The Body, the Dance, and the Voice: Asserting the Celtic Identity in Contemporary Irish Drama

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Abstract: Throughout the nineteenth century the Irish body was excluded, distorted, deprived of its organic, plastic, verbal, and linguistic function onstage and offstage. Contemporary Irish drama seeks to stage the spectacle of this infected, tormented, and famished Irish flesh which internalized physical and historical stigmas that have been transposed into types and stereotypes onstage. Contemporary Irish drama tries to reinvent and reconquer this corporeal identity to make it a postmodern and postcolonial Celtic body: a body given new status revalorized through a katabatic process, through an ontological and bodily experience based on the ritual. By integrating the choreographic body inherited from druidic dances, Contemporary Irish drama reinvents an identity for the Irish stage and anchors it into its contemporaneity. From a theatre of inertia to a physical theatre, contemporary Irish drama stages the revenge of a postcolonial and even a decolonial Gaelic body that hankers after words.

Résumé : Tout au long du dix-neuvième siècle, le corps irlandais s'est vu exclu, tordu, dépouillé tant de sa fonction organique que verbale et linguistique sur scène et hors scène. Le théâtre irlandais contemporain cherche précisément à mettre en scène le spectacle de cette chair irlandaise infectée, tourmentée, affamée et qui a intériorisé ces stigmates physiques sous la forme de types et de stéréotypes scéniques. La scène théâtrale irlandaise contemporaine réinvente et reconquiert cette identité corporelle pour en faire un corps postmoderne et postcolonial celtique, c'est-à-dire un corps revalorisé à travers le processus catabatique, à travers l'expérience ontologique et charnelle du rite. L'intégration d'un corps chorégraphique permet à ce nouveau théâtre de se réinventer une identité scénique et d'intégrer le corps dans sa contemporanéité. D'un théâtre de l'inertie à un théâtre physique, le théâtre contemporain cherche à mettre en scène la revanche d'un corps postcolonial et décolonial gaélique animé d'une soif de mots.

Keywords: Corporeity, contemporary drama, performativity, Irishness

Mots-clés : Corporéité, théâtre contemporain, performativité, Irlandicité

The body haunts Irish history and the Irish stage. From the Great Famine to the British colonization to The Troubles, Ireland has always been concerned with the body whether it be a political, an organic or a cultural and linguistic body. The Irish body has been feared. It is indeed a threat because it encapsulates the very essence of Irish identity and history. Through the body, Irishness can be experienced as a new form of nonverbal expression and can be a medium to reappropriate words and a language that Irish people have been deprived of. Through physicality and, especially choreography, Irish contemporary dramatists are given a chance to transcend the somatic and traumatic Irish body to create a postcolonial and even decolonial dramatic body. Irishness could finally be voiced through these dramatized bodies which release corporeal memories.

Throughout centuries, the Irish body has been the epicenter of an obsession, of a control. British tried to twist those political bodies, History tried to starve those bodies, a powerful Clergy wanted to imprison bodies, a nationalistic political organization tried to use these bodies to mold them into what seemed to be the illusion of "Celticity." In this regard, the Irish body has never been considered for itself, and thus has been deprived of two of its main characteristics: performativity and theatricality. Indeed, the Irish body is inherently dramatic, because it crystallizes the somatic memories of a national and traumatic tragedy, of a painful individual and ontological corporeal enucleation. The flesh internalized the trauma and turned the body into a living memorial. For those reasons, the bodies on the Irish stage need to be taken into consideration and Irish contemporary drama needs to be regarded as a physical theater: a theater of the body.

Centuries of British repression have not only tortured the Irish bodies from a political viewpoint, but also from an artistic perspective. Onstage, the Irish body has been turned into a type and even a stereotype. Progressively that stereotype started to be taken as a reality to the point of estranging Irish people to their own body. Theater allows re-presentation, that is to say the projection of an identity onstage. Re-presentation is necessary to be aware of one's own identity. But the dramatic representation of Irish onstage throughout British colonization mirrored an inverted and grotesque reflect. As a consequence, 19th century Irish dramatists decided to obliterate corporeity to the advantage of orality. The staged Irish body was reduced to a mouth, to performativity only, that is to say that the Word remained a word and never fulfilled its injunctive power. Indeed, performativity refers originally to the divine injunction, to the very passage from a verbal state to an incarnated state. The Word is turned into an action: performativity transmutes into performance. The body translates, through body lines, through motions, through plasticity, what the words cannot express. Body is not only an embodied vehicle for the words: it is a dramatic entity.

Therefore, considering Irish history and Irish theatrical historiography, it is merely impossible to neglect the body onstage. Irishness and Celticity are based on vitality, on the performative and choreographic body. Irish contemporary drama challenges the traditional model by investing the language and the capacities of those bodies, and by staging the very spectacle of a contemporary Irishness resisting immobility. Through performance, Irish contemporary theater dramatizes a katabatic diving into a mythical Ireland based on the ritualistic and druidic body. From line dances to *Riverdance* to posthuman productions, Irish physical drama tries to reintegrate corporeity into the stage. Through the study of those different portraits of the Irish bodies and through the introduction of physicality, I will show that Irish contemporary drama returns to its theatrical and ancestral origin, and that performance reinvents Irishness into its contemporaneity. In *the Great Hunger* (1983) by Tom MacIntyre, Irish bodies onstage not only tell the story of the Great Famine, but the story of a physical, sensual,

and corporeal body that has been smothered by a powerful Clergy. In Friel's *Dancing at Lughnasa* (1990), dance and performance are used to stage an electric *catabasis* to the world of the ancient Celts liberating female repressed bodies. In *Carthaginians* (1996), Franck McGuinness plays with transgressive identities and explores the corporeal limits through the story of the wounds left by The Troubles. In *Disco Pigs* (1997), Enda Walsh reasserts vitality through kinesics and asserts the rise of post-modern Irish identities, whereas McPherson's *The Weir* (1998) stages the quest of Irish specters hungry for embodied words. Eventually, Marina Carr's *On Raftery's Hill* (2000) allows us to understand the arbitrariness of a traumatic postcolonial language and the importance for Irish contemporary drama to deal with taboos and ontological questions placing the individual at the center of Ireland's new challenges.

First, Irish traditional theater is based on a phenomenon of fragmentation between the *logos* and the body. According to that paradigm, the body is considered as secondary, whereas speech is regarded as the verbal embodiment of intellectual literariness. Throughout centuries of British colonization, Irish have been considered as uncultured, and uncivilized Hibernians. Onstage, Irish bodies were represented through the prism of animality. Hence the emergence of theatrical stereotypes such as the drunken, gesticulating *Paddy,* known as the stage Irishman "dancing about the stage in an expletive manner and in indulging in ridiculous capers and extravagancies of gesture" (Boucicault in Hogan 81). This caricatural representation of the Irish body convinced Irish 19th century dramatists to reject corporeality. In the *Irish Literary Theatre* manifesto, Lady Gregory says that the "[Celtic Theatre] will show that Ireland is not the home of buffoonery and of easy sentiment, as it has been represented, but the home of an ancient idealism" (9). Thus, the choice of erasing the body from the stage was considered as a way to emancipate from this demeaning image created by the colonizer. Therefore, Irish actors started to discipline their bodies to erase this "ludicrous" physicality. They confined themselves in a limited scenography, topographically expressed in domestic places such as the kitchen, the pub or even the cemetery,

and dramatically "reinforced by confining the actors within a box-set that varied little from one rural play to the next" (Morash 187). By constructing space and stage limitations, Irish traditional theater contributed to the dramatic oppression of the Irish female bodies reduced to petrified allegorical images. As noticed by Pilkington, in the Irish traditional drama "the bodies of the actresses appeared like statues" (in Lecossois and Hopes 87). Those female domesticated bodies became votives. *The Great Hunger* rewrites this traditional dramatization or rather anti-dramatization of Irish maternal bodies, especially through the sacred icon of the mother. Maguire's mother is turned into the "MOTHER-effigy" (*TGH*: 15).[1] The personal and individual mother has become a collective, national immobile image. The contemporary corpus under scrutiny ingeniously reminds the audience of this tradition in order to show that this frozen conception is no longer valid.

However, this physical and mental subjugation of the bodies onstage chimes with a traumatic relationship of the Irish with their bodies caused by the stigmas etched on the flesh. The image of a "shameful" Irish body is not only nourished by the English colonizer, but also by the Irish Catholic Clergy and nationalistic political organizations. In the 1930s Irish bodies, especially dancing bodies, started to be regarded and treated as a threat. Irish bodies were socially regulated. The *Public Dance Hall Act* of 1935 forbade Irish people to dance in other places than those imposed by the Irish Church and the *Gaelic League* (Brennan 10). Thus, Irish people internalized this vision of a reprehensible and immoral dancing and moving body to the point of producing what Fintan O'Toole describes as the "fear of the flesh" (20). Irish stages were contaminated by this phobia of sensuality, of physicality, of Celticity. Irish people started to reject their own body, to see it as a Kristevian abject object (Kristeva 230). They understood their bodies as it was described by the Church: as an object of guilt. In *Dancing at Lughnasa*, set in the 1930s, Kate's reaction over her sisters' dancing shows how much this vision of a contaminated and corrupted body pervaded the Irish mindset and dramatic stage. She declares about the Lughnasa festival and dancing that they threat the morality of "their Christian home" (*DAL*: 17).[2] Friel shows that these

dancing female bodies are dangerous because they can unshackle an ancestral and ritualistic power maintained in the body and repressed by society. Contemporary plays highlight this domination of religious and political institutions to show how this vision penetrated the Irish psyche, but also hindered Irish theater to evolve and to become a balanced theater characterized by the combination of kinesics and the verbal expression of a vernacular identity. This invention of a theatrical tradition captures the dramatic, thematic, and scenic dysfunctionality that pervaded 19th century Irish stages. Evacuating the body from the stage is intrinsically antidramatic and a contradiction of a Celtic identity centered on movement. I tried to demonstrate that the body encapsulates this history of reject; it contains the story of a misunderstood and distorted body. That is the reason why the body is essential in the contemporary stage because it enables, through the spectacle of its muscles, its lines, its scars, to bequeath a national memory and to keep it alive through the perpetuality of body movements. Irish bodies onstage could also graphically and visually epicize the body material and the story of Irish drama by other means than through verbal language.

Therefore, the bodies onstage need to be reconsidered as the material extension of the voice and not as physical and dramatic hurdles. Irish contemporary drama tries to recompose this lost harmony through the staging of the spectacle of a living and talking body, thus creating the organic language of a performative body and identity. Indeed, contemporary drama tries to reassert the Irish bodies by showing how much damage this contranatural theatrical tradition did to the bodies. Irish bodies are totemically linked to movement. As posited by the director of the Irish World Academy of Music and Dance of Limerick's University, Micheál Ó Súilleabháin, the Irish traditional rural world implies "a lot of kicking and lepping and digging-in-going on [refering to]—the part of dance which is actually linked into the soil" (in Mulrooney 230). Irish identity is based on that rustic, active, and dancing gesture. Therefore, this negation and even denegation of corporeity contributed to the staging of dysfunctional and pathological bodies. In *Disco Pigs* and *On Raftery's Hill*,[3] bodies are imprisoned in

incestuous, dysfunctional, violent, and abusive relationships to their own bodies. Red wants his daughter to stay inside the family nucleus, and by doing so the play stages the obliteration of Sorrel's female voice and body symbolized by the "*blackout*" (*ORH*: 36). Her disappearance is counterbalanced by Runt's victory in Walsh's play. The ending monologue of the play contributes to Pig's male locutionary disappearance and to the destruction of his physical presence onstage: "Light slowly fades down on PIG until out" (*DP*: 29). Contemporary plays multiply these scenes of death and mourning bodies. *The Weir*'s characters tell individual stories about a loss. Valerie lost her daughter, Niamh, and tries to recompose her presence through the weir, standing as a metaphor for the umbilical cord (Harris 15). McGuinness's Creggan graveyard is filled with mourning people. Those staged deaths and the persistence of this pattern reveal the pervasiveness of specters, of revenants on the Irish stage. These phantoms want to be embodied to tell their story and this ballet of shadows hampers those mourning people to move on. It can be interpreted as the difficult process of mourning that Irish contemporary drama is experiencing. The resurrection of Irish drama could only be possible through the reinvention of a new dramatic language. Words have proven to be unsatisfying. Irish contemporary theater needs to explore a new language to finally give a chance to these voices of the past to reintegrate the present. Kiberd declares that Irish contemporary drama tries to "reconnect [the Irish] theatre of the word with those experienced buried deep in th[e] bodies" (in Mulrooney xiv). Indeed, contemporary drama tries to re-semantize the trauma to give it a new meaning. *ORH* and *DP* play with the intricacies of language creating soundscapes and musicality coming out from the mouth. The mouth is eminently symbolical. It does stand as an organic, synecdochical embodiment of the voice. Through the mouth, contemporary dramatists stage an intermediary preverbal and almost prelapsarian language. Then, the animality serves another purpose; it is reinvested by the dramatists to create a contemporary language. For instance, Walsh manages to create a porcine decolonial language. He reappropriates the animalistic stereotypes of the pig used during colonization to distort it and

to create a primitive phatic language which turns into a conventional contemporary language. The stage direction specifies that Pig "oinks" (*DP*: 18). By playing with language, with words, the dramatists try to challenge the arbitrariness of language creating an infra-language, a minor language mocking and mimicking the colonizer's language (Bhabba 126).

Moreover, the invention or rather reinvention of a new language also partakes in reappropriating an Irish folklore. The reuse of folklore in contemporary plays builds a textual and intertextual Irish corpus turning the text into an Irish bodily palimpsest, where ancestral stories are rewritten in the flesh. This return to mythical Celtic origins enables the re-membering of the fragmented Irish bodies. Irish drama delves into the origins of theater by modifying and reinventing the national tragedy. By doing so, Irish contemporary drama manages to stage the "re-vigoration of tradition, a cross-cultural absorption and adaptation of form, content and context, and an attempt to interrogate the present by appropriation" (Jordan xvii).

Eventually, this return to the origin and this transcendence of tradition, and of language lead to the creation of a kinesics allowing new Irish dramatists to emancipate from a model and producing a phenomenon of deterritorialization, which helps Irish identities to be reconnected to their Irishness through the medium of otherness. By doing so, Irish contemporary drama anchors Irish bodies into a post-modern contemporaneity since Irish identity is plural and enriched by exogenic influences. This otherness is materialized in the meeting with other cultures which are part of Ireland's new generation. And this otherness is dramatically expressed through music and dance, such as in *DAL*. Indeed, contemporary plays stage dancing bodies, which are reminiscent of Celtic druidic bodies, in order to untie Irish bodies, especially female bodies. Indeed, the liberation is ensured by a process of transformation and circulation of those contemporary bodies. The energetic, violent, and frenzied choreographic performance enables to overcome the deadlock the Irish traditional drama is left in. *DP* is the most brilliant example to portray this bodily ultraviolence which

translates the uneasiness of the new generation to cope with a traumatic and troubled past. Dance and music appear as a way to overcome those outdated concerns and to enter contemporariness, which is characterized by globalization. Thus, references to a contemporary consumerist culture nourished by foreign inspirations are reinforced. For instance, Pig and Runt are watching the American TV show *Baywatch*, whereas the Mundy sisters dance on a jazz music by Ben Selvin derived from Caribbean and African American influences (*DP*: 36). This new Irish drama deals with individual and transnational trajectories disclosed in dancing. Dance symbolizes the temptation of otherness which allows to uncover Irishness. In *DAL,* the references to African music and religious ceremonies introduced by Father Jack are a way for the Mundy sisters to return to their Celtic, collective, and national identity. It triggers, through a chthonian dancing rhythm, the apparition of the ancient Celts' spirits. The mediation with African dancing culture facilitates the understanding of Irishness and unfetters the Celtic druidic choreographic origin through the staging of the sisters' frenetic dance. Eventually, these intercultural exchanges, which happen in dancing, are perpetuated in contemporary Irish productions through intermediality. Indeed, contemporary drama re-locates the body to create what I call "extra-bodies." By transgressing aesthetic, physical, and scenographic limits the new Irish physical theater creates another form of graphic visuality which disqualifies the *logos*. This new language deconstructs binaries by dematerializing the body and by playing with its lines and possibilities.

The decorporized humanity will be a new challenge for the Irish physical theater to represent Irish contemporary bodies under a new form: a disturbing, but a truthful form as experimented by physical theater companies such as the *Operating Theatre*. The Irish dramatic body yearns for renewal and reinvention. Irish contemporary drama gives a possibility to those bodies to escape from their own limits and empowers them to find a balance between an ancestral Celtic origin and a modernity turned towards new dramatic practices. The Irish contemporary stage is now ready for this revolution of the body that will hopefully change the vision of the body in contemporary Ireland.

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1 MacIntyre's *The Great Hunger* is referred to as *TGH* throughout this article.

2 Friel's *Dancing at Lughnasa* is referred to as *DAL* throughout this article.

3 Carr's *On Raftery's Hill* is referred to as *ORH* throughout this article, Walsh's *Disco Pigs* as *DP*.