

IRISH DRAMA IN A “FLUID SITUATION”:
PERFORMATIVE INTERVENTION AND THEATRICAL POSING
IN THE INCEPTIONS OF THE ABBEY THEATRE AND OF FIELD DAY

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RESUMO: O surpreendente apoio de Arthur Griffith, futuro fundador e líder do partido *Sinn Féin*, ao Teatro Literário Irlandês (ILT) em 8 de maio de 1899, dá uma indicação do apelo que tal empreendimento tinha para o público irlandês, em um momento em que a expressão política da nacionalidade era negada pelo governo britânico. Além de mudar a história do teatro na Irlanda, o Abbey e seus dramaturgos desempenharam um papel crucial na hipótese de Christopher Murray de que “na experiência histórica irlandesa, o drama, como a criação de textos para performance, e o teatro, como a formação dos meios de produção e as condições de recepção do drama, foram ambos instrumentais na definição e manutenção da consciência nacional” (MURRAY, 1997, p. 3). No entanto, como ele aponta mais tarde em sua análises, não há um sentido claro de continuidade da tradição na história do teatro irlandês moderno e fases distintas destacam-se, como resultando, principalmente, de forças políticas (p.7). À esta formulação, acrescentamos também a importância das forças históricas, especialmente em relação à outra “fase distinta” do teatro irlandês: o desenvolvimento da companhia *Field Day*, na década de 1980. Os impulsos que levaram à criação de ambas as companhias são ainda mais semelhantes que o que Seamus Deane, diretor do *Field Day*, aponta no programa da peça *As três irmãs*, uma “tradução” de Friel para a obra de Tchekhov (1981): “[O *Field Day*] é como o Abbey em sua origem na medida em que tem, dentro de si, a idéia de uma cultura que ainda não existe em termos políticos” (DEANE, In: RICHTARIK, 2001, p.110). Pretende-se aqui comparar estas duas instituições a partir das declarações escritas de seus objetivos, formuladas em um intervalo de mais de 80 anos e em situações políticas consideravelmente diferentes, de modo a destacar as razões pelas quais o teatro continua a ser um importante fórum para a crítica social e política na Irlanda.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: *Abbey Theatre; Field Day Theatre Company; Teatro Irlandês.*

ABSTRACT: *The rather surprising endorsement by Arthur Griffith, later the founder and a leader of Sinn Féin to the opening of the Irish Literary Theatre (ILT) on May 8, 1899, gives an indication of the appeal of such an enterprise to the Irish public at a moment when the political expression of their nationality was denied by the British government. In addition to changing theatre history in Ireland, the Abbey and its playwrights played no small part in leading Christopher Murray to formulate the “assumption that in the Irish historical experience drama (the creation of texts for performance) and theatre (the formation of the means of production and conditions of reception of drama) were both instrumental in defining and sustaining national consciousness” (MURRAY, 1997, p. 3). However, as the same author points out later in his argument, there is no clear sense of continuity of tradition in the history of modern Irish drama, and discrete phases are singled out in result of forces mainly political (p.7). To his formulation, I would add the importance of historical forces, especially in relation to another “discrete phase” of Irish drama: the development of Field Day in the 1980s. The impulses that led to the creation of both enterprises share even more similarities than Field Day director Seamus Deane concedes in the program notes for Friel’s “translation” of Chekhov’s Three Sisters*

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(1981): “It [*Field Day*] is like the *Abbey* in its origin in that it has within it the idea of culture which has not yet come to be in political terms” (DEANE, qtd. in RICHTARIK, 2001, p.110). In this paper, I intend to compare both these institutions’ written statements of purpose, formulated with a time gap of over 80 years and under considerably different political situations, so as to highlight the reasons why drama continues to be an important forum for social and political critique in Ireland.

KEYWORDS: *Abbey Theatre; Field Day Theatre Company; Irish Theatre*

The rather surprising endorsement by Arthur Griffith, later the founder and a leader of Sinn Féin and then editor of the *United Irishman*, a weekly national review known for its uncompromising nationalist politics, to the opening of the Irish Literary Theatre (ILT) on May 8, 1899, gives an indication of the appeal of such an enterprise to the Irish public at a moment when the political expression of their nationality was denied by the British government. His support for “a healthy national drama [that] would educate the people far quicker, far easier, and more permanently than any number of histories or lectures” (qtd. in PILKINGTON, 2004, p. 8) highlights the civic side of a larger argument for the need of an Irish national theatre that grew among both unionists and nationalists who agreed on the “complex attractions of a prestigious national theatre for a country without statehood”. Pilkington explains that

[i]n a period in which the lack of a nationally responsive state power dominated the political debate, unionists and nationalists alike looked to an Irish or Celtic theatre as proof that Ireland ought no longer to be thought of as a colony. . . . Along with other existing or planned national institutions . . . an indigenous theatre institution would reveal that the Act of Union of 1800 had set out so cruelly to deny: Ireland’s independent public sphere and civilized national character. (PILKINGTON, 2004, p. 9)

Independence and civility are worth stressing here, as it was felt that they were both lacking in the theatre in Ireland, first because of its dependence on English touring companies and because of the portrayal of the “stage Irishman” as an uncivilized buffoon. Despite being then a “fragile little creation” (MORASH, 2005, p. 102), the ILT, in its various incarnations up to its establishment as the *Abbey*, did succeed and according to the same author,

[o]pening its [the *Abbey*’s] doors for the first time with Yeats’ *On Baile’s Strand*, *Cathleen ni Houlihan* and Lady Gregory’s *Spreading the News*, its founders could reflect on the fact that they had created something which had been talked about for centuries: a theatre with a completely Irish repertoire” (MORASH, 2002, p. 129)

In addition to changing theatre history in Ireland, the *Abbey* and its playwrights played no small part in leading Christopher Murray to formulate the “assumption that in the Irish historical experience drama (the creation of texts for performance) and theatre (the formation of the means of production and conditions of reception of drama) were both instrumental in defining and sustaining national consciousness” (MURRAY, 1997, p. 3). However, as the same author points out later in his argument, there is no clear sense of continuity of tradition in the history of modern Irish drama, and discrete phases are singled out in result of forces mainly political (1997, p. 7). To his formulation, I would add the importance of historical forces, especially in relation to another “discrete phase” of Irish drama: the development of *Field Day* in the 1980s.

The impulses that led to the creation of both enterprises (Field Day and the Abbey here understood as institutions and not just their associated theatrical companies) share even more similarities than Field Day director Seamus Deane concedes in the program notes for Friel's "translation" of Chekhov's *Three Sisters* (1981): "It [Field Day] is like the Abbey in its origin in that it has within it the idea of culture which has not yet come to be in political terms" (DEANE, qtd. in RICHTARIK, 2001, p. 110). In this paper, I intend to analyze how these institutions communicate their purposes to audiences (real or intended), so as to highlight the reasons why drama continues to be an important forum for social and political critique.

What is now recognized as the ILT manifesto, originally sent as a letter to guarantors in the summer of 1887, presents many of the characteristics associated with art manifestos in the late nineteenth and twentieth century. Since Marx's and Engel's *Communist Manifesto*, this type of discourse is defined by its act of self-foundation and self-creation, with a clear intention of actual or attempted intervention, of maneuvering the present and fashioning a future:

Political manifestos are texts singularly invested in doing things with words, in changing the world. They are ideal instances of performative speech in the sense used by J. L. Austin. . . . [B]oth performative intervention and theatrical posing are, to some degree, at work in all manifestos. Political manifestos frequently overcompensate for the actual powerlessness of their position with theatrical exaggerations, and their confidence is often feigned rather than grounded in real authority. At the same time, even the most theatrical avant-garde manifestos achieved some performative effects and left some traces on history precisely through their calculated theatricality. (PUCHNER, 2005, p. 5)

The poetics of the ILT manifesto enacts this overcompensation by locating in the writing of the plays a "high ambition" and their "hopes" of finding an uncorrupted audience is grounded on an unsubstantiated belief in an audience "trained to listen by its passion for oratory", who will ensure a "tolerant welcome" because they too are "weary of representation." Chris Morash analyses what he identifies as the two liberating (even if wrong) assumptions governing the manifesto, the *ad ovum* creation of first, a new tradition, and second, an audience (MORASH, 2002, p. 117). The characterization of this audience would prove problematic as the productions started and the gap between intended/imagined audience and the actual audience was made visible – or more frequently, audible.

Another important characteristic of the ILT manifesto is its inclusiveness and appeal to "all Irish people," a complicated ideal given the political and religious differences that divided Ireland, historically and still at the time. This tendency, confirmed in the later denominations of the ILT (1897-1901) as it changed status, from Irish National Dramatic Company (1902), Irish National Theatre Society (1903-1906) to its current National Theatre Society (1906–), is countered even at the moment of its inception, as made visible in the manifesto, by the contradictory impulse of projecting a specific, namely "literary," audience, akin to the experimentation the founders found should be one of the theatre's aims.

In addition to the conflict between an expected largely homogenous national audience and a specific, embodied one, the national pretensions of the ILT encountered a theoretical problem made specific by Chris Morash's questioning in "Can a Theatre be

National?'. Morash contrasts Yeats's intention of creating, through a national theatre, a sense of solidarity between geographically distant individuals with Benedict Anderson's influential concept of imagined communities uniting the spatially diffuse masses by means of print culture into sharing a kinship and forming some national consciousness. According to the author,

[h]owever, if we look at theatre as performance, we find that none of Anderson's arguments apply. A play in performance takes place in a clearly demarcated space (usually a theatre building) at a clearly defined time. The audience for any given performance is limited to those people who are in the same theatre at the same time. Members of an audience at a play are not, in Anderson's phrase, an "imagined community": they are a real, *albeit* temporary, community whose relationship to one another is clearly bounded by the temporal and spatial parameters of the performance of the play." (MORASH, 2005, p. 104-05)

Thus, for Morash, the play as event creates not a *national* but a *local* community. After exploring touring as a way of establishing such a national culture, only to highlight how the touring of the Abbey led to the development of other local theatres, the author concludes that

[t]he publication of reviews, play scripts, and the accumulation of these sources in theatre histories re-configures the temporally and spatially specific form of performance into the temporally and spatially diffuse form of print. ... This was true for the readers of Walker's "Historical Essay" in 1788; it was true for the readers of Yeats's essays in *Samhain*; and is true for the reader of this essay today. (MORASH, 2005, p. 113-14)

After the ILT established itself, the "official" dialogue between founders and the public, which started with the manifesto, continued through the publication of *Beltaine* (three issues, 1899-1900), the aforementioned *Samhain* (seven issues 1901-1908) and also *The Arrow* (five issues, 1906-1909). These occasional publications coincided with the performances of the ILT, INTS and the NTS at the Abbey and provided a space "in which [Yeats] could present his views on the drama and respond to the inevitable attacks" (FITZGERALD, 2003, p. xvii). In the case of the ILT's very first performance on 8 May 1899, which included Yeats's *The Countess Cathleen*, controversy and attack preceded the play itself, thus making the distribution of the first *Beltaine* a response of sorts to the debate that had gone on in newspapers and other pamphlets. The importance of pamphlets in shaping the expectations of the audience was very early on grasped by Yeats (MORASH, 2002, p. 118), who had originally planned that these writings be distributed during performances free of charge (FITZGERALD, 2003, p. xvii). Even if they were eventually charged according to the total number of pages, by including the program and sometimes the play script within them, these pamphlets can be seen in very close conjunction to the performances themselves.

In the case of Field Day, although no manifesto was issued marking the establishment of the project (unless one agrees with Ciarán Deane in considering the inaugural play *Translations* as its foundational text, "also contain[ing] within it the core message of all of the group's subsequent creative endeavours," [DEANE, 2009, p. 8]), the programs for the plays, at first, filled this gap in providing printed statements of purpose. As with *Beltaine*, *Samhain* and *The Arrow*, the Field Day Pamphlets and the whole

publishing arm of Field Day institutionalized a space for discussion of the main governing issues the members sought to explore.

Brian Friel's and Stephen Rea's reluctance to provide their audiences and the reading public with a clear outline of Field Day's intentions may have less to do with the playwright's aversion to making public statements (DELANEY, 2003, p. 2) than with a more postmodern suspicion of political labeling. If the program notes for *Translations* gave a few, if misleading, pointers to the founders' intentions, the following two led to "raised eyebrows all around Ireland" (RICHTARIK, 2001, p. 136). In his aforementioned introductory note to the second Field Day production, *Three Sisters*, Seamus Deane, already speaking as one of the directors officially invited to the Board after the success of *Translations* and possibly its more vocal and theoretically engaged member, presents what can be construed as the company's mission. In an address unambiguously entitled "What is Field Day?" Deane establishes that it was

"a political gesture, smacking of Northernness" that involved "a double secession – from the North and from the Republic." . . . Field Day "breaks new ground not in stage convention, not in theatrical language, but in the idea of breaking down the calcification of the theatrical audience". It was "inventing an audience." . . . With sideswipes at the "hallowed and hollowed tradition of the Abbey" and "the spurious aestheticism of the Lyric", he unnecessarily affronted much of the theatrical establishment in Ireland. (RICHTARIK, 2001, p. 110)

One may or may not agree whether this "affront" was justified, but it clear that, despite the criticism directed to the contemporary Abbey, the similarities between this "mission statement" and the original ILT manifesto are striking. Clearly identifying with the political role of the theatre, Field Day appeals to localism, in the idea of "Northernness" as opposed to the more encompassing "National" and "Irish" of the tradition of the Abbey. This maneuver highlights Field Day's attempt to distance itself from the establishment, from a previous tradition, here identified with the once tradition-changing Abbey, which, "[f]rom the early 1970s had produced theatrical responses to the Northern Ireland conflict" that were "remarkably unified in their tendency to view the Northern Ireland conflict exclusively outside of a political context" (PILKINGTON, 2004, p. 241). It may not be the naïve *ad ovum* proposition of the ITL but in its choice of location, making it "the first time in almost two centuries that a professional company had rehearsed a play in Derry" (MORASH, 2002, p. 233), Field Day highlighted the cultural vacuum from which they were operating and hoped to fill. Finally, the focus on the invention of an audience where the current one is thought of as "calcified" finds its parallel in the ILT's appeal for an "imaginative" audience.

In his introduction to *The Politics of Irish Drama*, Nicholas Grene states that

[a]s long as there has been a distinct Irish drama it has been so closely bound up with national politics that the one has often been considered the reflection of the other. . . . Irish drama since the time of the early Abbey has remained self-consciously aware of its relation to the life of the nation and the state. (GRENE, 1999, p. 1)

The author also explains that this relation is much more than purely mimetic and must include a negotiation in the "three-way set of relationships between subject, playwright and audience." This relationship frequently touches on questions of authority

and authenticity by presupposing representation and delegation of/from the audience by/to the playwright in its development of the subject and the players onstage. While the ILT manifesto purports to properly represent the Irish people, the protests over their opening play, *The Countess Cathleen* (and later over most plays by J. M. Synge), shows the difficulties the audience had in feeling represented on the early Abbey stage. According to Pilkington, “[t]hat the setting and thematics of Yeats’s play should evoke so notorious an instance of Protestant anti-Catholicism as famine ‘souperism’ meant that the ILT’s claim to exist ‘outside all the political questions that divide us’ was placed under immense strain” (PILKINGTON, 2004, p. 28). The authority of the Abbey playwrights is complicated by their background, because they were mostly, at certain points, all, Protestant, of Anglo-Irish stock, frequently landed or markedly urban. Possibly through their links with the West of Ireland and because of their beliefs on what was the “true” Ireland (if not by the limitations of the Abbey stage), the peasant play became one of the commonest types of drama represented. Thomas Kilroy reflects on this paradox: “It is arguable that from the beginning this type of drama had a high degree of artifice and that playwrights with an authentic experience of peasant Ireland, like John B Keane and M.J. Molloy, for example, were the exception” (KILROY, 2000, p. 3). Turning to Northern localism and the markedly theoretical and utopian idea of a “Fifth Province,” Field Day tried to bypass such questions of authority for speaking for the whole nation, while claiming for representativeness of a part of it.

Despite an attempt to keep the Catholic to Protestant ratio among board members equal (three and three), no such balance was sought in terms of politics (republican and unionist) or provenance (five were born or raised in Northern Ireland and only one, with the later addition of Kilroy, was from the Republic). This focus on the North and in Derry, specifically, was part of the kind of agenda Field Day was trying to establish and is again comparable to the ILT’s in that it opposes a situation of political dispossession and violence to a civic and culture-building enterprise. The populist objective of reaching a wider audience through touring, which was also undertaken by the Abbey at a later stage, was balanced with this “parochial” impulse of being confident and self-sufficient (RICHTARIK, 2001, p. 11-12).

In addition to a more generalized perception that the Abbey was “moribund” – a complaint made in as early as its first decade of existence (HUNT, 1979, p. 84) – there was also a sense of detachment from the Northern “Troubles” and complacency emanating from the Southern government and, by extension, from its national theatre. An index of this perceived complacency is the audience’s responses to Friel’s *Freedom of the City* and *Volunteers*, two plays addressing the situation in the North and staged in Dublin right before the creation of Field Day. According to Murray, *Volunteers* marked Friel’s “last attempt to interest the Abbey audiences in political matters. When next he had something political to say he set up his own company to say it” (MURRAY, 1997, p. 202). Basing the this new company in Derry gave Field Day an even more noticeable aura of novelty: “In some respects, the fact that Derry was more or less a clean slate, in terms of professional theatre, was part of its attraction” (MORASH, 2002, p. 235). This too can be liberating to a new company trying to do groundbreaking work.

As a “discrete phase” in Irish drama, Field Day “generated excitement and hope in Ireland at a time of political and indeed theatrical uncertainty. . . . All Field Day plays insist that the problem of identity is best understood theatrically, involving audiences in the process of redefinition” (MURRAY, 1997, p. 222). The end of the Field Day Theatre Company did not end the need to discuss these problems of identity but just as the Abbey

tenets were made irrelevant by the historical and political changes, a new focus on audience questions even the localism practiced by Field Day. According to Chris Morash,

[p]aradoxically, the emergence of community theatre marks the dissolution of a wider sense of national community in Ireland. When the Abbey had been founded in the early years of the twentieth century, it was as a theatre to reflect the life of the entire country. The community arts movement challenged the idea that one theatre might represent the whole island, pushing the wider concept of representation to the breaking point by blurring the lines between artist and audience. Those who were represented were now the same people doing the representation. (MORASH, 2005, p. 262)

This new development in Irish drama, exemplified in contemporary Irish theatre in the plays of Dermot Bolger at the Axis Art Centre in Ballymun, seems to question the idea of delegation and representation and, to take up the metaphor of map-making from *Translations*, makes us wonder of what use this map on a one-to-one scale really is.

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