



## **Globalisation and national theatre: two Abbey Theatre productions of Sean o'Casey's The Plough and the Stars**

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## **Globalisation and National Theatre: Two Abbey Theatre Productions of O’Casey’s *The Plough and the Stars***

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In 2006, Ireland’s Industrial Development Agency– the government body responsible for attracting foreign direct investment into the state – announced that Ireland was to be rebranded for the first time in three decades. The new slogan for the country would be ‘Ireland – knowledge is in our nature’, which was to be part of a proposed promotional campaign on ‘The Irish Mind’ announced in the Agency’s 2005 Annual Report:

What is different in Ireland is the way in which we tackle issues, solve problems and seek other new and better ways to meet needs. It is evidenced in the speed, agility, flexibility and responsiveness of public agencies and private bodies. It requires ambition, vision, cooperation and partnership among many players. It reflects a mindset and an approach that is innate, and which is likely related to the creativity that has been manifest in the Irish literary and artistic tradition. This is what we will be conveying in our new promotional campaign on *The Irish Mind* (IDA, 2006 9)

To underline the relationship between Ireland’s culture and its economy, the Report opens with one quotation from Irish philosopher, critic, and novelist Richard Kearney and another from Gary Hamel and CK Prahalad’s *Competing for the Future* (1994). Between both is a self-portrait by renowned Irish artist Louis Le Brocquy, which, as shown below in Figure 1, features the slogan ‘The Irish mind. The unique resource you will need to bring your knowledge-based business to peak performance’ (IDA 2006 2).

This proposed re-branding of Ireland as a ‘creative economy’ offers a useful indicator of the contemporary relationship between economic and cultural networks, and of the way in which the global and the national interact in both fields. On the one

hand, the document seems an obvious response to the challenges of globalization, an attempt to differentiate Ireland from its competitors for FDI (China, India, Singapore, Puerto Rico, etc). The IDA's campaign is therefore 'national' in a number of senses: it arises as a result of governmental policy-making at national level, and presents a vision of the Irish national character as encompassing several 'innate' or essential characteristics. It also proposes a relationship between the national literary/cultural canon and the economy, arguing that the creativity of Le Brocquy and Richard Kearney is not an example of individual genius, but evidence of an Irish 'mindset and approach' that will, it is implied, be evident in boardrooms, customer service centres, and factory floors throughout the country.

It is often suggested that globalization is rendering the category of nation obsolete, and that it leads to cultural and social homogenisation. The IDA campaign suggests however that the national – an essentialised category that is applicable to the life of the state in its entirety – may operate as a mode of differentiating the state in a global marketplace.



Ireland,  
knowledge  
is in our  
nature™



**The Irish mind.**  
The unique resource you will need to bring your  
knowledge-based business to peak performance.



**Figure 1: The Irish Mind**

Many of the suggestions put forward by the IDA are nonsensical. Countless numbers of Ireland's great thinkers and artists achieved success by leaving the country (Joyce, Wilde, Shaw), while those who remained at home often achieved an international profile by operating within North American cultural frameworks, as in

the case of U2. The suggestion that there is an ‘innate’ Irish temperament seems worryingly essentialist, particularly given the increased multiculturalism of Irish society – not to mention the way in which recent social and legislative changes have created space for the expression of many different forms of Irish identity, encompassing ethnic, religious, linguistic, sexual, gender, and regional differences. The use of Ireland’s cultural capital as a ‘brand’ to attract economic investment is therefore founded on a reinvention of Ireland that is based more on how the country is understood abroad than the social realities within its own borders.

This convergence between cultural and economic interests – with the global and national operating as branded categories in both fields – is increasingly evident in theatre around the world. Since the early 1990s, the impact of globalisation on theatre has been apparent in such phenomena as the growth of international touring networks, the increased mobility across borders of theatre scholars and practitioners, the proliferation of information about theatre through virtual and print media, and the development of intercultural performance styles. However, such ‘globalised’ developments have occurred at the same time as an apparent revival in the fortunes of theatres with a specifically national remit. In 2003, for example, state funding for the National Theatre of Scotland was finally secured after many years of lobbying; while in New York it was proposed that an American National Theatre be built on the site of the World Trade Centre<sup>1</sup>. Meanwhile, many existing national theatres are receiving greater levels of public funding and support than ever before, while also attracting higher levels of corporate sponsorship.

The surprising good health of national theatres during a period of globalization is especially notable in Ireland, which has not only been dubbed the ‘most globalized

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<sup>1</sup> Cf Pogrebin 2003.

country in the world'<sup>2</sup>, but is also the home of the Abbey, one of the most famous national theatres in the world. During the 1990s, the impact of processes associated with globalization led many commentators to describe Ireland as both 'post-national' and 'post-nationalist'. Yet during the same decade, the Abbey Theatre enjoyed a minor renaissance under the Artistic Directorships of Garry Hynes (1991-1993) and Patrick Mason (1994-1999), which was underpinned by its promotion of itself as Ireland's national theatre, a status that allowed it to claim almost forty percent of state funding for theatre in Ireland in 1999.<sup>3</sup>

To investigate this apparent tension between globalisation and national theatre in Ireland, and to explore further the inter-relationship of the cultural, economic, and social development of Ireland since 1990, I want to argue that the recent renaissance in the concept of national theatres is intimately related to the formation of theatrical and economic networks. To illustrate this, I discuss two Abbey Theatre productions of Sean O'Casey's 1926 play, *The Plough and the Stars*, that appeared during the period in question: the first in 1991 and the second in 2002. By exploring how both relate – and sometimes fail to relate – to national traditions as well as global events, I want to explore the transformation of Irish approaches to national theatre.

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Together with JM Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World* (1907), O'Casey's *Plough and the Stars* is regarded as the definitive Abbey Theatre play. This status is assured by O'Casey's use of many characteristics closely identified with the Abbey style: provocative political content, linguistic inventiveness, naturalistic acting, the inclusion of characters drawn from the margins of Irish society, and the use of a single

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. AT Kearney/Foreign Policy Magazine, 2002.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Arts Council Annual Report, 1999.

household to represent the entire nation. And the play is of course noted for WB Yeats's mythologisation of the 'riots' that occurred during its first week of performances. However, its lasting significance is that the play's production reconstituted the role of the national theatre in relation to the newly independent Irish state (which had existed for four years when the *Plough* premiered), in three ways.

First, it established that one function of the Abbey in an independent Ireland would be to analyze the nation's sense of itself. *The Plough and the Stars* was produced shortly before the tenth anniversary of the 1916 Easter Rising, an event presented by many (including Yeats himself) as the foundational event of the new Irish state. O'Casey's representation of that event was both an evaluation of the moral and political legitimacy of the new Ireland, and an attempt to broaden representations of Irish identity to include people already being marginalised in the new order, such as the urban working class and Irish Protestants. So whereas during the Irish Literary Revival (c. 1890-1916), the Abbey's plays had been national insofar as they imagined an Ireland that might someday exist, *The Plough and the Stars* took nation to be a relatively stable category – one that needed to be challenged, broadened, and subjected to a process of continuous renewal.

Second, the production allowed the Abbey to emphasise its importance to – but independence from – the new Irish state. In 1925, the Abbey had become the first state-endowed theatre in any Anglophone country. The subsidy was a recognition by the state of the Abbey's role in the movement towards Irish independence, and an attempt by that state to use the Abbey's cultural capital, international profile, and nationalist credentials as a way of legitimating itself. However, that recognition also involved the threat of interference from a government whose outlook was becoming dominated by conservative Catholic values. In the months before the production of

*The Plough*, George O'Brien – the new director of the Theatre and 'effectively a government nominee' (Foster, 2003 302) – demanded cuts from the play, objecting particularly to the inclusion of a prostitute in its second act. The ensuing dispute between O'Brien on the one hand, and Yeats and Lady Gregory on the other, became a battle for the artistic freedom of the theatre. O'Brien's argument seemed grounded in the belief that a theatre in receipt of a state subsidy should hold an outlook consistent with the values of that state. Yeats disagreed, arguing that to 'eliminate any part of [*The Plough*] on grounds that have nothing to do with dramatic tradition would be to deny all our traditions' (qtd by Foster 2003, 305). This statement was a reminder of the theatre's importance to the state, and a challenge to the state's claim to be sole moral arbiter for the entire nation: Yeats was effectively claiming for the Abbey a moral authority that was greater than the authority of the state itself.

Finally, the production of *The Plough* provoked a series of protests that were based in the conviction that national theatre is worthy of serious debate and contestation. The Irish tradition of theatre protest has often been misunderstood as riotous behaviour by ignorant philistines, who could always be depended upon to 'disgrace themselves again', in Yeats's memorable formulation. Although they involved moments of violence, the *Plough* 'riots' were occasions of passionate debate about the function of theatre in a national context. These protests reinforced the Irish public's perception that they were entitled to a sense of ownership over the national theatre. That the Abbey's status has remained a subject of incessant dispute in Ireland is, arguably, a sign of the strength of Irish theatre: people feel that it is important enough to become angry about its direction. I am arguing therefore that the significance of *The Plough* is that it configured the category of nation as something



that transcends the state, seeing nation as a concept better realised in artistic production than legislation.

In subsequent years, *The Plough* lost a great deal of its power, as the Abbey descended into a period of stagnation under the directorship of Ernest Blythe, a former Minister for Finance. Nevertheless, the play retained its capacity to echo contemporary events. For example, productions of *The Plough* were staged a month after the outbreak of the Second World War, and shortly after its conclusion.<sup>4</sup> One might see such productions as attempts to use O'Casey's critique of political violence as a way of commenting upon events in mainland Europe – and perhaps as an attempt to justify Irish neutrality in the Second World War<sup>5</sup>. In 1947, two prominent Irish intellectuals (NAMES TO COME) staged a walkout from a revival of *The Plough*, using the status of the play and the history of the Abbey to perform a 'staged event that condensed wider public misgivings about ... the nature and direction of the Irish state', according to Lionel Pilkington (2001, 43). Similarly, the outbreak of the Northern Irish Troubles in the late 1960s led to many productions of O'Casey's Dublin plays (*The Shadow of a Gunman*, *Juno and the Paycock*, and *The Plough*), which were used as a way for theatres in the Republic of Ireland to indicate their hostility to Republican violence. Again, the national status of the play was used to challenge other expressions of national authority, not only by the British and Irish governments, but also by the IRA. By the 1990s, however, the *Plough* had been largely sanitised by its classical status, with most productions of the play being presented in commercial venues during the tourist season. As Brian Singleton writes,

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<sup>4</sup> Based on material consulted in the Abbey Theatre archive (henceforth referred to as NTA). Thanks to Mairead Delaney for making material in the archive accessible to me.

<sup>5</sup> Ireland's policy of military neutrality has been a controversial element of its foreign policy since independence. Originally, it arose from a desire not to be aligned with Britain in any military conflict; after the Second World War (which Ireland did not participate in), it also involved a refusal to align itself formally with NATO.

‘production of O’Casey’s plays was trapped in an unchallenged tradition of sentimental accretions ...something had to be done’ (2004, 63). The 1991 production of *The Plough and the Stars* by Garry Hynes at the Abbey Theatre was a response to this situation.

The play was Hynes’s inaugural production during her Artistic Directorship of the Abbey, and is notable for having provoked unusual levels of media hostility. Many aspects of the production explain this controversy. It placed strong emphasis on the poverty of its characters, who were presented on an almost entirely bare stage, in monochromatic costumes, and with shaved heads – a presentation that worked against the tendency to see O’Casey’s characters as ‘colourful’ expressions of working class life. This and many other aspects of the play highlighted the fact that poverty was a far greater cause of hardship to these characters than the military conflict dramatised on stage. The production also challenged many existing images of Anglo-Irish violence. Before the action began, the stage was draped in a large Union Jack; at its conclusion, the flag was again drawn across the stage, this time covering the body of Bessie Burgess, the Irish Protestant whose son is fighting in the First World War while rebellion is underway in Dublin. This framing device can be seen as a statement about Ireland being quite literally *under* imperial rule, with the outburst of rebellion being fully contained by the end of the action.

Republican violence is treated with a similarly harsh manner, however. In Hynes’s production, Nora’s miscarriage arises directly from the actions of her husband Jack, who throws her across the stage in response to her demands that he stop fighting in the Rising. Political violence in this production is thus evaluated in terms of gender, with both British and Irish militarisms presented as arising from various forms of male inadequacy – and all of the victims of that violence being female. This,

added to the emphasis on Bessie Burgess' Protestantism, made the production very relevant to debates about the Northern Ireland Troubles.

Finally, the production insisted that *The Plough* should not be seen as an element of Ireland's heritage, but rather as a statement of where the nation found itself in 1991. Particularly controversial in this context was Hynes's staging of the play's second act, which takes place in a bar while, offstage, a figure representing Padraic Pearse (a playwright and teacher best known for his leadership of the 1916 Easter Rising) addresses a crowd. In this part of Hynes's production, the back of the stage was dominated by a large mirror, in which the Abbey audience could see themselves. Suddenly, a member of the audience rose and began to speak while the action was underway, leading the other spectators to realise – after some moments of uneasiness – that what they were seeing on stage was not a literal representation of a mirror, but a window from the bar, opening out to a public arena in which a large crowd was being addressed by a speaker. The audience, therefore, was put into the world represented onstage; they were watching a historically significant event, while seeing themselves represented in it. This disruptive nature of this act evoked memories of the riots that greeted the premiere of *Plough* in 1926, while also making it difficult for the Abbey audience to imagine that the people represented by O'Casey were different from themselves<sup>6</sup>.

The production was the subject of intensive media debate. Playwright and columnist Hugh Leonard was particularly critical of what he termed the production's 'Brechtian' elements, and he criticised Hynes's decision to hire the theatre critic and liberal intellectual Fintan O'Toole as a literary adviser for the production, referring to him disparagingly as Hynes's 'grisly guru'. Leonard also attempted to shame the

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<sup>6</sup> Comments about this production are based on attendance at a performance in April 1991, and viewing of a videotaped performance at the Abbey Theatre Archive in 2003. Comments on the 2002 production discussed below are based on attendance at productions in November 2002 and January 2003.

production by referring to how his English guests had not been able to understand the action – before admitting that he had left at the interval (Leonard 1991). A vigorous letter writing campaign to the *Irish Times* took place in support of Hynes’s version of the play.

This controversy damaged the production initially, but positive word of mouth meant that the final weeks of the run almost all sold out. One therefore sees in 1991 a sense that Irish theatregoers believed that national theatre was worthy of serious discussion and debate, the occurrence of which ultimately encouraged audiences to make up their own minds about the production. Much of that debate focussed on the play’s relevance to contemporary events, including the changing role of women in Irish life, the ongoing conflict in Northern Ireland, and fears about the erosion of Irish sovereignty caused by the impending transformation of the European Community into the European Union (the Maastricht Treaty was due to become part of Irish law on 1 January 1992, causing some anxiety within Ireland). So again, we see an example of an interesting form of national theatre, formulated to address the concerns, and challenge the assumptions, of a specifically Irish audience.

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The Abbey did not produce *The Plough* again until eleven years later, in November 2002 (the longest previous gap between productions had been eight years<sup>7</sup>). Much had changed during the intervening years. Irish life during the 1990s was dominated by the so-called ‘Celtic Tiger’, which lasted from approximately 1993 to 2001<sup>8</sup>, which

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<sup>7</sup> *The Plough* appeared at least once a year at the Abbey from 1926 to 1939. Thereafter, productions became less frequent, appearing every four to seven years (Source, NTA).

<sup>8</sup> While the term ‘Celtic Tiger’ is used to refer to Ireland’s economic performance as recently as 2006, I feel that it is best suited to describe the period of economic development from the early 1990s onwards,

saw Ireland become one of the world's richest countries. GDP per capita jumped from €9,846 in 1990, to €23,909 in 1999, and on to €33,875 in 2003 (CSO Principal Statistics 2004). However, the benefits of the Celtic Tiger period have been unevenly distributed. By 2004, the gap between rich and poor in Ireland was one of the widest in the world, second only to that in the United States (cf. United Nations 2004). And, according to a 2003 OECD Report, the apparent success of the Celtic Tiger period has masked serious problems in the provision of healthcare, education, infrastructure, housing, local government, and environmental protection in Ireland. The other major feature of Irish life during the decade was the development of the Peace Process in Northern Ireland. At the beginning of the 1990s, the Northern Ireland Troubles seemed intractable: the early years of the decade were among the worst of the entire conflict, with 81 deaths in 1990, and 96 in 1991, the year in which Hynes's *Plough* appeared (Sutton, 2004). However, secret talks between the IRA and the British government were underway at that time, leading to the development of the Peace Process, which resulted in the Good Friday Agreement of 1998. By enshrining the notion of 'parity of esteem' in the legislation of both Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic, the Peace Process established that there could be no single, homogenous Irish identity: a person living in one of the six counties of Northern Ireland could identify himself or herself as Irish, British, or both. Many other significant alterations in Irish life occurred during this time: the secularisation of society, the transformation of Ireland into a country of net migration, the liberalisation of the legal system, the changing status of Irish women, and the revelation of political corruption and clerical child abuse. The important point here is that Ireland in 2002 was thoroughly different

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which was a result of foreign direct investment, low corporate taxation, and an increase in exports in such areas as software and pharmaceuticals. While these areas of the Irish economy remain strong, economic output since 2002 has been influenced more by developments in the Irish property market than global economics.

to the Ireland of 1991, and that no single narrative or theory can meaningfully explain or encompass all of these changes.

The 2002 production of *The Plough and the Stars* presented an opportunity for the production team to use the national status of the play as a way of analysing and responding to contemporary social arrangements, as Hynes had done in 1991. The poverty of the characters might have been used to challenge Irish complacency about its newfound economic prosperity; the treatment of Bessie Burgess might have allowed for an exploration of the changing demography of Irish society, and the play's treatment of militarism might have allowed audiences to reflect upon the changing status of politics in Northern Ireland, as well as Irish involvement in the emerging 'war against terror'. In short, the national status of the play might have been used to provoke countless new modes of enquiry into the transformed Ireland. Despite the existence of these opportunities, however, the play as directed by Ben Barnes was firmly in the style of a heritage production, with the theatre's national remit being fulfilled not on stage, but in a range of ancillary activities of civic merit, such as international touring and outreach.

First, the play was stripped entirely of any relevance to contemporary events. Its meaning was generated not by the audience's interaction with text and performance, but rather by the use of cinematic and musical cues. Traditional Irish music was used to instruct the audience on the appropriate emotional responses, while also authenticating the action as recognisably 'Irish'. Similarly, spotlighting and freeze-framing were used to underscore key moments, signalling an unwillingness to trust audiences' ability to draw their own conclusions. While Garry Hynes's production had emphasised its characters' poverty by using an almost empty and colourless set, Barnes's production filled the stage with expensively constructed

images of destitution: the front rows of the auditorium were removed, replaced by layers of rubble and detritus, while the crumbling tenement building in which most of the action takes place dominated the stage, impressively revealing how much money the theatre had spent on design. In scale and substance, the set created a (presumably unintended) tension between medium and message.

Second, the production was accompanied by an array of supporting materials and events, coordinated by the theatre's Outreach and Education department. While the Abbey (in common with many Irish theatres) routinely engages in outreach activity, it invested an unprecedented level of funding in support of *The Plough*: a resource guide and DVD were produced to accompany the production, both of which featured interviews with the creative team and background information about O'Casey and the play. Although educational materials had been produced for previous Abbey productions, none had received so great a level of investment (indeed, only one subsequent production has received similar levels of funding: Barnes's 2004 production of *The Playboy of Western World*). While such material undoubtedly has value – and while outreach is important – it is notable that the effect of these materials is to present the meaning of the play as stable, as something that can be consumed by audiences. Essays by Martin Drury and Christopher Murray in the book, and interviews with Barnes on the DVD, instruct audiences on how they should receive the play, highlighting themes and key features<sup>9</sup>. A significant element of this process is a concentration on the historical context of the play: the publication and DVD emphasise the accuracy of accents and settings, suggesting that the production aimed to communicate more about Ireland's past than its present or future.

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<sup>9</sup> Cf. Drury, 2002

Third, the play appears to have been designed to appeal to theatregoers' sense of connoisseurship. With its high production values, expensive design, and the inclusion of many of Ireland's leading actors in its cast, the production was presented as a lavish spectacle that compared favourably with other forms of cultural output available at that time. This emphasis on connoisseurship had become an important feature of the Abbey's management under Barnes's tenure. For example, he attempted to differentiate the Abbey from other forms of culture: one of his earliest decisions as artistic director was to raise ticket prices, not from a need to increase funding, but because he believed that audiences found the Abbey's products too cheap (White 2000 12). Barnes argued that the value of the Abbey would be determined by its relative expense in comparison to other forms of entertainment, rather than by its theatrical output. Furthermore, the production is an example of the rise in event-driven theatre in Ireland, in which audiences do not purchase access to a play, but instead consume the experience of having been to the play. Michael Colgan, the director of Dublin's Gate Theatre, has been extremely influential in promoting this practice in Ireland, as director of three Beckett Festivals, two Pinter Festivals, and a co-producer of the 1999 Friel Festival. He explains the reasons for his interest in such practice: 'I don't think audiences will sit down for two hours anymore unless you give them a reward. And the reward you give them is by telling them that they have been to an *Event*. When you *Event* something, you've a much better chance of getting them to sit through even five hours' of theatre (qtd in Chambers et al 2001 87). The distinguishing characteristic of the 'events' that have been staged since the mid-1990s is that they did not require social or political significance for their value, but proclaimed themselves as events in order to attract audiences. The production of a DVD and book for this production is one example of an 'eventing' strategy; another is



the production's inclusion in the theatre's *abbeyonehundred* centenary programme, as part of which it toured to London in 2005.

The production was generally successful during its Dublin run: if it failed to provoke the excitement that Garry Hynes's 1991 *Plough* had generated, so did it avoid that earlier production's controversial response. In addition, it was well attended by audiences, and was revived in 2003. Reviews for the production were generally positive, though none was unreservedly enthusiastic. Fintan O'Toole (who had resigned his post at the Abbey when Hynes left in 1993) offers a typical example: he saw Barnes's *Plough* as 'a forceful, persuasive mainstream production of a great play' but was disappointed that it had failed to rise to the challenges laid down by Hynes in 1991.<sup>10</sup>

The production subsequently toured to London in 2005 as part of the Abbey's centenary programme, where it generated a mixed response, receiving positive reviews from such critics as Michael Billington and Benedict Nightingale, while Paul Taylor was particularly scathing. 'The only thing that this touring revival by Ben Barnes and Dublin's Abbey Theatre is likely to provoke is incredulity', he wrote. '[H]ow can they have made a play that is so bursting with tragicomic, unregenerate humanity feel so remote and unengaging?' (2005, 40). Notwithstanding this variety of responses, it is possible to identify some areas of consensus: most agree that Barnes's version was produced with skill and efficiency; few seem to have been moved or challenged by it.

I would suggest that Barnes's production should be seen in the context of the impact of globalisation on theatre generally, and in particular on the Abbey. Theatre. Ireland was by 2002 increasingly affected by the economic ideologies most associated

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<sup>10</sup> It may be worth observing that O'Toole failed to mention his own involvement in Hynes's production in his review of Barnes's work.

with globalisation, such as competition, privatisation, deregulation, and liberalisation. This led theatres to redefine themselves according to the models of business used mainly by multinational companies. In particular, theatres increasingly present their work as a form of 'brand', so that an individual's consumption of a theatre product becomes a mode of identification with the values that product purports to represent, such as authenticity, iconoclasm, sophistication, or resistance. The use in *The Plough and the Stars* of a range of authenticating markers allows the production to be branded as Irish, a status that allows it to be recognisable to audiences internationally, facilitating international touring, and enhancing access to the theatre for tourist visitors to Ireland<sup>11</sup>.

The creation of global theatre networks creates opportunities for companies to earn large amounts of money but doing so also incurs serious financial risks. These risks are exacerbated by the fact that the reception (and hence the financial success) of a theatre product is generally dependent on unpredictable factors, such as reviews, performances by actors, and so on. Branding is a means of insuring against such risks, allowing the reception of a play to be determined in advance: it is, in other words, a way of facilitating the secure mobility of a theatre product through global networks. This mobility arises from the impact of mass media entertainment such as cinema on the production of theatre. Walter Benjamin had argued that 'any thorough study proves that there is indeed no greater contrast than that of the stage play to a work of art that is completely subject to, or like the film, founded in mechanical reproduction' (223). However, while the presence of live actors before an audience means that important differences between cinema and theatre remain, the reception of both is increasingly influenced by the concept of *reproducibility*. Benjamin had observed

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<sup>11</sup> For further discussion of the branding of Irish identity in theatre, cf. Lonergan, 2004. For discussion of the Abbey Theatre and tourism, cf. Bennett, 2004.

that in older art forms such as painting and theatre, ‘the presence of the original is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity’ so that ‘the original preserved all its authority’ (223). In a theatrical context, authority and authenticity were vested in the presence of a live audience and performers. In film, however, ‘man has to operate with his whole living person, while forgoing its aura. For aura is tied to presence: there can be no replica of it. The aura which, on stage, emanates from Macbeth, cannot be separated for the spectators from that of the actor’ (223). A theatrical performance cannot be mechanically reproduced, as Benjamin observes. The use of branding means, however, that the site of authenticity and authority – a production’s ‘aura’ – has been removed from the live performance, and made conceptual: the authenticity of a cultural product is now grounded in the recognisability of its cultural sources. In a branded cultural product, audiences do not experience a performance, but identifies with a concept – with the Irishness of the Abbey Theatre, or a Le Brocquy portrait, or a U2 Album. A theatrical performance cannot be reproduced, and thus is resistant to the centralised management required for mass-mediation. But a brand may be controlled centrally, and reproduced infinitely without a loss of authenticity. This explains producers’ emphasis on the brand over the performance. If a show is internationally distributed, then actors, sets, and performances must change. A brand can be used everywhere, however. Globalization thus creates the conditions under which it became possible to think of theatre as a mass-mediated form of entertainment, with the brand a form of manageable reproduction that is not mechanical but conceptual.

The use of branding, corporate sponsorship, and similar developments facilitates the transformation of theatre into a creative industry. This leads to what China Tao-Wu has termed the ‘privatisation of culture’, where funding for theatre is

moving away from state subsidy and towards corporate sponsorship. The role of the state in this context is to promote work with obvious social utility. Governments are not particularly enthusiastic about funding art, but they will fund activities that are consistent with state concerns. The 2002 *Plough* exemplifies this, with its emphasis on international touring, educational outreach, and other activities that can be related directly to economic output. We have an interesting reversal of roles here, whereby corporations are willing to sponsor art for art's sake, while state agencies insist that theatres must have discernible civic utility – preferably of a kind that can be measured in economic terms. This suggests that the two globalized networks under discussion – the economic and the cultural – are beginning to converge in important respects. Just as the IDA uses the cultural capital of Ireland's writers to 'brand' the nation as a site for investment, so has the production of Irish theatre been influenced by the importation of strategies first developed by corporations and state entities competing on a global network.

What we see therefore is a transformation between 1991 and 2002 of the conception of national theatre in an Irish context, whereby the Abbey has moved from the pinnacle of a vertical network to being one hub on a horizontal network. The 1991 *Plough* was created on the basis that the Abbey theatre was related to but independent of the state: its function was to draw on the best elements of Irish theatre (all of which were positioned below it on a vertical network) as a means of critiquing the state. There were connections between state and the national theatre at this time (principally in relation to funding), but these involved limited interactions, such as the transfer of funds from state to the theatre.

In contrast, the 2002 *Plough* shows that the national theatre has become one hub on a state-run network, operating in tandem with – and governed by similar

ideologies to – such institutions as the IDA, tourism agencies, educational agencies, and so on. The Abbey also operates on an international theatre network where it must compete against other national and international theatres, its success in doing so determined by the dominance and success of branded versions of Irish identity.

This move from being part of a vertical network to occupying a position on many horizontal networks has led to a transformation in the cultural authority of the Abbey theatre. By operating at the summit of a national network, the Abbey in 1991 had an influence on the development of Irish culture and society: Hynes's production was controversial precisely because she used the status of the Abbey to communicate and raise troubling issues. Yet in 2002, we see an Abbey Theatre that is simply one of a number of government agencies engaged in activities of social, civic, and economic utility; it is, furthermore, only one of countless national theatres occupying an international stage, each of them promising various forms of experiences branded as authentic by their use of nationalised stereotypes. The 2002 *Plough* may suggest that national theatres are thriving because the concept of nation is now regarded simply as a brand that can function on the international network, and that the national theatre is just one hub of a state network.

This discussion allows a refocusing of the consideration of the place of national theatre in a globalising world. As David Lloyd points out, there can be 'sound pragmatic reasons' (36) for using the national as a defence against homogenisation. The Abbey Theatre in 1904 was established to resist the homogenising tendencies of a transnational ideology: namely, colonialism. At a time when Ireland is again facing homogenisation and integration into a transnational system over which its citizens have little influence, the purpose of national theatre might be to act as a site of cultural expression and, perhaps, of resistance. This may be

one explanation for the current high status of national theatres throughout the world. The Royal National Theatre in London has, for example, achieved impressive levels of commercial and critical success by producing work such as David Hare's *The Permanent Way* (2003) and *Stuff Happens* (2004), each of which makes use of a state subsidy to challenge government policy at both national and international levels.

It may also be the case that national theatres are thriving because the concept of nation is now regarded as obsolete. The production in 2002 of Ben Barnes's *Plough* implies that this is more likely to be the case, in Ireland anyway. This is not to suggest that education and outreach activities, or international touring, are of themselves bad things – quite the contrary. But there is no evidence in this production of tension between the goals of the national theatre and the interests of both the Irish state and the corporations that sponsor much Irish economic activity. Rather, the production seems to support the goals of the Industrial Development Agency – promoting a representation of Irish identity that is homogenised, regressive, and essentialist – but also recognisable on the international cultural and economic networks. Indeed, we see that old divisions between the economic and the cultural are becoming increasingly redundant, as both become organised into networks that operate in similar and often overlapping ways. This reveals that theatre can interrogate globalization – but it can also act as a vehicle for it.

At present, we see two modes of national theatre jostling with each other for dominance. The first is a national theatre that presents national identity as a globalised brand – a commodified abstraction – that may be diffused internationally, while at home it exists not to challenge state policy, but to enact or promote it. The second is a national theatre grounded in notions of citizenship – one that assumes that theatre practitioners' experiences and concerns with local audiences, even when these

experiences exist only to be rejected or evaluated. These two productions of O'Casey's *Plough and the Stars* – not to mention the original 1926 production of the play – show that, despite globalisation, the category of nation still has value. The question however is this: will that value be construed mainly in civic terms – or economic ones?

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