconscious mind.

NOTES

1. As a playwright, Mac Intyre was inspired by a wide range of innovators in theatre practice, dance and cinema: the modern Irish and European theatre experimentation of John Millington Synge, William Butler Yeats, Samuel Beckett, George Fitzmaurice, M. J. Molloy, and Maurice Meldon; European alternative theatre practices of Antonin Artaud, Vsevolod Meyerhold and Jerzy Grotowski; the imagistic cinema of Werner Herzog and Federico Fellini; modern dance practices of Merce Cunningham,

Martha Graham and Meredith Monk; the aesthetics of Theatre of the Image and Dance Theatre, in particular the work of Polish auteur Tadeusz Kantor and German choreographer Pina Bausch.

2. Patrick Mason was Staff Director and Voice and Movement Coach at the Abbey Theatre. He trained in Martha Graham's choreographic technique and spent time observing Peter Brook in Paris. At intervals during the 1970s Mac Intyre spent time abroad, particularly in the US where he joined Calck Hook Dance Theatre, a dance theatre company based at Oberlin College in Ohio. It was there that Mac Intyre gained hands-on experience of collaboration and performance, taking part in rehearsals and performing in two plays, *Deer Crossing* (Oberlin, 1978) and *Doobally/Black Way* (Le Ranelagh, Paris and Edmund Burke Theatre, Trinity College, Dublin, 1979). It was also during this time that Mac Intyre's enthusiasm for alternative and movement-based theatre was kindled by seeing a wide range of theatre and dance both in Europe and the US.
3. The actors, as Ní Neachtain says, were free both to 'dig, explore, and investigate the fabric of the play' and 'to invent even in performance'. The company was working, she says, 'towards a fresh and vibrant form of theatre that served the playwright and challenged the audience' (Ní Neachtain, in Sweeney and Kelly 137). As a consequence, accreditation for the full realisation of these plays of the 1980s belongs to Mac Intyre in collaboration with a creative group: including the actors' performances, Mason's direction, and Casson's designs, as well as Mac Intyre's vision and dramatic text.
4. As Mac Intyre has described it, 'the mode of work that declared itself to us was as follows: it was, let's say, spontaneously agreed, that the writer could also be quasi-director and quasi-actor, the director could be quasi-writer and quasi-actor and the actor could be quasi-writer and quasi-director. And I think it's probably extraordinarily rare in the theatre for that conjuncture to happen.' (Chambers, FitzGibbon and Jordan 312).
5. *The Great Hunger* was first staged in the Peacock Theatre, Dublin, on 9 May 1983, revived in July 1986. The production subsequently toured to the Edinburgh Festival, where it gained massive critical acclaim and won a Fringe First Award. In 1986 the production toured Ireland to venues in Belfast, Waterford and Annaghmakerrig, Co. Monaghan. In 1987 the production travelled to London and Paris. The final tour took place in 1988 with the production travelling to Leningrad and Moscow where it played in the famous Moscow Art Theatre.
6. Published plays in the period include: *Sheep's Milk on the Boil* (Syracuse University Press, 1994), *Good Evening, Mr Collins* (in *The Dazzling Dark: New Irish Plays*, Faber, 1996), *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoghaire* (Coisceim, 1999), *Cúirt an Mheán Oíche* (Coisceim, 1999), *The Gallant*

- John-Joe* (in *The Great Hunger* and *The Gallant John Joe*, The Lilliput Press, 2002). *What Happened Bridgie Cleary* (New Island, 2005) and *Only an Apple* (New Island, 2009).
7. According to Carr: 'the whole play is peopled with ghosts. It is what Mac Intyre himself calls 'A Ghost Sonata'. You've one actress playing the three women—Moya, Kitty and Hazel. Another piece of banditry but it works a dream. The women merge into one another, separate, merge again. They're ghosts, Collins's own private ghosts.' See 'The Bandit Pen'.
 8. The heave—euphemism for political shafting.
 9. According to Declan Kiberd, in his time Synge was an 'agent of [...] change, bringing the first alarm-clock to the islands (with the attendant notion of clock-time, efficiency and measurement) as well as his camera (itself creating a new narcissism among the islanders, which he observes with some disgust, since the camera was a curiosity employed by him to win the confidence and respect of the people). Seeing his photographs of them, the islanders tell Synge that they are seeing themselves for the first time' (172–173).
 10. 'You can't go wrong with sex and death. There is no other story.' Mac Intyre, qtd in *Playwrights in Profile* (Series 1). Presenter Sean Rocks (Dublin: RTÉ Radio 1, 11 February 2007).
 11. These included a libretto for a production of *Ariane and Bluebeard* for Opera North (1990, directed by Patrick Mason at Leeds Grand Theatre). He also had a series of plays produced by other companies around Ireland: *The Mankeeper* (1991, directed by Paul Brennan for Midas Theatre-in-Education Company, Limerick), *Fine Day for a Hunt* (1992, directed by Sean Evers for Punchbag Theatre Company, Galway), *Chickadee* (1993, directed by Tom Hickey for Red Kettle Theatre Company, Waterford) and *Foggy Hair and Green Eyes* (1993, directed by Tom Hickey at the Project Arts Centre and Clarence Hotel, Dublin). There was also a one-man play, *The Gallant John-Joe*, based on the earlier play, *The Chirpaun*, which toured extensively nationally and internationally from 2001 onwards, as well as a dance piece *You Must Tell the Bees* (1996, co-choreographed by John Scott and Tom Mac Intyre, co-produced by Irish Modern Dance Theatre and Firkin Crane Arts Centre, Cork).
 12. 'We propose to have performed in Dublin in the spring of every year certain Celtic and Irish plays, which whatever be their degree of excellence will be written with high ambition, and so to build up a Celtic and Irish school of dramatic literature. We hope to find in Ireland an uncorrupted and imaginative audience trained to listen by its passion for oratory [...] We will show that Ireland is not the home of buffoonery or of easy sentiment, as it has been represented but the home of an ancient idealism. We are confident of the support of all Irish people, who are weary of

misrepresentation, in carrying out a work that is outside all the political questions that divide us.' Lady Augusta Persse Gregory, *Our Irish Theatre: A Chapter of Autobiography* (Gerrards Cross, UK: Colin Smythe, 1972), 20.

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