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Title	'Perform, or Else!'
Author(s)	Haughton, Miriam;Kurdi, Maria
Publication Date	2014
Publication information	Haughton, Miriam , & Kurdi, Maria (2014). Perform, Or Else! Irish Theatre International, 3(1).
Publisher	ISTR Irish Society for Theatre Research
Link to publisher's version	http://istr.ie/irish-theatre-international/irish-theatre-international-3-1-2014/
Item record	http://hdl.handle.net/10379/14592

Editorial

MIRIAM HAUGHTON, MARIA KURDI

Perform, Or Else!

'Freedom [...] is a very good horse to ride, but to ride somewhere'.

Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy* (1869)

This latest issue of *Irish Theatre International* bridges the discourses of theatre practice and research with that of performance studies, and also with the ways in which social, economic, political and cultural activities perform their needs and demands. Recent decades honed these links through the 'turn to performance' markedly explored in the US since the 1960s, as ideas of play, ritual, and performativity flowered and cross-pollinated the humanities and indeed, scientific disciplines, crossing shores and attracting a global reach. This bridge specifically locates these interdisciplinary enquiries in the context of neoliberal economic cultures pervading the western world and further afield, produced and managed under the costume of 'freedom'. Neoliberal engineers and advocates argue for the economic and social benefits such policies offer, foregrounding their argument around the notion of 'freedom'. Freedom is a human right, a moral imperative, and a symbol of progress in civilization. As David Harvey summarizes, 'The founding figures of neoliberal thought took political ideals of human dignity and individual freedom as fundamental, as "the central values of civilization" [...] These values, they held, were threatened not only by fascism, dictatorships, and communism, but by all forms of state intervention that substituted collective judgements for those of individuals free to choose' (*A Brief History of Neoliberalism* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005], p. 5).

The language of neoliberalism is tempting, and its narrative appealing; increased private wealth, globalized connections, and virtual worlds alongside physical encounters where commerce can expand – in theory. As performance scholars are all too well aware, in practice, performances can live and grow separate to the control of their auteurs, gather pace and produce unanticipated responses. Each performance is unique, as is each audience. Fundamentally, this cultural moment is enveloped in a framework of pressure and threat, 'perform – or else'. This threat dominates the arts and academia as well as commercial fields, territorializing all aspects of public life as 'industry', thus treating citizens as consumers, and equating value with wealth and profit.

Ireland is no exception. Nations and communities wield less power over the performance of everyday life than multinationals; what impact can individual presence and action still achieve? This is where the realm of theatre research and sites of performance provide pathways of enquiry and response. Throughout the scope of this issue, these interwoven interdisciplinary dialogues present a querying of value systems in modern and contemporary Irish theatre and performance, and their relationship to Irish culture, society and global politics. Paradigm-shifts in theatre-making and the arts in Ireland since the early twentieth century are potently responding to this culture of pressure, consumption and manipulation of the scope of the term 'performance' through producing work marked by instances of interrogation, exposure, and resistance. Politically and economically, the 'Celtic Tiger' performance of Ireland crashed in 2009, resulting in global recognition as a member of the EU 'PIIGS' [Portugal, Ireland, Italy, Greece, Spain] category. In a matter of months, the international branding of the nation jumped from Celtic Tiger to Kitten. Socially, individuals and communities struggled to cope with performing daily tasks and rituals. Artistically, the same period is incredibly rich. While Arts Council funding and other supports have been heavily penalized, many artists and companies survive due to the increasing audience interest in their challenging work. As the momentum of institutional collapse in Ireland roars ahead, the ritual, celebration, and critique facilitated by the arts offers, in varying degrees, access to encounters of integrity, dignity, exposure, truth and community to a shaken Irish society. 'Boom' indeed; the sound of cannon fire on a battlefield. The battlefield is a play for power, where dominant ideas and organizations vie for control and do so under the guise of 'this is good for you'. In this 'democracy', the stronger are not protecting the weaker. Performing 'freedom' through Ireland's neoliberal policies has failed. What horse do we ride now, and in which direction?

At the annual Irish Society for Theatre Research conference in 2012 hosted by NUI Galway, themed 'Perform, or Else!', the call for papers declared that performance 'is how a neo-liberal service economy measures failure or success'. Noting the political under-theorization of this term in Irish theatre and performance, the conference asked how might 'the terms and conditions of the theatrical encounter as imagined by dramatists, directors and performers clarify and/or expand an understanding of social and political value?' Value is the key word in this question, and reflects the overarching enquiry in each of the forthcoming essays, the first versions or parts of which were presented at the conference. Interrogating a culture of performance on and off stage in a

neoliberal climate manifests as an investigation and analysis of value systems between people and place. Activities and relationships often appearing insignificant and everyday through the veneer of habit, dominant attitudes and everyday social practice, become scrutinized in performance, resisting and disrupting normalized and naturalized patterns of viewing and thinking. It is hardly possible to scrutinize the present without pointing back to the past, which often results in a sense of continuity. The first article in the present issue, 'The Cries of Pagan Desperation' by Chris Collins, is concerned with the way in which J. M. Synge uses the performance of the pre-Christian Gaelic ritual of keening in *Riders to the Sea*. In 1904, when the play was first performed, revitalizing this tradition for the stage challenged the cultural expectations dictated by the powerful Catholic Church and its influence on nationalist ideas about theatre. 'Pre-Christian residual culture could be instrumental in the articulation of state-orientated nationalism. However, if the pre-Christian fantasy of the Celtic Geist materialized as pre-Christian reality then it was promptly removed from cultural hegemony, because its apparent pre-political logic was problematical for the habitations of Catholic, bourgeois modernity' Collins writes. Performance in Synge's work, thus, assumes a disruptive, critical role and intervenes in the univocal, restrictive power and value systems of the bourgeois nationalists, potential ancestors of today's neoliberals in Ireland.

Indeed, Siobhan O'Gorman's essay 'Scenographic Interactions' marks the roots of Ireland's turn to western first world economics in the 1950s, seeking the leadership and expertise of economics from the world stage. Employing the Pike Theatre's scenographic histories and wider Irish visual culture as case studies, O'Gorman interrogates how what we see is prepared images, moulded, informed and reflecting a much larger canvas. Placing these design and performance histories among the cultural critique of 1950s tells a wider narrative; one that encompasses policy making at government level, during an era when Ireland moved from economic isolation to a global marketplace. Thus, O'Gorman maps a turning point in Ireland's economic policies, which are fundamental to the present-day pressures to perform. Considering the role of multiple state organizations, she argues, 'These organizations harnessed visual and theatrical culture to enhance Ireland's performance on the international stage, and to promote what can now be seen as a revisionist questioning of established constructions of Irishness'.

Jumping to the present post-millennium and post-Celtic Tiger era, Lisa Fitzgerald's essay presents how fifty-odd years on, Ireland's international

economics imprints everyday artistic practice and cultural consumption. She acutely reviews the policies of the Arts Council in her essay 'Uneasy Bedfellows', bringing the daily challenges and complexities of Ireland's venues and theatremakers to the fore. Through analysis of 'creative clustering' in recent years and the 'production hub' model encouraged through recent Arts Council policies, Fitzgerald asserts that while economic funding to the arts must be sustainable, at the same time, fears are widespread that ultimately, 'the sporadic and somewhat nomadic work of the production hubs model and the clustering of theatre practitioners in varying projects will destabilize a successful framework for theatre making'.

Eamonn Jordan has appropriately chosen 'Respond or Else' as the title of his analysis of Conor McPherson's *The Weir* at the Donmar Warehouse, London, 2013. Performances elicit responses of many kinds, which then have an immense role in alerting theatre people as well as authors to audience needs and the possibility to influence those needs. While providing a highly perceptive analysis of the revival of *The Weir* directed by Josie Rourke, with attention to all kinds of theatrical detail, Jordan raises important and also intrusive questions about what critics and audience members bring with them to the theatre, which will then manipulate their responses. Among so much else, '[t]here can be problems with being over-familiar with a work, less emotionally engaged, less easily instinctive and also perhaps overly anticipative in one's responses' Jordan warns. The endless range of responses and interpretations are both culturally and economically embedded, therefore, to continue this train of thought, they are not at all free, irrespective of how subjective they may seem, from the influence of the larger political milieu, its values and constraints.

'Gay Masculinities in Performance: Towards a Queer Dramaturgy' by Cormac O'Brien has most of the above mentioned strands in its hold. O'Brien analyses some contemporary Irish plays and performances which address issues of gay identity and subjectivity utilizing conventional and experimental strategies respectively. The former evoke neoliberal pressures towards assimilation, whereas the latter place emphasis on performativity as a force to contest commodified versions and fixities of Irish masculinity. The author argues that 'there has been a recent shift in performances of gay masculinities in Irish theatrical culture', which can be identified 'as a move from gay dramas into queer theatre'. This move is evaluated as a healthy one, liberating theatre and performance from the evolving 'homonormativity' in neoliberal cultures. To a degree, 'homonormativity' works similarly to bourgeois nationalism

which, in Synge's time and later, restricted the conception of Irish identity to purify and homogenize it in the interest of what its representatives thought was progress and (national) freedom.

This collection of papers would not be complete without the striking contribution of Neil Watkins, an Irish theatre maker's reflections regarding how he experienced a call to 'Perform, Or Else!' amidst the problems with selfhood he confronts. His piece delves into the sensitive issue of artistic freedom, implying the imperative to constantly revise assumptions about what performance might/should mean to performers, spectators, critics and those in charge of distributing funds for cultural production to be consumed by different layers of the society. 'Art, art, art, is suffering because of self-consciousness, fear and ego. And the standard from the Irish Institutions is sending out the wrong message to the masses. Work is too often soulless', Watkins rightly warns us.

When scholars, theatre makers and communities turn to the archives of our theatre and performance history in 100 years, what will the records tell them? Early in the twentieth century, during the creative lifetime of Synge, the island of Ireland was under the rule of the British Empire, and factions throughout the nation were readying themselves for resistance against colonialism; ruling forces which prevented society existing in the 'freedom' preferable to them. These experiences and histories were captured, complicated and contested through the plays and artworks of politicized playwrights, poets and individuals. They tell of action and consequence, short-term and long-term. In 2014, notions of freedom remain pivotal to how we govern and live on this island, among neighbours and on distant shores. Will the theatre of today, produced in a climate of neoliberal policy and centralized European hegemony, further complicated by remnants of patriarchal Irish laws and customs, be a strange story to the future civilization, or a familiar one? Publications like the present one with its inquisitive material will hopefully survive and tell future readers, some perhaps our representatives, about the interface between theatre studies discourse, performance, society and economy in our time.

As guest editors we express gratitude to the president of ISTR, Dr Melissa Sihra, for asking us to guest edit this significant issue. Thanks are due to the authors as well, including theatre maker Neil Watkins, who have answered the call and are bringing fresh insights to the broad theme of 'Perform, Or Else!' in their papers. Further, we thank members of the ITI advisory board who were ready to become involved in the peer-reviewing process of the papers and offered the authors (and editors) valuable advice and suggestions about

revisions. Finally, we are grateful to Carysfort Press and the Arts Council Ireland/An Chomhairle Ealaíon for generously assisting and supporting the publication of this journal issue, which would not have materialized without their kind consideration and efforts. We hope it offers as much value to its readers as it has to its editors and authors, making Irish theatre research and practice all the richer, in uncertain yet provocative times.