




“WHAT IS A PLAY?”

“WHAT IS A PLAY?” RESPONSES AND REFLECTIONS FROM
IRELAND’S PLAYWRIGHTS AND THEATRE MAKERS



IRISH THEATRE INSTITUTE



WHAT IS A PLAY?

A PUBLICATION AND SYMPOSIUM
TO MARK THE 20TH ANNIVERSARY OF ITI'S CORE
RESOURCE *PLAYOGRAPHYIreland*.

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*“Play – to play, player, playwright, play-
acting, plaything – the word has an
extraordinary range of meanings.”*

THOMAS KILROY

CONTENTS

FOREWORD	06
INTRODUCTION	08
BIOGRAPHIES	10
RESPONSES & REFLECTIONS	13
THOMAS KILROY	14
ZOE NÍ RIORDÁIN	18
ROSEMARY JENKINSON	22
MARTIN SHARRY	28
VERONICA COBURN	32
PHILLIP McMAHON	40
ABOUT	47
CREDITS	48

WHAT IS A PLAY?

Embarking on Playography in a relatively pre-digital world 20 years ago was innovative and often very challenging. We were all learning as we went and, latterly, keeping up with technical innovation and sustaining the resource was equally as challenging. However, here we are today with a database that has stood the test of time containing information on over 4,000 plays and is, for the long term, a true reflection of the Irish play repertoire that, importantly, is freely accessible to everyone.

The central aim of Playography is to capture the repertoire of new Irish writing, in English and Irish, from Ireland North and South since 1900. In essence it's a catalogue of world premieres by Irish playwrights. It provides an insight into the writers, actors, directors, stage managers and creative personnel who shaped the world of Irish theatre for the last 120 years. Its practical application, being a fully searchable and relational resource, is important as a catalogue of writers, their agents and rights information, and as an ePlay repository.

If the early years working on Playography was all about research parameters¹ and the search for accuracy and comprehensiveness, the more recent years have involved many conversations with our advisers and colleagues on 'what is a play?' and a related question on 'who authored the work?'

This *What is a Play?* Publication and Symposium offers Irish Theatre Institute an opportunity to engage with the theatre community, to hear your insights and feedback so that we may refine our research parameters, if necessary, and accurately reflect your work in PLAYOGRAPHYIreland in the future.

It has taken a village of artists, arts managers, arts workers, and database specialists to build Playography and to each and every one of these individuals we extend our thanks and gratitude.

SIOBHÁN BOURKE AND JANE DALY

Co-Directors, Irish Theatre Institute

INTRODUCTION

WHAT IS A PLAY?

The question is deliberately provocative. In asking it, we nod to the countless others who have asked the same question before us and those that will continue to ask it long into the future: in post-show foyers and festival clubs; on application forms and in policy documents; in lecture halls and rehearsal rooms; and on the pages of plays themselves.

What marks a play out from other types of performances? What is its essential playness?

In its day-to-day operations, PLAYOGRAPHY*Ireland* grapples with the philosophical quandary underpinning the question: *what is a play?* Each production considered for entry by the Playography team is assessed under a set of guiding principles. These criteria were carefully drawn up at the foundation of the project, and are revisited and reassessed on an ongoing basis with the support of the deeply knowledgeable and generous artform experts that make up the Playography Advisory Panel. Theatre as an artform has always been the subject of radical change, its borders permeable.

In the two decades since the establishment of the online catalogue in 2001, Irish theatre has witnessed huge shifts as new generations of playwrights and theatre artists continue to find their own forms, joining the journey of more established artists in bravely venturing to tell the story of the rapidly changing world we now live in. PLAYOGRAPHY*Ireland* similarly strives to continually adapt to these dynamic changes in practice.

In early 2020, as we began to have conversations about how to celebrate Playography's 20-year anniversary, the grounds shifted in the most profound way. The Covid-19 pandemic has altered the playing field in a way few could have predicted. The qualities that had always drawn diverse playmaking practices together – theatre's liveness, the togetherness of the audience – could no longer be taken for granted. In that radically changed landscape, in the most difficult of circumstances, it is the artists who have persevered and adapted, forging new forms in a profoundly changed context. As ever, we endeavour to follow their lead.

In celebration of PLAYOGRAPHY*Ireland's* 20th anniversary, we invited six playwrights and theatre-makers to contend with our question: in the wake of 2020 and in the context of their own practices. The responses here are from Veronica Coburn, Rosemary Jenkinson, Thomas Kilroy, Zoe Ní Riordáin, Martin Sharry, and Phillip McMahon (who was set the unenviable task to reflect on the shared themes of his five fellow artists). These responses and reflections point to the range of practices and multiplicity of voices that theatre invites, includes, and celebrates.

The artists engaged sincerely with the complexity of the question, within the context of their own practices, and in the knowledge that to speak as playwright or theatre artist is to simultaneously speak as collaborator and audience member. Their reflections are filled with the memory of plays made and plays seen, a richness which, despite this variety of performance practice, speaks to the tightly woven community at the heart of Irish theatre-making. Engaged and effervescent in their celebration of theatre, these commissioned responses are the light from which our symposium radiates.

With this publication and companion symposium, on the eve of its 21st birthday, PLAYOGRAPHY*Ireland* looks back at its formative years while it looks forward to its future. As theatre continues to grow, change, survive, and thrive, the catalogue will continue to become deeper and richer with each and every entry – as we continue to grapple with the most fundamental of questions, *what is a play?*

KATE HEFFERNAN AND KATHERINE MURPHY

BIOGRAPHIES



VERONICA COBURN [VIEW PLAYOGRAPHY ENTRY »](#)

Veronica Coburn is a writer and playwright with a particular interest in participation and play. She was a founder member of Barabbas Theatre Company with whom she toured to, amongst others, New York (Next Wave Festival BAM), Washington (Kennedy Centre), and New Zealand (Wellington International Arts Festival). She is the author of *Clown Through Mask – The Pioneering Work of Richard Pochinko As Practised By Sue Morrison* (written in collaboration with Sue Morrison, published by Intellect Press). Veronica

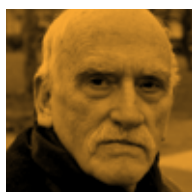
is a Civic Theatre Associate Artist and programme director of Tenderfoot, the Civic’s theatre programme for transition year students. She was Artist in Residence in Draíocht Arts Centre, 2012–2015, and Artistic Director of National Youth Theatre, 2018–2021. Favourite projects include Artistic Director of Home Theatre (Ireland), an innovative project that saw 30 original plays performed in people’s homes in Dublin 15, the development of *Hallelujah! A Community Clown Choir* (both for Draíocht Arts Centre), and *Songs of Change*, a participatory art project commissioned by the Civic Theatre in response to Covid-19. Veronica is the recipient of the Prix Europa/Radio France and a Writers Guild of Ireland Zebbie Award for her work on radio.



ROSEMARY JENKINSON [VIEW PLAYOGRAPHY ENTRY »](#)

Rosemary Jenkinson is a playwright and short story writer from Belfast. Plays include *The Bonfire* (Stewart Parker BBC Radio Award), *White Star of the North*, *Planet Belfast*, *Here Comes the Night*, *Michelle and Arlene*, *May the Road Rise Up*, and *Lives in Translation*. Her plays have been performed in Belfast, Dublin, London, Edinburgh, New York and Washington DC. She was 2017 Artist-in-Residence at the Lyric Theatre and in 2018 received a Major

Artist Award from the Arts Council of Northern Ireland. She has written four collections of short stories and was singled out by the Irish Times for ‘an elegant wit, terrific characterisation and an absolute sense of her own particular Belfast’. Her latest play *Billy Boy* was produced by the EastSide Arts Festival in Belfast in August 2021. She is currently under commission to the Abbey Theatre.



THOMAS KILROY [VIEW PLAYOGRAPHY ENTRY »](#)

Thomas Kilroy has been active in Irish theatre for over fifty years. His plays include *The O’Neill*, *The Death and Resurrection of Mr. Roche*, *Tea and Sex and Shakespeare*, *Talbot’s Box*, *The Secret Fall of Constance Wilde* and *The Shape of Metal*. His most recent production was the Druid Theatre revival this year of his version of *The Seagull*. He was a director of Field Day Theatre Company, founded by playwright Brian Friel and actor Stephen Rea, and

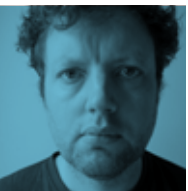
was recently on the board of the Abbey Theatre. He has been awarded numerous literary prizes including the Guardian Fiction Prize, BBC Drama Prize, the Heinemann Award for Literature, The American-Irish Literary Award, short-listed Booker Prize. He is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature, a member of the Irish Academy of Letters and of Aosdána, and Professor Emeritus of Modern English at NUI Galway. At the Irish Times/ESB Theatre Awards in 2004, Kilroy was awarded a Lifetime Special Tribute Award for his contribution to theatre. In 2007 he was presented with the PEN Ireland Cross Award for his contribution to literature. In 2011 he was elected an Honorary Fellow of Trinity College Dublin. He was awarded the Ulysses Medal in 2016.


PHILLIP McMAHON [VIEW PLAYOGRAPHY ENTRY »](#)

Phillip McMahon is a playwright and director based in Dublin. His latest play, *Once Before I Go*, reopened The Gate Theatre to live audiences in September 2021. His plays include *The Rock*, *Come On Home*, *Town Is Dead*, *Alice In Funderland*, *Pineapple*, *Elevator*, *Investment Potential*, *All Over Town*, and *Danny & Chantelle (still here)*. Directing highlights include *Dublin Oldschool* by Emmet Kirwan (Project Arts Centre, National Theatre UK), *Not A Funny Word* by Tara Flynn (THISISPOPBABY), *Insane Animals* by Bourgeois & Maurice (HOME, Manchester), and *Town Is Dead* (Abbey Theatre). He has developed, directed, and toured five smash hit shows with drag superstar Panti Bliss, and was co-writer and co-producer on Conor Horgan's esteemed documentary about Panti, *The Queen of Ireland*. Phillip is co-founder and co-director of theatre production company THISISPOPBABY, wherein he was co-creator and co-curator of the THISISPOPBABY performance venue at Electric Picnic Music and Arts Festival, Queer Notions cross arts festival, WERK Performance/Art/Club, Where We Live festival of performance and ideas, and the international smash hit show *RIOT* (Winner Best Production Dublin Fringe Festival 2016). He was a former Writer In Association at the Abbey Theatre and is a current Artistic Associate at the Lyric Hammersmith Theatre, London.


ZOE NÍ RIORDÁIN [VIEW PLAYOGRAPHY ENTRY »](#)

Zoe Ní Riordáin is an award winning theatre and filmmaker from Dublin. She is co-artistic director of One Two One Two with Maud Lee. Their critically acclaimed work in theatre, film and music has toured nationally and internationally since 2014. Recent work includes: *Dúirt Tú* (you said), which received the Best Director award at Cork International Film Festival 2020; *Everything I Do* (winner of Best Performer at Dublin Fringe Awards 2019); and *Recovery* (which received the 2018 Romilly Walton Masters award for experimental theatre). One Two One Two are committed to making challenging and heartfelt work with a spirit of adventure. Zoe is an associate artist with Pan Pan Theatre and One Two One Two are resident artists at Project Arts Centre, Dublin.


MARTIN SHARRY [VIEW PLAYOGRAPHY ENTRY »](#)

Martin lives on Inis Óírr. He has been involved in performance since completing a Masters in Drama and Theatre Studies at NUI Galway in 2008. He writes, directs, and performs. In 2012 he presented his one man show *I Am Martin Sharry* at Solstice, Cork and the Dublin Fringe Festival. *Marky Mac Sherry Tells It Like Is!* was a double nominee in the Fringe Awards, and continued his examination of the self but through a comic lens. *Playboyz*, inspired by Synge's *Playboy of the Western World*, premiered at the Dublin Theatre Festival 2017 with a sold-out run. It dealt with the inability to see other people. *Running + Walking* in the Phoenix Park followed in 2018. A scorched tree trunk that marked where a man was murdered, was the starting point for that story. In 2012 he was diagnosed as having Parkinson's. This news facilitates a wider appreciation of creativity. He recently received mentorship from poet Jessica Traynor via Arts Disability Ireland. Martin continues to write, albeit more and more slowly. He is currently working on an essay for Covid Funding. www.martinsharry.com

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THOMAS KILROY



Many plays begin with a question or questions. The dramatic action which follows is a kind of response to all this. In order to grow and spread its effects, all art is dependent upon human curiosity. Theatre is no different. The most familiar opening question in a play in the English language is that of *Hamlet*. 'Who's there?' are the words of one nervous sentry to another and they immediately capture the dangerous threats to the state in which the play is set. Shakespeare believed that the corruption of a leader corrupts the whole state. This is why the setting of a play is so important in Shakespeare. The setting is a crucial element of the writing.

One of the most extraordinary presentations of *Hamlet* that I've seen was Peter Brook's in the ramshackle building of Theatre des Bouffes du Nord in Paris in 1996. It is as if the building had been stripped to its bare bones, not unlike the process to which Brook was subjecting the play. He got rid of over half the text which was largely replaced by passages from the writings of some of his distinguished predecessors, all, like himself, theorists of staging, directors like Stanislavski, Meyerhold, Artaud, and others. He used a small team of barefoot actors from different countries, with different languages and he called the evening *Qui Est La?*, that essential question again. It was like being at a workshop or a rehearsal or something in between, with that question dominating everything else.

So, you could say, then, that one working definition of a play is that it's a stage presentation which first excites the curiosity of an audience and then goes on to satisfy or relieve it.

The first step in the staging of a play is the draping of the human figure, the putting on of clothes, the costuming of the actor. This leads to the creation of a hugely theatrical illusion, the illusion of identity. Who are these people? Perhaps, also, what are they doing? Where are they supposed to be? Here you have passed along to the next great illusion of theatre, the illusion of place: where are we? Where are they? What is the situation of these people? Sometimes we are told this immediately. Sometimes we have to discover it as we go along. The discovery process then becomes part of the play's action.

Place or space adds its own dynamic to the creation of a play. It may be anywhere. Or nowhere, like the 'empty space' of Peter Brook. Sometimes the place is dressed in such a fashion as to invoke a dominant image. The action of the play is identified, at least partially, by where it is set. In the Western tradition the most common use of stage space has been that of the dwelling place or home, the domus, indicating the importance of the family in Western culture. Our stories tend to be domestic. In the Irish theatre the choice is even narrower. So we have had the endless use of country kitchens in so many Irish plays, at least

until comparatively recent times. On the other hand, modern design gives the playwright a limitless range of stage settings and invites the writer to experiment with the form of the play to match the variety of its settings. There is even a greater choice of setting with the use of modern technology.

In the 1970s I wrote a play for the Abbey Theatre called *Talbot's Box* and we had a gifted designer, Wendy Shea, who was willing to try anything. The play called for a design which dominated the stage. It took the form of a huge box made of unfinished slats of timber. When closed, these slatted walls allowed light to seep out from within, suggesting a hidden life in there to the watching audience. When the box was opened, the play began; when it closed again the play had ended.

What was revealed in the opened box was a space of multiple purposes, indoor and outdoor, giving a freedom to bring about time changes in addition to movement from one place to another. The actors, too, were discovered within as the box opened; they stood about, ready to perform. All the props and costume changes needed in their performances were also in place in there; the machinery of the play, as it were, was entirely visible to the audience. Like every other feature of the box this was to draw attention to the play's essential, theatrical artifice. The first thing the audience sees on the stage is this mysterious wooden box; quite literally, a box of tricks.

The box came to me as an integral part of the play's writing, an image, a metaphor of closure, of entrapment, entombment. For me, it caught in emphatic fashion the savage control of the Catholic Church, imposed upon this man, Matt Talbot, through his demented, inhumane vision of Christianity that is at the centre of the play. The rough timber of the box comes from his work in the timber yards of Dublin. My Talbot is a man who loves timber, the touch and smell of it. He has a special feeling for the crucifixion of Christ because of his sense of the reality of crude timber that is hammered into the shape of the cross. In other words the box was not an added design feature to embellish the action. It was something, thematically integrated into the action played out before us, an essential part of the play's written structure.

In at least two later productions, to my knowledge, of *Talbot's Box*, the play was presented without the big box. In one of these I was asked permission about it beforehand and said, 'Sure. Try it out.' I am a great believer in the collaborative nature of theatre and have drawn heavily, in my time, on the inspiration of others, including that of the excellent director of this production of *Talbot's Box*. At the time, I knew it this was not right although it took a while for me to see that this production, despite some splendid details, was not of the play that I had written.

Play – to play, player, playwright, play-acting, plaything – the word has an extraordinary range of meanings. It goes from drama of high seriousness at one end, to child's play at the other, the child's innate capacity to invent games. All of it is an expression of the ludic, the human capacity to entertain itself or others.

There is another scale involving plays. Plays come in many shapes and sizes. There is a scale of stage representation from, at one end, naturalistic imitation of life as it actually is outside the theatre itself. This scale extends to the other end where you find plays of great artifice, sometimes plays which seem to have almost lost touch completely with everyday reality. The more the play is distanced from the action and speech of the everyday, the more theatrical it is. It is also true that, in general, the closer a work approaches the comic the more it displays theatrical artifice. The most extreme version of this is farce, a kind of play that has the perfect shape of a mathematical theorem. What makes it a farce is its logic and the fact that the logic is based upon a premise of absurdity. Absurdity is piled upon absurdity. It may not be too far from nightmare but it is potentially hilarious.

I've been coping with the pandemic by watching old Hollywood movies with my daughter and wife. This has included Frank Capra's production of that great 20th century farce, *Arsenic and Old Lace*. I also have an old, personal connection with this play. Over 50 years ago I was in the cast of a production of it by the Old Charter Players of Callan. What is interesting is that, like other farces, this one is actually about theatre itself among kindred matters. Its hero, Mortimer, is a New York drama critic. One of the tortures that he is subjected to is that he's forced to listen to an Irish-American policeman called O'Hara. O'Hara takes him through what sounds like an endless summary of the plot of a play that he, O'Hara, is trying to write. In his dashing in and out trying to prevent a catastrophe, Mortimer confuses the action of a Broadway play with the one he is in himself on our stage ('My God! – I'm still there... I know this isn't a nightmare, but what is it?'). What makes this bedlam acceptable is its opening premise that Mortimer's two elderly, angelic aunts are capable of being serial killers with their own private burial ground down in the cellar.

Samuel Beckett, who loved farce, would seem to have borrowed a joke from this play for his own *Waiting for Godot* which came over ten years after *Arsenic and Old Lace*. Both plays have comic battles in them with the trading of insults. The one dispatched by Mortimer's girlfriend Elaine towards Mortimer is the identical one hurled by Estragon at Vladimir. It is the most deadly weapon in a playwright's armoury, the word: 'Critic!'

THOMAS KILROY

ZOE NÍ RIORDÁIN



'Not everyone's an artist, but everyone's a fucking critic.' – Marcel Duchamp

As an artist, not an academic, I will avoid answering the question, and instead, offer some thoughts on what a play means to me.

My first memory of going to a play outside of school plays, was sitting in Christchurch Cathedral watching T.S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*. What I remember from that experience (I think I was eight or nine), was the whole cathedral turning bright red and the organ playing a deafening noise. It must have been when the murder happened. My other memory of that night was at the interval, seeing the couple that were sitting in front of us shuffle in their pew, and realising it was Nicole Kidman and Tom Cruise.

I'm not diminishing the words or wisdom of T.S. Eliot; he is one of my favourite poets today. But, I think this early experience has had a big influence on my work in theatre. I went to a lot of plays growing up. I was lucky to have a family member who is an actor, so I got the chance to go to the Gate, the Abbey, the Gaiety, and others from an early age. Maybe I was too young to understand any of the words and subtleties of the language, so instead, I concentrated on the atmosphere, the smell, the lights, and the other audience members.

Today, I am a so-called theatre-maker. I think this is because I don't write dialogue and the theatre I make doesn't have a traditional plot. I do have a secret wish to write a play before I die. I am building up to it.

I've always been interested in the spaces between language. This is because I am not a great communicator in my real life. Studying the work of Tom Murphy, Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams, Annie Baker, and Young Jean Lee, I hear the loudness of the silence – or lack thereof. I admire writers who can write text and subtext. My theatre work has this question at the centre of it. I am trying to get the point where I can comfortably write dialogue.

Sometimes I think of the reasons that I don't write plays. I am a songwriter, and often I write songs about a theme or a subject or a conversation. When I was in a band with my collaborator Maud Lee, we always talked about how difficult it was to talk between the songs. To come out of the heightened reality that exists in the music, and talk on a different level to the audience, sometimes felt insincere. Singing songs to people requires a suspension of disbelief, and to puncture that by speaking as yourself can prove very difficult. So, often that is why some bands don't speak between songs I think.

If my instinct is to begin the creative process by writing a song, then that presents a barrier. It creates a poetic layer that you have to pierce through with plain language. However, if we just view a play as a form of theatre, and not the centre around which everything else revolves, it frees us to create anything that is in our imagination.

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ZOE NÍ RIORDÁIN

I have always seen theatre as the ultimate form of expression. Everything I make has to be a celebration of the artform. That is my only guiding principle.

I think there are certain works of art that are referenced when talking about form. *Fountain* (readymade urinal) by Marcel Duchamp is a very common one. In music there is John Cage's *4'33"* and in theatre, Peter Handke's *Offending the Audience*. I think when I encountered these artworks, the overall influence they had was how central the audience is to theatre.

Even though Peter Handke wrote that in *Offending the Audience* he was 'using the theatre to protest against the theatre', I choose to see this piece as an ironic celebration of the form. It foregrounds the audience, making them subject, much like John Cage's four minutes and 33 seconds of 'silence'.

In my own work, I choose to make the audience make up half of the narrative. The performers watch them, they make eye contact, while drawing them into the secret world of the piece. I work to create parallel realities, layers of perception, almost like a 'super subtext'.

Recently, I watched a live stream of *The Approach* by Mark O'Rowe from the Project Arts Centre in Dublin. It is a play, made up of pure dialogue. The plot is roughly to do with three women remembering their past in slightly different ways through separate conversations. The only movement they make is to get up from their chair to exit, and walk to the chair to make an entrance into the scene. It is starkly anti-dramatic, much like Peter Handke's work.

Throughout the play, although I wasn't in the room, I felt close to the people talking. I was having deep thoughts about how life is a series of these kinds of conversations, and pretentious things like that. The subtext in this play was heavy and very sad to me. They don't stop talking. I thought Mark O'Rowe achieved something very moving in how the lack of silence expressed the longing of the characters so well.

I mention this recent play as a way to observe the relationship between language and the stage. In contrast with *Offending the Audience*, which ends in a list of insults in an attempt to draw attention to the artifice of language, *The Approach* is playing a different game with words. I am fascinated with both and I take hope from the continuing experimentation with dialogue and its importance to the form of theatre.

As I remember the deafening sound of the church organ and the excitement of the red lights and celebrities, I wonder about documentation. It is not possible to archive the visceral experience of a theatrical performance. We have scripts and reviews. I am a contemporary theatre-maker with an ambition to write dialogue that can be easily categorised as a play. However, in the meantime, I would like to concentrate more on the documentation of the work I am making now. If the idea is that it can be reproduced in the future.

ROSEMARY JENKINSON



A PLAY IS WORDS

What is a play literally? A written story simulating spoken word, designed for performance. The inherent contradiction in every play is that it's both literary and oral. Language should serve the story and tends to be wittier and more incisive, lyrical, rhythmic and turbo-charged than real life. If Bob Dylan can win the Nobel Prize in Literature for his song lyrics, then I can win the Mercury Music Prize since there's music in dialogue and even more melody in monologue.

A play must contain words, otherwise it's mime or a music/dance performance. It's a verbal stage-strut and I'd much rather it had its own syntax and truth than try to reproduce everyday conversation. My aim is mimicry rather than replication. No matter how diverse my characters are, they will all have a trace of my own speech patterns and word selections. Verbatim plays may purport to be closer to real time language but it's deceptive as the editing process bends reality out of shape, making dialogue sound surreal and stylised. I like to whip my plays more brutally into shape than a dominatrix whips her sex slaves. The sentences are leaner than a starved pig and cleaner than bones stripped by a vulture.

A line should crackle like popping candy in an actor's mouth. This is all the more true for Irish playwrights who write Syngelish instead of English. I call it thea-trick-ality, as it has the appearance of speech with none of the associated longeurs or banality. Of course, playwrights use speech fillers to echo naturalism but with the right beats and pauses they function as poetry. A great one-liner is the snowflake in the snow, the seed in the sunflower and the petal in the blossom. Placement is key and, on the rare occasions an actor transposes words, the effect can be disastrously discordant like Eric Morecambe's piano sketch where he's 'playing all the right notes, but not necessarily in the right order.'

What is a play? A play is the unsayable. It's a public outpouring of truths. If you were to voice the opinions of your characters yourself, the Twitter mob would murder you. Every play is a form of direct action. It's a confrontation; a confrontation between characters and between conflicting ideas. It's a stone through stained glass, it's a velvet-lined cosh on the head. And the harder your statements are, the funnier they must be. There's a quote attributed to both Wilde and Shaw that says, 'If you want to tell people the truth, make them laugh, otherwise they'll kill you.' I also love Dario Fo's view that 'comedy makes the subversion of the existing state of affairs possible.'

A play makes unpalatable truths palatable through playfulness. The Oxford Dictionary's definition of the verb 'play' is to 'engage in activity for enjoyment and

recreation rather than a serious or practical purpose', but plays use characterisation and narrative to make you believe they're entertainment when their practical purpose is lurking underneath. I write delicious candy-coated revolution. To return to Dario Fo, 'Every artistic expression is either influenced by or adds something to politics'.

Any new play, even if it's historical, should have contemporary relevance. A truly great play is an illumination of the political ethers and miasmas of our time and, when it works, it has the brief overarching immensity of a light-filled rainbow before it disappears. George Bernard Shaw said, 'The secret to success is to offend the greatest number of people', and, like him, I believe that shocking people through theatre is necessary for the progress of society. Although I've said that every play should be contemporary, the ghosts of the past are hovering over my desk as I write and whispering into my ear. 'In any play,' wrote Stewart Parker, 'ancestral voices prophesy and bicker, and the ghosts of your own time and birthplace wrestle and dance'.

Does a play have to be live? Absolutely not. It doesn't have to be performed live as, when it's read, it is live in the mind. I've read more plays than I've seen and find reading much more stimulating for the imagination than performance. Can a digital play be considered a play? Absolutely, as long as it's filmed in a theatre space. Even as I write the words 'theatre space' I immediately think of non-traditional theatre spaces, so one stipulation would be for a play to be filmed in one location. Few dictionary definitions of a play make specific mention of liveness but, notably, the Oxford Dictionary defines it as 'a dramatic work for the stage or to be broadcast', so it's very clear that a play can be filmed.

I've been commissioned to write a play for filming this spring and my mission is to have it included in *Playography/Ireland*. I won't write it differently than I would for the theatre and I believe plays performed digitally from spring 2020 to autumn 2021 should be recorded for posterity, as a void in the archives implies that none of us wrote or produced any plays during the pandemic. Plays created during lockdown need to be celebrated, not ignored or deemed unworthy just because of an outmoded prescriptive view of what a play is. A play should never be too tightly categorized or put in a box – unless it's a black box of course! If the pre-established notion of a play precludes it from being online, then that notion has become a sacred cow and, like all sacred cows, it must be slaughtered.

I want more plays to be filmed. I grew up in the seventies and eighties when *Play for Today* was prominent on the BBC with classics like *Abigail's Party*; my first introduction to *Macbeth* was via the film of the RSC production with a turbaned Judi Dench. The fact that studio sitcom has survived throughout the years proves there is a market for filmed plays. Some of the greatest films ever like *Reservoir Dogs* and *Sunset Boulevard* are virtually one-location stage plays.

Is a play made or written? The word playwright is derived from the Old English *whyrtā* – ‘maker’ – which means I’m a maker already, so I don’t see the need to call myself a theatre-maker. I appreciate that the term theatre-maker is an attempt to disrupt the directorial hierarchy, but I can’t help feeling it’s also been invented to diminish the playwright’s role and, as I have a high bullshit sensor, the provocation I want to pose in return is this: What is a theatre-maker?

It’s hard to find the term online. Wiktionary calls it: a theatrical producer, director, writer or impresario. Perhaps I should coin my own term just to prove my on-trend modernising credentials – from now on, call me a play builder or a scene scripter. I totally understand that if an artist combines directing/producing/performing with writing, they might want to be called a theatre maker, but the issue I have is with theatre-makers putting the performance above the text in importance. I believe they are equally important.

In my experience, a theatre-maker is often a director with a strong vision who may contribute text but isn’t a good enough playwright to write a full play. I agree a director deserves credit for devising shows and coming up with an overall creative plan, but, without a playwright’s strong authorial voice, a play might be cool and zeitgeisty but will inevitably be flimsy. The point is that a scripted play by a playwright is already a shared piece of art, a collaboration. A play shares the DNA of the director, dramaturg and actors through workshops and readings. Sometimes, a play passes through more hands than a consignment of cocaine and, if the playwright doesn’t watch out, it can be left just as adulterated.

Talking of DNA, some writers say they neither write nor make a play, but give birth to one. However, if that’s true, I dump mine in the orphanage as soon as it’s born and start procreating for the next one.

To me, a play is for performance, but the minute the performance is over, the play becomes literature. I write for a live audience as much as for an armchair audience and the best thing about the latter is that it can’t confuse the flaws in a production for flaws in the play. Back in the 1830s, bad reviews from critics (or reviews from bad critics) prompted Alfred de Musset to devise ‘un spectacle dans un fauteuil’ – ‘a show in an armchair’ – consisting of a collection of plays designed solely to be read. It was a clever move as his new plays were brilliantly received.

What else is a play? An accidental creation from coincidental thoughts. Edward Albee said, ‘Creativity is magic. Don’t look at it too closely.’ A play is so magical it can’t be taught. I don’t teach playwriting because I agree with the George Bernard Shaw quote, ‘If you can’t write a play without being taught – don’t,’ but instead I run sessions on what playwriting means to me.

*“A play is the unsayable. It’s a public
outpouring of truths.”*

ROSEMARY JENKINSON

A play is a unique piece of art made by a maverick. I don't know of any playwrights who have formed a movement. To be honest, the only movement playwrights have in common is a bowel movement on opening night. A play is primarily about hearing, not seeing; more about the auditory than the visual. During the process of writing a play, I need to socialise and hear the snap of dialogue to keep reminding myself of its liveliness. Writing prose is an introspective act; writing a play is extrospective.

A play is wrongly considered a lesser artform than a novel when it's only a shorter artform. I sometimes think of Owen McCafferty telling me how delighted he was to win an *Evening Standard* Award for *Scenes from the Big Picture* only for his less than enthused father-in-law to dampen his achievement with, 'Good. Maybe you can go on and write a book now.' I write short stories and, to me, a play is comparable to a collection of interlocking short stories. Each scene is as self-contained and open-ended as a short story. The brevity of both forms lets the imagination soar.

Is a play definable? It's experimental and ineffably indefinable. Words should pour from a playwright like a disgorged sunbeam. A play takes its influences from all art form and, recently, I've been inspired by John Cage who wrote a musical composition, *As Slow As Possible*, that lasts for 639 years with the next chord change scheduled for 2022. In this vein, I've decided to write my own play called *Temporarily Eternal* that will last 2000 years. Here is the first word and I will release the next word in January 2023. I'd better add that it's a satire.

Tarragon I...

ROSEMARY JENKINSON

MARTIN SHARRY



I haven't the wherewithal to harness an argument in order to overhaul any inherited ideas. Instead, I offer a loose assemblage of associating thoughts, provoked by the question and invitation.

Bruce Naumann declared that art was anything that he made in his shed. I enjoy the freedom in his definition and I appreciate the work enabled by such liberation.

A play is bound by the terms and conditions of its construction. People in space/time. (people/space/time?) A play is what survives of theatre. The porous fourth wall distracts us from seeing all the other walls, floors, and ceilings. The overheads and bottom-lines are front and centre in shaping a culture in which plays are received.

A robin keeps flying into the window, the new double glazed one into the kitchen. I worry about the unintentional self-harm, it repeats and I get angry at its stupidity. I search Google, it appears that the male sees his reflection in the window and thinks it is a rival trying to usurp his territory. He flies at the window to try and make the rival leave. I relax.

Dr Daniel J. Siegel talks of 'presence' that allows integration. Being with trauma and not overidentifying with your story. Without presence and integration, everything is like soup. The state of being present and being able to integrate difficult things that happened, is likened to salad. A play can create the conditions to go some way towards this nutritious reversal.

A play is shared finitude. It involves the coordination of implicit and explicit agreements. Situation and behaviour. We are conscious of the limits in expression and language. There is space around things. Time happens. Things end. Thank God. Negative Capability, end of.

This distance offers potential relief from the official commissions and the perpetual deniability. And better still, it seems to be an ideal forum for interrogating accountability. I'm reminded of Vicky Phelan identifying 'accountability, action and change' as missing from political culture. All advertised as possible ingredients for a play. These stories only process emotion and might soothe an annoyed conscience.

Stories sell plays. There are online classes that teach people the right moment and way to laugh when watching plays by Beckett. A play is a good place for walking backwards à la Diogenes. This ticks the box for immeasurable outcomes on funding applications. Plays are laughably pathetic in their effort to simulate reality. This can be used for comedy or tragedy.

A play is the thing to catch a king. We're a great little country. A play can reveal the lies we tell ourselves. Professor Timothy Snyder, speaking on Trump, says fascism wants to maintain the 'big lie'. In relation to the Mother and Baby Homes Report, TD Catherine Connolly rejects the 'prevailing narrative (is) that we're all in this together'. Perhaps some of us are in some play whereby we've been schooled into suspending disbelief. Occasionally there are outbreaks of reason and justice.

Plays are somatic, they are made of bodies in space, regardless of whether they open their mouth or not. Play helps the brain to grow. Liveness is not guaranteed by being live.

Each morning a Blackbird sings in the garden. The postman arrives at about 11 o'clock, he comments on the weather, 'it's not too bad'. He brings the same postcard from my brother, for five days in a row. He asks me if we're actors in some play. I say no, but we might be characters. Have you seen your man's shed? Steve Bruce?

I want to liberate the process of a play from the pressure of market forces. Would Croke Park work without a sliotar or a football? Maybe reframing can help reappropriate of the play. John Cage defined music as the production of sound. This inspires the definition of a play as the production of community. Where two or three are gathered in theatre's name, theatre is among them.

MARTIN SHARRY

VERONICA COBURN



*Inside a theatre. Or a public square. Or a shipping container.
A room above a pub. A hairdressing salon after hours, all empty chairs,
stagnant air, no swivel and swing.*

I've watched three Shakespeare plays in one day in a purpose-built temporary theatre at King's Cross St. Pancras, three Tom Murphy plays in The Gaiety Theatre in Dublin in another single day theatrical odyssey, and a cracking production of *Blue/Orange* in the subterranean world that is the Peacock Theatre. I've been asked to sit in a wheelchair and wear a blindfold so that I could be wheeled into a performance environment in Smock Alley. I've downed a shot of vodka at 10am (I don't like vodka), whilst sitting in a booth opposite an actor before dancing with him to I don't remember what song. I've been filmed so that I become the performance for the next audience member. And I've sat in a bank of seats in a shopping centre in Toronto listening to a conversation through headphones staring all the while at passers-by wondering who I am listening to?

PROVOCATEUR: What is a play? I think what's interesting is why the question is being asked. When did the idea of what is or isn't a play become contentious? Perhaps it became contentious when the borders started to change. For so long it was perfectly clear what a play was and who was allowed to write one. The significant word in the last sentence is 'write'. Plays were written. Written down. Usually before production. By a playwright. Usually a man. So far, so good. So straightforward. And there were recognisable features, stage directions helpfully written in italics, names of characters, mostly men, to the left so that everyone knew who was speaking because people always speak in plays, don't they? And, of course, there is always dialogue, what the characters say because that's how the story is told. Through dialogue. Isn't it?

But then everything got a bit messy. A bit unruly. The word 'devising' started to appear. What did that mean? And what's the difference between a 'play' and a 'piece of theatre' And what of theatre that doesn't use words? And now there's theatre that doesn't have actors. And when did the idea of a 'written' play become retro, that's the polite word, the impolite possibilities include old-fashioned, uninteresting, outmoded, irrelevant, boring, and out of date?

Perhaps the question we should be considering is not what is a play but what is a play now. In focussing on the present and current practice we can look for commonalities rather than difference. Seek to include rather than exclude. Build on what a play is rather than how it might deviate from a set idea of what it should be. Prioritise purpose and form over characteristics. Perhaps this is our Duchamp moment. We are all staring at a theatrical toilet bowl and only some people see a fountain.

Let me suggest the following definition.

play

theatre

1. a constructed ritual that communicates something worth communicating, pretence its form

Theatre is a giant game of pretend. It is 'mammies and daddies' for adults, 'playing shop', 'teaching school', it is 'superheroes and villains'. The theatre, in all its historical and contemporary manifestations, is the village fire where we gather to tell stories, to while away the dark nights, to impart knowledge that is useful to us, or precious to us, to tease out the things that trouble us, and to mark what has happened to us as we think forward and imagine what we hope or fear will come to pass.

A traditional theatre. A stage. An auditorium with red plush seats. The floor is not sticky because of the necessity to keep the institution afloat via late night gigs. A playwright enters the stage.

Adjust your expectations. The playwright is a woman. Expectations based on history dictate how we think a 'play' should present and what or who a 'playwright' is. But times have changed.

Act One

An alleyway. A group of people, the audience, gather round a bed. The bed is roughly made. Personal items lie scattered about. There is a chart, a large diagram, hung on one of the alleyway's walls. A woman, the woman who owns the bed, welcomes the audience.

Or Act One

A theatre. A large model of a town can be seen. Behind it a screen.

Or This Act One

Lights up. Empty stage. Beat. A person runs from left to right. Beat. A different person runs from right to left.

The last example, 'Or This Act One', is the opening of Barabbas' *Out The Back Door*, produced in 1997 in The Ark. It was a show of no words. A play script exists. It comprises details of the overall structure of the show, the exploration of imagination in relation to space, sitting on a rooftop is more conducive to creative thought than the kitchen table at mealtimes. Action comprising physical sequences, order and speed of running, object manipulation, so many shoals of fish, moments of interaction, gestures, touch, looks, and moments of stillness, are

all notated. And when words proved cumbersome there are pictures. Sketches. Line drawings. The purpose to communicate the form and purpose of each scene within the overall context of the piece. Three years earlier, in 1994, Barabbas received Arts Council commissioning funding to 'write' a new work. That work, *Sick Dying Dead Buried Out*, another show with no words, premiered in Project Arts Centre, the one with the holes in the roof, in 1995. It is credited as being 'devised and written by the Company'. A play script exists notating aesthetic, form, and content. We have always considered The Arts Council's decision to grant 'commissioning' funding to a company like Barabbas producing the sort of work we were producing at the time as a really important political act. A political act that said this is writing. A necessary political act in response to the shifting of borders.

The first example of a play opening above, 'Act One', is my imagining of how Veronica Dyas' *In My Bed*, which premiered in 2011, might begin. If you want to see how it actually begins check out the script. It's listed on PLAYOGRAPHYIreland. Interestingly, Veronica Dyas, the playwright, adds the following note: 'In collaboration with Niamh Burke Kennedy'.

I love this detail and it's what makes me certain that diversity of thought is what is needed in how we collate and record and share contemporary theatre work. Rather than focus on imagining parameters for what a play is let's be open and curious about exploring the wonderful liminal space at the edges of our practice.

The second play opening, 'Or Act One', is my imagining of how *Zvizdal* by Belgian company Berlin begins. It was presented as part of Dublin Theatre Festival in 2016. It explores the life of Pétro and Nadia Lubenoc, a couple who refused to leave their home in the exclusion zone around Chernobyl. Actors did not pretend to be Pétro and Nadia Lubenoc in *Zvizdal*. Actors did not tell the audience about them. The tools of theatrical telling were film and miniature landscape. There was some debate at the time if it was, in fact, theatre, with some suggestion that it would be more correct to categorise it as a film.

I tend to be philosophical around such conversations. I think the salient opinion is that of the artist. Every other opinion is subjective and for every person who passionately declares that a piece of work is 'not theatre' there will an equally passionate response proclaiming that it is. What is important is the artist's intent. In simple terms, if someone tells me that they have made a piece of theatre I am inclined to believe them. It is then up to me to decipher my response.

Let me develop my proposed definition.

play

noun

1. a play, a happening in a theatrical space, formal or found, a constructed ritual that communicates something worth communicating, pretence its form
2. a play, as in a play text, a document detailing the important information about a particular piece of theatre to facilitate the enactment, in the case of a first production, or re-enactment at a date beyond the original production of the public ritual

This definition is inclusive of contemporary form and helps us to move on from the narrow idea of a 'play' as being something that only features spoken text, is always 'written' by one person, a 'playwright', and always before the inaugural production. It was the lovely Gavin Kostick who pointed out to me that a 'wright' is a maker or builder, so a playwright is simply a maker or builder of plays. Our primary tools are our hearts and intellects, our psychologies, our minds, our physical selves, and, yes, pens and keyboards, but also architecture and space and those with whom we collaborate.

I think there is a difference between a document and a play text. I have chosen to use the term, 'play text', rather than 'script' or any other variation as, for me, it is more open and inclusive. 'Play' sustains the connection to what has come before whilst also holding within it, new ways of thinking. And a 'text' is, according to the online dictionary, written or printed material that simply conveys the authentic and primary form of a particular work. A document, I would suggest, marks something that has happened. An event is documented. Whereas the purpose of the play text is to enable enactment or re-enactment. It's a question of tense. A document is a record of the past whereas a play text is about the future. Given time I think we, as a community, will become better at notating and recording and encountering diverse play texts. I look forward to a time when a first day of rehearsal read-through in a subsequent production of an original work might be dominated by detailed description of location or space, notated physical action, images and artistic intent rather than spoken words.

Don't misunderstand. I bear the spoken word no ill will. I adore words. I have long since passed the point in my practice when they did not feature in my work. I am all about the words. My policy of inclusion is not mono-directional. I don't just embrace that gorgeous not-quite-there space at the edges, all murk and silence and mist, I luxuriate in the richness of the densely populated middle. I believe in building on what has gone before. I believe in co-existence. Without a middle, edges do not exist. I believe in the value of a rich and layered ecology.

I am responsible for two playwriting initiatives. Tenderfoot @ The Civic Theatre and ARTiculate under the auspices of Youth Theatre Ireland. Both programmes develop young artistic voices, the former caters for Transition Year students, 15-

16 years of age, and the latter caters for young adults, 18+. Tenderfoot is, if you like, for young people who haven't as yet engaged with youth theatre, and ARTiculate is for those who have. Tenderfoot produces plays written by young people to a peer audience. ARTiculate seeks to develop the capability of young adult playwrights with a view to increasing the capacity of young adult audiences. Both programmes align with contemporary theatre practice and utilise a philosophy of apprenticeship and mentorship. Our young writers learn by doing, they learn by writing plays, under the guidance of professional playwrights. Tenderfoot has just completed its 14th iteration and ARTiculate's first iteration completed in December 2020. To date, across the two programmes, 296 young people have written original plays. I am interested to observe that the younger writers, those who are 15-16 years old with less experience of theatre, generally speaking, write what one might term 'traditional plays'. Having just completed the first ARTiculate programme it is interesting to note the slightly older and more theatrically experienced playwrights are bolder in their approach to content and form.

Underpinning both programmes is a respect for the integrity of the individual writer and an understanding of the creative process. We encourage our young playwrights to value their voice, to understand the collegial nature of a creative room, to gain experience of developing their work in collaboration with others, and to know that they always retain full ownership of their creative output.

In many ways we were ahead of our time in Barabbas. In the very early 90s Raymond Keane, Mikel Murfi, and I met every morning, five days a week, for a year to figure out what sort of theatre we wanted to make. We seeded three shows in that time: *Come Down From The Mountain John Clown, John Clown*; *Half Eight Mass of a Tuesday*; and an idea for a highly physical production of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* in collaboration with Gerry Stembridge. We launched the company a year later and by then had put in place an agreement to cover intellectual copyright. The intellectual copyright for all work collectively devised, we devised and performed in all our early work, was shared equally between the three of us with the work credited as being 'devised and written by the Company'.

I do not suggest that what we did in Barabbas is the basis of any universal practice. What we did in Barabbas was right for us. I would suggest, however, that clarity is universally useful. Think ahead. Consider how you work and make agreements that are right for you.

As play texts change and develop in response to new practice so must our thinking in relation to intellectual copyright. Again, I shy away from a one size fits all model. I prefer principles to rules. They are more elastic. More fit for purpose. The current debate on whether actresses and actors are interpretive or creative artists is too restrictive. I don't know that binaries ever work. What of all that

*“a ‘wright’ is a maker or builder,
so a playwright is simply a maker
or builder of plays.”*

VERONICA COBURN

space between? To my mind actresses and actors are artists capable of both interpretation and creation. And to my mind a writer is no different.

In the latter years of my time with Barabbas I became more interested in writing independently. By then the company had changed as had how we worked and so our original agreements on intellectual copyright were no longer appropriate for all contexts. They had to change and adapt to match our practice.

Since leaving Barabbas I have written 19 plays, nine for theatre and ten for radio. Some were written at my desk, some were written at my desk following a collaborative process, and some were written at my desk following a longitudinal engagement with a specific community. I hold intellectual copyright on all my work. I credit collaborative processes where appropriate.

Clarity is key. Make the agreement that is right for you, your project, your company. And walk away if what is offered is not acceptable to you.

As a society we are used to not saying what we mean. And as a sector the balance of power makes it difficult to ask for what we want. That's why theatre is so important. It is where we can say the hard-to-say, the as yet unsaid, the things that we need to say again and again and again because we never learn, and the theatre is where we can contemplate saying those things that feel unsayable. We are growing up. Societally. As a sector. As artists. Let us take the courage we display in our work and apply it to our professional lives. Claim the written space for the work we believe in. Make it up if it doesn't already exist. Speak out about how we want things to be. Let us no longer be afraid to say what it is we want.

VERONICA COBURN

PHILLIP McMAHON



On the 20th anniversary of the excellent PLAYOGRAPHY/Ireland resource, Irish Theatre Institute pose the question, What is a play?

It's a mischievous question, in that it's unanswerable, and yet in knowingly asking the unanswerable question ITI invite us to share our own experiences, to tussle with our own answers, to paint our own meaning.

Five terrific artists were asked this question and I was lucky enough to read their responses before writing these words. You too will have read the pieces by Veronica Coburn, Rosemary Jenkinson, Thomas Kilroy, Zoe Ní Riordáin, and Martin Sharry. I found their insights intriguing, moving, informative, and thought provoking. It's no coincidence that these people make great theatre.

Perhaps the question is not really, *what is a play?* But rather, what is a play *to me?*

It's a question I've not asked myself until now. The chaotic hamster wheel of The Hustle plus commission commitments plus production cycles has meant that there's been little time to stop and reflect. Keeping the head above water has been something of a full time gig. It took a global pandemic to force a pause, and now in that pause, I find myself asking what *everything* is to me.

So forgive the introspection – it's just where I'm at.

Until I joined Dublin Youth Theatre at fifteen, I had never seen a play. I'm not entirely sure I even knew that theatre existed. I had read Willy Russell's *Our Day Out* for the Junior Certificate, but the teacher didn't mention that the text could be experienced live or in any other way beyond our rowdy class of boys taking a line each and passing the baton without regard for scene, character, or story. Let's just say the magic of theatre was yet to present itself.

Youth theatre changed all that – in fact, youth theatre changed *everything*. The first play I saw live was a Dublin Youth Theatre production of the Brecht, Weill, and Hauptmann musical comedy *Happy End* at Project Arts Centre. The outrageously energetic company of teenagers (all older than me) were singing, acting, and dancing for their lives. I didn't have a clue what was going on. I had no frame of reference for what I was looking at but there was magic in that dingy room – and under electric light in a black box theatre the mysterious promise of possibility presented itself.

In truth, I would feel locked out of plays for a long time. I didn't get to study them, I couldn't afford to see them, and the ones that I did see didn't reflect my life. Talking about class and inequality – in theatre and wider society – can make some feel uncomfortable, but we live in a time where there is an appetite to fix broken systems. I talk about inequality knowing that so many are advocating

for change, and that change is possible and is happening. That said, barriers to education and meaningful access points to the arts continue to be substantial challenges for our industry and both were huge obstacles in my life.

To bring it back to a play – enter *King Lear*. He was on the Honours English syllabus for my Leaving Cert year and I was determined to do the Honours paper. As a teenager I was obsessed with reading and had a passion for creative writing. The problem was that our working class comprehensive didn't offer an honours syllabus. We were expected to be Gnáthleibhéal, at best. We were being prepped to take up a trade if we were lucky, or to stand in the dole queue if we were not. But being stubborn, I insisted on doing the higher level exam and with some back-up from my parents I was eventually accommodated. But there was a caveat: I'd have to teach myself the honours syllabus in the back corner of the class room, unassisted, while the rest of the class learned and studied for an entirely different exam. So I did. I shouldn't have had to, but I did. I studied and fought with *King Lear* like I was a character in the play itself, and in the end I felt the broken King's isolation on a deeper level than most. And then I sat the paper. But this isn't like the movies. I did not overcome in spite of the odds. I did not ace the exam. I did not go to college.

This didn't stop me but it almost did. The plays, the theatre, kept calling me back, and so I beat my own path and found a different route. But it would be close to a decade before I would write again.

***'A truly great play is an illumination of the political ethers and miasmas of our time and, when it works, it has the brief overarching immensity of a light-filled rainbow before it disappears.'* – Rosemary Jenkinson**

Plays are emotional messy things. They are deeply personal and political as a result. I have fought with plays, raged at them, hated them. They have got me down, put me in my place, made me feel less than. But more often they have been like oxygen or lifeblood to me. They've given me voice and given *mine* voice through me. They have helped me to understand myself and the world around me and helped me, my collaborators, and our audiences, to build value systems together. Equality, social equity, fairness – our ideals were fostered and nurtured under electric light while actors were interpreting words. Sometimes I was the audience member, once or twice I was the actor, the odd time I was lucky enough to be the director, and on some very meaningful occasions I was the playwright.

Great Plays take us somewhere, they help us to see the world from a new perspective, they deepen or shift our understanding of ourselves, and they reflect ourselves back at ourselves so that we might inch closer to solving the riddle of who we are. The *Really* Great Plays spit us out of the theatre and make us want to change the fucking world.

***'I have always seen theatre as the ultimate form of expression. Everything I make has to be a celebration of the art form. That is my only guiding principle.'* – Zoe Ní Riordáin**

I began writing plays around 2006 out of necessity. It was becoming clear that if I wanted to sustain a 'career' in theatre I would have to do more than audition twice a year. I wrote my first play *Danny & Chantelle (still here)* for Dublin Fringe in 2006 – it was about two young people from Ballymun who adventure through Dublin's nightlife sampling all the vices the city has to offer, discovering new people, new worlds, and ultimately themselves as the sun rises over the boardwalk and the River Liffey. My collaborators and I were determined to tell our own stories on our own terms. We were talking about youth culture, found family, sexuality and working class Dublin, all to a rave soundtrack. With that production, we no longer felt locked out of the theatre party, or rather, we'd stopped waiting to be invited – we were giving the middle finger and making our own party. It was a magic time. The play won a prize, I found my tribe, THISISPOPBABY was born, and the whole affair got my parents off my back for a little while longer.

***'...a "wright" is a maker or builder so a playwright is simply a maker or builder of plays. Our primary tools are our hearts and intellects, our psychologies, our minds, our physical selves, and, yes, pens and keyboards, but also architecture and space and those with whom we collaborate.'* – Veronica Coburn**

Thankfully my parents weren't pushy when it came to career. As long as you were working and self-sufficient my father was, for all intents and purposes, follow-your-dreams adjacent. He would make vague noises about acquiring a trade to fall back on, but his heart wasn't in it. He had built a life based on no plan and a sense of adventure so he was open to his kids following in his footsteps.

But I was tickled when I learned that plays are literally *wrought* by playwrights. It explained the pain, for one, but it also meant that I had accidentally gone and gotten myself a trade after all. But rather than falling back on it I was being propelled forward by it, from play to play, adventure to adventure.

***'I think what's interesting is why the question is being asked. When did the idea of what is or isn't a play become contentious? Perhaps it became contentious when the borders started to change. For so long it was perfectly clear what a play was and who was allowed to write one.'* – Veronica Coburn**

Perhaps the question is not, *what is a play?* Nor, *what is a play to me?* But rather, *what can a play be?*

There is no mystery in a play. Theatre should be for everyone. Each play is simply an invitation to view the world from a particular angle. There's a lot to be said

for seeing the world from someone else's point of view, for walking in someone else's shoes. Theatre then can be a powerful unifying medium in an increasingly divided world. But only if everyone has access to it. We must kick down the doors and blast off the barriers – real or perceived. Everyone in our society should be able to access theatre. Nobody should feel locked out of plays. And the form itself should be, it is, elastic enough to accommodate an infinite amount of stories, communities, forms and viewpoints.

Great Plays happen when playwrights and theatre artists are supported. We must continue to build and rebuild the systemic scaffolding to support playwrights of all backgrounds, genders, and ages to help them to achieve their full potential. It sounds simple, but if we don't support and encourage playwrights, creating the conditions for them to truly flourish, then we must lower our expectations about the *Next Great Play*.

I'm personally not ready to lower my expectations. I believe that playwrights, artists, and play-makers play a vital role in what happens next: by helping us to make sense of this confusing time, by pushing buttons and questioning our flawed systems, by creating the space for us to grieve, by bringing us together to regroup and rebuild – by offering us hope.

'John Cage defined music as the production of sound. This inspires the definition of a play as the production of community. Where two or three are gathered in theatre's name, theatre is among them.' – Martin Sharry

A theatre is a town hall. It's an analogue communal space where we make social contracts and create value systems together. A theatre is a community centre – essential and necessary. We need them more than ever. In our hyper-connected turbo-technological world, opportunity knocks for plays. Plays can be a refuge, a meditation, a purge – or a simply a wild and cathartic exchange between actor and audience. Plays are a live conversation between artist and citizen, artist and artist, citizen and citizen. A robust dialogue that is increasingly valuable amidst the chaos of our times.

That conversation can be noisily interrupted from time to time by anything from rejection (and repeat rejection) to that frustratingly timed three-star review. But artists, playwrights, you know your mettle. You know your worth is not tied up in submissions and application forms. Your stars are not committed to print. You've gone through too much shit for that to be true. You've sacrificed too much to simply be in the arena. Your stars are out in the world. They are in rehearsal rooms, workshop spaces, auditoriums, and theatres. They are nailing a punchline, getting eleven characters to talk in one scene, moving the audience to tears,

working with Barbara Brennan, causing an audience member to storm out in disgust – or simply getting a note from a theatre-goer to say that they had a great night out. Your stars are incremental, stardust gathered over years. A life in the theatre, of play-making, is one very long and fabulous conversation with a couple of opening nights in between.

‘Many plays begin with a question or questions. The dramatic action which follows is a kind of response to all this. In order to grow and spread its effects, all art is dependent upon human curiosity.’ – Thomas Kilroy

What is a play?

In the end, plays are just plays. They are just words on a page. They are merely a proposition, a question in and of themselves. The rest is up to us. It’s up to us to impose our own meaning, to interpret them fiercely, to transform them soulfully, to receive them openly – to shower them in glitter and electric light and then change the fucking world with them.

PHILLIP McMAHON

ABOUT

IRISH THEATRE INSTITUTE

Irish Theatre Institute (ITI) is a resource organisation that nurtures, promotes and drives the ambition of Irish theatre makers and Irish theatre, from its grassroots beginnings to its presentation on the world stage. We seek to maximise creative opportunities and resources for performing artists and producers across theatre and dance in an all Ireland and international context.

PLAYOGRAPHY*Ireland*

PLAYOGRAPHY*Ireland* comprises two comprehensive online searchable databases: Irish Playography (all new professionally produced Irish plays written in English since the formation of the Abbey, Ireland's National Theatre, in 1904) and Playography na Gaeilge (all new plays written and produced in the Irish language since 1901). Each play listing contains a playwright biography, synopsis, cast size, creative and production team for the premiere production, date and location of the first performance and much more.

PLAYOGRAPHY*Ireland* not only defines the Irish theatrical repertoire for the first time but also aims to revitalise that repertoire by reintroducing many lost scripts and providing a gateway for locating and clearing rights for a very large number of existing scripts. We are delighted to receive information from users where our own research has been unable to locate details on the holder of a play's rights. As PLAYOGRAPHY*Ireland* allows writers to attach downloadable versions of their unpublished plays to the database, it also acts as an online script repository.

Irish Playography was launched in three phases: Phase I (1975–2003) following two and half years of extensive research; then Phase II (1950–2005) and finally Phase III (1904–1949) in July 2006. This database is updated on an on-going basis as each new Irish play written in English is premiered. [Explore the Database »](#)

Playography na Gaeilge was launched in two phases: Phase I (1975–2009) in April 2010, and Phase II (1901–1974) in May 2011. This database is also updated on an ongoing basis. [Explore the Database »](#)

*“Where two or three are gathered in theatre’s
name, theatre is among them.”*

MARTIN SHARRY

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WHAT IS A PLAY? PUBLICATION

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Proof-reader: Emer McHugh

Publication Design: Alphabet Soup

WHAT IS A PLAY? SYMPOSIUM 4TH AND 5TH NOVEMBER 2021

Keynote Speaker: Mark Ravenhill

Digital Producer: Noelia Ruiz

Full programme available on irishtheatreinstitute.ie/event/symposium-what-is-play

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THANK YOU

Thank you to everyone who has worked on the PLAYOGRAPHY/Ireland Project over the years, including: Playography Editors/Directors (Claire Keogh, Alan O'Riordan, Caroline Williams, Loughlin Deegan), Playography na Gaeilge Editors (Nóra de Buiteléir, Anna Bale, Pádraig Ó Siadhail) and former Playography Researchers and members of Advisory Panels (Ben Barnes, Ophelia Byrne, Jen Coppinger, Peter Crawley, Frances Cullen, Deirdre Davitt, Loughlin Deegan, Miche Doherty, Phelim Donlon, John Fairleigh, Christopher Fitz-Simon, Maria Fleming, Garry Hynes, Gavin Kostick, Patrick Leech, Eleanor Methven, Nick McGinley, Nicola Morris, David Mount, Gina Moxley, Tony Ó Dálaigh, Jody O'Neill, and Ted Sheehy.) To all current and previous members of the Irish Theatre Institute board of directors, especially Catriona Crowe, Damian Downes, Margaret Kelleher, Fintan O'Toole, and Chris Morash. To Barry Houlihan, Mark O'Rowe, and Dylan Tighe. To Ciaran Burke, Marie Redmond, and Patricia Quinn.

Published by Irish Theatre Institute in November 2021

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FUNDERS

Irish Theatre Institute is core funded by the Arts Council/An Chomhairle Ealaíon, with project funding from Culture Ireland, The Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media, Foras na Gaeilge and Rethink Ireland.



IRISH THEATRE INSTITUTE

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PLAYOGRAPHY*Ireland*

A comprehensive database of new Irish plays produced professionally since 1904



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