UNCONSCIOUS BIASES IN IRISH THEATRE
Reading plays by women before and after #WakingTheFeminists

A Thesis submitted for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Department of Drama, School of Creative Arts
The University of Dublin, Trinity College

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2021
DECLARATION

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SUMMARY

The emergence of #WakingTheFeminists in response to the Abbey Theatre’s male-dominated 2016 “Waking The Nation” programme confirmed the presence of systemic gender bias within Irish theatre. This thesis investigates the root causes of this gendered disparity by using research from cognitive science, linguistics and neuroeconomics alongside feminist and performance studies to analyse how unconscious biases affect the ways plays by women are evaluated. It introduces Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner’s theory of conceptual blending to illustrate how unconscious biases infiltrate the play-reading process, affecting not only how the programmer imagines the play working on stage, but how they assess its merit against an implicit canonical standard.

Initially focussing on the period from the start of Fiach Mac Conghail’s directorship at the Abbey in 2005, until the emergence of #WakingTheFeminists in 2015, the thesis draws on Irish plays by women that premiered in the Republic of Ireland, Northern Ireland, and Great Britain to explore how unconscious biases effect the way new scripts are perceived. Chapter One argues that the process of evaluating a play script relies on the creation of an imagined production of the play in the mind of the programmer using conceptual blending. Taking examples from plays premiered in Ireland, north and south, including Carmel Winters’ Best Man, Abbie Spallen’s Strandline and Lally the Scut, Lucy Caldwell’s Leaves, Stacey Gregg’s Scorch and Morna Regan’s The House Keeper, the chapter pinpoints the place where unconscious biases infiltrate the play-reading process. Drawing on Baddeley and Hitch’s multi-component model of working memory, alongside Patrick Colm Hogan’s theory of literary reading, it shows how both memory and emotion affect the kinds of responses a programmer has to a new play. Chapter Two draws on linguistic research by Robin Tolmach Lakoff, Jennifer Coates and
Dale Spender to explore the ways in which the linguistic structures of women’s plays create worlds defined by collaboration, connectedness, and community. It shows how language triggers implicit associations within the blending model that are driven by the linguistic structures and use of dialect in Elaine Murphy’s *Shush*, Carmel Winters’ *B for Baby* and Stacey Gregg’s *Shibboleth*. Drawing on Stephen Jeffrey’s classification of the nine basic stories, and Jane Alison’s description of the seven basic forms, Chapter Three investigates the role that basic forms and stories play in anchoring new plays in relation to the canon. Taking examples from Irish plays that premiered in Great Britain, including Stacey Gregg’s *Override* and *Lagan*, Abbie Spallen’s *Pumpgirl*, Nancy Harris’ *Our New Girl*, Lynda Radley’s *Futureproof*, Fiona Doyle’s *Coolatully* and *Deluge*, Stella Feehily’s *Dreams of Violence*, *O Go My Man* and *Bang Bang Bang*, Lucy Caldwell’s *Notes to Future Self*, Ursula Rani Sarma’s *The Dark Things* and Ailís Ní Ríain’s *Desolate Heaven*, it reveals how these basic structures determine the kinds of responses programmers have to plays.

The timeline then shifts in Chapter Four to the period between 2017 and 2019 to analyse the gender equality policies that were put in place by ten leading theatre organisations after #WakingTheFeminists. Finding they do not address script assessments specifically, the chapter then shows how biases are continuing to manifest in the artistic programmes of the Abbey Theatre, Fishamble: The New Play Company, Druid, and their producing partners. Having established this policy gap, the Conclusion recommends that new writing companies introduce clear evaluative criteria, horizontal reading structures, and anonymised readings for all scripts to mitigate the effects of biased evaluations. This thesis will provide a vital insight into unconscious evaluation processes at a turning point in the quest for gender parity in Irish theatre, while providing a path towards lessening the impact of biases on theatre programming in the future.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS


The research conducted in this thesis was funded by the Irish Research Council under the Government of Ireland Postgraduate Scholarship, the Trinity Trust Travel Grant, and the HEA Covid Extension Fund 2020.

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INTRODUCTION: BETWEEN THE CENTENARIES ABBEYONEHUNDRED AND WAKING THE NATION

Lian Bell, Facebook, 28 October 2015, 13.53pm

Just did a quick trot up of the Abbey Theatre's 2016 programme 'Waking the Nation' launched moments ago. Of the 10 listed productions on the website there are:
9 male and 1 female writers (of Me, Mólser - which is already touring in 2015) and 7 male and 2 female directors (again, one is of Me, Mólser).
I can't see a credit for who's directing The Wake, so that might redress the balance a little. Though it did take me a good bit of searching to come up with a director's name for Me, Mólser as Sarah Fitzgibbon doesn't seem to be credited on the Abbey's website.
Adding to that the main stage show that's on through January 2016, and Pan Pan's revival of the (wonderful) All That Fall in February, there's another two men directing plays by a further two men.
Happy to be proven wrong, if I've missed something major in my flurry of righteous indignation.
But, like, REALLY?

Lian Bell, Facebook, 28 October 2015, 13.53pm

@fmacconghail, Twitter, 29 October 2015, 9:36am

Also, sometimes plays and ideas that we have commissioned by and about women just don't work out. That has happened. Them the breaks.
At lunchtime on 28 October 2015, Lian Bell said “Fuck it” and pressed send on a Facebook post that reverberated across the internet, initiating a tsunami of feminist anger, and creating a seismic shift in Irish theatre. The tremor that started this tsunami was the launch of the Abbey Theatre’s 2016 centenary programme, “Waking The Nation,” intended to mark one hundred years since the armed insurrection against British rule, known as the Easter Rising. The programme was designed to “interrogate and question the legacy of the Easter Rising rather than celebrate the centenary” and included ten
productions, a mixture of new plays and revivals from the canon. Only one of these was written by a woman. *Me, Mollser* by Ali White had been touring since 2012 as part of the Abbey Theatre’s Community and Education programme and would not appear on the stages of the national theatre in 2016. The initial anger and outrage at the male-dominance of this programme grew into a co-ordinated movement designed to hold the Irish theatre industry to account for its persistent and gross gender inequality. Counting, an important aspect of Bell’s original post, became a key part of the campaign which culminated in the publication of a report that revealed that, between 2006 and 2015, only 28% of plays by the top ten funded theatre organisations were authored by women. It also exposed “an inverse relationship between levels of funding and female representation. In other words, the higher the funding an organisation receives, the lower the female presence.”

Although the starkness of these findings conclusively proved that there was a serious problem in Irish theatre, the numbers could only quantify that problem. When the Abbey’s Director, Fiach Mac Conghail, apologised for the disparity in “Waking The Nation,” he attributed the error in his decision-making to unconscious gender bias. This thesis investigates the root causes of the gendered disparity in Irish theatre programming by using research from cognitive science, linguistics and neuroeconomics alongside feminist and performance studies to analyse how unconscious biases affect the ways plays by women are evaluated. By looking at why plays by women are more likely to be deemed unsuitable for production than those by men, it complements the quantitative

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analysis by explaining why this inequality came about and what steps can be taken to change it.

WakingTheFeminists

Bell’s Facebook post tapped into a well of latent frustration about the way women were being excluded, ignored, and undermined within Irish theatre. However, the remarkable events that followed solidified what might have been a fizzle of feminist frustration into a slick campaign for change. On Thursday, 29 October 2015, as he travelled to the airport for a holiday, Mac Conghail took to Twitter to defend his programme amid growing online criticism. Among the many tweets issued, he wrote:

I'm sorry that I have no female playwrights next season. But I'm not going to produce a play that is not ready and undermine the writer #wtn

I don't and haven't programmed plays or productions on a gender basis. I took decisions based on who I admired and wanted to work with.

All my new play choices are based on the quality of the play, form and theme. It’s my call and I’m pleased with the plays I picked for #wtn

In programming any season I want to make sure that the plays are good (imho), ready and delivered. 1/2

I’m not going to expose any playwright, man or woman, by producing a play that’s not ready. Always a challenge in programming 2/2

Also, sometimes the plays and ideas that we have commissioned by and about women just don’t work out. That has happened. Them the breaks.

(@fmacconghail 29 October 2015).

#wtn stands for “Waking The Nation;” imho is an acronym for “in my humble opinion.” Following significant backlash, Mac Conghail later deleted some of these tweets, including the seditious “Them the breaks.” He has since deleted his Twitter account.
His comment, “Them the breaks,” was incendiary to the growing protest. Testimonies from many artists published online revealed the extent of the anger and frustration felt by women working in the industry. By Saturday, 31 October, calls began to be made online for a public meeting. Emails started flowing the next day and on the following Thursday, just eight days after the “Waking The Nation” announcement, fourteen theatre workers met at the offices of Rough Magic Theatre Company to plan the event. The next day, Friday, 6 November, Fiach Mac Conghail returned from his holiday and issued a letter of apology:

I regret the gender imbalance in our WAKING THE NATION programme for the significant year ahead. The fact that I haven’t programmed a new play by a female playwright is not something I can defend.

This experience has presented a professional challenge to me as a programmer and has made me question the filters and factors that influence my decision-making.  

This was followed on Monday, 9 November by a statement from the Board and Director of the Abbey acknowledging that “the 2016 programme does not represent gender equality.” However, these apologies were already too late, and in the interim, a team of highly motivated activists had formed and planned a major live event, thus laying the foundations for what would become a year-long campaign for gender equality that would not only penetrate the core of the Irish theatre sector, but have widespread reach throughout the arts sector in Ireland and internationally.

The timing of Mac Conghail’s holiday was fortuitous for the establishment of the movement, however there were other factors that contributed to its success. Many theatre

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workers had been deeply involved in the recent campaign to legislate for same-sex marriage, which, particularly for a younger cohort, was their first foray into political activism. Energised by the success of that campaign, they were primed and eager to continue lobbying for change. The timing of the “Waking The Nation” launch was also an auspicious moment as the theatre sector was on the cusp of transformation. Mac Conghail’s eleven-year tenure as Director was coming to an end, and there was enormous excitement about his successors. The retirement of Michael Colgan from his decades-long reign at the helm of the Gate Theatre was also widely anticipated. The expectation of imminent changes in leadership at the two biggest Dublin theatres was augmented by a workforce who, since funding cuts in 2009, were mostly sustaining careers beyond the patronage of the major funded companies. The combination of the knowledge that the existing directors’ eras were at an end, with artists already adept at creating their own work, meant that the fear of repercussions for speaking out, which had silenced dissenting voices in the past, was greatly reduced. In short, the atmosphere was ripe for change.

Amid the initial flurry of activity on social media, #WakingTheFeminists received public backing, not only in Ireland, but from the arts community internationally with celebrities including Meryl Streep and Debra Messing giving their support to the cause. This support helped to push the excitement about the public event to fever-pitch and when tickets for the meeting were released, they sold out in seven minutes. The Abbey Theatre auditorium was packed to capacity for that first public meeting, which began at 1pm on Thursday, 12 November. While thirty women spoke from the Abbey stage of their personal experiences of gender-based discrimination at the national theatre and beyond, many more gathered in the foyer and bar to listen to the event via a live feed. A further 1,800 people watched a livestream via the video streaming application, Periscope. The atmosphere was angry, impassioned, and electric. Speeches from the stage
were followed by many more voices from the floor, including Fiach Mac Conghail’s, who, laudably, said that he was listening. The afternoon concluded with the entire auditorium on their feet dancing to Aretha Franklin’s “Respect.” The rousing, cathartic release of the music also revealed the intent of the room: these women were not requesting, but demanding, to be treated equally.

“One thing I’ve learned over the past tumultuous year is that it doesn’t matter how much of a right-thinking, left-leaning, liberal, card-carrying feminist you are, in a sector we like to think is open and progressive, it’s a shock to realise that you were part of the problem.”

Anne Clarke, One Thing More, Abbey Theatre, 14 November 2016

#WakingTheFeminists committed to a year of campaigning, and in 2016 held two further major public events: “Spring Forward” took place at Liberty Hall in Dublin on International Women’s Day, 8 March; and “One Thing More” saw a return to the Abbey auditorium on 14 November. Smaller events also took place on 6 January to mark Nollaig na mBan (Women’s Christmas) and on 25 June for Feminist Midsummer. Although there were isolated voices of dissent, the overwhelming reaction to #WakingTheFeminists was embarrassment by a theatre community that had prided itself on its liberal values. Its success was due in part to the widespread support of the campaign’s objectives and its first achievement became clear on 30 August 2016, when the Abbey published its “Eight Guiding Principles for Gender Equality.” This publication was welcomed as a benchmark for the broader theatre community and was followed on 20 December by the first meeting of the Gender Policy Working Group. The group comprised initially five, and later, ten, leaders of theatre organisations and was created to collectively generate gender policies
for each organisation. A further significant milestone was the call by the Minister for Arts in March 2017, for all national cultural institutions to have gender policies in place by 2018. #WakingTheFeminists’ activity culminated on 7 June 2017 with the launch of their research findings, Gender Counts: An Analysis of Gender in Irish Theatre 2006-2015. The report focussed on the top ten funded theatre organisations in the Republic of Ireland, including two festivals, Dublin Theatre Festival and Dublin Fringe Festival; two producing houses, the Abbey Theatre and the Gate Theatre; one multi-disciplinary arts venue, Project Arts Centre; the dedicated children’s cultural centre, The Ark; and four theatre companies: Druid, Rough Magic Theatre Company, Barnstorm Theatre Company (focussed on theatre for young audiences) and Pan Pan Theatre. For the ten years between 2006 and 2015, the report presented percentages for female representation across the roles of Authors (28%), Directors (37%), Cast (42%) and the four major design disciplines, Set (40%), Lighting (34%), Costume (79%) and Sound (9%) for the ten organisations. In total, 1,155 productions and 9,205 roles were considered. Among the key findings, the researchers noted that “The four highest-funded organisations in our sample have the lowest female representation” and that “women are poorly represented in six of the seven roles studied; i.e., in every role except Costume Designer.” The achievements of #WakingTheFeminists resulted from the positive channelling of the deep anger initiated by the 2016 programme, an anger fuelled by the extremity of the levels of inequality exhibited at the national theatre since its own centenary celebrations in 2004.

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7 Initially comprised of representatives from The Lir, The Everyman, Abbey Theatre, Cork Midsummer Festival and The Corn Exchange, they were later joined by Druid, Gate Theatre, Fishamble: The New Play Company, Rough Magic Theatre Company and Dublin Theatre Festival.
8 Donohue et al, Gender Counts, 7.
“There’s a queue of women with ink-stained fingers and pages full of life on Abbey street and we’re ploughing through the stars one more time and murdering Desdemona post prayer, We’re There, a hundred years after and four hundred years since and dead men are still taking precedent over living women”

Laura Bowler, #WakingTheFeminists Public Meeting
Abbey Theatre, 12 November 2015

ABBEYONEHUNDRED AND WAKING THE NATION

As #WakingTheFeminists gained traction, many people were reminded of the previous centenary celebrations at the Abbey, when the male-dominant programme generated similar controversy because of its lack of female playwrights. “abbeyonehundred,” an ambitious programme marking the theatre’s first hundred years, was launched in November 2003. Every play programmed for the main stage in 2004 was written by a man. On the Peacock stage Paula Meehan’s play for young audiences, The Wolf Of Winter, ran over the Christmas period of 2003-4, while Marina Carr’s Portia Coughlan received a two-week run as part of the “Abbey and Ireland” season the following October. The absence of a production of any play by Lady Gregory was noticeable; her vast body of work was represented by a single staged reading of Spreading the News in the theatre’s rehearsal room. In The Irish Times, Gerry Smith described the paucity of female playwrights as a “miserable representation, given that the Abbey is celebrating 100 years of existence.”9 The fact that the gender disparity of the programme’s playwrights wasn’t even on the theatre’s radar is evident in comments from

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then Artistic Director, Ben Barnes, published in the *Sunday Business Post*: “‘It never occurred to me that we could be castigated for lack of commitment to women’s writing,’ he says, adding that he has ‘no problem with how women are represented.’” In his published diaries, in a vein similar to that expressed by Mac Conghail twelve years later, Barnes admitted he thought “it was a non-issue and that [he] would only ever discriminate in favour of what [he] judged to be good plays, irrespective of the gender of the writers.” While many journalists addressed this issue following the programme launch, as the year got underway, it became increasingly clear that there were deeper issues urgently affecting the existence of the national theatre. The vast debt incurred by an overambitious centenary programme led to investigations that revealed serious financial issues at the theatre, effectively removing the issue of gender equality from the table. Dismissed and disregarded, gender inequality was deemed secondary to the pressing financial and governance concerns, rather than part of the problem.

When Fiach Mac Conghail took over the reins in 2005, he inherited a theatre on the brink of destruction with a €3.5 million deficit, a reputation in ruins and a re-ignition of the conversation about the merits of the national theatre’s existence. Achieving the remarkable feat of securing €4.23 million from the Department of Arts, Sport and Tourism in 2005 to clear the deficit and fund structural changes within the company, Mac Conghail was hailed as the saviour of the Abbey Theatre. However, his appointment was in the more administrative role of Theatre Director, rather than Artistic Director, and the legacy of his twelve years at the helm is notable for conservative programming that

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13 Maples, *Culture War*, 234-5.
kept the company in business rather than artistically ambitious work. In 2011, remarking on Mac Conghail’s directorship, Peter Crawley described how “such financial conservatism had had inevitable consequences for the programme, which has featured prominent revivals of previous successes, productions imported from other companies and conspicuously thinner programmes at the Peacock.”¹⁴ Un-noted by Crawley, but evident from a review of the theatre’s programmes during these years, is that the consequences of this fiscal conservatism for women were dismal.

Table 1 shows that of the 140 plays produced between 2005 and 2015, just nineteen (14%) were by women.

**Table 1: Plays by Women at Abbey Theatre 2005 – 2015¹⁵**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total Plays</th>
<th>Plays by women</th>
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<td>12</td>
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<td>2007</td>
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<td>2</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>140</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>14%</td>
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Source: Abbey Theatre Archive, [https://www.abbeytheatre.ie/about/archive/](https://www.abbeytheatre.ie/about/archive/)

Following the controversy around the Abbey Theatre’s 2004 centenary programme, particularly the lack of attention afforded to Lady Gregory in the commemorative year,

¹⁵ Including new plays (and new adaptations), new productions of plays from the canon, touring plays (including TYA) and short plays. Includes productions, co-productions and plays produced in association with the Abbey as well as presentations of plays by visiting companies.
¹⁶ Percentages have been rounded for clarity.
no attempt to improve the representation of female playwrights was made. While the 2005 programme included the production of a newly commissioned play by Shelagh Stephenson (the first female British playwright to be commissioned), in 2006 there were again no plays by women presented at the Abbey Theatre. In 2007, the Abbey produced new productions of Caryl Churchill’s *A Number* and Marina Carr’s *Woman and Scarecrow*, while in 2008, Belinda McKeon’s short play *Two Houses* was produced by THISISPOPBABY in association with the Abbey at Project Arts Centre. It was, therefore, not until 2009, five years after the male-dominated “abbeyonehundred” programme, before a new play by an Irish woman appeared at the national theatre: Marina Carr’s *Marble*. While the situation improved in 2011 with four plays by female playwrights; out of a total seventeen productions presented that year, this still only represented 24% of the total programme. In 2013, Elaine Murphy became the first woman other than Marina Carr to have a play programmed on the Abbey’s main stage in twenty-five years. The following year saw no plays by women at the Abbey.

Of the forty-seven new plays produced during this eleven-year period, twelve (25%) were by women. Of the fifty-two productions of existing plays during this eleven-year period, four (8%) were written by women. Of the fifteen productions that had tours or revivals during this eleven-year period, one (7%) was by a woman. Of the twenty-four plays presented at the Abbey by visiting companies, two (8%) were by women. Of the nineteen plays by women presented at the Abbey during this eleven-year period, only three (16%) were presented on the theatre’s main stage. Of the seven productions that received over 100 performances (including tours and revivals), one (14%) was by a woman. No matter how the numbers are broken down, the answer remains the same: women did not feature significantly in any part of the national theatre’s programme.
The seven most prolific productions between 2005 and 2015 were *The Importance of Being Earnest* by Oscar Wilde with prologue by Conall Morrisson (154 performances); *Terminus* by Mark O’Rowe (141 performances); *Quietly* by Owen McCafferty (125 performances); *Sive* by John B Keane (125 performances); *The Plough and the Stars* by Sean O’Casey (117 performances); *B for Baby* by Carmel Winters (107 performances); and *The Playboy of the Western World* by Bisi Adigun & Roddy Doyle (103 performances). With all seven plays directed by male directors and two plays with all-male casts (Morrisson’s *Earnest* and McCafferty’s *Quietly*), the most performed plays from this period reveal the hyper-masculinity of programming at the Abbey. While describing an “Abbey style” is by definition limiting, there was a certain expectation of the type of play usually encountered at the national theatre during Mac Conghail’s tenure. Playwright-led, straight plays of about two hours duration, that address political or social issues were typical Abbey fare. In an interview in *The Stage* in 2016, Mac Conghail described his programming as follows: “I wanted to position the Abbey as the home of the big production: the convergence of classic plays set in particular contexts; major works that offered audiences a sense of spectacle and allowed actors to work with the likes of Shakespeare and Shaw.” Although the 2004 crisis created enough drama to keep the myth of “controversies at the Abbey” floating through the national broadsheets, onstage controversies were few and far between, with the theatre retaining its conservative middle-class audience through a mixture of well-worn classics and new writing from middle-aged men. With such drastic over-emphasis on plays by men

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17 Data extracted from the Abbey Theatre Archive, https://www.abbeytheatre.ie/about/archive/.
forming the programmes since the previous centenary celebrations, the level of outrage at the 2016 centenary programme announcement was not surprising.

"there can be no more shoving us into a corner labelled ‘Reading Series’ or ‘Short Plays’ – the programming equivalent of a snug”

Lisa Tierney Keogh
#WakingTheFeminists Public Meeting, Abbey Theatre, 12 November 2015
Although the representation of female playwrights at the Abbey Theatre during this period was very low, there were plays by women presented at the national theatre, predominantly on the Peacock stage.\(^\text{19}\) Under the Literary Directorship of Aideen Howard, female playwrights were commissioned, developed, and workshopped; however, there persisted a tendency towards ghettoization when it came to the programming of their work. Twelve (86%) of the fourteen plays by women produced by the Abbey Theatre between 2005 and 2015 were presented in the smaller Peacock theatre, compared to twenty-six (31%) of the eighty-three plays by men.\(^\text{20}\) That the numbers of women represented improves the more the scale of the production is reduced is made evident from an analysis of play-readings at the theatre. The “20: Love” series in 2008, while not specifically aimed at women, had a significantly higher representation than that normally seen at the Abbey with three female and three male playwrights.\(^\text{21}\) For Nancy Harris, the scheme eventually led to a full production of *No Romance* in 2011, and a limited run of *Love in A Glass Jar* in 2013. Stacey Gregg has also maintained an ongoing relationship with the theatre since 2009 with *Perve, Shibboleth* and *Josephine K and the Algorithms* all premiering at the national theatre. “20:Love” was followed by the offensively titled “The Fairer Sex” series of play readings in 2009, which appeared to confine the destiny of plays by women to public readings rather than promising a path to future productions. On 31 October 2015, as women began speaking about their experiences at the Abbey on Twitter, Lian Bell shared a Facebook post by Abbie Spallen about “The Fairer Sex” programme in which Spallen said, “I was offered it and turned it down [….] I felt they were only including me because I had just been very vocal about the lack of opportunities. I felt it was a token gesture, its aim to silence them wimmen”

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\(^{19}\) The Peacock is a studio space with a seating capacity of 127.

\(^{20}\) Excluding tours, revivals, short plays, plays produced in association with the Abbey, and presentations of plays by visiting companies. Percentages have been rounded for clarity.

\(^{21}\) Stacy Gregg, Nancy Harris, Paul Murray, Gary Duggan, Belinda McKeon and Philip McMahon
Of the six playwrights who did feature in this programme,\(^{22}\) only Elaine Murphy went on to have a play produced at the national theatre. *Ribbons*, presented as part of a double bill of short plays alongside *Love in a Glass Jar* by Nancy Harris, received ten performances in February 2013, while *Shush*, received a major main stage production the following June. Despite this, the total lack of productions of plays by women in 2014 reveals the tokenism of this piece of programming. Referring directly to “The Fairer Sex” play readings and the premiere of *Shush*, Chris McCormack suggested that “the Abbey’s recent efforts to engage with female voices […] have involved an ‘eventing up’ of women writers when they should be produced as the norm.”\(^{23}\) This “eventing up” results in the further marginalisation of work by female playwrights, presenting plays by women as exceptional, strange, and marked.

“*Is it that the plays we’re writing are not seen as big enough, relevant enough or national enough?*”

“Yet women are being commissioned by this theatre, the implication therefore is that whatever it is we are writing, it does not accord to the concept of national theatre. It seems obvious then that we need to change our concept of national theatre to include women and what women want to write about rather than asking female playwrights to conform to tired templates of what a national play should be.”

*Nancy Harris, #WakingTheFeminists Public Meeting*  
*Abbey Theatre, 12 November 2015*

**Unconscious Bias**

Contextualised by the previous ten years of programming, it becomes clear that “Waking The Nation” was a manifestation of systemic disparity in the treatment of

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\(^{22}\) Rosemary Jenkinson, Claire Kilroy, Deirdre Kinahan, Lisa McGee, Elaine Murphy, Ursula Rani Sarma.

female playwrights at the Abbey. This is made clear by #WakingTheFeminists’ quantitative analysis and Fiach Mac Conghail’s admission that unconscious biases had influenced his programming.\(^\text{24}\) This thesis will explore how biases impact programming selections by focussing on how they affect evaluations of new scripts. With the frequent suggestion that plays by women were not ready, not good enough, or not to the programmer’s taste, there was an indication that there is something in the plays themselves that makes them unfavourable for production. If we agree that women are not generally worse at writing plays than men, then we must ask how what is deemed ready, good enough, or to the programmer’s taste is judged. Mac Conghail’s tweet that “all [his] new play choices are based on the quality of the play, form and theme,”\(^\text{25}\) and Barnes’ comment that he “would only ever discriminate in favour of what [he] judged to be good plays,”\(^\text{26}\) position the script as a neutral object whose value is capable of being appraised in an objective, unbiased manner. Yet, language itself is not a value-neutral symbolic system and much research on gender biases has already shown how they manifest linguistically in job advertisements, letters of recommendation and performance evaluations. The fact that language both reflects and triggers biases is not disputed, but exactly how creative writing is subject to biased interpretations and evaluations is less well understood. Because they are unconscious, implicit biases are notoriously difficult to see in action. They can, however, be traced through patterns of behaviour and the programmes of both Mac Conghail and Barnes reveal systemic discrimination in favour of plays by men. The following chapters explore how unconscious biases influence


\(^{25}\) Fiach Mac Conghail (@fmacconghail), Twitter, 29 October 2015.

programming decisions by focusing specifically on how they affect the ways new plays by women are read and evaluated. They do this by focusing specifically on the moment in which the programmer conducts the first read of a new play and makes an evaluation that determines whether the play will go on to be considered for production. In what follows, I will use the term ‘programmer’ to refer to the person who completes this first read-through, and who evaluates the script with a potential production in mind.

In order to understand how biases affect interpretations and evaluations of play scripts, it is important to first articulate the extent to which unconscious cognitive mechanisms influence our decision-making. Biases arise from errors in unconscious mental shortcuts in what psychologists refer to as the brain’s automatic system, System 1. Daniel Kahneman describes System 1 as the system that “operates automatically and quickly, with little or no effort and no sense of voluntary control.”27 System 1 is responsible for generating the kinds of automatic responses people have to a picture of puppies, or to a loud noise. Its cognitive processes are those that are constantly and invisibly running in the background. System 2, on the other hand, “allocates attention to the effortful mental activities that demand it, including complex computations.”28 Examples of System 2 processes include calculating tax benefits, finding the correct gate in the airport, and following this argument as you read. While System 1 is undetectable through self-reflection, “the operations of System 2 are often associated with the subjective experience of agency, choice, and concentration.”29 According to Kahneman,

System 1 continuously generates suggestions for System 2: impressions, intuitions, intentions, and feelings. If endorsed by System 2, impressions and intuitions turn into beliefs, and impulses turn into voluntary actions. When all goes smoothly, which is most of the time,

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28 Kahneman, Thinking, Fast and Slow, 21.
29 Kahneman, Thinking, Fast and Slow, 21.
System 2 adopts the suggestions of System 1 with little or no modification.\textsuperscript{30} Kahneman describes unconscious biases as “Systematic errors [that] recur predictably in particular circumstances.”\textsuperscript{31} When endorsed by System 2 reasoning, they become engrained and rationalised, resulting in deep-seated discriminatory beliefs that masquerade as common sense.

Anthony Greenwald and Linda Hamilton Krieger introduced implicit biases in 2006 as “discriminatory biases based on implicit attitudes or implicit stereotypes.”\textsuperscript{32} Biases derive from an evolutionary adaptation that allows our brains to make quick decisions based on “our past experiences, interactions, our situations and our contexts.”\textsuperscript{33} For our evolutionary ancestors, the ability to recognize danger instantly, or to recognize the signs that danger may be approaching, were essential for survival. However, human societies have evolved faster than our neurobiology, and what was once an essential tool for self-protection has developed into a cognitive glitch that allows us to quickly stereotype people according to irrelevant criteria. Not all biases are bad. In fact, we would struggle to get through our daily life without recognising signs of impending danger, such as the threat of a burn from boiling water or the threat of a sting from a nettle. However, when biases are misapplied to certain categories of people, such as people of colour, the results can be not only damaging, but fatal.

Unconscious biases emerge from the brain’s ability to make fast decisions by generating associations from implicit memories of prior experiences. Howard Ross describes this process as pattern recognition, which is “the tendency to sort and identify

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{30} Kahneman, Thinking, Fast and Slow, 24.
\textsuperscript{31} Kahneman, Thinking, Fast and Slow, 3-4.
\textsuperscript{33} Pragya Agarwal, Sway: Unravelling Unconscious Bias, (London: Bloomsbury Sigma, 2020), 41.
\end{footnotesize}
information based on prior experience or habit.”34 He explains that stereotyping is “a strong form of pattern recognition.”35 When we first encounter a new phenomenon, our initial instinct is to stereotype it in our minds. We relate it to a type or kind of thing we have seen before, and all subsequent impressions are measured against this initial evaluation. If we apply this thinking to the process of reading a play script, our initial encounter with the first pages of the script creates an expectation of what will follow, an expectation that may be met or denied. If the playwright’s name is typed on the front page of the script, an impression of what plays by people with this kind of name are typically like is formed. Salient stereotypes arising from a name include those of gender, class, nationality, and race, and the script that unfolds over the subsequent pages may either conform to, or deviate from, these stereotypes. The initial pages of a script will create expectations that will link the new play with a past one, and these expectations will influence not only which elements of the script the programmer focusses on, but how well they judge it in comparison to comparable past examples. When we read a play, we are already comparing it to the bank of plays held in our memories. As for most people, this bank of plays is likely to have been dominated by male-authored scripts, the types of language, stories, and form associated with those scripts establish the normative frame through which the new script is read and evaluated. Paul B. Armstrong describes how

Reading is not a linear process of adding sign to sign, scanning one after the other in a sequential manner. Rather reading a text requires the recognition of patterns, and a pattern is a reciprocal construction of an overall order and its constituent parts, the overarching arrangement making sense of the details by their relation to one another, even as their configuration only emerges as its parts fit together.36

35 Howard J. Ross, *Everyday Bias*, 47.
The recognition of patterns is unconscious, and our brain is constantly working to make newly encountered material fit existing patterns in our minds. When a new script fails to conform to an established pattern, the system often deems it a failure and our aesthetic evaluation of it is returned as falling short of the conventional standard.

Kinds

One of the primary ways in which new plays are linked to existing plays is through connections prompted by the play’s genre. The process aligns with the fundamental human instinct to categorize new phenomena according to a classificatory system held in long-term memory. This impulse to categorize is essential to human cognition as, according to Scott Atran, “it is logically impossible that humans are able to conceptually generalize from limited experience without pre-existing structures that govern the projection of finite instances to their infinitely extendable classes.”37 Categorising new phenomena in relation to basic concepts gave our ancestors an evolutionary advantage by allowing them to respond quickly and accurately to new encounters. The advantages of the process’ efficiency have been outlined by Eleanor Rosch, who explains that “the perceived world comes as structured information rather than as arbitrary or unpredictable attributes. Thus maximum information with least cognitive effort is achieved if categories map the perceived world structure as closely as possible.”38 Rosch outlines two basic principles of categorization which may be conceived “as having both a vertical and horizontal dimension.”39 The vertical dimension is organised according to levels of specificity. For instance, in theatre, the vertical dimension would include play, tragedy, revenge tragedy, *Hamlet*. The horizontal dimension “concerns the segmentation of

categories” according to their variance.\textsuperscript{40} For instance, in theatre, the horizontal dimension might include plays, dance theatre, opera, and puppet theatre.

TABLE 2. EXAMPLE OF HORIZONTAL AND VERTICAL CATEGORIZATION OF PLAY GENRES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Play</th>
<th>Comedy</th>
<th>Tragedy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Farce</td>
<td>Comedy Of Manners</td>
<td>Revenge Tragedy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bedroom Farce</td>
<td>The Importance of Being Earnest</td>
<td>Hamlet</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Rosch explains that for the vertical dimension, “the most basic level of categorization will be the most inclusive (abstract) level at which the categories can mirror the structure of attributes perceived in the world” while for the horizontal dimension, “categories tend to become defined in terms of prototypes or prototypical instances that contain the attributes most representative of items inside and least representative of items outside the category.”\textsuperscript{41} Our brains use these categories, and the many sub-classifications beneath them, to make sense of encounters with everyday people, animals, objects and concepts. We also use them to understand plays within specific generic, stylistic and cultural traditions. In theatre, the two primary generic traditions derived from Aristotle are tragedy and comedy; however, these have been divided into many sub-genres and artistic styles at varying levels of abstraction. Like Rosch’s system of categorization, genres in theatre are understood intuitively, yet have a profound impact on the way the work is understood. The impression that such classifications make on responses to plays is outlined by Susan L. Feagin as follows:

The kind of thing one takes an individual work of literature to be, moreover, will dictate to some extent what kinds of properties are aesthetically or artistically significant, either because they are definitive

\textsuperscript{40} Rosch, "Principles of Categorization," 4.
\textsuperscript{41} Rosch, "Principles of Categorization," 30.
of works of that kind, or because they are an innovative treatment of something that is definitive, or perhaps because they tend to disqualify a work as member of that kind.\footnote{Susan L. Feagin, \textit{Reading with Feeling: The Aesthetics of Appreciation} (New York: Cornell University Press, 1996), 154.}

The play’s genre impacts which elements of the play the reader attends to. It will make certain elements of the work more salient than others, while providing a benchmark according to which the work will be judged.

\textbf{Reading plays}

Performance scholars have primarily devoted their attention to the processes undertaken by spectators when considering how a play’s meaning-making occurs.\footnote{For examples of in-depth discussions of the spectator’s role in creating meaning, see Bruce McConachie’s \textit{Engaging Audiences} and Susan Bennett’s \textit{Theatre Audiences}.} However, the act of reading a play differs dramatically from the acts of viewing a performance or listening to a radio play. When spectating, the viewer is absorbing the many aspects of a particular production team’s interpretation of a script. The set and characters are presented before them, and the level of opportunity afforded to the spectator to input into the creation of the play’s meaning is less than that required when reading. The communal act of spectating as part of an audience, along with the durational aspect of the experience, and the reliance on sight, sound and occasionally smell, taste and touch all affect the spectator’s understanding of the play. The process of listening to a radio play is closer to that of reading one, as the auditor must create mental images of the scene and characters within their mind. However, they are again processing a particular interpretation of a script, which will include the actors’ characterisations, additional sound effects, or the addition of scenic descriptions within the script itself to compensate for the absence of both stage directions and visual scene. While reading a
play differs both from watching and listening to a play, it is not quite the same as reading other forms of literature either. Reader-response theories have tended to treat the act of reading plays as if it were the same process as reading poetry or prose; however, this conflation of forms under the general composite of “literature” reveals either a fundamental misunderstanding or wilful disregard of the essential nature of the dramatic form. In other literary forms, everything the author has wanted you to read is placed on the page before you. If they have left gaps or caused the reader to wonder, this has, in some way, been their intent. The reader of other literary forms is of course not inactive and may vigorously engage with the text in an intellectually and imaginatively strenuous way. Yet, there is a marked difference between the process of reading prose or poetry than that of reading a play.

When a programmer approaches a play script, they must not only read those words the playwright has committed to the page, but also imagine the final theatrical production that might result from this. They read with the knowledge that in its final form the play will have been augmented, interrogated, and enlivened by actors, directors, designers, and numerous other creatives who contribute to the production process. The programmer reading a playscript must engage with the dialogue and stage directions before them, while working to imagine the scene within the parameters of the theatrical form. They must do the cognitive work to imagine how the dialogue they are reading will seem within a realistic set, or under a wash of red light, or with the sound of waves crashing in the background. They must imagine how a spectator might feel watching the action described in the stage directions, or how the sequence of events, the timing and length of the interval, or the duration of a particular movement scene might affect the

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play’s meaning. Of course, the playwright has written their script knowing that many other artists will contribute to its final production and knowing that those who read will do so freely without the restraint of a director’s input. The playwright’s desire for either control or collaboration will influence the extent to which they elaborate on stage directions, annotate speech, and how they licence the play to production companies. Despite this, no matter how much they try to retain control over other people’s interpretation of the text, the programmer who reads their script must still imagine.

Michael Burke has proposed the term Literary Reading Imagery (LRI) to describe the “mental images that are produced in the minds of people when they read literature.” In Burke’s account, “experiencing imagery while reading literature is wholly a subconscious [act].” However, I would argue that the experience of reading a play, particularly as a potential producer of that play, involves the conscious production of mental imagery in order to imagine how it might work in performance. This makes the process of reading a play script for production more cognitively engaging than that required in other literary forms. Expert readers of play scripts, such as our theatre programmer, must therefore approach the task with vigour and creativity. They will, of course, rely on their knowledge of previously read plays in assessing the new script before them; however, it is their knowledge of previously seen productions that is of greater value in assessing the script’s stage-worthiness. The imaginative exercise required when reading a play script can be effortful for the programmer, but it is based on a cognitive operation that is fundamental to human consciousness: conceptual blending.

**Conceptual blending**

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In their 2002 book, *The Way We Think*, Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner explain that conceptual blending is a “basic mental operation [that is] highly imaginative but crucial to even the simplest kinds of thought [and that] blending is an invisible, unconscious activity involved in every aspect of human life.”47 Conceptual blending involves the merging of two or more inputs to create a blended scenario that contains some characteristics of each input and some properties of its own. It is the cognitive function that allows humans to imagine, to assume other roles and to assign roles to objects; its fundamental operation facilitated the development of tools, language, religion, and art. In fact, as Fauconnier and Turner argue, it is cognitive blending that allows the imaginative act of theatre to take place.48 Bruce McConachie has already developed this theory to explain the spectator’s response to performers on stage.49 However, here, I propose to show how it is critical for the process of reading a play script. The conscious production of mental imagery that is required when reading a play script is facilitated by the human capacity for cognitive blending. Basic blends involve the merging of two or more inputs to create a blend that is more than the sum of its parts. The inputs to the production the programmer imagines while reading are the script, which provides the characters, plot, dialogue and stage directions to the blend, and the programmer themselves, who will bring their knowledge of theatre to the imagined production in the form of emotion, memory, empathy, and intuition. The recruitment of inputs to the blend happens unconsciously, often through pattern completion, which Fauconnier and Turner tell us, is “the most basic kind of recruitment: We see some parts of a familiar frame of meaning, and much more of the frame is recruited silently but effectively to the blend.”50

When discussing unconscious bias, we have already seen how pattern completion can lead to biases, and it is the role of this unconscious process that will be explored further in Chapter One, where instances of explicit blending with canonical texts and cultural events will be explained in relation to plays premiered by some of Ireland’s foremost new writing companies between 2005 and 2015.

**Language**

The inputs to the blend are connected by a generic space which contains the qualities that both inputs share. Language is one of the most fundamental elements that connect the programmer and the script, yet its recruitment to the blend will prompt implicit associations that will inform the imagined play production. As the programmer’s System 2 brain is focussed on reading the language of the new play’s script, their System 1 brain will be silently interpreting the implicit meanings of its structure, dialect, and syntax. One of the places in which gender bias is made most explicit is within the structures of the English language itself. In her study of the history of English, Julia Penelope has shown how the structure of the language was devised by men for male usage.51 Beginning with the etymology of the word ‘grammar,’ which is derived from the Latin *grammatica*, “the study of letters” and the French *gramaire* “book of magic,” she describes how the first grammars of English were being written during the renaissance.52 While women were being burned because of their power to cast “glamours” (spells which caused the genitalia of men to disappear), male clerics and scholars were writing the earliest grammars of the English language, which she describes as “illusions conjured by men’s ideas of how language ought to behave.”53 Penelope describes how “international

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52 Penelope, *Speaking Freely*, xv.  
53 Penelope, *Speaking Freely*, 8.
rivalries and nationalism determined that the language has to be protected from ‘bastardization;’” resulting in the creation of “rules that would perpetuate [men’s] ideas about linguistic purity.”54 The new rules imposed on English by the early grammarians were derived from the grammars of Greek and Latin and had little to do with the structure of English, causing confusion and idiosyncrasies within the language.55 In moulding the existing language to fit this contrived structure, the male grammarians imposed their own patriarchal outlook upon the language and legitimised rules to perpetuate these structures under the guise of “protecting” it from pollution. One example Penelope provides of how the new rules reflected the biases of the grammarians is evident in Lindley Murray’s 1795 description of how gender is applied for noun classification in English:

Figuratively, in the English tongue, we commonly give the masculine gender to nouns which are conspicuous for the attributes of imparting or communicating, and which are by nature strong and efficacious. Those, again, are made feminine which are conspicuous for the attributes of containing or bringing forth, or which are particularly beautiful or amiable. Upon these principles the sun is always masculine, and the moon, because the receptacle of the sun’s light, is feminine. The earth is generally feminine. A ship, a country, a city, &c. are likewise made feminine, being receivers or containers.56

Discussing how heteronormative ideologies have been imposed on the language’s content and semantics, she describes how “men have used the distinction of sex to construct language structures that perpetuate their dominance and to force women to speak a dialect of submission.”57 Control of meaning-making by men has resulted in a language that reinforces gender stereotypes, and places the woman writer in a particularly tricky position in relation to the medium of her art.

54 Penelope, Speaking Freely, 8.
55 Penelope, Speaking Freely, 9.
56 Penelope, Speaking Freely, 20.
57 Penelope, Speaking Freely, 90.
Before a woman puts pen to paper, there is a struggle. How do you express your experience of the world through a language that is inherently pitted against you? In an interview on the Royal Court Playwright’s Podcast, Alice Birch talks about the moment before putting pen to paper. Poised over the blank page, she despairs at the difficulty she faces every time she tries to express an idea in what she refers to as “man-made language.”58 This phrase, which forms the title of Dale Spender’s exploration into the gendered construction of language, refers to a language consciously constructed by men for their purposes. Spender concedes that “It is the silence [sic] of women, in language and in the use of language, that has emerged when women are considered within the patriarchal order.”59 Doubly bound, Irish women playwrights face the dual hazards of writing into a patriarchal theatrical form in a language that was imposed on this country less than 200 years ago. The construction of the post-colonial state was consciously gendered in a reaction to the British depiction of Ireland as feminine and incapable of self-rule, causing Irish nationalists to assert their masculinity by restricting the lives of women to the domestic and policing their moral behaviour. Through the 1937 Constitution, the oppressive forces of national, colonial, and linguistic patriarchies act upon the Irish woman writing in English, inscribing her life within the domestic, proscribing the limits of her consciousness and carving her space within the society as either niche and marked or silent and invisible.

While Irish women writing novels and poetry have risen to distinction in recent years, women writing plays in Ireland have not enjoyed the same levels of prominence. The issue is, of course, that of form. Theatre is firmly in the public realm. Despite

improvements made in women’s working lives in many arenas, vast tracts of public discourse, including politics and the media, remain largely closed off to women. Jennifer Coates has described how “The public domain is a male-dominated domain, and the discourse patterns of male-speakers have become the established norm in public life.” With male voices and perspectives dominating public narratives, the structure, style, and content of their discourse pattern becomes standardized. Their stories are normalized to the extent that the possibility of another kind of story is completely alien. Their way of telling their stories becomes the right way, the only possible way, and any other narrative structure is deemed impossible, wrong. In *The Language War*, Robin Lakoff explains:

> We all believe that some ideas, terms, concepts, story-lines, and such, are ‘normal’ – natural, simple, expected. Others seem more complicated, less probable, even bizarre. We are prone to consider cases of the former as neutral – not requiring defense or explanation – but we subject the latter to severe tests and often still refuse to accept them.  

In order to understand why women’s plays have been systematically deemed unready for the stages of Ireland’s biggest theatres, it is important to investigate how the judgements Lakoff describes of improbability, non-neutrality and unnaturalness are made. Often unconscious biases are the root cause of these judgements which are then rationalised by conscious reasoning. Linguistic biases contribute to evaluations of women’s writing as improbable and bizarre, and Chapter Two will explore the way playwrights at the Abbey Theatre play with language, and how this poses problems for the programmer.

**Story**

While language carries implicit gender biases within its structure, a play’s story may trigger biases through unconscious links with archetypal versions from the historical, male-authored canon. The creation of stories is a fundamental aspect of the way our

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brains work; in fact, the primary job of the conscious brain is to construct narratives that make the sensory perceptions it receives coherent.62 It organizes incoming data into narrative patterns that are immediately clear and comprehensible within the subject’s historical moment and social milieu. The concept that there are basic story structures that are repeated again and again across nations and civilisations has been debated since Vladimir Propp’s comprehensive analysis of the fairy-tale in the 1920s.63 Such basic stories represent a type of cognitive schema that works unconsciously to help us structure our experiences. Michael Eysenck explains that a schema “is a well-integrated chunk of knowledge about the world, events, people or actions.”64 Schemas can be either scripts or frames:

Scripts deal with knowledge about events and the consequences of event. In contrast, frames are knowledge structures referring to some aspect of the world (e.g. building) containing fixed structural information (e.g. has floors and walls) and slots for variable information (e.g. materials from which the building is constructed).65

According to Schank and Abelson, “a script is a predetermined, stereotyped sequence of actions that defines a well-known situation.”66 For example, attending a theatrical performance will have a script that includes buying a ticket, going to the theatre at a specific time, sitting in a particular seat and applauding when the show is over. Eysenck affirms that “schematic knowledge in the form of scripts is useful because it allows us to form realistic expectations. Schemas (including scripts) make the world more predictable

63 Originally published in Russian in 1928, Propp’s Morphology of the Folktale was translated into English in 1958.
65 Baddeley, Eysenck, and Anderson, Memory, 182.
than would otherwise be the case because our expectations are generally confirmed.”

He also notes that “schemas play an important role in reading and listening because they allow us to fill in the gaps in what we are reading or hearing and so enhance our understanding. More specifically, they provide the basis for us to draw inferences as we read or listen.” Schemata not only allow us to distinguish a love story from a detective story, but they help us to predict the action of those stories based on the schema. Hogan points out that “we have schemas for genres, for characters, for imagery, for dialogue, and so on. Indeed, we have more than one schema for each.” Identifying the story’s schema will then help the reader to locate characters’ roles within that narrative and interpret those roles accordingly. However, such schemas can be stereotyped according to patriarchal norms, and they influence not only the way the play’s action is seen, but how it is valued also.

Since the publication of Christopher Booker’s *The Seven Basic Plots*, there has been renewed interest in the classification of a set of basic stories which have persisted throughout human history across diverse cultural, political and geographic societies. Booker’s seven plots are: Overcoming the Monster, Rags to Riches, The Quest, Voyage and Return, Comedy, Tragedy, and Rebirth. I agree, however, with Stephen Jeffreys that Booker’s classification is deeply flawed. Jeffreys summarizes its flaws as follows: “Comedy and Tragedy are not stories but genres; Rebirth is a phase in a story, rather than a story of its own; Overcoming the Monster could apply to almost anything; the Quest, and Voyage and Return are virtually synonymous.”

68 Baddeley, Eysenck, and Anderson, *Memory*, 184. He goes on to emphasise that schemas also help to prevent cognitive overload, particularly through stereotypes, which are a kind of schema that aid faster evaluations.
classification of nine basic stories, which are drawn from, and expand on, a list originally produced by Denis Johnston, who traced their prototypical origins to the Bible, European mythology, children’s fairy tales and folklore.\(^{71}\) Initially, Johnston noticed seven plots that have been in use throughout history: 1) Cinderella “Unrecognized Virtue at last Recognized;” 2) Achilles “the Fatal Flaw;” 3) Faust “The Debt That Must Be Paid;” 4) Tristan – that standard triangular plot of two women and one man, or two men and one woman; 5) Circe “The Spider and The Fly;” 6) Romeo: Boy meets Girl, Boy loses Girl, Boy either finds or does not find Girl, it doesn’t matter which; and 7) Orpheus “The Gift Taken Away.”\(^{72}\) Following classes with students in Massachusetts, he added an eighth: “The Hero Who Cannot Be Kept Down.”\(^{73}\) Jeffreys later made his own addition, “The Rival Siblings,” based on the biblical story of Jacob and Esau, to bring the total number of basic stories to nine.\(^{74}\) The following list outlines the nine basic stories, as described by Jeffreys. Each story has a prototypical example and an inverted version, which is “a photographic negative of the paradigm.”\(^{75}\)

1. The Love Story

“The Love Story” is one of the most familiar and consistently told stories among humans. The most famous example is Romeo and Juliet, and Jeffreys summarises the classic love story as “girl meets boy, girl gets boy, girl loses boy, girl gets boy back again,” but there are variations.\(^{76}\) Plays based on this story may end happily or unhappily; the interest for the reader arises from the obstacles the couple face and how they overcome them. Jeffreys

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\(^{74}\) Jeffreys, *Playwriting*, 226.

\(^{75}\) Jeffreys, *Playwriting*, 223.

\(^{76}\) Jeffreys, *Playwriting*, 221.
summarises how this kind of story works through two questions ‘“what draws the couple together?’ and ‘what can pull them apart?’”77

Inversion: “The Unrequited Love Story.”

2. The Gift That is Lost

“The Gift That is Lost” is based on the Orpheus myth, and Jeffreys describes how these stories are often “a quest to find a particular thing – money, a person, an ideology or a way of life – that has disappeared.”78 He says that “the gift can be anything, so long as it is immensely valuable to the person who is given it.”79 There are two ways of thinking about the Orpheus story: “the loss of the gift or the attempt to regain the gift.”80

Inversion: “the receipt or acceptance at the start of the play of an unsolicited gift, which transforms the protagonist’s life.”81

3. The Rival Siblings

Stories based on “The Rival Siblings” narrative can be traced back to the story of Jacob and Esau in the Book of Genesis.82 Their narratives are “about rival brothers or sisters: sometimes they are literal siblings, sometimes metaphorical siblings.”83 The narrative “illustrates the ways in which this rivalry manifests itself in subsequent events.”84

Inversion: siblings unite against a common enemy. This frequently takes the form of buddy narratives and narratives centred on teams.

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77 Jeffreys, Playwriting, 219.
78 Jeffreys, Playwriting, 224.
79 Jeffreys, Playwriting, 225.
80 Jeffreys, Playwriting, 225.
81 Jeffreys, Playwriting, 226.
82 Jeffreys, Playwriting, 226.
83 Jeffreys, Playwriting, 226.
84 Jeffreys, Playwriting, 227.
4. **The Spider and the Fly**

Based on Odysseus’ encounter with Circe in *The Odyssey*, “The Spider and the Fly” story “depicts one character seeking to trap another.”\(^{85}\) Its most familiar manifestations are in detective stories, hostage dramas and stories centred around bounty hunters.

**Inversion:** “the fly ends up eating the spider.”\(^{86}\)

5. **The Love Triangle**

Jeffreys traces “The Love Triangle” back to the legend of Tristan and Isolde and derives two primary ways of constructing this story. The first is “where A is in love with B and C. The person in the middle, A, has to make a choice.”\(^{87}\) This is usually depicted in the form of “a marriage with an intruder,” featuring the husband, the wife and lover.\(^{88}\) The second way of constructing this story is “where A loves B, B loves C, but C loves A.”\(^{89}\) This creates a constantly moving energy through the triangle that is accompanied by the threat that no-one can ever be truly satisfied.

**Inversion:** “The Loveless Triangle.”

6. **The Fatal Flaw**

The story of “The Fatal Flaw” comes from the tale of Achilles. It is the story “of the hero with one weakness.”\(^{90}\) According to Jeffreys, it has four variations: 1) the flaw is a weakness in an otherwise stable personality; 2) the flaw is a weakness that could possibly be overcome; 3) the flaw is seen not as a weakness but as a potential strength; 4) the protagonist is characterised by a difference that is perceived as a flaw.\(^{91}\)

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\(^{85}\) Jeffreys, *Playwriting*, 229.

\(^{86}\) Jeffreys, *Playwriting*, 231.

\(^{87}\) Jeffreys, *Playwriting*, 231.

\(^{88}\) Jeffreys, *Playwriting*, 231.

\(^{89}\) Jeffreys, *Playwriting*, 232.

\(^{90}\) Jeffreys, *Playwriting*, 235.

\(^{91}\) Jeffreys, *Playwriting*, 234-5.
Inversion: “the fatal flaw is the one good thing the character can do.”

7. Good Triumphs in the End

The fairy-tale, Cinderella, epitomises the “Good Triumphs in the End” narrative. In it “the good person is vindicated – they are proved to be good by the end of the story – and this is recognised by someone who matters to the character.” Jeffreys notes that, outside of pantomime and opera, “there aren’t many theatrical examples in which goodness is recognised and earns its rewards.” However, the plot has proliferated in Hollywood, particularly in romantic comedies that centre on an ugly duckling or a make-over.

Inversion: “evil triumphs and virtue is punished.”

8. The Hero Who Keeps Going

The myth underlying “The Hero Who Keeps Going” is that of Hercules. Such stories are motivated by a shared will to believe “that despite whatever odds are thrown against someone they will rise up and recover.”

Inversion: “the hero who can’t be bothered to get up.”

9. The Debt That Must Be Paid

“The Debt That Must Be Paid” is based on the Faust legend. Jeffreys says that “these are extremely dramatic and intensely moral stories. They always end badly, and the audience knows this.”

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92 Jeffreys, Playwriting, 236.
93 Jeffreys, Playwriting, 236.
94 Jeffreys, Playwriting, 237.
95 Jeffreys, Playwriting, 237.
96 Jeffreys, Playwriting, 238.
97 Jeffreys, Playwriting, 240.
98 Jeffreys, Playwriting, 240.
Inversion: the debt is never called. Jeffreys calls this version, “Getting Away With Murder.”

According to Jeffreys, these stories represent the basic plots on which all narrative art is based. Although some works may use two or more of these basic plots at the same time, every work will engage to some extent with at least one. Of course, by drawing on well-established narratives, playwrights assimilate the audience into the experience more quickly. The use of such shorthand, whether in plotting, design or gesture is essential in live art where the audience do not have the opportunity to pause and reflect or rewind. They must understand immediately the basics of characterization, setting and plot in order to follow the stage action, which makes recycling familiar narratives not only economical but often essential. While the programmer reading a play will consciously follow its unique story, the basic plot on which it is based will be recruited implicitly to their perception of the imagined production. It will work on their unconscious as they read, creating anticipation about how the story will unfold and suggesting implicit value judgements based on how well it compares with canonical examples. Chapter Three will use examples of Irish plays by women that premiered in Great Britain between 2005 and 2015 to explore how basic stories affect the programmer’s reading experience alongside basic forms.

Form

Figure 1: Wave, Wavelet, Meander, Spiral, Networks & Cells, Radial/Explosion, Fractals

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While the schematic script translates to the basic story of a play, the schematic frame is usually referred to as a play’s form. Any of the basic stories already discussed can be told through a variety of different forms. Jane Alison has drawn on Peter S. Stevens’ description of patterns in nature to catalogue the seven natural patterns that occur in narrative fiction. She describes how Stevens’ work revealed to her that “Matter fills space according to a host of natural laws that again and again yield the same patterns.”

Alison identifies seven basic patterns that recur in the natural world: Waves, Wavelets, Meanders, Spirals, Radials/Explosions, Networks & Cells and Fractals. The arc or Wave immediately brings to mind the ocean, but it also reflects the patterns formed by moving light and sound. Wavelets can be ripples created by a pebble dropped into a river, or the marks the tide leaves on the shore. Meanders follow the path of the river, or the movement of the earthworm; while Spirals can be seen in whirlpools, hurricanes and snails’ shells. Radials or Explosions are seen in the patterns of a daisy’s petals and in nuclear bombs, while Networks & Cells can be found in honeycomb, spiders’ webs, and tortoise shells. Fractals are branching patterns that can be traced everywhere, from the structure of trees to the patterns of reproduction. Alison explains that:

Our brains recognize and want patterns. We follow natural patterns without a thought: coiling a garden hose, stacking boxes, creating a wavering path when walking along the shore. We invoke these patterns to describe motions in our minds, too: someone spirals into despair or compartmentalizes emotions, thoughts meander, heartbreak can be so great we feel we’ll explode. There are, in other words, recurring ways that we order and make things. Those natural patterns have inspired

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visual artists and architects for centuries. Why wouldn’t they form our narratives, too? While the form of the Wave has predominated in critical analyses of story structure, Alison’s breakdown reveals that its precedence is an anomaly in comparison to the variety of possible shapes available for writers’ use.

Because of theatre’s liveness and temporality, the form of a play has a profound impact on the interpretation generated by its audiences. As a conveyor of both narrative meaning and political viewpoints, a play’s form shapes not only how its story is told, but the role the spectator plays in determining its meaning. Despite the impetus since Brecht for forms that draw attention to their means of production, many spectators continue to experience plays without consciously thinking about their formal dimensions. As a four-dimensional artform, form in theatre operates on two levels. Firstly, there is the production form, which will determine the type of encounter an audience member will have with the play. Production forms range from fourth-wall drama in a proscenium arch theatre (audience observes without interaction), to one-on-one immersive encounters in site-specific drama (high level of audience interaction), to invisible theatre (audience is unaware that the performance is taking place). Because my focus here is on plays that are submitted to literary departments in producing houses, I will primarily be dealing with plays from the first category: fourth wall drama. The other form operating in theatre is the narrative form and Chapter Three will explore how story and form work together to create the basic foundations on which these plays are built. Form works with story to create the unconscious canvas on which the play is both written and read. By borrowing from natural patterns and appealing to basic emotions, these structural elements often

102 Alison, Meander, Spiral, Explode, 22.
work imperceptibly in the play to create its effects but can significantly impact a programmer’s responses to the work.

Methodology and Literature Review

Although #WakingTheFeminists became a campaign advocating for gender equality for all theatre workers, this thesis remains concerned with the initial problem posed by the Waking the Nation programme: the underrepresentation of female playwrights. In order to uncover how unconscious biases affect the selection of play scripts for production, the focus in this thesis is on plays that were submitted as scripts to a theatre before being produced. As most of the companies and artists working in non-traditional ways are self-generating and self-funding their own work, it is often subject to unconscious biases at either an earlier stage (that of the funding decision, the “idea” stage) or a later stage (reviews of the completed work, touring etc.). For artists who are approached by funded theatres to create work in a devised, documentary or community-oriented way, the appraisal of their suitability for the job is typically based on track record, rather than on a literary appraisal. Although this thesis takes the process of evaluating a play script as its focus, some of the issues affecting the appraisal of ideas and the programming of devised work will be addressed in the Conclusion.

In the vast majority of instances in Irish theatre, the decision to programme a new play is based on script-reading. While this means that the work of companies like ANU, THEATREclub and others using devised or documentary practices fall outside this criterion, they have already been subject to significant academic research, notably in Brian Singleton’s ANU Productions: The Monto Cycle, and the edited collections

Radical Contemporary Theatre Practices by Women in Ireland, ed. Miriam Haughton and Mària Kurdi,104 “That Was Us”: Contemporary Irish Theatre and Performance, ed. Fintan Walsh105 and Devised Performance in Irish Theatre: Histories and Contemporary Practice ed. Siobhán O’Gorman and Charlotte McIvor.106 Instead, the focus here is on scripted theatre, and on uncovering the unconscious processes that contribute to evaluations made of the play script. While the programming of devised, documentary, or other forms of non-script-originated theatre is often based primarily on an artist’s reputation and secondarily on the strength of an idea, the programming of scripts is perceived to be a more objective, bias-free process. The script was positioned throughout the #WakingTheFeminists debate as a neutral object, whose quality was objectively discernible. This sentiment, that asserts that if plays by women were good enough, they would be programmed, has been echoed in conversations about gender inequality beyond the Irish context. In a letter responding to criticism of an all-male programme in 2017, the Artistic Director of London’s Hampstead Theatre, Edward Hall, said, “we have never turned down a play because of any characteristic of the playwright. We just read the plays we are sent, […] we try to decide whether they are good, and we try to figure out whether we can produce them and how.”107 Hall’s statement, like those of Mac Conghail and Barnes previously discussed, assumes that the theatre’s evaluation of new scripts is objective and unbiased; however, the statistics of programmes at both theatres that led to these statements confirms that biases had influenced play selection. Because my focus here is on how the unconscious affects the way a programmer reads and values new plays,
I have also chosen to exclude plays that were self-produced or produced by the playwright’s own company. This unfortunately has resulted in the exclusion of important writers from this period, such as Amy Conroy. However, with my emphasis on how programmers read new plays, it is important to remain focussed on scripts that were chosen by a different company for production. This allows me to trace the biases of those programmers through their choices and to expose how the kinds of work favoured by them follow regular patterns.

Throughout this thesis, I refer to the quantitative findings of two reports exploring gender bias in Irish theatre: #WakingTheFeminist’s *Gender Counts*, and the Irish Theatre Institute’s *Findings Report of the Irish Playography: Gender Breakdown, New Play Repertoire 2006-2015*. While *Gender Counts* focussed on every new production by the top ten funded theatre organisations in the Republic of Ireland between 2005 and 2015, Irish Theatre Institute’s *Findings Report* looked at every new play produced across the island, as well as plays by significant Irish playwrights premiered overseas, during the same period. Published to coincide with *Gender Counts*, it considered 737 productions and found that “33% of single-authored new plays […] were written by female playwrights.”108 It also found that “Over the ten-year period, there has been little change in the proportion of new plays by female playwrights produced, averaging at 29% for the period from 2006-2010 and 31% for the period from 2011-2015.”109 The Theatre Institute’s *Findings Report* confirms that the gender disparity found in *Gender Counts* prevails, for new plays at least, across the sector more widely. With the *Findings Report*

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https://irishplayography.com/attachments/64f63835-00db-4a06-b6d1-c8f9326e6a7a.PDF.
only looking at new plays, and *Gender Counts* only looking at ten organisations, the two documents combine give an insight into two important subsets of the theatre landscape.

While these reports catalogued and quantified the numbers of plays by women premiered in recent years, a list of Irish women playwrights since 1663 has been compiled by Melissa Sihra, including many forgotten and unknown names.\textsuperscript{110} Colette Connor has also catalogued plays by female playwrights produced or read at the Abbey between 1904 and 2004, highlighting the lengthy periods where no play by a female playwright appeared on the main stage and the tendency to produce plays by women at the Peacock.\textsuperscript{111} While the listing and naming of these lost playwrights is of vital importance; having catalogued the canon, it is now pertinent to question why so few female playwrights are programmed. Although the amount of academic scholarship engaging with plays by female playwrights is growing, a review of major works reveals that the discussion is centred around a handful of women (Teresa Deevy, Marie Jones and Marina Carr). While names of the emerging generation of playwrights are beginning to appear more frequently and the amount of research on these playwrights will undoubtedly increase over the coming years; there is opportunity to expand the discussion to include many more playwrights who have risen to prominence in the twenty-first century but have yet to be given scholarly attention. Since #WakingTheFeminists, the publication of *The Golden Thread*, a two-volume edited collection of essays on Irish women’s playwriting from 1716 – 2016 has been the most significant output concerning female playwrights.\textsuperscript{112} However, other important volumes include Shonagh Hill’s *Women and Embodied Mythmaking in Irish Theatre*, which makes a case for a feminist genealogy

throughout the last century, are also making important contributions to the field.\textsuperscript{113} The difficulty faced by Irish women playwrights writing for the national theatre, due to the iconizing of Irish women in the figure of Cathleen Ní Houlihan has been argued by Victoria White;\textsuperscript{114} while much scholarship has been dedicated to the rejection of woman as defined within the narrow limits of the constitution and the traditional mythical representation of female icons including The Virgin Mary that pervade Irish literature.\textsuperscript{115} However, Brian Singleton has argued that contemporary women’s writing replaces the iconizing of the mythical woman with a rejection of male authority advocating a de-essentialization of gender.\textsuperscript{116} There exists significant scholarship looking at the processes of canon-formation, paying particular attention to the publication of the Field Day Volumes and the role of editorial boards and critics in assessing plays’ merit.\textsuperscript{117} However there is no contemporary analysis of the status of female playwrights at the national theatre. As discussed above, the Abbey has engaged with many women through their New Playwrights Programme, workshops, and readings; which raises the question: why do these plays not receive full productions on the Abbey’s main stage?

Of the many reports and studies concerning this question of gender disparity in theatre programmes in the UK, the USA and Ireland, Emily Glassberg Sands’ “Opening the Curtain on Playwright Gender: An Integrated Economic Analysis of Discrimination

\textsuperscript{113} Shonagh Hill, Women and Embodied Mythmaking in Irish Theatre (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).
\textsuperscript{114} Victoria White, ”Cathleen Ni Houlihan Is Not a Playwright,” Theatre Ireland, no. 30 (1993), JSTOR.
\textsuperscript{117} Helen Thompson, The Current Debate About the Irish Literary Canon: Essays Reassessing the Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing (Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen Press, 2006).
in American Theater” is the most significant and comprehensive.\textsuperscript{118} Although her analysis includes a survey of the ways gender inequality manifests on Broadway in terms of the number of plays by women being programmed, the length of their runs, and their ticket pricing, Glassberg Sands’ thesis is in the field of economics and does not address the play selection process from a qualitative perspective. An interesting study that gets closer to this issue is a 2017 paper by Karen McConarty and Heidi Rose that uses a systems theory approach alongside interviews with theatre directors and literary managers to uncover the biases at play in programme selections.\textsuperscript{119} Although this work reveals interesting insights about programmers’ articulated selection processes, it does not look specifically at how biases affect the ways plays are read. This work will be discussed further in the Conclusion. Natalie Wreyford’s \textit{Gender Inequality in Screenwriting Work} insightfully addresses the problem from a qualitative perspective in relation to the British film industry.\textsuperscript{120} Drawing on the work of Bourdieu and interviews with screenwriters and their employers, this work like many others employs a sociological approach to the problem of gender inequality. Of the research already conducted on #WakingTheFeminists, Gráinne Pollack’s MA dissertation also takes a sociological approach, using interviews with the theatre practitioners to describe the problem and make suggestions for solutions to it.\textsuperscript{121} While useful, Pollack’s work is more global in scope and does not address the issue of biased readings specifically.

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\item[120] Natalie Wreyford, \textit{Gender Inequality in Screenwriting Work}, (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).
\end{thebibliography}
Iris Bohnet’s *What Works: Gender Equality by Design* is also important due to its articulation and assessment of steps already taken to address gender inequality in a range of fields from education to politics and the performing arts.\(^{122}\) This book was gifted by #WakingTheFeminists to leading Irish theatre organisations at the end of their campaign, making its place within the story of the movement one of great significance. Critically important also is Lucy Kerbel’s *All Change Please: A Practical Guide to Achieving Gender Equality in Theatre*, which outlines the impact of gender biases within the specific working environment of the British theatre industry.\(^{123}\) Kerbel’s focus is on the work of making theatre in a general sense and does not address the processes of script selection specifically. As her company, Tonic Theatre, runs the Advance programme in which they work with theatre companies to address gender inequalities in their working practices, the book does not give specific advice on changes theatres can make to address these issues. The findings presented in the Conclusion have been designed to plug this gap, by presenting concrete actions theatres can take to offset the influence of biases on script selection. Both Miriam Haughton\(^ {124}\) and Emer O’Toole\(^ {125}\) published articles exploring the causes of #WakingTheFeminists, while Olwen Dawe has published a review of the movement’s legacy from the perspective of 2020.\(^ {126}\) Their work offers important contextualisation for the 2016 movement in both historical terms and in terms of the broader Irish theatre landscape. This study will provide an important addition to


the field by isolating the moment of script-evaluation as a significant point in the establishment of gender biases. Its findings will complement both the existing quantitative and qualitative studies on Irish theatre, while contributing to the wider international conversation on biased programming selections in the performing arts.

In contrast to the dominant preference for research based on interviews with theatre practitioners, this thesis will approach the problem using insights from cognitive science and behavioural economics. While the interviews conducted by researchers in publications already mentioned provide insight into the conscious evaluation procedures of programmers in theatre, they cannot penetrate the unconscious processes operating behind these decisions. As previously discussed, these unconscious processes can only be traced through evidence of behavioural patterns found in theatre programmes and this thesis draws on the burgeoning research on unconscious bias that has emerged in recent years to uncover evidence of such patterns in the theatre programmes of the last fifteen years. The health of the field is evident from the dramatic increase in publications since I started this research, with books by Pragya Agarwal, Jennifer Eberhardt, essay collections by Routledge and an updated edition of Howard J Ross’ Everyday Bias all published in 2020 alone. The growing interest in implicit biases is due predominantly to the heightened awareness of police shootings of innocent black people in America, a subject which Jennifer Eberhardt offers extraordinary insight into due to years working with US police forces as an expert on tackling unconscious racial biases.

127 Agarwal, Sway.
130 Ross, Everyday Bias.
By focussing on new writing, this research will address the most vital and highest risk element of the artistic programme and the direct employment of women in Irish theatre. The analysis will focus on playwrights who have worked within and beyond the Abbey Theatre in the eleven years between the last controversy about the lack of plays by women being programmed in 2004, and #WakingTheFeminists in 2015, in the Republic of Ireland, Northern Ireland and Great Britain. The playwrights under consideration include Elaine Murphy, Carmel Winters, Stacey Gregg, Abbie Spallen, Lucy Caldwell, Morna Regan, Fiona Doyle, Nancy Harris, Stella Feehily, and Ursula Rani Sarma. These writers have all risen to prominence following the trailblazing success of Marina Carr in the 1990s. As Carr has received relatively extensive critical analysis, the decision to not discuss her work here will give space to the next generation of women, giving due focus to an underrepresented group in theatre scholarship. I have also excluded work by Deirdre Kinahan and Rosemary Jenkinson as, despite not being programmed at the Abbey, these women were widely produced in the Irish theatre sector during these years. Because of the significance of Kinahan’s inclusion in the Abbey’s programmes post-#WakingTheFeminists, her plays will be included in the final chapter, where I look at the work of playwrights who were given access to major Irish stages after #WakingTheFeminists. They include Margaret Perry, Lisa-Tierney Keogh, Gina Moxley, Karen Cogan, Tracy Martin, Sonya Kelly, and Eva O’Connor alongside established writers like Kinahan and Emma Donoghue, whose work was finally welcomed at the Abbey following years of exclusion. This thesis does not discuss every woman writing plays in Ireland today, but by showcasing the depth and breadth of plays by women premiered over the past fifteen years, it contributes to an expansion of the field of research on women in contemporary Irish theatre.
Chapter breakdown

The research is divided into two time periods. Chapters One, Two and Three focus on the period coinciding with the start of Mac Conghail’s tenure at the Abbey in 2005 until the announcement of the “Waking The Nation” programme in 2015. Chapter One, “Conceptual Blending and the Play Reading Process,” is concerned with how biases infiltrate the evaluation process when a script is submitted to a theatre. It introduces Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner’s theory of conceptual blending as the framework through which the cognitive processes underlying the act of reading a play can be understood and visualised. The conceptual blending model critically pinpoints the place in the reading process where unconscious biases effect the way new scripts are perceived. Focussing on plays that premiered across the island between 2005 and 2015, including Carmel Winters’ *Best Man*, Abbie Spallen’s *Strandline* and *Lally the Scut*, Lucy Caldwell’s *Leaves*, Stacey Gregg’s *Scorch* and Morna Regan’s *The House Keeper*, the chapter showcases the broad range of plays by women that were being produced outside the Abbey during this period, thus counteracting the argument that there weren’t enough plays by women to choose from. Chapter Two, “Women’s Language at the Abbey Theatre” delves deeper into one of the key components of the conceptual blend: language. Turning towards the Abbey’s own programmes during Mac Conghail’s tenure, the chapter draws on linguistic research by Robin Tolmach Lakoff, Jennifer Coates and Dale Spender to explore the ways in which these plays use language to challenge dominant forms of dialogue and discourse. The plays discussed in this chapter include Elaine Murphy’s *Shush*, Carmel Winters’ *B for Baby* and Stacey Gregg’s *Shibboleth*. The role that basic forms and stories play in anchoring new plays in relation to the canon is teased out in Chapter Three, “Form, Story & Logic: Reading Kinds,” through an examination of the Irish plays by women that premiered in Great Britain between 2005 and 2015. Drawing on Stephen Jeffrey’s
classification of the nine basic stories, and Jane Alison’s description of the seven basic forms, the chapter reveals how these basic structures determine the kinds of responses programmers have to plays. By focussing on plays that premiered in Great Britain, including Stacey Gregg’s Override, and Lagan, Abbie Spallen’s Pumpgirl, Nancy Harris’ Our New Girl, Lynda Radley’s Futureproof, Fiona Doyle’s Coolatully and Deluge, Stella Feehily’s Dreams of Violence, O Go My Man and Bang Bang Bang, Lucy Caldwell’s Notes to Future Self, Ursula Rani Sarma’s The Dark Things and Ailís Ní Riain’s Desolate Heaven, the chapter exposes the extent of the reliance on British theatre companies to programme plays by women when Irish companies were not.

The timeline then shifts in Chapter Four, “#WakingTheFeminists: The Aftermath,” as attention turns to the period after 2016 to analyse the gender equality policies that were put in place by ten leading theatre organisations in the wake of the controversy. In line with #WakingTheFeminists’ 2020 publication, 5 Years On, this chapter explores plays by women produced by the Abbey Theatre, Fishamble: The New Play Company, Druid, and their producing partners between 2017 and 2019, to analyse how well the policies are working, and to mine the key trends emerging from these programmes that reveal latent biases continuing to inform producing decisions. The combined evidence of the effect unconscious bias has on the ways in which plays are read and interpreted as outlined in the first three chapters, and that of the ongoing issues in programming outlined in Chapter Four, leads to the Conclusion which introduces concrete strategies new writing companies can take in order to mitigate against biased evaluations of new scripts. This thesis will provide a vital insight into unconscious evaluation processes at a turning point in the quest for gender parity in Irish theatre. By

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exposing how biased evaluations result in systemic discrimination, it will explain why plays by women were omitted from the programmes of Irish theatre for so long, while providing a path towards lessening the impact of biases on theatre programming in the future.
CHAPTER ONE: CONCEPTUAL BLENDING AND THE PLAY READING PROCESS

“We weren’t good enough for the National Theatre”

Jen Coppinger

“This movement has become known as Waking The Feminists, and I don’t think that means we were asleep, I think it’s that we need to become conscious of these factors and stay conscious in order to fight them, both within our industry and within ourselves”

Tanya Dean

#WakingTheFeminists Public Meeting, Abbey Theatre, 12 November 2015

The decision-making process for programming new work at most Irish theatres begins with the reading of a play script. As the earliest point in the selection process, the first read is the moment at which unconscious biases are most likely to solidify. It is, therefore, particularly important for an understanding of why plays by women have been systematically deemed to be less worthy of production than plays by men. This chapter will focus on the process of reading at this early stage of programming and will address how the unconscious shapes evaluations of new playscripts. Drawing examples from plays produced by companies funded both by the Arts Councils of Ireland (An Chomhairle Ealaion) and Northern Ireland, this chapter will focus on the act of reading plays in order to uncover the role the unconscious mind performs in the play selection process. While the conversation started by #WakingTheFeminists began with focus on the Abbey, the vast majority of new plays in Ireland are produced elsewhere. According to Irish Theatre Institute’s findings, of the 737 new plays produced between 2006 and
2015, only 43 were produced by the Abbey Theatre.\textsuperscript{132} A list of new plays by women that premiered outside the Abbey between 2005 and 2015 is included in Appendix II. Of the 131 full-length, single-authored plays by women produced outside the Abbey, I have chosen to focus on one play from four of the major funded theatre companies that actively read new plays. These include Abbie Spallen’s \textit{Strandline} (Fishamble: The New Play Company 2009) and \textit{Lally the Scut} (Tinderbox Theatre Company and MAC 2015), Lucy Caldwell’s \textit{Leaves} (Druid & Royal Court 2007), and Morna Regan’s \textit{The House Keeper} (Rough Magic Theatre Company 2012). I have also chosen to include Carmel Winters’ \textit{Best Man} (The Everyman, Project Arts Centre & Cork Midsummer Festival 2013), as it was commissioned by the Abbey Theatre, but not produced there; and Stacey Gregg’s \textit{Scorch} (Prime Cut 2015), the subject matter of which makes it an exciting programming choice by an esteemed company that occasionally premieres new plays. As examples of plays produced by a range of the foremost funded new-writing companies operating on the island, these plays provide a snapshot of the kinds of work being programmed beyond the Abbey during this period. To date, neither Spallen, Caldwell nor Regan have ever been programmed at the Abbey.\textsuperscript{133} Consequently, an analysis of these plays will offer an insight into the programming at the national theatre by revealing what they didn’t produce. By uncovering how the unconscious informs the way programmers read, this chapter will provide a better understanding of how biases influence the way plays are conceptualised during the reading process, which will in turn inform evaluations of the imagined production’s merit.

The programmer who completes the first read-through of a new play will make an evaluation that determines whether the play will go on to be considered for production.

\textsuperscript{133} Regan was employed as Dramaturg on the Abbey’s 2017 production of Teresa Deevy’s \textit{Katie Roche}. 
For unsolicited scripts in theatres with a literary department, such as the Abbey Theatre, the plays are sent to a reading panel who typically read plays blind before writing reports on the scripts which are then delivered to the literary department for review and collation. The literary department will meet to discuss those plays and, in some cases, compile feedback which is sent to the playwright. Plays from the unsolicited pile are rarely programmed, but they occasionally spark interest in a writer who the theatre might commission to write a new script. In the case of commissioned plays, it may be the Literary Manager or Artistic Director who does the reading. If read by a Literary Manager, their evaluation of the play will determine how they present it to their Artistic Director, whether they make a strong recommendation for its suitability for production, or otherwise. The Artistic Director normally has final decision-making power over what gets programmed, and the extent to which they are influenced by the opinions and recommendations of the rest of the programming team will vary from organisation to organisation. Whether or not a play fares better when first read by a Reader’s Panel, Literary Manager or Artistic Director is debatable. In any case, the first read will often determine the initial evaluation of the play – whether it is being placed in the “good” or “bad” pile, even if such piles exist only in the mind of the reader. As already stated, the term ‘programmer’ will be used throughout this chapter to refer to the person who completes this first read-through, and who evaluates the script with a potential production in mind. In this chapter, I will outline the cognitive process that occur when a programmer reads a new play for the first time and will draw attention to places where biases are most likely to influence their evaluation.

134 The Abbey Theatre were, during this period, the only theatre that guaranteed that it would provide feedback for unsolicited scripts, although the pace of the feedback process was usually glacial.
It is firstly important to note that the script that the programmer evaluates can differ dramatically from the script of the ultimate production. Once the play is chosen for production, changes may be requested by the director or dramaturg before rehearsals begin. During the rehearsal period, the playwright may be required to make rewrites as problems or changes emerge as the play is brought to life by the cast and production team. In some cases, these changes continue to be made throughout the preview period until the opening night. These rewrites can be instigated by the director, dramaturg, actors, designers or the playwright themselves, however they are usually delivered to the playwright by the director. The prompt script or stage manager’s script used during the run is usually the final version of the script and the one that accurately represents the production; however, published scripts often go to press before rehearsals begin. The play script then, is a malleable, changeable artefact that can take many forms throughout the selection, rehearsal and production stages and even occasionally post-production.

The second important point to emphasise is that context plays an important role in determining how the programmer reads. A programmer in a theatre will read with a different set of considerations than a publisher, a judge of a playwriting competition, a student in a classroom or someone simply reading for pleasure. The programmer reading a playscript will read with the intention of considering whether they want to produce the play or not. The frame of a potential production will bring considerations of space, finance, talent, time, and audience expectations to the reading process. We can further distinguish between theatre programmers, who will each have a particular set of preferences for certain types of theatre which may be political, artistic, social, or cultural. The programmer’s intentions while reading might include considerations of the following:
• How will this play work with the rest of the theatre’s programme (programming)?

• Will this play work on stage (form)?

• How will the theatre’s audience respond to this play (reception)?

• How much will this play cost to produce (finance)?

• Are there suitably qualified artists available to produce this play well (talent)?

• How well does this play chime with the theatre’s mission (programming)?

• How will this play be received by the theatre’s board, the public, the critics etc. (reputation)?

Responses to these questions may include categorizing the play as a potential money-spinner (cash-cow for the theatre), a potential award-winner (status and reputation), a new voice (investment in future talent), a draw for a particular section of the population (audience development), a finger on the pulse or response to the zeitgeist (media coverage). Each individual programmer will answer these questions differently, depending on the unique context of their theatrical environment. Which of the above questions is most urgent and, therefore, prominent in a programmer’s mind will affect their intentions while reading, and those intentions will influence both what they see in the play and how they evaluate it.

In the Introduction, I outlined how programmers will use conceptual blending when reading a play in order to imagine how it will work on stage. The generic diagram in figure 2 represents the basic structure of the blend. In this simple construction, the blend is comprised of two inputs, a generic space that links the inputs, and the blended space itself.
The circles in the diagram above are mental spaces, which Fauconnier and Turner describe as “small conceptual packets constructed as we think and talk” that have frames and operate in working memory.\textsuperscript{135} The inputs are the two concepts feeding the blend. The generic space “maps onto each of the inputs and contains what the inputs have in common.”\textsuperscript{136} Elements in the generic space are held in long-term memory, while the blend itself operates in working memory. The square in the blended space represents the

\textsuperscript{135} Fauconnier and Turner, \textit{The Way We Think}, 102.
\textsuperscript{136} Fauconnier and Turner, \textit{The Way We Think}, 41.
emergent structure which is unique to the blend. This emergent structure is created through the unconscious recruitment of existing knowledge about the input on the path from it to the blend. The blend is more than the sum of its parts. The dashed lines between the inputs and the blend represent this unconscious activity.

Unlike the spectator who “is able to live in the blend, looking directly at its reality,”¹³⁷ the programmer reading a script must create the blend, imagining how it will play in performance. For the act of reading a play script, there are two inputs to the blend: the script itself, and the reader, who in this instance is the programmer. The programmer’s blend is illustrated in figure 3.

¹³⁷ Fauconnier and Turner, *The Way We Think*, 266.
The script will provide what Michael Burke terms “sign-fed” inputs such as dialogue, stage directions, setting, plot and characters to the blend, while the programmer will bring “mind-fed” inputs: emotion, memory, empathy, and intuition.\textsuperscript{138} The generic space will contain the shared cultural and canonical values from which they emerge. The blends created by the programmer as they read will include a blend for each of the characters. They will also create blends for each scene, which may include inputs from multiple character blends as well as those for the setting. These several blends act as cascading inputs to the megablend that is the play.

The diagram in figure 3 is a static representation of what is actually a dynamic process of continual interpretation, anticipation, and revision. When reading, the programmer’s conscious System 2 brain will focus on following character journeys, timelines and remembering changes in settings and plot. In the absence of visual cues afforded to the spectator of a stage production, the programmer reading a playscript will be required to consciously keep details of the gender, age, and race of characters in mind. Their unconscious System 1 brain will be filling in the gaps, anticipating the ensuing action and making emotional and evaluative judgements as the plot progresses.

Working memory, which is a form of short-term memory and overlaps with the idea of consciousness, will be used by the programmer when reading the script. Working memory is a system that “not only temporarily stores information but also manipulates it so as to allow people to perform such complex activities as reasoning, learning, and comprehension.”\textsuperscript{139} I propose to draw on Baddeley and Hitch’s multi-component model

\textsuperscript{138} Burke, \textit{Literary Reading, Cognition and Emotion}, 26.
of working memory which is comprised of four systems: a phonological loop, a visuo-
spatial sketchpad, a central executive and an episodic buffer.\textsuperscript{140} Baddeley explains that

… the phonological loop, is assumed to be specialized for holding
sequences of acoustic or speech-based items. A second subsystem, the
visuo-spatial sketchpad performs a similar function for visually and/or
spatially encoded items and arrays. The whole system is controlled by
the central executive, an attentionally limited system that selects and
manipulates material in the subsystems, serving as a controller that runs
the whole show.\textsuperscript{141}

Baddeley later added a fourth component to the system, the episodic buffer, which is a
storage system that can hold about four chunks of information which may come from a
range of sources including perception, working memory and long-term memory.\textsuperscript{142} When
a programmer reads a new play, the phonological loop will allow them to make sense of
a line of dialogue or a stage direction by enabling the retention of the words at the start
of the sentence until its end. The visuo-spatial sketchpad will allow them to create the
imaginary production in their minds by facilitating the manipulation of the spatial
arrangements of the set, props, and actors onstage. The central executive will focus their
attention on the act of reading, directing the work of both phonological loop and the
visuo-spatial sketchpad. Finally, the episodic buffer provides a critical link to long-term
memory, through which the programmer will make sense of the work before them, using
it to inform their acts of understanding, imagining, and evaluating. While working
memory is where the conscious activity of imagining the play takes place, it is the
connection with long-term memory provided by the episodic buffer that facilitates the
processes of selection and pattern completion the programmer uses when constructing
the blend. How a programmer makes these selections or completes these patterns will be

\textsuperscript{140} Baddeley, Eysenck, and Anderson, \textit{Memory}, 67-100.
\textsuperscript{141} Baddeley, Eysenck, and Anderson, \textit{Memory}, 69-70.
\textsuperscript{142} Baddeley, Eysenck, and Anderson, \textit{Memory}, 82.
unique to each individual. For instance, a playwright might read plays with attention focused on the language and structure and may disregard visual images, while a designer might do the opposite. While there will be a certain amount of shared selections between all readers because of the particular saliency of certain features of the script, such as plot or characters, divergences among readers will emerge because of their unique inputs to the blend, their memories and emotions.

Emotions play a critical role not only in informing our interpretations of artistic works, but in all of our cognitive reasoning. The role of feelings in making choices is widely acknowledged by neuroscientists, particularly in relation to their role in helping to “solve nonstandard problems involving creativity, judgment, and decision-making that require the display and manipulation of vast amounts of knowledge.”\(^\text{143}\) Evaluating the merits of a play script is such a non-standard problem, and the evaluation will be deeply influenced by the emotions of the programmer reading. According to Bruce McConachie “Cognitive neuroscientists and psychologists now affirm that emotional drives undergird and sustain even the simplest of intellectual tasks, such as adding two numbers together; the old separations between reason and emotion no longer hold.”\(^\text{144}\) Although a programmer’s emotional response to a play will influence their evaluation, its influence will only occasionally rise to conscious awareness. The process by which an emotion, initially felt in the body of the programmer reading, is brought to consciousness through feeling has been outlined by Antonio Damasio, who says that:

The triggering of emotive responses occurs automatically and non-consciously, without the intervention of our will. We often end up learning that an emotion is happening not as the triggering situation


\(^{144}\) McConachie, *Engaging Audiences*, 3.
unfolds but because the processing of the situation causes feelings; that is, it causes conscious mental experiences of the emotional event.\textsuperscript{145}

According to Damasio, emotions are caused by a physical response of the body to both its own internal state and an external situation. The response creates a mental image in the brain of how the emotion evaluates the internal or external state as either good- or bad-for-life. It is only when this mental image is strong enough that we experience the emotion in what we commonly refer to as feelings. Both Joseph Le Doux and Damasio agree that feelings result from a conscious awareness of the underlying emotional state. As Damasio says “Emotions play out in the theater of the body. Feelings play out in the theater of the mind.”\textsuperscript{146} This process helps to explain how emotions influence a programmer’s response to a play without their conscious knowledge of that happening.

In examining how both memory and emotion contribute to readers’ engagement with literature, Patrick Colm Hogan has drawn on the Medieval Sanskrit principle “that artistic works communicate emotion through their “dhvani” or suggestiveness. Dhvani includes all the associations that cluster around anything that a reader encounters in a work of literature or a viewer encounters in a performance.”\textsuperscript{147} In cognitive science, dhvani corresponds with the notion of priming, which Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein define as a product of the Automatic System of the brain (System 1) in which subtle influences “increase the ease with which certain information comes to mind.”\textsuperscript{148} This is critical to Hogan’s conception of emotional memory. He explains how the Sanskrit philosopher Abhinavagupta theorised that “all our experiences leave traces in our

\textsuperscript{146} Damasio, \textit{Looking for Spinoza}, 28.
\textsuperscript{147} Hogan, \textit{Cognitive Science, Literature, and the Arts}, 156.
memory. These traces bear with them the emotions we felt at the time. The mind accumulates these traces and they contextualize each new experience.”¹⁴⁹ According to Hogan,

As our emotional response to a work develops out of a particular set of primed personal memories, those memories begin to guide our realization or concretization of that work. As a result of this concretization, the memories themselves are reprimed and thus our emotional response is reinforced or enhanced.¹⁵⁰

Because the emotional memory is stored in a different part of the brain,¹⁵¹ the representational memory that triggered it will not be consciously recalled, but the emotions associated with the memory may be felt intensely. Hogan explains that “In keeping with our general tendency to explain emotions by reference to salient experiences, we attribute that emotional response to the events of the work, which are the objects of our attentional focus.”¹⁵² These memories and emotions prompted by the script will influence not only the programmer’s interpretation of the play, but their evaluative judgement of it also. Hogan draws a gender distinction in reader’s responses to literary works:

Insofar as men and women have different emotional experiences, we would expect them to show patterned differences in literary response. Insofar as people from different cultures have different emotional experiences, we would expect them to have different emotional responses to literature. The same point holds for economic classes, and so on.¹⁵³

¹⁴⁹ Hogan, Cognitive Science, Literature, and the Arts, 156.
¹⁵² Hogan, Cognitive Science, Literature, and the Arts, 162.
¹⁵³ Hogan, Cognitive Science, Literature, and the Arts, 185.
The memories that affect programmers’ responses to play scripts are both personal and culturally shared. They are triggered by unconscious associations from long-term memory and carry emotions with them.

The cognitive work undertaken when imagining how the script might appear in performance and before an audience, is taxing on the brain of the programmer. A playscript is not something that can be passively read and taken in but must be engaged with and energetically interpreted. The extent to which the programmer must work to participate in the creation of a play’s world varies from play to play and from person to person. Yet, the more a play requires the programmer to work to imagine its production, the greater room it creates for stereotyping and biased conclusions. For dialogue plays, the cognitive effort required by the programmer when reading can be greater than that of monologue plays because of the requirement to imagine different characters and complex staging arrangements. The addition of more elaborate set designs also places a greater imaginative toll on the programmer as they must remember where the entrances and exits take place, how the actors would be positioned in relation to each other and whether the lighting would allow the spectator to see the entire scene at once etc. If the programmer is already tired, overworked, stressed, or otherwise cognitively engaged, they may be less likely to do the cognitive imagining required to reveal the play’s world. Their tired brain might make lazy assumptions about the events described before them and miss nuances of the writing because of the stereotyped lens through which they view the world. Daniel Kahneman describes how “People who are cognitively busy are also more likely to make selfish choices, use sexist language, and make superficial judgements in social situations.”154 If the playscript before the programmer requires some cognitive effort, for instance, because of an unfamiliar protagonist, their tired brains might switch off, dismiss

154 Kahneman, Thinking, Fast and Slow, 41.
the character as boring, uninteresting or cliché, the play itself as unremarkable, not universal, not ready. Readiness implies that the script is ready to be brought to the rehearsal room and ultimately to be performed; however, if the programmer hasn’t been able to imagine the work on stage, or if their act of imagining hasn’t been sufficiently stimulating, then a verdict of unreadiness may be their response. Reading outside of your comfort zone takes effort. This effort is not physical, but cognitive exertion. If the programmer’s identity profile (sex/gender/race/class/ability etc.) is not aligned with that of the writer or characters, they may not appreciate the insights or authenticity of the representation before their eyes. In an interview with Maddy Costa, Dawn Walton, founder of the UK’s principal Black-led production company, Eclipse Theatre, recalls

…attending script meetings at the Royal Court in the late-1990s and realising that the texts to which she had a ‘visceral and emotional’ response invariably struck her colleagues as underdeveloped: Black writing has more chance of being programmed, she’s found, through staged readings rather than script meetings.155

Who is reading the scripts, and assessing them, matters profoundly. Walton’s suggestion would also hint that the cognitive leap in appraising a play purely from the page is lessened when actors bring it to life in a staged reading. In hearing and seeing it read by professional actors, the spectator does not need to work as hard to bridge the gap between page and stage.

While blending is an essential part of the reading process, it is also a tool used by playwrights to create the worlds of their plays. The following chapter will explore both how playwrights use blending to create structures and resonances within their scripts, and how programmers create blends while reading those scripts. By exploring the relationship between script and programmer through the lens of cognitive blending, this chapter will

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interrogate how unconscious cognitive processes inform both our reading and assessment of women’s plays.

**Best Man**

*Best Man* by Carmel Winters (1971-) is a play in which the process of blending is intrinsic to how it makes its meaning. Although commissioned by the Abbey Theatre, it was produced by The Everyman (Artistic Director: Michael Barker-Caven) and Project Arts Centre (Artistic Director: Cian O’Brien) in association with Cork Midsummer Festival (Festival Director: Tom Creed) at The Everyman, Cork on 21 June 2013 before transferring to Project Arts Centre, Dublin on 16 July. The production was directed by Michael Barker-Caven. *Best Man* is a family drama about the break-up of a marriage when a Bolivian nanny enters the household and has an affair with the wife. The wife, Kay, is a ruthless estate agent whose primary focus in life is pursuing the next deal. Her husband, Alan, is a writer and the primary carer of their two children. An aspiring novelist, Alan has been writing best man speeches for weddings as temporary employment until his novel is published; however, resenting the time that this and childcare takes away from his writing, he suggests they hire a nanny. When the attractive South American nanny, Marta, arrives, Kay is seduced by her, and they begin an affair. Kay and Marta move in together, and Alan uses his closer relationship with the children to drive a wedge between them and their mother. Having secured full custody, Alan manipulates the children to reject their mother, resulting in the breakdown of Kay’s relationships with Marta, her children, and her ex-husband. With an elaborate, kinky sex scene between Kay and Marta, and a timeline that traverses boom and bust, the play feels considerably more contemporary than the plays in the Abbey’s 2013 programme, while tackling stereotypes of gender, sexuality, and the nuclear family.
"Best Man" presents challenges to normative societal expectations around gender conformity, sexual desire, and traditional roles within the nuclear family. It does this by using conceptual blending to call the norm to mind while contesting it through alternative scenarios. Of course, this is a technique that has been used frequently by feminist writers and thinkers to expose gender inequality in everyday situations. Usually, in such scenarios, the blend involves the merging of a familiar scenario with an unfamiliar one in order to reveal the hidden structures concealed by the familiarity of the everyday occurrence. Recently used by comedian Tracey Ullman in the “Robbery as Rape” sketch broadcast by BBC One on Friday, 17 March 2017, the blend invokes the script commonly associated with rape cases but applies it to a man who has been robbed. This concept originally appeared as a cartoon by Marian Henley in the Summer 1993 issue of Hysteria and contains a transcript of the sketch’s dialogue which is worth repeating in full:

MAN    I’ve been ROBBED! Some* took my WALLET!
COP 1    Well, what did you EXPECT?
COP 2    You’re dressed so EXPENSIVELY!
COP 1    I’m afraid you wouldn’t have much of a case…
COP 2    It’d be YOUR word against THEIRS!
MAN    WHAT?!
COP 2    How could you prove that you weren’t willing?
MAN    WILLING?
COP 1    Nice men keep their wallet covered in public. They spend money MODESTLY…
COP 2    … and don’t call attention to their FINANCIAL CHARMS!
COP 1    Otherwise, people get the wrong idea!
COP 2    If someone takes your money, it’s YOUR fault, not THEIRS!
MAN    This … THIS IS CRAZY!

156 Video accessed on Twitter https://twitter.com/bbcomedy/status/840315832005738496?lang=en
COP 1  No, this is role-reversal!

COP 2  I mean, if you arouse somebody financially, you’ve GOT to follow through…

As Janet Bing and Joanne Scheibman explain, “This particular blend evokes two scripts. The first is the “robbery” script, and the second is the “rape” script. The robbery script provides the structure for the joke. However, the rape script provides the content.”157 The blended script serves to reveal the hidden superstructure beneath the scenario; by placing new content within a familiar frame, the biases that the frame normally occludes are exposed. However, in order for the joke to work, the reader must be familiar with the original and must keep it in mind throughout the scenario. Therefore, the writer must constantly trigger reminders of the original in order to get their point across.

The use of conceptual blending in the example above helps to reveal the hidden structures operating behind the gendered crime of rape. Winters uses a similar strategy in Best Man to highlight the stereotypical gender roles expected within heterosexual relationships and the nuclear family, although she expands to include multiple blends that build layer upon layer to create the complexity required by the theatrical form. The first blend invoked draws on the input of the traditional marriage with its masculine, bread-winning husband, and feminine, care-giving wife. Winters opens the play with husband and wife in the marital bedroom, immediately evoking the frame of the traditional marriage. Within this frame is the expectation that the husband earns more money, is less emotionally available and is the “head” of the family. The expectation of the wife is that she would earn less money, is emotionally open and assumes primary responsibility for the well-being of their children. However, when Kay enters the bedroom, she has a glass

of whiskey in hand, and turns on the macho television programme *Top Gear*. The first lines are spoken by Alan, and they reveal his concern for the children, his emotional and physical proximity to them (he put them to bed) and his nagging of his wife:

Alan: Two ticks, nearly finished. Did you say goodnight?

*Beat.*

Claire made me promise you’d tuck them in. Said she’d know if you hadn’t if they woke up without lipstick on their cheeks.\(^{158}\)

These first few lines of the script establish the gendered role-reversal and the programmer will understand the switch of stereotypes instantly. Their unconscious mind will meld the stereotype of the traditional heterosexual marriage with the characteristics of the two characters, Kay and Alan, to make sense of the blended world put before them on the page (see figure 4).

Winters’ script goes on to consciously remind the programmer of the traditional marriage she is sending up. As Kay recalls the first time she saw Alan at the University Open Day with a screaming baby on his back, she remarks how “The girls were all fawning over the ‘new man’.” Alan later likens his situation to that of a housewife by remarking that he is “Raising our children by day and earning ‘pin money’ by night…” While in scene two, Kay again remarks of the inequality between the gender roles “The stay-at-home Super-Dad … It was the same growing up – all the women in our townland practically

159 Winters, Best Man, 4.
160 Winters, Best Man, 6.
falling over each other to rescue my poor widowed father, scrambling to save him from a job every mother is expected to do with her eyes shut and her hands tied!”

For the programmer, the invocation of the traditional marital structure will remain in their working memory while they encounter the gender reversal of Kay and Alan’s relationship. Unconscious assumptions about gender roles, the traditional marriage and feminism will accompany the transfer from the input to the blend and the programmer’s evaluation of the play’s ideas will be influenced by their emotional responses to these issues.

In the reviews of the first production, some commentators remarked on the shallowness of the characters. But their sometimes-stereotypical representation could be seen as a purposeful tool used to draw our attention to the social frames that constrain them. Fauconnier and Turner suggest some general principles in relation to character and framing: “To clarify a single frame, fill it with different essential characters; to clarify the relationship between frames, fill them with the same essential character; and to clarify essential character, transport it across different frames.”

Within this logic, Winters purpose in making these reversals is to expose the politics of the social frames within which the actions of individuals are interpreted and judged. It makes sense that her explicit aim is to critique to social norms. In an interview for the Abbey Theatre’s Abbey Talks podcast, Winters describes how, as a dramatist, she is “acutely involved always with trying to provide an audience with new ways of seeing things, particularly the familiar.” For her, “the artist’s job is to make invisible things visible.” The gender reversal employed in feminist conceptual blending in scenarios like the heterosexual

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161 Winters, Best Man, 10.
162 Fauconnier and Turner, The Way We Think, 252.
164 Winters, “Meet the Makers: Carmel Winters.”
marriage of *Best Man* aims to make visible the frame through which the actions of individuals are judged. By calling attention to the frame, the gendered nature of the inherent stereotypes and power structures within such social constructs is revealed.

Winters’ critique of gendered expectations within heterosexual marriage is layered with the stereotype of “cheating with the nanny” to expose the way gender and sexuality interact and layer behavioural clichés in marriage and monogamy. In the “Love Triangle” blend in figure 5, the frame “cheating with the nanny” carries the stereotype of the husband having an affair with the nanny. However, when it is blended with the specific characters in Winters’ script, it is the wife, Kay, that runs off with the nanny, and the husband, Alan, who is left heartbroken.

*Figure 5. Love Triangle*

(Adapted from *The Way We Think* by Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner, copyright © 2003. Reprinted by permission of Basic Books, an imprint of Hachette Book Group, Inc.)
The “cheating with the nanny” script is directly referred to in the early scenes of the play when Kay references the stereotype in a joco-serious warning to her husband to avoid the trap. She says: “Your mother warned me. She said I shouldn’t let another woman into the house who still had her own teeth.” In order to expose the inequality of the heterosexual marriage, Winters turns it inside-out and up-side-down in an effort to challenge our inherited biases about gender roles and sexualities within the traditional family unit. Again, we carry emotions and judgements about the stereotypical scenario into the blend. For instance, we carry the assumption that the nanny is younger, more beautiful, more sexually attractive than the wife. In the stereotypical scenario the husband’s cheating is a sign of his virility; however, in the blend, when the wife cheats it is inevitably transformed into salaciousness. These interpretations of the culturally shared stereotype are those most popular in society and shared by the majority of people, but each individual programmer will interpret them based on their own personal history. When combined with the gender reversal of the stay-at-home dad and career-driven, deal-thirsty mother, the play’s layered blend is neat, clean, and obvious.

165 Winters, Best Man, 21.
Until Winters signals the stereotypical scenario within the script, it is buried beneath the actual structure of the play. According to Fauconnier and Turner, because the blend is presented ready-made “We don’t need explicit direction to do the blending, and so we don’t ordinarily notice it. But once pointed out the […] frame is very salient and makes the blend intuitively accessible.”166 In the mind of the programmer, the work to create the

166 Fauconnier and Turner, The Way We Think, 68.
blend happens below the level of consciousness: when reading, they don’t think ‘Kay/husband,’ they just think ‘Kay.’ Then, when Winters’ draws attention to it, it is so obvious that they will think they had been consciously aware of it the whole time; its overtness is what makes it invisible. Fauconnier and Turner explain that “In the case of blending, the effects of the unconscious imaginative work are apprehended in consciousness, but not the operations that produce it.”  

While the programmer will then become aware of the blend, the unconscious work that has created it remains imperceptible: knowledge of the blend does not mean awareness of the emotions, judgements and biases that have helped to create it.

If the programmer then is someone for whom these issues are important, their unconscious mind will bring multiple associations to the blend creating a richness of reference and depth of meaning in the cognitive space between inputs. However, if these stereotypes are not an immediate concern or not something they’re particularly invested in, the play’s action may appear thin, shallow or insignificant. The amount of room left to the programmer to bring associations to the play can influence how much their own biases feed into the way they interpret the script. Daniel Kahneman remarks that “you will often find that knowing little makes it easier to fit everything you know into a coherent pattern.”  

The less information the playwright gives to the programmer, the more likely they are to allow stereotyped reactions influence their interpretation of it. Winters error in *Best Man* may then have been to leave too much space for the programmer to input, or to make it too easy for them to jump to stereotyped conclusions.

In *Best Man*, Winters uses conceptual blending in order to expose the hidden biases within familiar social constructs. Paul Armstrong has described how “Dissonant

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168 Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, 87.
art defamiliarizes by violating a norm, and this requires the invocation of the norm."

The use of conceptual blending as a conscious dramaturgical device in Best Man creates room for the programmer to vigorously engage with the play’s construction. However, if the programmer begins this process from an antagonistic position to that of the playwright, the imaginative space allowed to them may be filled in ways not intended by the author. Or, if the programmer is simply unconcerned by issues that don’t affect them, they may not do the work to cognitively engage with the script at all. Disengagement is death to a play, making Winter’s strategy appear riskier than perhaps first assumed. How well that risk pays off depends on the sympathies of the programmer, on their personal reading history and their willingness to engage in the play’s imaginative construction. When used in this way, conceptual blending can facilitate greater interaction between the programmer and the material, but playwrights should be wary of the potential pitfalls of leaving their script too open. Open scripts rely more heavily on the input of the programmer, which creates greater opportunities for biases to inform their perception of the play as they fill in the blanks created by the playwright.

169 Armstrong, How Literature Plays with the Brain, 49.
Strandline

While the blending required by the programmer reading Best Man was implicit and open, Strandline by Abbie Spallen (1969-) calls for more specific blends through direct and indirect references to the canon. Strandline was commissioned by Fishamble: The New Play Company (Artistic Director: Jim Culleton) and premiered at Project Arts Centre in Dublin on 19 November 2009, in a production directed by Jim Culleton.170 Fishamble is one of the most significant theatre companies in Ireland for producing and developing new writing; however, it was not included in #WakingTheFeminists’ Gender Counts report due to its comparatively lower level of subsidy than the other organisations studied.171 This omission, although surprising, arises as a result of the broad scope of Gender Counts which included theatre festivals and venues as well as productions companies. However, with only ten organisations included in that report, it also suggests the underfunding of Fishamble, given the company’s importance within the theatre landscape. The company is included in Irish Theatre Institute’s Findings Report of the Irish Playography, which reveals that of the nineteen new plays premiered by the company between 2006 and 2015, two were by women, fourteen were by men and three were co-authored.172 173 Two plays by women represents 12.5% of the total sixteen single-

171 The organisations with the lowest levels of funding in Gender Counts were Barnstorm Theatre Company and Pan Pan Theatre who had received €2.8 million each from the Arts Council of Ireland between 2006 and 2015. Fishamble had only received €2.6 million from the Arts Council for the same period.
173 The other play by a woman was Deirdre Kinahan’s 2015 play, Spinning. The co-authored plays were Whereabouts by Jacqueline Strawbridge, Shane Carr, Tom Swift, Anna Newell, Jack Olohan, Jody O'Neill, Belinda McKeon, Louise Lowe, Colin Murphy, John Grogan and John Cronin; Tiny Plays for Ireland by Darren Donohue, Joseph O'Connor, Michael West, Dermot Bolger, Michelle Read, Deirdre Kinahan, Karl O'Neill, Rory Nolan, Ardal O'Halton, Gerald Murphy, Jody O'Neill, Colin Murphy, Sean McLoughlin, Rosaleen McDonagh, Niamh Creely, Evan Lee D'Alton, Rachel Feehily, Mark Hennessy, Adrienne Michel-Long, Gregory Rosenstock, Michael Cussen, Ronan Geoghegan, Ciara Ni Chuiirc, Jesse Weaver and Antonia Hart; and Tiny Plays for Ireland 2 by Mike Finn, Garrett Keogh, Pauline Mclynn,
authored plays premiered, or 10.5% of the total nineteen plays premiered in the ten years before #WakingTheFeminists. As the foremost production company dedicated solely to new writing, this statistic is more than depressing. It reveals the systematised nature of the discrimination. Of course, there were female playwrights produced as part of the “Show In A Bag” scheme, which Fishamble co-produced with Irish Theatre Institute and Dublin Fringe Festival; however, in terms of the major full productions that the company invested in, the representation of women is dismal. Spallen’s success then, in having her second play picked up by the company is quite significant.

*Strandline* contains close links to classic plays from the Irish canon, which are triggered implicitly during the reading process. This process, which happens in working memory, is fed by sensory inputs; however, it is conditioned by long-term memory. When reading, the programmer makes sense of the letters and words on the page in terms of learned conventions stored in long-term memory. They will understand the concepts, actions, and feelings those words evoke through their past experiences. As already outlined, working memory is where the activity of imagining the play production takes place, but as Joseph Le Doux explains, “working memory is not a pure product of the here and now. It also depends on what we know and what kinds of experiences we’ve had in the past. In other words, it depends on long-term memory.”

As the programmer reads a new playscript, they will make sense of it in terms of previous scripts they’ve read, past productions they’ve seen, and their own life experience in the world. The canon plays an important role in determining both how they read and evaluate a play, and in

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Tom Swift, Maeve Binchy, Brendan Griffin, Justine Mitchell, Geraldine McAlinden, Richie O'Sullivan, Kevin Gildea, Tanya Wilson, Eleanor White, Conor Hanratty, Mark Cantan, Henry Martin, Colum McCann, Christine McKeon, Lucy Montague-Moffatt, Patrick O'Sullivan, Liz Quinn, Federico Storni and Graham Stull.

how they interpret it in terms of style, genre, and staging conventions. The nature of the
canon’s influence on the way a programmer reads and interprets a new script manifests in two ways. The first of these contains the background frequency of canonical works, which may have been learned explicitly through formal education (semantic memory), or implicitly through cultural participation. The influence of the background frequency may be imperceptible in the moment of reading, but it will determine the way the programmer makes sense of the play. It will also have contributed to the development of their personal taste as well as their awareness of the social and cultural implications of their choices. The second way the canon influences the programmer is through saliency: either recent or prominent examples of canonical works will be readily available to the programmer for comparison with the new script they are reading through episodic memory. Aleida Assman suggests that “The canon stands for the active working memory of a society that defines and supports the cultural identity of a group.” Like the working memory of an individual, attention must be actively kept on those canonical works through repetition, reiteration, and citation in order to prevent them from falling into the culture’s long-term memory – the archive. The impact of the canon on the individual programmer is filtered through the working memory of the society, however, society also plays a secondary role in this decision through the weight of social judgement. In higher profile theatres such as a national theatre, the weight of the judgement of society on the programmer’s taste as evidenced by their programming may strongly influence the programmer when exercising that taste. As dramatized in Strandline, articulating taste is a powerful performance of identity, and the fear of public shame probably drives many individuals

to err on the side of caution (status quo) when making public statements about their preferences.

Through long-term memory, the canon informs how a new script is read and interpreted by the programmer. However, the canon also influences the playwright when constructing the script, whether they are choosing to write within or against its traditions. *Strandline* provides an interesting example of a play that revisits the themes and styles of plays associated with the early years of the Abbey, such as Lady Gregory’s *Spreading the News* and JM Synge’s *The Playboy of the Western World* but re-situates them within a contemporary setting in post-Celtic Tiger Ireland. The opening of *Strandline* begins with the following stage directions.


*Máirín and Eileen stand on the beach looking out.*

Within a few lines of dialogue, it becomes clear that the women are searching for someone out at sea. This opening evokes scene two of Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, in which Miranda recollects the trauma of watching the shipwreck from the shore:

> O! I have suffered
> With those I saw suffer: A brave vessel,
> (Who had no doubt some noble creature in her!)
> Dashed all to pieces…

The resonances with the Shakespearean play will be noticed by anyone familiar with the western canon and will immediately create an anchor that pins the play within a specific playwriting tradition. However, Shakespeare is not the only playwright invoked. The

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image of women watching on the shore for a drowning male relative also calls JM Synge’s *Riders to the Sea* to mind. Like *Strandline*, Synge’s play is punctuated by references to the rising wind and the threat of an incoming swell, its inhabitants also at the mercy of the elements. The set for *Riders* is a “*Cottage kitchen, with nets, oil-skins, spinning wheel, some new boards standing by the wall.*”\(^{178}\) In *Strandline*, as the action moves to Máirín’s house for a memorial service, the set is dominated by a massive loom and a catafalque – a wooden box of “*a rustic structure, possible driftwood or at least local wood.*”\(^{179}\) It is highly probable that most programmers of Irish theatre will be familiar with both plays and these references in the setting and design will trigger memories and emotions that will inform their interpretation.

The dialogue too makes important reference to Lady Gregory’s *Spreading the News*. Like that play, knowledge, in the form of gossip, is the town’s currency in *Strandline*, and like Gregory, Spallen’s use of dialect has an important function within the play as a signifier of who belongs to the town and who is an outsider. In *Strandline*’s first scene, as the women watch from the shore, their speech locates the place of the play for the programmer:

**Eileen** They’re there. Just there. Look, can you see the white. Wee dippy thing in the water. Thon wee flash of paint.

**Máirín** Barely white thon. An oul’ boat no one owns; broken back on it, two oars a dog would leave. Why would you go near an oul’ plank of an oul’ heap like thon?\(^{180}\)

The “wee”s “thon”s and “oul”’s of the script mark the dialect within Ulster. As well as giving a sense of the place of this territory, they offer a poetic timelessness to the writing.


The women on the beach, the men lost at sea and the use of dialect all gesture towards specific aspects of the Irish theatrical canon, acting as triggers which are described by Susan L Feagin as “conditioners:”

A variety of factors, such as one’s current psychological state or condition, memories of past experiences, beliefs and background knowledge will condition one’s responses. Conditioners – these states and conditions of the individual doing the reading and appreciating – affect both how one responds and what one responds to.\(^\text{181}\)

Because the memories and emotions evoked are so strongly linked to well-known plays, these will help the programmer to orient the new play in relation to the canon. This anchoring effect has been summarised by Daniel Kahneman in relation to the two systems of the brain. When anchors operate for adjustments (start with an anchor and adjust your evaluation in relation to it), they are a consciously-engaged product of System 2. When anchors operate as a priming effect (unconsciously influencing evaluation by calling compatible thoughts and ideas to mind), they are a product of System 1.\(^\text{182}\) As a programmer reads *Strandline*, it is far more likely that the canonical anchors act as unconscious priming effects on their System 1 brain (unless they are given the play with a description that says it’s like a modern *Riders*). They will influence how the programmer imagines the scene on stage and will prompt the kinds of patterns they will use to fill in the gaps in the script. References to the canon will also carry notions of literary value and artistic worth, implicitly linking the new play with those of the past. This unconscious influence is a form of implicit memory, which arise from “situations in which some form of learning has occurred, but which is reflected in performance rather

\(^{181}\) Feagin, *Reading with Feeling*, 25.

\(^{182}\) Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, 120.
than through overt remembering." The influence of such unconscious memories will remain invisible but can affect interpretations of the play in powerful ways.

Conceptual blending can be triggered by language which links two inputs within the blend. Fauconnier and Turner describe how “Words themselves are part of activation patterns, so when the same word is appropriate for two elements, we can prompt someone to match them by using the same word for both.” While *Strandline* indirectly evokes the style of the early Abbey plays through its poetised dialect and references to Irish mythology, Synge is more obviously referenced in the final scene when Sweeney returns to Máirín’s house. Signalled by a knock at the door and his salutation “God bless all here,” Sweeney’s return evokes the entrance of one of the best recognised figures in Irish theatre – Christy Mahon from *The Playboy of the Western World*. Although the exact phrase uttered by Synge’s Mahon is “God save all here!” Sweeney’s line in *Strandline* is similar enough to call *The Playboy* to mind. In fact, the archaic construction marks it out from the rest of the dialogue, so that it draws the attention of the programmer to its strange sound. Following the first call, Eileen opens the door to reveal Sweeney standing in the threshold with a suitcase; he reiterates the line: “God bless all here.” To avoid any doubt of a programmer not noticing the reference, on Sweeney’s third attempt to repeat the line, Eileen exclaims: “Get the f*** in, will you? You’re not in an oul’ play.” Spallen’s conscious evocation of Christy Mahon’s salute momentarily facilitates the blending of the character from Synge’s peasant drama with the figure of Sweeney in the post-Celtic Tiger world of *Strandline* (see figure 7).

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186 Synge, *The Playboy of the Western World, and Other Plays*, 103.
188 Spallen, *Strandline*, 85.
As one of the foundational texts of the modern Irish dramatic canon, it is safe to assume that any programmer of Irish theatre will be familiar with Synge’s play, so the probability of the blend being constructed is quite high. Although *Strandline* premiered in 2009, the decision to programme it would have been made at least a year earlier, and there were numerous productions of both the original script as well as adaptations of *The Playboy* in the preceding years. The Abbey’s most recent traditional version of the play had premiered in 2004 as part of the theatre’s centenary celebrations. This was followed
by Druid’s classic version as part of *DruidSynge* in 2005, and a mandarin adaptation by Pan Pan the same year. In 2007 (the centenary of the play’s premiere production), the Abbey produced Bisi Adigun and Roddy Doyle’s new version of the *Playboy* which was revived in 2008. Given the extent of the play’s production history in the years preceding *Strandline*’s premiere, it would have been remarkable if the programmer had not a memory of a production readily accessible in their mind. This memory may be a familiarity-based recognition, which is “a fast, automatic recognition process based on the perception of a memory’s strength [and] independent of the contextual information characteristic of recollection.” Or it may be a recollection, which is a “slower, more attention demanding component of recognition memory […] which involves retrieval of contextual information about the memory.” The programmer may have a semantic memory of such an occasion, for instance that Aaron Monaghan played Christy Mahon in Druid’s production in 2005. Or, they may have an episodic memory; they may remember the experience of seeing Monaghan’s head come slowly around the door in that production. The deliberate blending of the two characters evokes a comparison between the contemporary playwright and the canonical play and the programmer will keep such comparisons in mind as they continue reading. Of course, Sweeney is also a reincarnation of the ‘mad’ king from Irish folklore, and Spallen has specified that she based her character on Seamus Heaney’s *Mac Suibhne.* Layers of canonical references then build through the male figure to represent the canon of literature to which Spallen responds. The direct and indirect references to such plays create an automatic comparison, and the programmer will hold both the memory of the past version and the current one before them, referring between the two as they read. The blend is less obvious

190 Baddeley, Eysenck, and Anderson, *Memory*, 221.
than *Best Man* and works as a reference point rather than a frame, but the deliberate referencing means the play is consciously speaking back to the canon. By engaging with the canon, Spallen aligns herself with writers such as Heaney and Synge. In calling to mind canonical texts, she inserts this play within that tradition. Yet, the strength of the challenge to that tradition within *Strandline* makes her position not one of compromise but of a contender. The creation of blends between contemporary and canonical works is likely to bring positive associations to the mind of the programmer, biasing them in favour of plays that work within the established traditions, even as they challenge them. This kind of feminist challenge to canonical work can be traced through the plays of Marina Carr, and it may be why Spallen was successful in being produced by Fishamble when so few other women formed part of their programmes.

**Leaves**

The canon plays an important role in determining the parameters through which new plays are interpreted and evaluated. Its influence is mediated, either consciously or unconsciously, by long-term memory. Memories, and the act of remembering, have always played a strong thematic role in Irish theatre, in which playwrights have mined the events of the past in order to process the emotions of the present. In the 2007 play, *Leaves*, by Lucy Caldwell (1981-), this act of using past memories to make connections in the present is explored through the microcosm of an average middle-class family in Belfast. The play, however, did not premiere in the city of its setting, but at Druid Lane in Galway on 1 March 2007 in a co-production by Druid (Artistic Director: Garry Hynes) and the Royal Court (Artistic Director: Dominic Cooke), directed by Garry Hynes.192

192 Druid Lane was renamed the Mick Lally Theatre in 2011.
Having won the George Devine Award in 2006, it transferred from Galway to the Royal Court’s Jerwood Theatre Upstairs on 14 March 2007.\textsuperscript{193} Known best for their productions of classic plays from the Irish canon, a new play by Druid usually marks the discovery of a significant new writer. According to #WakingTheFeminists’ \textit{Gender Counts}, only 13\% of all plays produced by Druid between 2006 and 2015 were by women.\textsuperscript{194} This percentage is slightly lower when looking at world premieres only, with Irish Theatre Institute reporting that only one of the ten new plays produced by Druid between 2006 and 2015 was by a woman.\textsuperscript{195} That one play was \textit{Leaves} by Lucy Caldwell; its significance made more distinct by the company’s preference for male playwrights. In 2007, Caldwell won the Susan Smith Blackburn award for \textit{Leaves} along with two other Irish women – Abbie Spallen for \textit{Pumpgirl} and Stella Feehily for \textit{O Go My Man}. The coincidence of this tripartite award would, you might think, have prompted a surge of interest in these playwrights in Ireland. However, none of their playwriting careers developed much in the Republic over the next ten years, despite this recognition of their talent.\textsuperscript{196} I will discuss \textit{Pumpgirl} and \textit{O Go My Man} further in Chapter Three but will focus here on Caldwell’s \textit{Leaves}.

Set among a conventional middle-class family in Belfast, \textit{Leaves}, follows the story of a family as they come to terms with the attempted suicide of their eldest daughter, Lori. Like \textit{Strandline}, \textit{Leaves} contains echoes from the Irish canon that situate it within a specific playwrighting tradition. The father, David, is an academic writing a book on

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{193} Directed by Garry Hynes, \textit{Leaves’} set and costume design was by Francis O’Connor, with lighting design by Ben Ormerod and sound design by John Leonard. Fiona Bell and Conor Lovett played the roles of the parents Phyllis and David, with Kathy Rose O’Brien playing Lori and Penelope Maguire playing Clover. The role of eleven-year old Poppy was shared by Alana Brennan and Daisy Maguire.
  \item \textsuperscript{194} Donohue et al, \textit{Gender Counts}, 33.
  \item \textsuperscript{195} Irish Theatre Institute, \textit{Findings Report of the Irish Playography}, 9.
  \item \textsuperscript{196} Spallen’s \textit{Strandline} was the only play by one of these women to premiere in the Republic between 2008 and 2015. Both Spallen and Caldwell had plays produced in Northern Ireland and both Caldwell and Feehily had premieres in Great Britain during this period. While there were some student productions in the Republic, I’m not aware of any professional productions of their plays at this time.
\end{itemize}
Northern Irish placenames. A scholar, he echoes the O’Donnells of Brian Friel’s *Translations*, although his task works in the reverse-order: deciphering the roots of Anglicised place names, rather than creating them. Naming is a primary theme of the play, with David’s deterministic attitude locating the cause for Lori’s depression in her christening. The name Dolores, from which Lori is derived, means sorrow; her baptism, he feels, has destined her for a life of unhappiness. Any potential programmer of Irish theatre would recognise these echoes instantly and may subconsciously refer to Friel’s writing while reading the contemporary play. *Translations* has also been frequently produced in London, with a 2005 production most likely to have been prominent in the British programmers’ minds at the time of reading. However, Caldwell’s play differs in significant ways from Friel’s text. In *Leaves*, the self-contained family is isolated from the outside community and decidedly middle-class. While the family is likely one of a “mixed marriage” (Catholic and Protestant) this is never stated overtly in the script but signalled through the naming of the sisters “Clover” and “Poppy.” In contrast, Friel’s play explicitly confronts the theme of a love that crosses boundaries. Set in Belfast, the world of *Leaves* is contemporary and urban unlike the rural idyll of Friel’s classic. Of course, these divergences from the canonical work are not only pleasing, but necessary. Should Caldwell have written in a vein too closely to Friel’s, she would be dismissed as derivative. Yet in echoing the canonical playwright, her play is situated within a literary tradition that places language itself at the core of identity, politics, and theatre. These themes are ones already deemed important within the canon (unlike, for instance,

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197 The fact that a link with a canonical play is important for new work by women arises later in relation to the premiere of Margaret Perry’s *Porcelain*, which in intertwines the twin storylines of Hat’s struggle with depression in London in 2016 with Bridget Cleary’s struggles in Tipperary in 1895. In an interview with Eithne Shortall, Perry revealed that “The contemporary component of the play dates to 2014, but it was only when Perry combined it with Cleary’s story that theatres became interested.” Eithne Shortall, “In The Box Seat,” *The Sunday Times*, 4 February 2018, ProQuest. The canonical story (already dramatized in a play at the Abbey by Tom Mac Intyre in 2005) was necessary to anchor the contemporary story within a canonically familiar frame.
girlhood), and might trigger positive responses in the mind of the programmer who likens this play to those classics we have been taught are ‘good.’

However, Friel is not the only canonical playwright invoked. The play is structured by three acts, the third functioning as a coda to what has gone before. Act One sees the tensions within the family on Lori’s homecoming. However, while she is talked about and around, she does not appear until Act Two, when her mental state is as much revealed as it is veiled. Echoing the eponymous Godot, the anticipation of her arrival creates a tension throughout the first act that is satisfied by Act Two. In this way, Caldwell departs from the deferral of Beckett’s play. In many ways the play engages with the conventions of canonical texts. Its naturalistic style, familiar family dynamics, domestic setting and constrained plot development provide familiar and comfortable reminders of successful plays of the past. Although the novelty of *Leaves* may lie precisely within these conventions (the representation of a middle-class family at a time when stages seemed more concerned with working class lives, a fully-fledged mid-scale play, when monologues were ubiquitous), it also breaks with traditional representations by focussing on the lives of teenage and pre-teen sisters rather than adult relationships. Unlike *Strandline* and *Best Man*, which are structured in line with a feminist morphology, *Leaves* portrays the girls’ stories within a conventional form. In his analysis of the reading process, Paul Armstrong describes how “Neurobiologically, aesthetics of harmony appeal to and reinforce the brain’s need for synthesis and pattern, whereas dissonance serves the purpose of keeping the brain flexible and open to change, combating the rigidities of habit.”198 It may be possible that Caldwell struck that perfect balance in writing between convention and novelty, with *Leaves*’ blended world triggering

comforting pleasure in the brain through a conventional form and style but instigating surprise through novel voices and a shift in perspective.

Leaves’ ending, with its nostalgic return to the moment before Lori leaves for college a few months earlier, reveals what has been lost for this family through her suicide attempt. Gathered in the garden and lighting lanterns at dusk, the slightly hazy quality of the scene echoes those final moments of *Dancing at Lughnasa* and is the element of the play that most resembles Friel. In *The Way We Think*, Daniel Kahneman reveals that

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\text{...in intuitive evaluation [...] peaks and ends matter but duration does not. [...] What truly matters when we intuitively assess such episodes is the progressive deterioration or improvement of the ongoing experience, and how the person feels at the end.}^{199}
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The final moments of Caldwell’s play will solidify the association with canonical plays in the mind of the programmer and, as with *Strandline*, this will leave a positive impression at the crucial temporal moment at which an evaluation is confirmed.

The cognitive effort of reading a play involves imagining not only the narrative that unfolds before you, but how it would play on a stage with living actors performing within the conventions of theatrical production. A good reader will pay attention to the spatial dimension of the play’s world, to the movement of the characters within that space and to the ways in which set, props and costumes etc. contribute to the meaning-making process. The theatre programmer will bring other considerations to their reading, such as the financial implications of the design, the cast, and how play would work in a particular space and for a particular audience. This makes the process of choosing a script for *production* more fraught than that of choosing a volume of poetry, a short story, or a novel for *publication*. It may have contributed to the reason why writers such as Caldwell

have found greater success and more opportunities with their published prose rather than on stage. In her #WakingTheFeminists testimony, Lucy Caldwell said:

> you learn a lot from read-throughs and you learn a hell of a lot from rehearsals. But you learn most of all from seeing your play in front of its first proper audience on the night it previews: then, you learn at the speed of light, and you continue to learn by watching it during the course of its run.\(^{200}\)

This is why simply commissioning playwrights, workshopping their work, or “developing” them cannot work alone. Women need to see their plays produced. They need to be allowed to fail as well as succeed and to be given the space to learn from that failure, to be able to return and try again.

**The House Keeper, Scorch and Lally the Scut**

While *Strandline* and *Leaves* require the creation of blends that merge the new play with familiar ones, three further plays from this period summon blends derived from real-world events with the fictional world on stage. According to Marvin Carlson, this impulse of re-iteration is particularly common in the dramatic form: “Among all literary forms it is the drama pre-eminently that has always been centrally concerned not simply with the telling of stories but with the retelling of stories already known to its public.”\(^{201}\)

*The House Keeper* by Morna Regan was directed by Lynne Parker and produced by Rough Magic Theatre Company (Artistic Director: Lynne Parker) at Project Arts Centre in 2012, during the depths of the post-Celtic Tiger Irish recession. Despite having a feminist ethos embedded in the way the company makes work, only 22% of its plays between 2006 and 2015 were written by women, according to *Gender Counts*.\(^{202}\) This


\(^{202}\) Donohue et al, *Gender Counts*, 33.
number rises significantly when only new plays are considered with Irish Theatre Institute reporting that five of the eleven new plays Rough Magic premiered during this period were written by women, in comparison to four by men, and two which were co-authored. This represents 45% of the total number of new plays, or 56% of the single-authored plays being written by women. The five solo-authored plays were *The Bonefire* by Rosemary Jenkinson (2006), *Sodome, My Love* by Olwen Fouéré (2010), *The House Keeper* by Morna Regan (2012), *How To Keep An Alien* by Sonya Kelly (2014), and *Famished Castle* by Hilary Fanin (2015). As already indicated in the Introduction, I have chosen to omit Jenkinson’s work from these discussions due to the vast number of plays she premiered during this period (twelve plays between 2005 and 2015). Fouéré’s work has been excluded as it was an adaptation, while Kelly’s has been omitted due to its autobiographical nature. Of those remaining, both Fanin and Regan’s plays are concerned with the impact of the economic recession, however in this section I have chosen to focus on *The House Keeper* as it was nominated for the Best New Play Award at the Irish Times Theatre Awards.

Critics in *The Irish Times* and *Irish Theatre Magazine* remarked on the resemblances between the play’s plotting and that of Edward Albee’s *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, as both plays feature the psychological warfare of a sparring married couple created by their reproductive shortcomings (inability to conceive in Albee, degenerative genetic inheritance in Regan). Through its storyline of inheritances, both economic and biological, its domestic entrapment and class concerns, Regan’s play also bears striking resemblance to Ibsen’s *Ghosts*. However, it is the play’s resonances with the contemporary moment of the global credit crunch and the Occupy movement that dominate. *The House Keeper*’s plot concerns a former Manhattan worker who has lost

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her job and her home and is fighting to retain custody of her children while living out of a car. She breaks into the palatial home of a wealthy older woman with the intent of claiming the house for her and her family. Although the plot twists in surprising ways, at its core are questions about the fairness of the distribution of wealth and inheritance, and the programmer will blend the specifics of the fictional story with the reality of the financial crash, housing crisis and its impact on the lives of ordinary workers.

- **Beth** You can’t just come in and take a person’s house!
- **Mary** Why not?
- **Beth** Because you just can’t.
- **Mary** The bank just came in and took mine.  

The programmer’s response to the play will be influenced by aspects of their own identity, specifically their class, and as they bring their personal experience of the economic downturn to the play, it will be accompanied implicitly by their feelings about its issues. That this process is implicit is important, as “the emotional signal can operate entirely under the radar of consciousness. It can produce alterations in working memory, attention, and reasoning so that the decision-making process is biased toward selecting the action most likely to lead to the best possible outcome, given prior experience.”

This means the programmer selectively prioritises aspects of the script that confirm an interpretation based on an initial emotional reaction. Pointing out the unequal distribution of work and wealth under capitalism, Mary tells Beth: “I work, work and work and the bank gets my house anyway. You get born rich, marry rich and sit on your rich ass in a house like this you didn’t work a single day!”

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206 Regan, "The House Keeper," 199.
this speech with pity, guilt, defiance, vindication, or any other emotion will depend on a variety of factors including whether they have been in either Mary’s or Beth’s position in the past, and their current mood at the time of reading. Whatever their emotional response, their imagined conception of this scene in production will result from a blend of their own memories and emotions and the script’s action. These feelings will in turn influence whether they believe Mary’s attempted occupation of Beth’s home is credible and as well as the probability of Beth’s response to it. Damasio surmises that “Ultimately, feelings are the judges of the cultural creative process. This is because, in good part, the merits of the cultural inventions end up being classified as effective or not so by a feeling interface.”\(^{207}\) While the canonical references of Strandline and Leaves help to situate those plays within specific theatrical traditions, the real-world comparisons of The House Keeper give the script feelings of relevance. Plays that reference the contemporary zeitgeist will activate more of the programmer’s memories due to their recency, and the memories triggered are likely to be stronger than a play that references historical events.

In Scorch by Stacey Gregg (1983-), the play’s source material was the growth in prosecutions of gender-fraud in Great Britain in the 2010s. Scorch was directed by Emma Jordan and produced by Prime Cut Productions (Artistic Director: Emma Jordan) at the Outburst Queer Arts Festival in Belfast in 2015. Prime Cut Productions were not included in Gender Counts, which focussed exclusively on companies funded by The Arts Council of Ireland/An Comhairle Ealaíon. Although between 2006 and 2015 Prime Cut tended to produce Irish premieres of plays, rather than new scripts, they did work with Lisa Magee and Louise Lowe on a number of community engagement productions during these years. The Findings Report of the Irish Playography, however, reveals that they only premiered two new plays between 2006 and 2015, a new adaptation of Antigone by Owen

\(^{207}\) Damasio, The Strange Order of Things, 171.
McCafferty and Scorch by Stacey Gregg. Scorch is a one person-show, performed in the round to reflect its setting in a support group meeting. The play dramatizes the story of Kes, a teen in the process of discovering their gender identity and sexuality. Kes’ identity in the play is initially split between their everyday life, in which they struggle against the social norms forced upon them, and their online life, in which they’re free to inhabit male avatars and assume masculine personas. The two selves are established in the first part of the play as operating in separate realms, but when Kes is issued with a court summons, their twin personas form the inputs to their identity blend through compression. Fauconnier and Turner explain that “identity is taken for granted as primitive, but it is a feat of the imagination, something the imagination must build or disassemble.”208 While Fauconnier and Turner articulate how the compression of identity across time occurs when we link a baby with their adult selves, in Kes’ case, the compression occurs across space: the real-world self and the virtual self. The programmer reading the play journeys with Kes, from childhood when they “try wee standing up” to the surprise of adolescence: “I’m a boy. Then eleven. Then boobs.”209 The programmer will understand Kes’ journey through implicit memories of their own experience of gender confusion, or that of a friend, or through media coverage of the subject. Due to the highly personal nature of the subject, these implicit memories will carry strong emotions that will shape the programmer’s understanding of the play. Damasio explains that not only do our emotions reflect our responses to an object, under their influence “we gradually categorize the situations we experience – the structure of the scenarios, their components, their significance in terms of our personal narrative.”210 As the play unfolds, the programmer’s

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208 Fauconnier and Turner, The Way We Think, 95.
210 Damasio, Looking for Spinoza, 146.
creation of the blend of Kes’ twin identities will be unconsciously categorized and structured by their implicit emotional memories of their own personal experience.

*Scorch* begins like a love story, as Kes meets Jules online and describes with painful honesty the growing intimacy of first love. When a court summons arrives accusing Kes of fraud, they are confused. In response to the Judge’s accusation that Kes groomed Jules, Kes says “I – I didn’t realise, sir. I didn’t realise that’s what I was doing.”211 Although the concept of being falsely accused of a crime you didn’t know exists has parallels with Kafka’s *The Trial*, in the case of *Scorch*, the actual imprisonment of young people under the crime of gender fraud is the more powerful reference point. Programmers will read the play with the knowledge that it is based on real crimes, and part of the process of blending the fictional account with those trials is to test the story for its validity. Gregg’s dramatization of the teenage Kes’ process of discovering their identity, their confusion about sex and relationships in general, and the gradual progression of the relationship with Jules from the mediated online gaming world to their real-world encounter brings complexity and empathy into a story previously known through the prism of media reports on a criminal trial.

Like *Best Man*, Gregg has deliberately left the script open for interpretation, saying “Some see Scorch as dealing with LGBTQIA concerns, some with trans, some with a general duty of care towards young people, and this may be reflected in casting. The dissensus is deliberate.”212 Yet, unlike *Best Man*, this dissensus is what makes the play compelling. Where *Best Man* relied on the input of programmers to bring rich associations to the play, the irresolution at the heart of *Scorch* not only dramatizes Kes’ uncertainty but fascinates the programmer as they conjure their own interpretations. The

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211 Gregg, *Scorch*, 33.
212 Gregg, *Scorch*, 10.
emotional responses to the story that contribute to this interpretation will peak when Kes and Jules meet in person. As Kes describes their preparation, what began as a harmless love story becomes more ambiguous: “strap down them pesky boobs […] Packing is when you put something down there, to feel, to feel like, comfy.”213 When they have sex, this ambiguity is made salient: “Worry a bit. Hurt her a bit […] Want to be the perfect boyfriend […] Pick the one that has the best reviews. Says it’s soft. Soft and realistic to touch, like a real ahm, cock, the website says.”214 Scorch’s power arises from its capacity to create strong empathetic bonds between its audience and Kes, which are achieved through its staging as much as the confessional tone of the play. Kes is an immensely likeable character, and it is difficult to imagine a programmer not rooting for them. Yet the programmer’s biases will emerge in their conception of Kes’ casting. Depending on their interpretation, envisioning Kes as performed by cis female, cis male, non-binary, trans female, trans male or a performer of any other gender identity will have profound implications on how the morality of Kes’ actions are seen. For instance, amid the dominance of cultural conversations about consent, if Kes were performed by a cis man, would this impact interpretations of the morality of their actions? The effect of current media conversations about gender identities on conceptions of the play was remarked on by Gregg in an interview in The Guardian:

I’m interested in responses to the play, its interpretation as a trans piece, because that seems to ignore aspects of lesbian sexuality. It is as if butch lesbians have gone away – they haven’t – and now we can only talk about this in terms of a medicalised idea of transition from one gender to another.215

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213 Gregg, Scorch, 22.
214 Gregg, Scorch, 23.
The salience of transgender lives culturally, and the emphasis in cultural conversations on inclusivity, have shaped interpretations of the play’s meaning. Were it to be performed in a different cultural or historical context, these interpretations would likely vary according to the dominant cultural gender norms of that time or place.

Like Scorch, Abbie Spallen’s Lally the Scut personalises an event that enthralled the public via sensationalised media representation. Directed by Michael Duke, Artistic Director of Tinderbox Theatre Company, Lally the Scut premiered at the MAC, Belfast in 2015. Like Prime Cut, Tinderbox were excluded from Gender Counts due to their funding by the Arts Council of Northern Ireland. They were, however, included in Irish Theatre Institute’s research which revealed that of the nineteen new plays premiered by the company between 2006 and 2015, five were by women, twelve were by men, and two were co-authored. Women, therefore, wrote 26% percent of the total number of new plays by Tinderbox during this period, or 29% of the new single-authored plays. The four other plays were Girls and Dolls by Lisa McGee (2006), Huzzies by Stacey Gregg (2010), Planet Belfast by Rosemary Jenkinson (2013) and All Through the House by Judith King (2015). I have chosen here to focus on Lally The Scut as it was cited alongside Pumpgirl (discussed in Chapter Three) when Spallen was awarded a lucrative Wyndham Campbell Prize for Drama in 2016. With a cast of twelve, Lally the Scut represented a major investment by the company in Spallen, and is among the biggest plays under consideration in this thesis. The play’s plot revolves around a rescue operation to recover a boy who has become trapped down a well, thus building upon the global interest generated by the 2010 Chilean mining incident in which a sixty-nine-day rescue operation

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218 Other plays with large casts include Shibboleth (13), Bang Bang Bang (16) and O Go My Man (14).
of thirty-three miners trapped in a copper-gold mine was televised and broadcast across the world. Characters in Spallen’s play reference the Kirk Douglas film, *Ace in the Hole* (1951), in which a journalist convinces the rescuers of a man trapped in a cave to prolong the rescue so that he can generate a media spectacle from it. The rescue becomes a tourist attraction, replete with games, songs, and carnival rides, but the man develops pneumonia in the cave and dies before the rescuers reach him. *Lally the Scut*’s plot closely resembles that of the film, with an important shift in perspective from a privileging of the journalist’s perception of the story to the mother’s. *Ace in the Hole* presented a bleak portrayal of ruthless human selfishness. Its depressing outlook is remarked upon by Gav who comments: “it is very dark. I despaired.” For a programmer familiar with the film, its plot and dominant emotions will influence their perception of Spallen’s play. However, the film is over sixty years old, and its failure to reach audiences at its premiere is noted by Gav, who tells Owen that “It didn’t do the business at the box office.” *Ace in the Hole*’s relative obscurity then makes the more recent Chilean mining incident likely to be the salient reference point in the programmer’s memory.

The incident is referenced within the play by the journalist Gav who tells Lally,

> Have you any idea, day to day, how many poor, poor, poor kids get globally, trapped down wells? […] In India with a kid called … something and those Chilean miners that popped out like a packet of Pez, there were millions in bets placed on them coming out alive or dead.

References such as this, call for momentary blends as the programmer reads, which will colour their overall interpretation of the play. Central to its concerns is the repetition of

\[221\] Spallen, *Lally the Scut*, 34-5.
unbelievable events, and the story of the child stuck down a hole in the present is echoed by a prior incident when the same thing happened to Lally when she was a child.

**Owen** And then, when it’s happened twice? People are naturally a bit suspicious.

**Gav** Once is tragedy …. Twice is farce.²²²

The combination of the internal blending of Lally’s confinement with that of her son’s is magnified by the external references to the Chilean incident that create a robust superstructure supporting the plot. Unlike Gregg and Winters, Spallen does not leave the associations the programmer might bring to the play to chance, but carefully curates the links they might make. Of course, the way the programmers feel about these references cannot be curated completely. Again, blending plays an important role in how the programmer conceptualises the play, yet, because recruitment to the blend is unconscious, the generation of blends facilitates the incorporation of attendant implicit biases. In both the cases of *Scorch* and *Lally the Scut*, the salience of the real-world event is derived from its rareness, while for *The House Keeper*, the salience of the real-world context emerges from its pervasiveness. In each example the real event gives the story its relevance, while the canonical references give it the weight of cultural significance. These reference points provide anchors for the programmer against which the play is unconsciously measured for veracity, in relation to the real event, and quality, in relation to the canonical citation.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has explored how cognitive blending is an important structuring device used in various ways in each of the plays above, and how the programmer is required to create blends as they read. It has shown how cognitive blending is used to

²²² Spallen, *Lally the Scut*, 34.
create an imagined production prompted by the play script, and how the transfer from inputs to the blend relies on unconscious completion conducted by the programmer. This is the point at which unconscious biases are most likely to influence the reading process. The play analysis emphasised the extent to which the creation of the blend relies on the unconscious influence of both memory and emotion, while outlining how stereotypes inform the programmers’ interpretation of characters and how episodic memories of recent productions aid in the creation of imagined moments in new plays. The analysis has shown how emotions guide the programmer towards a decision, but it is important to note that emotions also help to predict that decision’s outcome. Damasio’s emphasis of the importance of our anticipation of the future consequences of decisions is important. He says that the neural process of appraisal allows us to connect categories of social knowledge – whether acquired or refined through individual experience – with the innate, gene-given apparatus of social emotions and their subsequent feelings. Among these emotions/feelings, I accord special importance to those that are associated with the future outcome of actions, because they come to signal a prediction of the future, an anticipation of the consequence of actions.223

This process plays an important role in the programmer’s decision-making: the anticipated social consequences of their programming choices will weigh heavily on their final decisions. Their knowledge that, at this historical moment, they will face backlash for programmes that are predominantly or solely white and male will play on their mind, as will the knowledge that such decisions may now result in financial as well as reputational and social penalties for their theatre. Not only is the process of evaluation of a new script contingent on the programmer’s perception of the marketplace of canonical

223 Damasio, Looking for Spinoza, 147.
and contemporaneous plays held in their cultural consciousness, but their decision will be swayed by an anticipation of a community response to it.

While often rewarding, the cognitive effort required for play-reading is draining, and a tired brain resorts to stereotypes in order to make decisions more quickly. Lucy Kerbel writes that:

> While theatre is a working environment that is often moving at great speed, and in which there’s a high frequency of decisions being made at any one time, the insertion of a moment to stop and think about why we’re instinctively making the choices we are is a crucial one. Consistently inserting a moment to think with our conscious brain could be what is required to break away from our unconscious bias and make new decisions in different directions.\(^{224}\)

Strategic interventions to force programmers to slow down and pay attention to what the writer is attempting to say, rather than what the programmer is inputting may change the types of evaluations programmers make of women’s scripts. Paul Armstrong notes that

> Art is a matter of learned conventions, and some works that seem odd, difficult, and unnatural may become less so as we become accustomed to them and learn how to understand their strategies – how to recognize the patterns that make their disruptions meaningful, the principles and purposes behind their breaking of the rules.\(^{225}\)

The more we read women’s scripts and attempt to understand them in their own right, rather than in comparison to an ideological norm, the more accustomed we will become to feminist dramaturgies and women’s experiences of the world we share. The plays under discussion here often rely on the salience of canonical and social references to create strong resonances within the play itself. Reliance on such references emerges as a significant trend in Irish theatre in the years after #WakingTheFeminists, and further

\(^{224}\) Kerbel, *All Change Please*, 68.

\(^{225}\) Armstrong, *How Literature Plays with the Brain*, 46.
discussion of how they influence biased programming will be discussed in Chapter Four. By invoking the canon, the playwrights discussed here situate their writing in comparison or conflict with previous narrative forms. In doing so, they reorient the repertoire of Irish plays, shifting the field ever so slightly in a new direction towards more diverse ranges of experience and representation. With each modification of the ground beneath an accepted format or concept, these playwrights alter the parameters of the canon itself, forging the way for the further incremental shifts that will eventually lead to radical change. These plays offer a reflection of other writers, other plays, themes, and ideas that the Abbey might have considered for their stages. Attention will now turn to the plays the Abbey did produce, to examine the role that language plays in conceptualising the imagined play blend and contributing to the overall appraisal of new plays.
CHAPTER TWO: WOMEN’S LANGUAGE AT THE ABBEY THEATRE

“women do not write lesser plays, women are not lesser artists, women are not lesser citizens”

Deirdre Kinahan, #WakingTheFeminists Public Meeting, Abbey Theatre, 12 November 2015

“The role of a national cultural institution has always been about setting the standard of contemporary art. It writes history by imposing the standard of what is recognised as a good piece of work and what isn’t. Its programming decisions determine such.”

Jane Deasy, One Thing More, Abbey Theatre, 14 November 2016

“Let us redefine the world we live in with the language we use. Words matter.”

Marie Tierney, One Thing More, Abbey Theatre, 14 November 2016

The conceptual blending model provides an explanation for how the unconscious contributes to biased conceptions of plays by women. The previous chapter showed how memory and emotion contribute to this process through triggered associations with the canon, the real world, and the programmer’s own personal life. Attention will now turn to one of the primary components that link the inputs to the blend, language, to explore the role it plays in contributing to biased responses to women’s plays.
Revisiting the Programmer’s Blend described in Chapter One (figure 8), it becomes clear that language plays an important role in recruiting elements to the blend. According to Fauconnier and Turner, “a language is a powerful culturally developed means of creating and transmitting blending schemes. [...] the capacity for language depends intricately on the capacity for blending and compression.”

It is through language that the world of the play is mediated, and the programmer must share the same language as the playwright in order to make sense of the play. However, language is not an ideologically neutral

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226 Fauconnier and Turner, The Way We Think, 369.
medium. It carries and reflects the value systems of the culture from which it emerged. In the form of a play script, it also carries the weight of canonical norms that typically manifest in expectations of clarity, directness of speech, linear logic of character motivation and forward momentum of action. The programmer will of course bring their own biases about the use of language which will be influenced not only by their literary education, but by their class, age, gender, race, ethnicity and so on. The play’s use of dialect, its literary or cultural allusions, or the inclusion of multiple languages, will all infer implicit associations about its author, its audience and whether it belongs on a particular stage. Discrepancies between the playwright’s use of language and the programmer’s conception of the kind of language that merits a production may therefore result in biases in the programmer’s conception and evaluation of the play.

In order to investigate how such biases might affect women, this chapter will explore the position of women in relation to the English language and the distinctive ways it is used in plays by women that premiered at the Abbey in the years preceding #WakingTheFeminists. The Abbey Theatre produced nine new full-length plays by women between 2005 and 2015: Enlightenment by Shelagh Stephenson (2005), Marble by Marina Carr (2009), B For Baby by Carmel Winters (2010), No Escape by Mary Rafferty (2010), 16 Possible Glimpses by Marina Carr (2011), No Romance by Nancy Harris (2011), Perve by Stacey Gregg (2011), Shush by Elaine Murphy (2013) and Shibboleth by Stacey Gregg (2015). Marina Carr will be excluded from the following discussion for reasons already outlined in the Introduction. As Shelagh Stephenson is a British playwright, primarily working in Britain, I have also chosen not to include her here. Mary Raftery’s No Escape was a piece of documentary theatre commissioned by

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227 A complete list of plays by women at the Abbey Theatre between 2005 and 2015 is available in Appendix I.
the Abbey in response to the publication of The Report of the Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse (The Ryan Report). As my focus here is on original scripts submitted to the theatre in advance of a production decision being made, it will also be excluded from this discussion. While Nancy Harris’ *No Romance* and Stacey Gregg’s *Perverse* do meet my criteria for inclusion, I have instead chosen to focus on *B for Baby*, *Shush* and *Shibboleth* due to their significance in the programme. *B for Baby* was the only play by a woman to tour during this period and, with over one hundred performances, it was, significantly, a play that generated revenue for the company. *Shush* premiered on the Abbey’s mainstage, making Elaine Murphy the first playwright other than Marina Carr to be programmed in the main space since 1988. Between 2005 and 2015, the only other play by a woman performed in the main auditorium was Carr’s *Marble*; for these reasons, the premiere of *Shush* was an important moment in the theatre’s history. Finally, Stacey Gregg’s *Shibboleth* was the first play by a woman to premiere after the significant production of *Shush*. As the last play to be programmed before #WakingTheFeminists, its premiere occurred before the cultural mind-shift towards women’s work at the national theatre; yet this premiere occurred five years after it was written, raising questions about why it took so long to receive a production. If a complete understanding of how the unconscious biases informing programming decisions is to be reached, it is important to interrogate the linguistic frameworks of each of these plays to question whether they conform with, or deviate from, stereotypical models of women’s language, why they were chosen for production, and how they relate to Mac Conghail’s conservative programming.

One of the places in which gender bias is made most explicit is in the very structures of the English language itself. As outlined in the introduction, Julia Penelope has shown how the English language positions women in subordination to men through hierarchical binary relationships in its lexicon, semantics, and morphology. This creates
a problem for the female playwright, who must stretch and twist the language to make it accommodate a female perspective. One of the ways this is accomplished is through blending, as “blends harness existing words in order to express the new meanings that arise in the blend.”\footnote{Fauconnier and Turner, \textit{The Way We Think}, 276.} The following discussion will show how linguistic blends are used in these plays to challenge dominant perspectives on the world. This use of blending to create new perceptions is one of the process’ most distinctive features, as what makes blends “so compelling [is] that they come to represent, mentally, a new reality, in culture, action, and science.”\footnote{Fauconnier and Turner, \textit{The Way We Think}, 21.} While the programmer may enjoy running the blends prompted in these plays, the value they place on such linguistic games will be measured implicitly against canonical norms of language-use which these blends exist, by definition, outside of. Paradox, therefore, is intrinsic to women’s relationship to the language and the success or failure of their plays often depends on how well they harness such inherent contradictions for their own ends.

\textbf{B for Baby}

\textit{B for Baby} by Carmel Winters (1971-) is a play full of such contradictions. Winters’ first full-length play formed part of the Abbey Theatre’s offering for the 2010 Dublin Theatre Festival (DTF).\footnote{Carmel Winters, \textit{B for Baby}, dir. Mikel Murfi, Abbey Theatre, Dublin, 30 September 2010.} It premiered during a difficult year in Ireland: the country was in the depths of economic depression following the bank guarantee in 2008 and anticipating the arrival of the Troika (European Commission, European Central Bank, and International Monetary Fund) who would lock the Irish government into an €85 billion bailout by the year’s end. The Report of the Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse (The Ryan Report) had been published the previous year and, as a society, the
nation was reeling from the collapse of trust in religious, political, and economic institutions. Eleven theatre companies lost their annual funding from The Arts Council/An Chomhairle Ealaíon in 2010 in a move that would radically alter the mode of production in Irish theatre from a company model to a project-based model, transferring both power and responsibility from institutions to individual artists. The Abbey Theatre’s 2010 programme reflected the various crises in hierarchical structures with David McWilliams’ *Outsiders* addressing the economic crisis and “The Darkest Corner” series, which included Mannix Flynn’s *James X*, Mary Raftery’s *No Escape* and Richard Johnson’s *The Evidence I Shall Give*, responding to the findings of the Ryan Report. Formally, the use of autobiographical, testimonial and documentary dramaturgies in these plays reflected the cultural distrust of fictional narrative and a desire for truth-seeking prompted by the collapse of hegemonic power structures. *B for Baby* offered a counterpoint to the otherwise sombre programming that year by entwining its troubling story of abuses of power in a care-home with moments of comparably light-hearted humour.

Programming a new play in the midst of economic crises is always a risky business with debuts typically shelved in favour of more bankable classics. However, in the depths of the depression of 2010, Mac Conghail took a risk on a relatively unknown playwright in the coveted DTF slot of his programme. At the time of programming, Winters was yet to receive the acclaim that would accompany her film debut *Snap*, which premiered at the Tribeca Film Festival just months before *B for Baby’s* opening. What was it about Winters’ play that prompted such a leap of faith from the director of the national theatre? The Abbey Theatre’s remit is to respond to the nation; describing its activity at that time as creating “discourse and debate on the political, cultural and social
issues of the day.”²³¹ Although fictional, B for Baby responds to the idea of the instability of knowledge by actively subverting its means of transmission – language. Touching on issues of the sexual rights of people with disabilities, the abuse of power and the pursuit of motherhood, the play speaks to the political, cultural, and social issues of the day; however, through its fictional narrative, abstract set design and focus on themes of love and relationships, its specific issues are made universal, appealing to the broader international audience that the Dublin Theatre Festival attracts.

The winner of the Best New Play Award at The Irish Times Theatre Awards, B for Baby was a popular success for the Abbey that went on to tour across the island throughout 2011. In fact, it was the only play written by a woman among the seven that exceeded 100 performances during Mac Conghail’s tenure. Directed by Mikel Murfi, B for Baby was originally commissioned by Theatre Lovett and featured Louis Lovett, for whom the play was written, in a two-hander with Michelle Moran. Winters’ play is set in a care home where B and Dee are residents. They pass their time by imagining other possibilities for their lives, conjuring new identities through the stories they tell each other. Mrs C, one of the home’s weekend carers, grows close to B, creating tensions between the two friends. Mrs C longs for a child; however, unable to conceive with her husband Brian, she has sex with B while overnighting in the care-home at Christmas. She doesn’t return to the home, but B is certain that their night together means that they will get married. When, with Dee’s help, he realises Mrs C is never coming back, he is left distraught and heartbroken. Two years later Mrs C returns and gives B a photograph of the daughter they conceived together. B and Dee’s relationship grows closer and the play ends with the suggestion of their budding romance.

²³¹ Carmel Winters, B for Baby (London: Methuen, 2010).
The linguistic structures of Winters’ script reveal the destabilization of patriarchal knowledge in the play. Through its female-male duologues, *B for Baby* creates a series of blends that challenge orthodox definitions by imbuing existing words with new meanings. The language through which the hegemonic power structures operate is undermined and disrupted, and in so doing, the apparently stable meanings it conveys are unhinged. Using a language that reinforces the systematic subordination of women through its grammar, vocabulary and morphology, women are forced to become more playful in adapting this language to their mode of expression. Their creativity within the language is a form of play necessary in order to convey a woman’s experience of the world through a language that does not have the vocabulary to capture this experience. Women’s focus on the appeasement of those in power forces a playfulness in their language use, an embracement of ambiguity made manifest in the refusal to take a strong position. Julia Penelope describes women’s position within the language as follows:

> We move and breathe and spend every day of our lives in negative semantic space […] Without words to describe our perceptions, a vocabulary that speaks of and to our experiences, ways to name ourselves […] we uncertainly navigate the conceptual distance between victim and survivor.232

Confined to negative semantic space, women embrace the liminal space that is embedded in their psyche and reflective of their position within the language itself. Women live in the middle ground, between the binary of man and an ‘ideal woman’ whom she can never live up to. This negative semantic space is not affirmative, it is the unknown, the unseen, the unacknowledged. This is the space that Winters is shedding light on, making visible the invisible world that has always been there but never identified, acknowledged, or

232 Penelope, *Speaking Freely*, 125.
named. Through blended wordplay, she subverts the patriarchal order, undermining the authority of the dictionary and illuminating the potential for feminine meanings.

Interrogating the loci of power and undermining the authority of those who hold it, Winters deliberately plays with language throughout *B for Baby*, presenting it as a slippery, evasive medium that is constantly shifting its foundations. This analysis will focus on the ways the script questions social, linguistic and gender norms, by using Elin Diamond’s method of gestic feminist criticism that works to “‘alienate’ or foreground those moments in a playtext when social attitudes about gender and sexuality conceal or disrupt patriarchal ideology.”

In the first scene of the play, the gendered creation and manipulation of language is demonstrated in the linguistic interplay between B and Dee. When Dee takes the chair to have her hair cut, her exchange with B reveals her command of their conversation:

Dee I might as well have the usual – wash, cut and blowjob.

B simulates brushing her hair – there’s no contact – until he realises what she has said.

B That’s not the ‘usual,’ not here at Mister B’s…

Dee What’s not?

B You know, you’re just trying to make me say it…

Dee ‘Wash, cut and blowdry?’ You’re imagining things B, they’d be carting you off to the loony bin if we weren’t already there…

Dee’s replacement of the word ‘blowjob’ for ‘blowdry’ is a suggestive trick in her coy seduction of B; yet, by inferring that it is he who has misheard because of his own nefarious intentions, she keeps the upper hand in the interaction. Fauconnier and Turner tell us that “language is rife with forms that prompt for the construction of a

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counterfactual relation between one space and another.”

The switch from the anticipated word “blowdry” in Dee’s first utterance to the sexual “blowjob” facilitates a blend between the act of hairdressing and the performance of oral sex. Dee dominates the conversation following this exchange until B criticises her for using a bad word. Immediately rounding on him, she reverses the jibe, explaining that it is he who has said something wicked: “‘Volume.’ That’s a dirty filthy word.”

As it becomes clear that neither B nor Dee knows the meaning of ‘volume,’ Dee ascribes the word a new meaning, a bad meaning, which will support her feigned disapproval of its use. Telling B, “It’s the word for a woman’s you-know-what,” she ascribes it to something without a polite lexical referent.

B’s guess that she is referring to “her boobydoobydoos” forces Dee to clarify further: “‘Volume’ is worse. Lower. Down there. Before-the-butt-hole. Bogsville. The place you’re called after.”

Endlessly euphemised, English speakers find “there is a lack of acceptable terminology to bridge the gap between the formal words for female genitalia associated with medicine and science, like ‘vagina’ and ‘vulva,’ and the most colloquial, glossed in dictionaries as ‘taboo’ and ‘offensive:’ ‘cunt.’”

The female genitalia invite such a variety of metaphors that when Dee sees an opportunity to ascribe an unknown lexical referent to them, she seizes it to aid in her flirtation with B.

While B holds the language as a fixed immutable thing, forcing Dee to repeat the pronunciation of “Boobydoobydoos” until she gets it right; it is Dee who understands the playful possibilities within the linguistic medium. By the time Dee says to B “You started it. Going around putting ‘volume’ into people’s hair. How would you like it if I put my

235 Fauconnier and Turner, *The Way We Think*, 238.
volume in your hair?” the meaning of the word has changed.\textsuperscript{240} In fact, the programmer reading the script must adopt the new meaning in order to understand the interaction, and the fact that the word has become sexualised is evidenced by B’s erection. What the script does is to use this exchange to force the programmer reading it to construct a blend from the familiar word “volume” and its new meaning “vagina.” Once the blend has been constructed, the programmer can “run the blend”\textsuperscript{241} by inserting the new sexual meaning of “volume” into the hairdressing frame, which allows them to make sense of the new meaning of the phrase “putting ‘volume’ into someone’s hair.” The fact that the programmer will complete this process without much effort happens because “blending routinely and inevitably extends the uses of words, but we rarely notice these extensions.”\textsuperscript{242} Dee’s manipulation of the word “volume” to confuse, intimidate and arouse B, reveals the arbitrariness of both the concept of ‘bad’ language and the connection between signifier and signified. However, in foregrounding the “wickedness” of mentioning a woman’s genitalia (particularly in comparison to the male organ that announces itself) this interaction highlights the ambivalence of social disgust towards vaginas. While Dee’s vagina is unspeakable, B’s penis has a title: Mister Whistler. This interaction at the start of the play establishes the instability of language that continues to be interrogated throughout the play. Language is revealed to be malleable and meaning elusive, however, in the confusion produced by the prevalence of euphemisms and metaphors, creativity reigns.

As the programmer constructs the blend, their emotional reaction to the wordplay will inform whether they view the scene as primarily funny, or disgusting, or any of a variety of other possible responses. This emotional reaction will be determined by their

\textsuperscript{240} Winters, B for Baby, 5.
\textsuperscript{241} Fauconnier and Turner, The Way We Think, 60.
\textsuperscript{242} Fauconnier and Turner, The Way We Think, 276.
personal history of relationships with people with intellectual disabilities, as well as their own comfort or squeamishness about vagina-talk. Their emotional responses will not only shape their conception of the scene but will carry value-judgements about the quality of the writing that will include appraisals of the appropriateness of this portrayal of characters with intellectual disabilities, as well as that of such sexualised discourse. Whether they relish the wordplay or find it stupid will be deeply informed by an emotional reaction fuelled by their personal experience.

Winters’ destabilisation of language at the word level creates a subsidence at the heart of the play, causing the play’s language to constantly collapse in upon itself. The destabilisation of knowledge is evident in the language of the women who contest the knowability of the world throughout the play. Unlike B who accepts anything he's ever been told as fact, both Dee and Mrs C question the veracity of received knowledge and lived experience. From the beginning of the play, Dee’s reliance on epistemology is evident. When B references that his mother’s soul is in heaven, Dee says “She’s dead, is she? Dead-dead? Not just pretending to be […] They do that. ‘The babies are dead. The mother’s dead. The father’s dead. The brother’s dead.’ Blablablablabla. I never believe a word unless I see the body.”243 Dee’s distrust of language is clear from this very early stage of the play - she doesn’t believe a “word.” Language is a deceptive tool for her, and she prefers to rely on the evidence gained from seeing. When B tells her that his new friend Shirley (his name for Mrs C) said his bread was the best she ever had, Dee remains suspicious about the existence of this “Shirley,” questioning B on exactly what she said. B admits that “she might have been exaggerating” causing Dee to surmise “She might have. Or she mightn’t have been here at all.”244 This resistance towards the reality of

243 Winters, B for Baby, 4.
244 Winters, B for Baby, 21.
occurrences is prevalent throughout the play and is mirrored in Mrs C’s language in the play’s central bedroom scene. Intimating that what has happened may be illusory, Mrs C questions whether she and B really had just had sex: “Did I imagine this, B? Did I dream it up? Maybe all this – none of this – really happened…”\(^{245}\) The play’s frequent forays into fantasy result in a blurring of the lines between reality and the imaginary world. Elaine Aston has shown how “modern women’s theatre is characterized by a resistance to being pushed “offstage” and is replete with explosions, ‘demolishings’ of discourse.”\(^{246}\) Through the disruption of language, Winters subverts the possibility of definitive knowledge, creating an environment in which a multiplicity of truths may coexist simultaneously. The environment of \textit{B for Baby} relies on a series of nested blends in which the play’s fictional characters themselves create fictitious realities in which they play and dream. Shirley both exists and does not exist, Mrs C’s relationship with B is both real and a lie, all of this will be brought to life onstage by actors who both are the characters and are not. As the programmer constructs these blends while reading, they may experience frustration at the dizzy instability of identities in the play, or an impulse to resolve its dualities.

Blending also happens at the discourse level when Dee explains to B the legal ramifications of the play’s central action: the sexual act between B and Mrs C. When Dee finds out that they have been intimate, she immediately infers the legal position, saying “Mrs C took advantage of you. She practically raped you!”\(^{247}\) B, however, is sure that as he has given consent it could not be rape, but Dee reminds him: “she’s a worker and you’re a client. She could go to jail for what she did.”\(^{248}\) On B’s second attempt to prove

\(^{245}\) Winters, \textit{B for Baby}, 42.
\(^{246}\) Elaine Aston, \textit{An Introduction to Feminism and Theatre}, (London: Routledge, 1995), 44.
\(^{247}\) Winters, \textit{B for Baby}, 62.
\(^{248}\) Winters, \textit{B for Baby}, 62.
that he gave consent: “What we did. I said ‘Yes,’” Dee spells out the letter of the law: “You aren’t capable of saying ‘No.’” In presenting this dialogue between these two characters, Winters’ troubles the legal position of sex with a “mentally impaired” person. The sexual act, which B believed was one of love, is reframed by Dee as a crime. Dee creates a blend in which the roles of “worker” and “client” are mapped onto Mrs C and B, which emphasises the power imbalance between them. The blend is created from the linguistic medium. Dee is sure that the letter of the law means that this is a crime; however, B is adamant that his verbal consent in the word “Yes” negates this.

In presenting the sex act as manipulative rather than violent, Winters disrupts accepted conceptions of how coercion occurs, creating a dialectical engagement with the issues rather than an argument. Much like the gender-reversal of Best Man, discussed in Chapter One, Winters disrupts the gendered roles of abuser and abused by presenting Mrs C as the violator of her position of power, and shifting the mode of coercion from physical to emotional. Refusing to take a position, the issue is reflected back on to the audience, offering questions rather than closing the debate. This duplicity of perspectives is typical of women’s writing which handles “the complex and contradictory meanings which are an inherent part of multidimensional reality.” In doing so, she uses the linguistic tension within the play to muddle the legal discourse, opening the conversation to broader conceptions of both love and abuse. The reversal in the gender of the abuser (a woman in a caring profession), and the nature of the abuse (the abused was in love), makes strange the very notion of abuse, calling all preconceived views of it into question. However, the power dynamic of these female-male conversations lies with the female characters. Both

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249 Winters, B for Baby, 62.
Mrs C and Dee draw their power from their female bodies, both through their sexuality and the capacity to carry a child. This power dynamic is reflected in the way language is used by both female characters to manipulate B, to interrogate the validity of received knowledge and to reveal the inherent incongruities within the words and phrases we have been taught to accept.

The blurring of linguistic boundaries that underlies every scene of the play is reflected in the bodies of the actors, who each assume two characters that also defy easy separation. The blend of the actor and the multiple characters they play is facilitated by compressions of identity already discussed in relation to *Scorch* in Chapter One. McConachie explains that spectators “temporarily forget” that the actors have “another life outside of the theatre” as they create the actor/character blend. However, for a programmer reading a script like *B for Baby*, where roles are doubled, they must actively remember that twinned characters will be performed by the same actor. This active remembering is helped in *B for Baby* through the linking of the characters by gender. For B and Brian, who were both played by Louis Lovett in the Abbey production, the linking of the characters through the first letters of their names provides an additional mnemonic aid. B plays the husband but becomes the father in the play while Brian, the actual husband, is offered the role of father. B is a slave to the arousal of his Mister Whistler; Brian gets a snake as an accusatory metaphor with which he confronts his wife. Both men are united through the character of Mrs C, the boundaries of their relationship to her are blurred in the dreamworld of the play’s central scene. Mrs C, on the other hand, is closely linked to Dee, both through the body of the actor and her pursuit of B. Dee was called Shirley Temple when she was younger, Mrs C assumes the name Shirley to facilitate her liaison with B. In the final scene when B shows Dee the photo of his daughter, Dee

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confuses the picture for one of herself. Reflected in the image of Mrs C’s daughter, the link between the two women is strengthened and further refracted. Faced with the imagined child, neither she or B have ever seen, she is offered the role of mother, as B says, “B and Dee’s little Bee Bee.”

The deferral of identity among both male and female characters emphasises the similarities rather than differences between them, rebuking individuality in favour of a collective conception of, if not actual, identity. The blurring of the identity of characters through the bodies of the actors is mirrored in the language and structure of the play to create an effect of multiplicity and fragmentation at every level of its structure which disrupts and destabilises easy meanings or simple responses. This doubling at the heart of the play critically blurred the lines between the characters with an intellectual disability, B and Dee, and those without, Mrs C and Brian, defying the neat separation of people into separate categories and encouraging a multiplicity of outlooks within the play. It therefore disrupts some of the biases that might have accompanied strictly separated identities between the residents and care-home workers, while also triggering biases about the lack of clarity and definition within the play’s world.

In *B for Baby*, Winters wrestles with the language. She does not master it. She twists and bends and pulls and pushes the big words that haunt our lives: rape, baby, mother, father, abuse, wife, family. In the play, language is shown to be slippery, hesitant, evasive, uncertain. The words yield and evade in equal measure as Winters wields them in a portrayal that conveys the impossibility of objectivity, knowledge, truth. While the play’s ending recognizes the impossibility of true knowledge, its revelation is that the truth lies in the relationship, the dialogue, the interaction – and this is theatrical. Elin Diamond describes how this Brechtian style of theatre, “invites the participatory play of

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the spectator, and the possibility […] that signification (the production of meaning) continues beyond the play’s end.” The dialectic relationship that exists between the playwright and her work is refracted into a further dialogue with the programmer reading the script, creating a house-of-mirrors structure in which the dialogue continues to refract and reflect beyond the confines of the page. Without the benefit of a staged interpretation, the programmer reading this kind of script will have to work hard to create the nested blends the play constructs through its lexical play, discourse, and cast doubling.

The linguistic and dramaturgical disruptions at work in B for Baby reflect the mistrust in discourses of power prevalent in Irish society in 2010. Sarah Mills has described how “when we read, we do not always read suspiciously […] We often view language as a tool or as a vehicle for ideas, rather than as a material entity which may in fact shape those ideas.” Responding to the political and cultural climate of 2010, B for Baby challenges the hegemonic power residing within language, calling attention to the mechanisms by which meanings are applied and troubling a simple acceptance of received narratives. In subverting the discourse, Winters creates a dialectical environment that accommodates multiple interpretations simultaneously. Throughout B for Baby, a feminist destabilisation of language, identity and discourse is mirrored in the fragmentation of the dramaturgical form, rejecting a monolithic narrative of stable power and embracing a dynamic and fluctuating truth. Capturing the zeitgeist of the historic moment, B for Baby responded to the cultural conversation without adopting a particular stance on it and so was a benign programming choice for the national theatre. As a two-hander, the play was relatively inexpensive to produce, and its successful touring proved the potential of plays by women to generate income for the theatre.

254 Diamond, Unmaking Mimesis, 49.
255 Mills, Feminist Stylistics, 1.
Shush

While *B for Baby* relied on the creation of blends to destabilise the fixity of linguistic meanings, *Shush*, by Elaine Murphy (1982-), is ironically concerned with the structure and style of women’s talk. Its premiere on 12 June 2013, made it the first play by a woman other than Marina Carr to be presented on the Abbey’s main stage since Jean Binnie’s *Colours* in 1988. In the twenty-five years between *Colours* and *Shush*, only three plays by a woman were produced on the main stage: Marina Carr’s *By the Bog of Cats* (1998), *Ariel* (2002) and *Marble* (2009). The 2013 production of *Shush* was therefore a significant moment in the history of the theatre. Commissioned by the Abbey and directed by Jim Culleton, the play’s cast included Deirdre Donnelly, Barbara Brennan, Ruth Hegarty, Eva Bartley, and Niamh Daly. Set on the evening of Breda’s birthday, the play opens with Breda (played by Donnelly) seated onstage alone drinking vodka and surveying the bottles of pills lined up on the table in front of her. She is interrupted by the arrival of her friends who have come to cheer her up and help her celebrate her birthday. The group drink and talk throughout the evening, before eventually arguing and leaving Breda alone once again at the end of the play. Unlike *B for Baby*, where blending happened at the word and discourse level, *Shush* requires the programmer to construct blends through its dialogical structure. Shaped by natural speech rhythms, *Shush*’s dialogue presents a challenge to normative turn-taking conversational structures by constructing its language from the blended patterns of women’s collaborative talk.

There is an old Irish seanfhocal (proverb) that says “An áit a mbíonn mná bíonn caint agus an áit a mbíonn géanna bíonn callán,” meaning “where there are women there is talk, and where there are geese there is cackling.” English too has its version: “Many women, many words, many geese, many turds.” As does Italian: “Wherever there are women and geese, the words are not few.” And Danish: “Silence is a wonderful jewel for
a woman but she seldom wears it.” In Hebrew: “Silence is a woman’s best garment,” and in French: “A silent woman is a gift from God.” It is a commonly held belief that women talk too much, and the proverbs of many cultures suggest that silence is desirable in a woman. Yet numerous linguistic studies have found that men talk more than women. So, why is there a proliferation of folklore denouncing women’s talkativeness? Because, as Dale Spender has shown, “the talkativeness of women has been gauged in comparison not with men but with silence [sic].” Women, like children, are meant to be seen and not heard.

Contemporary conceptions of the influence of gender on English language-use trace their roots to the 1975 publication of Robin Lakoff’s ground-breaking Language and Woman’s Place. In it, Lakoff posits the existence of women’s language which she describes as “both language restricted in use to women and language descriptive of women alone.” She suggests that the use of this language is a learned behaviour, driven by societal expectations of women’s position and status. She describes how as children “women are encouraged to be little ladies,” displaying docility and resignation and that they are “chastised more severely for throwing tantrums or showing temper.” The nine characteristics of women’s language outlined in Language and Woman’s Place are:

1. Women have a large stock of words relating to their specific interests, generally relegated to them as “woman’s work” e.g. magenta, shirr, dart (sewing)
2. “Empty” adjectives like divine, charming, cute
3. Question intonation where we might expect declaratives: for instance tag questions (“It’s so hot, isn’t it?”) and rising intonation in statement contexts (“What’s your name, dear?” “Mary Smith?”)
4. The use of hedges of various kinds e.g. “Well,” “y’know,” “kinda,” “Sorta,” “I think,” “I guess,” “I wonder.”
5. Related to this is the use of the intensive “so.”
6. Hypercorrect grammar: women are not supposed to talk rough
7. Superpolite forms (women are supposed to speak more politely than men)

8. Women don’t tell jokes
9. Women speak in italics

Revising her theory in the 1990 publication, Talking Power, Lakoff refines her list of characteristics that define women’s language. These are:

1. Women often seem to hit phonetic points less precisely than men: lisped s’s, obscured vowels.
2. Women’s intonational contours display more variety than men’s.
3. Women use diminutives and euphemisms more than men (“You nickname God’s creatures,” says Hamlet to Ophelia)
4. Women make more use of expressive forms (adjectives not nouns or verbs and, in that category, those expressing emotional rather than intellectual evaluation) more than men: lovely, divine.
5. Women use forms that convey impreciseness: so, such.
6. Women use hedges of all kinds more than men.
7. Women use intonation patterns that resemble questions, indicating uncertainty or need for approval.
8. Women’s voices are breathier than men’s.
9. Women are more indirect and polite than men.
10. Women won’t commit themselves to an opinion.
11. In conversation, women are more likely to be interrupted, less likely to introduce successful topics.
12. Women’s communicative style tends to be collaborative rather than competitive.
13. More of women’s communication is expressed nonverbally (by gesture and intonation) than men’s.
14. Women are more careful to be “correct” when they speak, using better grammar and fewer colloquialisms than men.

Criticised for her essentialism, many missed Lakoff’s central thesis which posited that while these traits are most often seen in language used by women, they are related to the speaker’s relative powerlessness in society and are therefore not intrinsically related to gender. She notes that homosexual men often use this type of speech as a rejection of the American masculine image and that upper class men use it because they are not competing for power in ordinary political or business affairs. She explains how the

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258 Tolmach Lakoff, Language and Woman’s Place: Text and Commentaries, 78-81
260 Lakoff, Language and Woman’s Place: Text and Commentaries, 44.
261 Lakoff, Language and Woman’s Place: Text and Commentaries, 47.
circle completes itself as “women are systematically denied access to power, on the
grounds that they are not capable of holding it as demonstrated by their linguistic
behaviour.” This double-bind manifests not only in the way the language uses women,
but in the way women are judged for their use of language.

While Lakoff related the use of this indirect and nondefinitive language to
women’s position of relative powerlessness in society, Jennifer Coates reconceptualised
it as an essential aspect of women’s unique conversational style. Coates describes how
“female speakers in all-female talk” adopt a collaborative mode of talking which she
describes as a conversational “jam session” in which “the different voices work with each
other, not against each other, to construct meaning.” Hedges, which Lakoff saw as
mitigating the impact of women’s speech, play a crucial role in this process because “in
a collaborative floor, it is very important to minimize social distance between
participants, and hedges appear to be a useful strategy to achieve this goal.” Tag
questions, which Lakoff had originally interpreted as a reluctance to make a strong
statement, are redefined in Coates’ theory as essential for the collaborative floor. She
remarks that “by phrasing utterances as questions rather than statements, speakers allow
for the expression of other views and for the participation of others.” While all-male
groups operate on the basis of the turn-taking model of the single-floor, groups of women
tend to use the collaborative floor in which “the group takes priority over the individual
and the women’s voices combine (or meld) to construct a shared text.” This melding
process is the creation of a blend, in which each woman contributes an input, and the

262 Lakoff, Language and Woman’s Place, 7.
263 Jennifer Coates, Women, Men and Language: A Sociolinguistic Account of Gender Differences in
265 Coates, Women Talk, 202.
266 Coates, Women Talk, 117.
resultant blended text is more than the sum of its parts. When one of Coates’ participants tried to describe the difference between her conversations with her husband and those with her friends, she used the word “blesh” to describe women’s talk. The word “blesh” is itself a blend of the words “blend” and “mesh” and over the course of her argument, Coates demonstrates her participants’ hypothesis that “some kind of merging or blending is a key feature […] of women’s style of talking.”\textsuperscript{267} It happens during simultaneous speech, overlapping speech, and laughter, which are all key components of the collaborative floor and contribute to its fundamental impulse of play. Coates emphasises that “the maintenance of a collaborative floor involves ‘playing’” and that “women friends talking are women friends playing.”\textsuperscript{268}

Although \textit{Shush} was criticised for the stasis of its plot, when understood through the frame of Coates’ model of the conversational jam session, it becomes clear that the play’s action is in the linguistic games its characters engage in. The sound of the play is poly-vocal with no one character dominating the conversation. Each of the five women contributes to the talk, building stories collaboratively by drawing on each other’s words. In the first act, the core group of friends Breda, Marie and Irene use questions and repetition to draw the outsiders, Clare and Ursula, into the collaborative mode of conversation. Clare has been brought to the party by her mother. In an invitational gesture, Marie encourages her daughter to tell the others about her recent promotion. When Clare reluctantly tells them she’s now Head of Marketing, Irene begins her interjection by repeating the phrase before adding her congratulations: “Head of Marketing, would you be able? Congratulations, Clare.”\textsuperscript{269} Breda also contributes her praise, acknowledging to Clare that she “worked hard” which allows Marie to build on

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\textsuperscript{267} Coates, \textit{Women Talk}, 117.
\textsuperscript{268} Coates, \textit{Women Talk}, 285-6.
\textsuperscript{269} Elaine Murphy, \textit{Shush} (London: Nick Hern Books, 2013) 11.
\end{flushleft}
the sentiment, saying “She did, she worked very hard.”270 The repetitions throughout this exchange serve to draw Clare into the conversation, validating her contributions and creating the collaborative floor. When Ursula joins the party, Breda is at pains to incorporate her into the conversation of the group, by encouraging her to talk about herself.

BREDA  Tell Clare what you do on a Thursday morning.
URSULA  What do I do?
BREDA  The yoga thing…
URSULA  Oh, yeah… baby yoga.
BREDA  Baby yoga. Isn’t it great what they have the kids doing nowadays and tell her what else you do?
URSULA  I… eh… what else do I do?
BREDA  The thing… the sign-language thing.
URSULA  Baby sign?
BREDA  Baby sign, show her a bit. [emphasis added]271

Throughout this exchange Breda is careful to never say the actual name of the activity in her questions, yet to repeat it following Ursula’s response as a way of providing encouragement and affirmation to her. The women use direct information-seeking questions and repetition to draw the outsiders into the group and establish the collaborative floor. This creates the camaraderie necessary for the blended talk of the conversational games the women spend their evening playing.

*Shush*’s dialogue is structured in a collaborative manner, where conversation topics are co-created by the women through a series of questions and responses. Tag questions, which are utterances mid-way between a statement and a question, become a

270 Murphy, *Shush*, 11.
271 Murphy, *Shush*, 16.
key component of the collaborative floor “when they are used primarily to draw others into conversation, to minimize expert status, and to affirm the importance of the group rather than the individual.”

Throughout Act One, the characters repeatedly use the formula of a statement followed by a tag question to draw the other members of the group into the conversation. When Marie is explaining that she has brought her daughter Clare with her because the electricity was gone, she says “that and the telly was shite – Wha’”? Irene, isn’t the telly shite these days?” The statement, “The telly was shite” is followed by the questions, “Wha’?” and “isn’t the telly shite these days?” function as a way of both seeking confirmation that the telly is shite, and as a way of drawing Irene into the conversation. The formula is repeated by Breda when commenting on the approaching anniversary of Irene’s second husband’s death: “It doesn’t feel that long, does it feel that long to you Irene?”

By stating her own feeling while seeking confirmation from Irene that she feels the same way, Breda creates the space for Irene to talk about her grief. The structure of the statement immediately followed by the question creates a musical rhythm that underscores the first act. Irene also uses this construction when Ursula offers to help Breda to update her CV, saying “That’d be wonderful, Ursula, wouldn’t that be wonderful, Breda?” In mentioning the names of both women, Irene acknowledges Ursula’s gesture and encourages Breda to participate, thus expanding the conversation to include multiple voices. This particular style of tag question is used by Murphy throughout the first act, combining the linguistic repetition and rising intonation that characterises the unique sound of the first half of the play.

272 Coates, Women Talk, 201.
273 Murphy, Shush, 5.
274 Murphy, Shush, 15.
275 Murphy, Shush, 20.
When the women begin to jam, the topic of cheating spouses becomes a common theme on which each of the women can input. When Breda reveals that her husband Tommy has moved out of the house and left her for another woman, the women’s voices combine to build a series of insults in condemnation of her.

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<tr>
<td><strong>URSULA</strong></td>
<td>He left for someone else?</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>BREDA</strong></td>
<td>They always leave for someone else.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>MARIE</strong></td>
<td>‘Teresa the Tramp.’</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>IRENE</strong></td>
<td>She’s no oil painting.</td>
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<td><strong>BREDA</strong></td>
<td>She looks like the back of a bus.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>MARIE</strong></td>
<td>She’s definitely the size of one, she has a pair of spades [hands] like Jack Charleton.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>BREDA</strong></td>
<td>There’s some comfort in getting traded in for a younger model, but for that yoke…²⁷⁶</td>
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Beginning with Ursula’s tag question, Breda echoes the language in her response which leads to each of the women commenting on the appearance of “Teresa the Tramp.” In co-constructing the story, the women show solidarity with Breda by deriding Teresa for her promiscuous behaviour. Each of the women inputs a statement that creates the blended story of “Teresa the Tramp.” Their playfulness in this exchange is evidenced by the use of similes, metaphor, and alliteration. Mirroring the language of other members of the group is an essential device used by the women to contribute and build on the story being told. When Breda opens up to the group about Tommy’s cheating, the women unite to co-construct the story of his infidelity. Breda begins by telling Ursula “I’m well used to his shenanigans, let’s just say this isn’t the first time.”²⁷⁷ This causes Ursula to ask “When was the first time?” to which Breda responds “Now there’s a question… the first time I

²⁷⁶ Murphy, *Shush*, 33.
²⁷⁷ Murphy, *Shush*, 35.
became suspicious was when [...]”. The repetition of the phrase “the first time” to build the beginning of the story is an essential component of co-structured talk; it is one of the ways participants “signal their commitment to the shared production of talk.” As Breda begins the story, she embarks on a solo within the jam session in which she reveals how she found proof that Tommy was seeing a woman from Fairfield. Crucially, she finishes with the line “once you know, you have to do something about it.” This leading statement allows Marie to pick up the story, and with encouragement from Clare and Ursula, she describes Breda’s attempt to catch Tommy and his mistress in bed together. Marie begins by saying “She was on the way home from the pub one night when she happened to be passing your woman’s house - “ Clare’s interjection, “Just happened to be passing...?” carefully repeats the phrase used by Marie, demonstrating her activity as a listener, while also emphasising the intent that might otherwise have remained hidden within the hedged phrase “just happened.” Marie continues with the story and, stopping just before its climax, allows room for Ursula to interject with a question, to which Marie responds with the punch line. The collaborative construction of the dialogue is typical of all-female talk and grounds the play in linguistic as well as dramatic realism. For women “talking with friends is constitutive of friendship; through talking, we do ‘being friends.’” The collaboration required to construct these stories is a demonstration of the friendship bonds among the group, talking is the activity on which the friendship is based.

278 Murphy, Shush, 35.
279 Coates, Women Talk, 222.
280 Murphy, Shush, 35.
281 Murphy, Shush, 35.
282 Murphy, Shush, 35.
283 Coates, Women Talk, 263.
In Act Two, as the women drop their façades, the talk becomes more intimate and the women’s participation in it more playful. When Ursula suggests that she might get Botox again, the women’s voices combine to jam on the theme of Botox which leads on to a consideration of whether appearance alone can keep a partner faithful in marriage. Repetition is a crucial element to how this playful riff is constructed.

MARIE Don’t, you’ll start with a tweak here and a tweak there and before you know it you’ll be like that Cat Lady. Sure, look at Kenny Rogers.

URSULA What about Kenny Rogers?

MARIE Have you not seen Kenny Rogers? He looks like he escaped from a fire.

IRENE And he was gorgeous.

MARIE He was a fine thing.

BREDA Sure, Halle Berry’s husband cheated on her and she’s fabulouls looking.

MARIE There’s feck all hope for the rest of us if Halle Berry can’t hold on to her husband.

BREDA Seemingly he was addicted to sex, he was with loads of different women on her.

IRENE My third husband, Shay was addicted to sex, did he teach me a thing or two in the bedroom.

MARIE I always thought he looked a bit like Tom Selleck.

IRENE I always thought that too. [emphasis added]²⁸⁴

In repeating the full names of the celebrities and particular phrases of the previous speaker, the women build on the previous statement to move the conversation forward. They jam on the topic of appearances, creating the blend from their shared knowledge of popular culture and people they know. The short rapid statements and repeated phrases create a rhythm of sharp quips and one-liners that requires deftness from the participants.

²⁸⁴ Murphy, Shush, 53–4.
This type of exchange necessitates a level of intimacy among its participants to quickly respond to the previous phrase, so it is no surprise that the closest friends, Breda, Marie, and Irene are the primary contributors to the conversation.

Throughout the play, the women’s specific use of language facilitates their gendered performance, and crucially acts as a means by which they proscribe their own behaviour. From the opening of the play, the women’s use of euphemisms, empty adjectives and diminutives is an enactment of their feminine identity. Irene’s use of the euphemism “love” to refer to the big hugs with which she greets and says goodbye to her friends is both childlike and distinctly feminine. The women use diminutives to refer to their eating and drinking, as a way of minimising their consumptive appetites. Marie offers to make all the women “a little drinkie,” Ursula brings Breda “a little birthday cake,” of which Breda decides to have “a little nibble.” Throughout the play, the women make excessive use of empty adjectives, which are echoed in the voices of the others. When Irene ask Clare to tell her about her new house, she says “It sounds gorgeous, is it gorgeous, Marie?” to which Marie replies “Fabulous, yeah.” When Breda tells the women that she’s had a fall in her driveway, Marie encourages her to get Cobble Lock, which she says is “brilliant, isn’t it brilliant Irene?” to which Irene echoes “Brilliant, yeah.” In both cases the women refer to the physical construction in terms that evoke emotional rather than practical responses. The echoed construction of their linguistic responses betrays their performativity; responding to a house, or a new driveway, as “gorgeous,” “fabulous” or “brilliant” is a performance of femininity.

285 Murphy, Shush, 4, 71.
286 Murphy, Shush, 6, 12, 30.
287 Murphy, Shush, 10.
288 Murphy, Shush, 25.
Murphy’s use of the collaborative floor, tag questions, empty adjectives and diminutives reveals that the play has been written in a style filled women’s language. While much of *Shush*’s dialogue relies on the co-construction of blended stories by its characters, the programmer reading the play will construct a blend to imagine how this will work on stage. The co-created conversational structure will rely heavily on the programmer’s use of the phonological loop to imagine the polyphony as a jam session, rather than as turn-taking dialogue. As the programmer recruits the scripted conversation to the blend, implicit biases about the play’s language will be unconsciously carried with it. If the programmer has absorbed the common cultural myth that women’s talk is worthless, gossip, or unimportant, they will bring those biases into their conception of the play’s blend. Murphy’s script is written according to the rhythms of her own working-class Dublin background. Phrases such as “he was with loads of different women on her” and “the telly was shite – Wha’?” indicate the character’s working-class accents and dialect. If the programmer has affinities with this linguistic community, they will bring positive associations about its use to the blend. However, if this not a dialect they are familiar with, they may not be able to accurately imagine the rhythms of its speech. If it is a dialect that activates negative associations, they may bring negative biases about it to the blend. The use of dialect in the play will prompt associations between the new script and canonical examples that use the same dialect, or, more likely, will prompt associations about its difference from canonical plays. Whether or not they consider both this dialect, or this kind of conversational structure canonical, or even stage-worthy, will influence their conception of the play.

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289 “Wha’?” is a tag questions associated with the dialect of Dublin’s north-side working-class communities comparable to the use of “innit?” in London.
Shush ran for six weeks at the Abbey, and immediately toured to the Civic Theatre in Tallaght and the Pavilion Theatre in Dun Laoghaire. As only Murphy’s second full-length play, and her first with dialogue, the presentation on the main stage of the Abbey and subsequent touring dates showed remarkable faith in the playwright by the theatre. Following on the back of her enormously successful first play, Little Gem, which began life as a fringe show, there can be no doubt that similar success was anticipated for Shush. Little Gem is a play in which three generations of women tell the story of a momentous year in their lives through a series of interlocking monologues. The play’s language situates it among the working-classes of Dublin’s northside, and the women’s speech conveys the often-mundane events of their lives through wit and humour characteristic of their linguistic community. Beginning on the fringe circuit, the play developed its audience on tour, eventually selling out forty-one performances in the Peacock space at the Abbey Theatre and one week at the 1,200-seat Olympia Theatre in Dublin, while winning numerous awards along the way. Its most memorable moment is the third monologue, delivered by grandmother, Kay, in which she describes a trip to the doctor that culminates in a visit to a sex shop where she buys a vibrator. A video recording of the original performance of this monologue by Anita Reeves reveals the hysterical laughter of the audience at this particular moment in the play.\footnote{Anita Reeves, perf. Little Gem by Elaine Murphy, dir. Paul Meade, 2010, Vimeo video, 0:07:33, https://vimeo.com/15673993.} It is my contention that the success of Little Gem and the salient memory of this particularly hilarious monologue, primed readers of Murphy’s second script to interpret it as pure comedy.

Shush opens with Breda, alone, drinking vodka and staring at numerous bottles of pills on the table before her. When her friends arrive to cheer her up on her birthday, she quickly hides both the pills and her drink. All of the ensuing playful laughter is set against
the backdrop of this opening image that infers a woman contemplating suicide. The revelation in the second act that Breda crashed her car, causing a blackout in the neighbourhood, adds to the foreboding sense of deeper issues than her husband’s affair fuelling her depression. Despite this serious undertone, the Abbey’s production played for laughs, presenting the play as pure comedy when the laughter is actually hiding something rather grave happening underneath. Although there are moments in the first act that could be interpreted as farcical, such as when a door falls off a drawer in the kitchen, or when the radiator bursts and sprays the women with water, the tone of the script suggests that these moments are the external manifestations of Breda’s psychological state, rather than simple comedy. Murphy has described the inspiration for the play as coming from “one of those programmes on More4 about people who hoard all this mad stuff.” She described the episode she saw, in which a former West End actress was now living in squalor, as “really trash TV, but it totally broke my heart.”

The influence of the show can be seen in the opening stage directions of Shush’s script which describe Breda’s kitchen “in a state of disrepair. Broken appliances have been replaced with new items but the old ones still remain, along with magazines, newspapers, a black sack of men’s clothing, golf clubs and other useless bric-a-brac.” When I initially read this description, I imagined a set filled with bric-a-brac. Then when I read that the presses were overflowing with tea-towels, and the doors were falling off the drawers, I interpreted them as a physical manifestation of the state of Breda’s mind. When I read that the women accidentally kicked the radiator while dancing, causing it to burst, I assumed it was because there was so little room to move in the space with all the piles

292 Elaine Murphy, “Tea and a whole lot of sympathy.”
293 Murphy, Shush, 3.
of junk. Yet, in the Abbey’s production, Anthony Lamble’s set design was remarkably sparse.

![Figure 9: Abbey Theatre Production of Shush with set design by Anthony Lamble. Courtesy of Ros Kavanagh.](image)

The blend of the play I had created in my head was completely different from the vision of the play’s artistic team. This difference arises from the different biases we each brought to our imagined play blend.

Riding on the back of Murphy’s financially successful *Little Gem*, it can be assumed that Mac Conghail’s administrative brain saw an opportunity to cash in on the “Girl’s Night Out” genre as a potential financial boost over the summer months. The biases of the Abbey’s marketing department can be traced through *Shush*’s promotional campaign, which included package deals that combined a makeover in Clery’s
department store with tickets for the play. In his column in The Irish Times, baffled by this marketing strategy, Peter Crawley noted that “The way a show is packaged speaks volumes about the culture of its theatre, the way it regards its audience, and the attention it is paying to its art.” Decidedly gendered, the campaign both commercialised and trivialised the subject matter of Murphy’s play, removing it from the realms of high art or literary theatre and aligning it with low brow entertainment. In doing so, it missed the underlying seriousness of the play’s plot and misrepresented the female characters within it. Marketing the play with a beauty promotional offer with the tagline “Keep it Shush Girls” emphasised the juvenility of the play’s women. Robin Lakoff has shown how the word girl serves as a euphemism for woman, “in stressing the idea of immaturity, it removes the sexual connotations lurking in woman [….] in recalling youth, frivolity, and immaturity, girl brings to mind irresponsibility: you don’t send a girl to do a woman’s errand.” In a play where the average character’s age is fifty, the descriptive “girl’s night in,” which featured on the published script’s cover, is more than just misleading; it creates an expectation of something frivolous, light and inconsequential.

Having marketed the play in such a particularly gendered way, there can be no surprise that some critics responded in a similarly gendered manner. Michael Moffatt in the Mail on Sunday was perhaps the most vicious, titling his review “Shush would do better to quieten down a bit more.” In a scathing review that focuses on Barbara Brennan’s performance as Marie, he claims “Loud women exist, but we don’t normally get too close to them unless they have some semblance of warmth or understanding to go

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294 Peter Crawley, “A sister act that’s somewhere between a sitcom and a kitchen sink,” review of Shush by Elaine Murphy, directed by Jim Culleton, Abbey Theatre, Dublin, The Irish Times, 13 June 2013.
296 Peter Crawley, “Stage Struck: The hard sell.”
297 Lakoff, Language and Woman’s Place, 25.
298 Michael Moffatt, “Shush would do better to quieten down a bit more,” review of Shush by Elaine Murphy, directed by Jim Culleton, Abbey Theatre, Dublin, Mail on Sunday, 16 June 2013.
with their bulling.” Loaded with gendered stereotypes, this comment presumes a “we” that must surely include all men and quiet (read: good) women. Mocking the women’s personal issues that emerge over the course of the evening as the play’s attempts “to show that it’s really serious,” he contrasts it with *Little Gem* which he deemed “delightful.”

Failing to respond to the play with any critical or artistic engagement, the scathing tone and gendered nature of this review responds at least in part to the manner in which the production was marketed. John McKeown’s review in the *Irish Independent* is also laden with stereotypes. His opening lines run: “It’s good to see that writer Elaine Murphy has moved on from the sticky sweet concoction which was *Little Gem*, her first full-length play. *Shush* still has a high sugar content but it’s palatably masked by other ingredients.” He too fails to consider the playwright with any importance, disparagingly saying that “after all the verbal and physical knockabout, Murphy’s reminding us that *Shush* actually has serious things to say.”

In a more nuanced and critically engaged review in the *Sunday Times*, Trevor White also could not resist a quip suggested by the play’s title, heading his review “Nothing to shout about.” Concluding that *Shush* is a gamble by Mac Conghail “on a female writer who speaks to women and sadomasochistic men,” he too places the play in the ghetto of things that normal people won’t relate to. His final line ultimately reveals the bias behind this critique: “*Shush* deserves the silent treatment.” Advocating the suffocation of Murphy’s voice, White falls back on stereotype, retreating behind the folklore that women should be silent. These reviews reveal both the salience of *Little Gem* when Murphy’s work is considered, as

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299 Moffatt, review of *Shush*.
300 Moffatt, review of *Shush*.
302 McKeown, review of *Shush*.
304 White, review of *Shush*.
305 White, review of *Shush*.
well as the perpetuation of biases about women’s talk. They also make clear that the biased interpretation of the script failed to reconcile its more serious moments with the playful nature of the women’s talk.

In her introduction to the 1989 anthology *Wildish Things*, Ailbhe Smyth has noted the consistent concern not only with language but with the issue of voice for Irish women writers. She states that “The hard fact for Irish women is that our voices have been overwhelmed as much by the needs of the nation as by the dictates of patriarchy.” When the Abbey Theatre launched its centenary programme in 2004, the dissenting voices of critics who judged the programme to be biased were quickly silenced in the wake of the financial crisis which threatened the theatre’s existence. Gender equality was once again sacrificed for the greater good, rather than acknowledged as part of the problem. In *Shush*, we see a response to the lack of female voices on the national theatre’s stage in the polyvocality of women’s voices brought to life in the play. In his review of the play, Patrick Lonergan said “the dialogue itself is very original – it literally sounds like no other play I’ve seen before.” The remarkable thing about *Shush*’s dialogue is that the collaborative structure results in a consistency of conversation that is virtually unmarked by ellipses, pauses and silences. Yet, if the programmer reading a script structured in this manner has, like Lonergan, never heard a play that sounds like this before, the possibility for biased readings and misinterpretations is greatly increased.

**Shibboleth**

Jointly commissioned by the Goethe Institute Dublin and the Abbey Theatre, Stacey Gregg was invited to write a play as part of the After the Fall project – a pan-

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European initiative to commemorate the twentieth anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall. Her piece, *Shibboleth*, took the idea of the wall as its central motif, drawing analogies between the fallen walls in Europe and the growing number of walls continuing to spread across Belfast’s cityscape. Premiered on the Peacock stage as part of the 2015 Dublin Theatre Festival, the play was directed by Hamish Pirie (Associate Director, Royal Court Theatre) and featured a cast of eleven in the studio space. *Shibboleth* was the last play by a woman to premiere at the Abbey before the announcement of the “Waking the Nation” programme, and Gregg provided testimony describing being “in a weird position as the only woman playwright featured in The Abbey’s last season, one who has also wondered if they deserved to be there.”

*Shibboleth* was the only new play by a woman produced at the Abbey in 2015 (there was however a welcome revival of Marina Carr’s *By the Bog of Cats* in August), and the first premiere of a new play by a woman since *Shush* in 2013. The play marked Gregg’s third commission by the Abbey and the second to receive a full production. Gregg now uses she/they pronouns, and I will use both to refer to them throughout this chapter.

Throughout *Shibboleth* collaboration, connectedness and questioning of power structures occur, alongside an obsession with voice and collective articulation that chimes with the tropes seen in the plays by Winters and Murphy. In *Shibboleth*, the intersection between women’s language and the language of the working classes becomes clear, however, the collective voice of Gregg’s *Shibboleth* is more closely aligned with male groupings than a female community. The voice of the playwright is made manifest through instructions for staging that invite collaboration from actors, director, and designers.

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...The brickies as chorus could be any size.
The play has an aural intonation that invites music or underscoring.
It may be that choreography is used.
It may be that the cast is onstage for the duration.

[...]
The staging of the wall is an invitation. It may be that the wall exerts influence over the world of the play. It may be that the wall is manifested in one being, or in all, or in none... [emphasis added]³⁰⁹

Filled with hedges, this direct impression of the author’s voice is deliberately obtuse to facilitate the contribution of the reader/artist to the performance text. Gregg’s instructions drive the reader toward the desired tone and texture of the performance without proscribing specific means of achieving it. In a speech delivered as part of the Abbey Theatre’s Theatre of War Symposium, and summarised as an afterword to the play, Gregg describes the gap between thought and language. They describe being “holed up in Berlin” where they “thought about walls and humans. The play didn’t present itself, but it knew it was a cacophony.”³¹⁰ Later they describe how “at script meetings I struggled to express my thoughts. I suggested they fire me.”³¹¹ The gap between the thought patterns in their head and the process of actualizing them on paper sounds remarkably similar to the moment described by Alice Birch where she pauses before putting pen to paper. It is the moment in which Dale Spender explains the association of hesitation with women’s speech; the moment in which women translate their thoughts into a language from which they are alienated:

**Table 3. Transformation in speech from thought to expression**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Deep Structure</th>
<th>Surface Structure</th>
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³¹⁰ Gregg, *Shibboleth*, 88.
³¹¹ Gregg, *Shibboleth*, 89.
Gregg’s struggle to express their thoughts at script meetings, and their description of the play as a ‘cacophony’ are linked. The English language, and the canon of literature through which it is circulated, is designed to describe the experience of the individual who is created through an encounter with the other. The binary, embedded in its structure, poses similar problems for the non-binary writer as those already outlined in relation to women. Marilyn French has suggested that feminist art is defined by its depiction of “a pluralistic reality made up of connection, flow, interrelation, and therefore equality” but that “we have not yet created a language to describe interconnection: our language is based on fabricated dichotomies…”³¹² While the language might not have expanded to included pluralistic representations of experience, female playwrights are challenging the linear turn-taking model of scripted dialogue. Alice Birch’s rotation of the published script to a landscape format for Anatomy of a Suicide allowed her to represent the simultaneous speech and action, the interconnection, of her three characters visually on the page, radically altering both the form of the script’s publication and the reader’s interaction with it.³¹³ Gregg too pushes the boundaries of the theatrical representation in Shibboleth, by suggesting simultaneity of experience through the use of music, the chorus, overlapping scenes, and LED screens displaying messages that link what’s happening on stage to other conflict zones worldwide. For the programmer reading these

³¹³ Alice Birch, Anatomy of a Suicide, (London: Oberon, 2017).
scripts, they will be required to make an adjustment from the anticipated linear, one-at-a-time dialogical structure typically associated with play scripts to the non-linear, all-together, simultaneous structure of these kinds of plays.

In the preface to *Shibboleth*, Gregg offers a definition of the word as follows: “a custom, principle, or belief distinguishing a particular class or group of people, especially a long-standing one regarded as outmoded or no longer important.” The shibboleth is a marker of difference that, despite being considered unimportant, remains in use. It has heritage and a shared meaning that is loaded with the weight of history. The English-language is full of shibboleths that mark otherwise innocuous terms with racial, religious, classed, abled, and gendered meanings. It is how we know ‘themens’ from ‘usens,’ yet its power lies in its apparent innocuousness: dismissed as unimportant or old-fashioned it persists, retaining the power to distinguish and therefore discriminate. Gregg describes the shibboleth as “a linguistic wall” – it is the territory that feminists have been battling over since the second wave. Gregg’s play is filled with shibboleths that mark the characters’ class and regional background. The use of ‘yer’ and ‘aye,’ the missing consonants at the end of words (‘wha?’ ‘shoutin,’ ‘sleepin’), and the conflation of nouns with prepositions (‘shoulda,’ ‘kinda,’ ‘piece-a toast’), mark the dialogue as working class and Irish with specific lexical items pointing to their regional location in Belfast. Terms including “jook,” “gurn,” “niknak,” and “tout” are used by the brickies, who “converge linguistically [...] in order to show solidarity, to mark their membership of the same group.” As described in relation to *Shush*, the programmer reading the play will carry biases about this working-class Belfast dialect to their conception and evaluation of the play. These biases may be different from those associated with the Dublin dialect of

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314 Gregg, *Shibboleth*, 3.
Murphy’s script and will carry associations prompted by the socio-political context of the North.

The play’s first scene draws a division between the native Belfast family and the Polish immigrants through linguistic markers, with the script indicating that Yuri’s family speak in Polish with English surtitles. In contrast, the dialogue in the Belfast household is written in dialect, with lines such as “give over the pair of youse, it’s hardly fucken seven a.m. and youse’ve my head turned” identifying them within a working-class speech community. Using ‘youse’ onstage is a political marker of membership with a class, and validation of the dialect that class use. In a 2018 article in *The Guardian*, Mish Grigor talks about her 2015 show, *The Talk*, in which verbatim transcripts of interviews with her family are read aloud by members of the audience. She relates how middle-class audience members frequently struggled and stumbled over the word ‘youse,’ even leading some to suggest that there was a typo in the script. If the dialect used in the script is shared by the programmer, their process of reading the script should be seamless. However, if the dialect is unfamiliar, this may create a barrier to the reading process. Understanding the meaning of the play’s Belfast slang, while not as important as the play’s sound, will also contribute significantly to the programmer’s emotional response to the play. Whether or not the programmer is familiar with the words “jouk” or “gurn” may provoke interest, frustration, alongside a range of emotional responses which will remain unconscious to the programmer but affect their feelings of attraction or aversion to the play. If the programmer assumes themselves to be in a position above these characters, like Gregor’s

audience member, they might even determine that the use of such terms is an error on the playwright’s behalf.

The collaborative mode of conversation that shaped the structure of the dialogue in *Shush* is completely absent from Gregg’s play, where the stereotypically competitive construction of male conversation is favoured. Tag questions, hedges and diminutives feature less frequently in *Shibboleth*, with the sound of the scenes featuring all male talk driven by the competitive posturing and playing the expert that has come to be associated with men’s speech.319 While the men’s voices frequently join in unison and solidarity for worker’s rights, and in protection of their identity as ‘brickies,’ unlike in *Shush*, the men also compete on an individual level for control of the conversation. During the Fag Break in scene two, the men begin to talk about Belfast, however, although they all contribute to the conversation, there is tension within the group. When Alan begins saying “Jesus I LOVE this city,” Mo’s response both mirrors and reverses his construction by beginning with “Christ I hate it.”320 When Corey describes “The pussy, the pills, the craic,” Mo retorts with “oul dolls draggin tartan pull-alongs like corpses…”321 Unlike the women of *Shush* whose conversational strategies are designed to allow the group to take precedence over the individual,322 the men of *Shibboleth* compete to win the argument. When they finish their cigarettes and return to digging the discovery of a rock beneath them sparks an opportunity for each of them to display their knowledge of the history of the area. This is an attempt to play the expert, but also a show of belonging, a marking of the territory through naming its history. Alan assumes the position of power, attributing the stone to a young lad who died in ’76 after he was caught murdering a couple.323 Corey and Stuarty

320 Gregg, *Shibboleth*, 20.
323 Gregg, *Shibboleth*, 23.
each contribute further stories and finally Mo relays the longest most detailed tale which
almost wins the argument, until he goes a step too far and claims to have slept with the
man’s daughter.324 Throughout this passage, the fixation on history, on taking ownership
of cultural narratives and the competitive construction of the dialogue suggests an
accurate representation of stereotypically male talk. As with the stereotypically feminine
talk of *Shush*, the programmer’s recruitment of this speech to the blend will carry
associations influenced by the programmer’s response to the macho posturing. Whether
or not they enjoy this kind of banter, or think it worthy of dramatic representation, will
influence their perception of the play’s merit.

In scene six when Mo meets Agnieszka near the site after dark, the tone of the
conversation changes drastically from the competitive banter of the all-male group to the
cajoling of one sex by the other. Gregg’s inclusion of this scene, rather than what happens
afterwards (Corey’s assault of Agnieszka) is important in displaying the linguistic
disparity between the genders through a direct encounter. Treated unfairly by the other
men on the site and struggling to take care of a mentally ill mother at home, Mo’s low
self-esteem is entangled with his virginity and manifests in creepy behaviour when he
encounters Agnieszka. Agnieszka, who has come to the site to meet Corey, is only
seventeen, and obviously wary in the interaction with a conspicuously drunk Mo. Her
responses to him are initially curt, however when Mo starts to ask about where she’s
from, she senses potential ethnic abuse and remains tight-lipped. It is at this point that
Mo becomes manipulative: “You’ve nice hair. Your hair’s nice I’m bein nice to ya,
what’s the matter? Bein civil. What’s wrong with me?”325 His comment puts the young
girl in a tricky position. Technically he has not been unfriendly, but the veiled threat of

325 Gregg, *Shibboleth*, 56.
an older drunken man accosting a teenager with personal questions on a dark street has prompted her cool response. As Mo asks “What’s Corey got I haven’t? My cock’s massive compared to his” and suggests that “A lot of your kind are whores,” the vague threat of sexual violence becomes more explicit, and Agnieszka becomes even more restrained in her responses. When Mo offers her a cigarette, her response “No thank you” prompts him to ask “Do you think you’re funny? Who do you think you are?” As Agnieszka turns away, Mo is at pains to draw her back into conversation “Comere. Look. No harm. Comere look, sorry – I wanta ask you something, seriously […] Sure comere, it’s only banter. I just wanna ask ya-” His sense of entitlement evident throughout the exchange triggers caution in Agnieszka’s responses. Knowing that he is likely to be able to overpower her, she must appease him, speak in a manner that firmly rejects him without triggering his anger. Lakoff defines politeness as “a system of interpersonal relations designed to facilitate interaction by minimizing the potential for conflict and confrontation.” It is in the confrontation of the sexes that reason for the association of women’s speech with politeness is illustrated. For Agnieszka to rouse Mo’s anger would be extremely dangerous, so she performs the difficult linguistic task of subduing him, without enticing or provoking, to save herself from harm. Again, the programmer’s empathy for one character or the other will be informed by their own personal experience. How they interpret the scene will be informed by whether or not they have personally experienced sexualised racial discrimination, such as that used against Agnieszka, or whether they have experienced the kind of pressure to prove their masculinity through sexual conquest as Mo displays. The programmer’s personal history will affect their

326 Gregg, Shibboleth, 57.
327 Gregg, Shibboleth, 57.
328 Tolmach Lakoff, Talking Power, 34.
evaluation of how well the scene works and how important it is within the overall dramaturgical structure of the play.

This scene is important for illustrating the sense of disenfranchisement felt by men who were reared with expectations of social power fuelled by feats of war that assert their masculinity, only to find this thwarted by peace in their adult lives, leaving them squandering in a city seeking to grow a post-conflict economy. They lack the tools to converse with women and revert to aggressive displays of machismo as a response to the absence of power in any aspect of their lives. Mo’s frustration with Agnieszka’s minimal responses and her refusal to talk is contrasted by Corey’s anger at her voicing of her ambitions for the future. When Mo later remembers the assault, he describes how with a “half-fist whack, she goes down, dropped from her smart chat and big plans she waltzed in with in a fucken blink [emphasis added].”329 As Corey leaves the scene of the assault, Mo hears him mutter “graphic fucken design.”330 It is the girl’s voice and her voicing of her future plans that draws the wrath of her boyfriend. Returning to her father, she says “They won’t let me be both […] Even though I sound like them.”331 Recognising the impossibility of assimilation, her dilemma resembles the one described by Lakoff whereby if a woman speaks like a woman she is dismissed for being silly and inconsequential, if she speaks like a man, she is chastised for being unfeminine: damned if she does, and damned if she doesn’t.332 For Agnieszka, learning to speak like a local might mitigate some of the racial abuse she expects as a Polish immigrant, but her education, ambition and success will be held against her because she is a woman.

Voice is a prominent concern within Shibboleth and its manifestation, in

329 Gregg, Shibboleth, 80.
330 Gregg, Shibboleth, 80.
331 Gregg, Shibboleth, 67.
332 Lakoff, Language and Woman’s Place, 41.
embodied and disembodied forms, underscores the power dynamics of the Belfast community. In their ‘Notes’ in the published script, Gregg suggests that “the play has an aural intonation that invites music or underscoring.”333 The play opens with a disembodied voice, the distant resonance of the President of the United States of America, Barack Obama. His is the voice of history and his speech contextualizes the moment: “We need you to get this right [….] They’re watching to see what you do next.”334 He is interrupted by the song of the Wall, calling to “BUILD ME BUILD ME BUILD ME.”335 Disembodied, Obama’s distant voice fades behind the Wall’s “deep, timeless hum.”336 The Wall’s voice is “A magnificent voice of ages, polyglot, from the cosmos.”337 It transcends temporal, geographic, and political frontiers. The individual voices of the play’s characters often elevate to the poetic as their thoughts are expressed verbally, their desires intimated in abstract phrases. The expression of Corey’s internal thoughts within the dialogue reveals the aural quality Gregg describes: “Muscles bulgy from the liftin, the gravysweatin, whiteringed weatherbeaten, manly manual labour, taut Adonis…”338 Later, Corey continues “biceps, six-pack, vein-dappled creepin lengthward towards my nail-bitten manhands – my lusty torso wants to beat, shout, flex – I haven’t even had a scrap before…”339 Although not contributing to the main action of the scene, this internal thought pattern that emerges though deeply rhythmic language acts as background to the ensuing dialogue, revealing the growing hostility of the group. It is the chord that plays behind the melody, offering a flavour of the tension that is building behind the surface.

333 Gregg, Shibboleth, 5.
334 Gregg, Shibboleth, 6.
335 Gregg, Shibboleth, 6.
336 Gregg, Shibboleth, 6.
337 Gregg, Shibboleth, 6.
338 Gregg, Shibboleth, 16.
339 Gregg, Shibboleth, 17.
The ability to be an individual, to speak as an individual is economically driven. A person needs wealth to achieve independence from other people and the collective voice of the working class is an attempt to claim power through unification that they would not have as individuals. While the Wall contains multiplicity in its single entity, the Brickies are the collective voice of a group of united individuals. Described in Gregg’s notes as “front-footed and jokey,” they are a choir of men, performing their masculinity through banter. They interject the dialogue with commentary on the ensuing action, often inciting violence while reflecting the feelings of the group. Their refrain “brick by brick by brick by brick by” is voiced not only as the collective, but in the mouths of the individual workers also. The repetitive rhythm is balanced but finishing on the down beat the final ‘by’ signals continuation, echoing the repetitious cycle of their work. This refrain is their mantra and their theme-tune; it is the identifying rhyme that represents as it unites. The Brickies are the voice of the collective machismo of the construction workers. The echoing motto, “Look out for the lads,” performs their testosterone-fuelled, tribal, masculinity. Their readiness to fight is evidenced by their encouragement of Alan to beat his wife, and their goading of the men to fight with Yuri:

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BRICKIES   Mush his face up! Crack! Rip!
MO         Pull his begs down! Flop! Smack!
BRICKIES   Snip!
COREY      Pull his tongue out! Chip! Bop!
BRICKIES   Pow!
STUARTY    Crush his fingers! Flip! Pop!
BRICKIES   Whack!
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340 Gregg, Shibboleth, 5.
341 Gregg, Shibboleth, 29.
342 Gregg, Shibboleth, 36.
Their interjections include onomatopoeic sounds which are a typical feature of male speech. Throughout the play they chant Michael McCarol’s name “Mikey Mikey MIKEY MIKEY MIKEY…” and sing “to the pub to the pub to the pub to the pub” as a demonstration of their masculinity. Simple and percussive, their chants offer a balanced beat that reflects the steady, repetitive monotony of their work. This beat determines the rhythm of the scene, providing a backdrop from which the play’s more lyrical language is counterbalanced against. In a play like Shibboleth, where the sound of the dialogue is as important as its meaning, the programmer’s ability to imagine the rhythm of its speech is critical for a true understanding of the play. As already discussed in relation to Shush’s collaborative floor, this makes the role of the phonological loop of particular importance in processing the scripts auditory quality. However, sounds, like data from the other senses, are processed spatially. Part of the programmer’s task in imagining the simultaneity of the play’s sounds will be to order them spatially, which helps to distinguish between background chants and foregrounded dialogue. The sound of the play requires blending that compresses time and space, to capture the simultaneity of the play’s sound.

Shibboleth’s world is one of simultaneity, its language punctured by interruptions, unfinished thoughts, and collective utterances. Although the time and place (Belfast, the present) are definitively specified in the play’s notes, the rejection of a realist representation of the characters’ dialogue in favour of an intermingling with chant, song and collective speech offers resonance with a mythic timelessness that could chime with any place in history. The play’s plot is traced along a timescale in which the Wall is built;

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344 Gregg, Shibboleth, 63, 72, 84.
however, within this temporal structure, Gregg plays with time to disrupt its linearity. The play’s first scene is marked by simultaneity. In it, the early morning routines of two households overlap and intertwine, one in English, one in Polish. The interrupted and overlapping speech throughout the scene “speeds up the dialogue by compressing it.”

It does this through blending, which is “a compression tool par excellence.” Gregg’s use of multilingualism to underscore the play’s polyvocality is an immediate effort to refuse the establishment of a single narrative line that follows one character’s or one family’s story.

*Shibboleth*’s cacophony, while markedly different from *Shush*’s polyphony, requires a conceptualisation by the programmer that embraces multiplicity and simultaneity. Despite these potential hurdles to the programmer’s conception of the play, its lyricism and political contextualisation are both elements favoured in the Abbey’s programme. The production of *Shibboleth* at the Abbey fed in to Fiach Mac Conghail’s stated interest in political and historically engaged work. He is quoted at the announcement of the production saying “This is an important play politically and culturally for the Abbey Theatre to do. It not only alerts us to the challenges of maintaining peace in Northern Ireland but also encourages cross community integration.” Despite its apparent thematic synchronicity with the Abbey’s national conversation, the play’s form was at odds with the straight social realist theatre the national theatre’s programmers typically favoured. In an interview with Fiona Coleman Coffey, Gregg describes how out of frustration with the Abbey’s refusal to programme

Shibboleth in 2009, she wrote a “paint by numbers social realist” play, Perve, in an attempt to get a professional production of her work on.\textsuperscript{349} Perve was immediately picked up, proving Gregg’s suspicions that theatres would not produce her more formally experimental work. Shibboleth remained on the Abbey’s shelves for five more years before finally being produced in 2015. While it is evident that the play’s scale and form were both deterrents to an earlier production, it also seems clear that the difficulty in conceptualising the play’s cacophony from the page created a barrier to a positive evaluation.

Conclusion

When women use the English language to represent the world from their perspective, the creation of blends is necessary to reconcile the conflicting biases of the male-defined language with female expression. These blends emerge through the semantic play of B for Baby, the collaborative talk of Shush, and the orchestral composition of Shibboleth. The writing of a play script is a performative act in which the playwright may display or suppress their learned linguistic behaviour to varying degrees. Strategic decisions may be made in relation to the play’s composition that its writer may judge will make it more or less favourable for production in the eyes of the programmer. This was certainly the case with Gregg, who eschewed their experimental style to write the formulaic Perve, which was immediately picked up and produced by the theatre. One study has shown that within the educational context, the institutionally successful students are those who edit out features of women’s language from their prose, from which it might be concluded that the style of writing rewarded by the educational system

is biased towards male forms. While it may not be possible to tell the extent to which a writer consciously acceded to literary or dramatic conventions when writing a play, or how much of the play’s structure and linguistic form emerged from learned behaviour below the level of consciousness, traces of their style can be read in the play script.

This chapter has made evident the difficulty posed by the kinds of linguistic structures favoured by the writers of these plays, with Shibboleth revealing how experimental forms can act as a barrier to production. While language triggers biases related to the gendered and classed style of its use, both form and story prompt implicit associations that link new scripts to the canon. Chapter Three will now turn to the Irish plays by women produced in Great Britain during this period in order to explore how form and story work on the unconscious of the programmer reading the new play. When #WakingTheFeminists prompted a search for the missing Irish playwrights, Britain emerged as the location where many had found the opportunities lacking for them in Ireland. It has provided an important production environment for many Irish playwrights, and in the next chapter I will explore how British theatres have played a critical role in both the development and production of Irish plays by women through the freedom they offer from the thematic and stylistic restraints that Irish theatres seem to prefer.

CHAPTER THREE: FORM, STORY & LOGIC – READING KINDS

“biases are culturally transmitted diseases”
Sarah Durcan, Spring Forward, Liberty Hall, 8 March 2016

“The key thing for any creative person is to find their voice, and I’ve been told over the years that I’m not very good at telling stories, that I go off on too many tangents, and I used to believe that because I wasn’t what you’d call a great story-teller, I shouldn’t even bother telling my stories at all. But then I realised: that it just how I tell stories, multiple storylines running simultaneously with multiple plots, sounds like a great and complex narrative to me. And, it’s my voice.”
Seána Kerslake, One Thing More, Abbey Theatre, 14 November 2016

“Women have to be conscious of the fact that in their heads they have a male artistic director filtering their creativity and censoring their output.”
Pom Boyd, #WakingTheFeminists Public Meeting, Abbey Theatre, 12 November 2015

The reach of #WakingTheFeminists extended to Great Britain where the protest received coverage in prominent media outlets including The Guardian and The Stage, tweets of “support from the all-female cast of the Donmar Warehouse’s Shakespeare Trilogy,” and an event at the Unicorn Theatre to watch the live-stream of the first Public Meeting.\(^{351}\) This reflected the strong presence of Irish theatre artists in Britain, which had become an important destination for many women writers who felt that the doors of the Abbey Theatre were closed to them. Part of the draw of a British production is the

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promise of higher production values and greater exposure for playwrights, while presenting an escape from the parochial politics that surround Irish productions. In the British context, #WakingTheFeminists was part of an ongoing public discussion of gender inequality in theatre. It was preceded by the publication of Victoria Sadler’s first blog analysing the gender of playwrights at the National Theatre (only one female playwright in their fiftieth anniversary programme), the Old Vic (one play by a woman and one co-authored by a woman in previous ten years) and the Donmar Warehouse (one adaptation by a woman out of twenty-four plays considered). Sadler’s blog was published in April 2015, just a month before the British Theatre Consortium, UK Theatre, and Society of London Theatre released a report analysing the gender of playwrights as part of an analysis of the British Theatre Repertoire in 2013. It found that only 31% of new plays premiered that year were written by women. These reports emerged despite the founding of Tonic Theatre in 2011, whose mission is “to support the theatre industry to achieve greater gender equality in its work and workforce.” Despite the evident gender disparity in British programming, the sheer size of its theatre industry has meant increased opportunities for Irish writers. This chapter will draw on the Irish plays by women that premiered in Britain between 2005 and 2015 in order to explore the ways in which a play’s basic form and story impact the construction of the imagined play blend. Although this process is applicable for all script-reading, regardless of the location of production or gender of the writer, the diversity of the forms and stories in this sample allows an exploration of each form in detail. By separating these productions from those


354 Lucy Kerbel, All Change Please, 155.
plays that premiered in Ireland, the biases of Irish programmers are brought to light through an analysis of the trends that emerge when these plays are considered as a group.

Between 2005 and 2015, twenty-three new Irish plays by women premiered in Great Britain.\textsuperscript{355}

\begin{table}[h]
\centering
\caption{Irish plays by women premiered in Great Britain 2005-2015}
\begin{tabular}{|c|c|c|c|c|}
\hline
Year & Play & Playwright & Company & Venue \\
\hline
2006 & O Go My Man & Stella Feehily & Out of Joint in association with The Royal Court & The Royal Court Theatre \\
\hline
2006 & Pumpgirl & Abbie Spallen & The Bush Theatre & Traverse Theatre \\
\hline
2006 & Woman and Scarecrow & Marina Carr & The Royal Court Theatre & The Royal Court Theatre \\
\hline
2008 & Brendan at the Chelsea & Janet Behan & Riverside Studios, Hammersmith & Riverside Studios, Hammersmith \\
\hline
2008 & The Cordelia Dream & Marina Carr & Royal Shakespeare Company & Wilton's Music Hall \\
\hline
2008 & The Legend of Lola Montez & Sylvia Cullen & NTC Touring Theatre Company & Newton & Bywell CM, Northumberland \\
\hline
2009 & Cell & Ailís Ní Ríain & 24/7 Theatre Festival & The Printworks \\
\hline
2009 & Dreams of Violence & Stella Feehily & Out of Joint in association with Soho Theatre & Soho Theatre \\
\hline
2009 & Guardians & Lucy Caldwell & High Tide Festival & The Cut \\
\hline
2009 & Haunted & Edna O'Brien & The Royal Exchange Theatre & The Royal Exchange Theatre \\
\hline
2009 & The Dark Things & Ursula Rani Sarma & Traverse Theatre & Traverse Theatre \\
\hline
\hline
\end{tabular}
\end{table}

These plays differ from the traditional “Irish play” in a number of important thematic ways. Firstly, the plays tend to be more oriented towards the future rather than the past. History, either personal or political, tends not to be foregrounded in these plays in the way it has traditionally been associated with Irish theatre, particularly through the work of Friel and McGuinness and in the explicit programming policies of the Abbey during Mac Conghail’s tenure. Secondly, these plays are more interested in personal identities...
that are developed outside of the confines of the family. Identity formation here comes from within, from self-discovery rather than from identification with a specific social group. Finally, the idea of home, typically presented in Irish theatre as rooted in a specific geographic location and associated with a particular patch of land, is absent. Home in these plays tends to be a less stable concept, if it features at all. Of the twenty-three plays listed above, thirteen have been selected for the discussions below. The chosen plays have been selected to continue explorations into the work of writers discussed in the previous chapters, but also to include other writers whose work offers viable alternatives to the Abbey’s predominantly male programmes over these years. While the previous chapter explored the role played by language in prompting blends within the plays, this chapter will focus on the more generic qualities of the play script to understand how a play’s kind influences the way it is read. I have already discussed specific instances in which the canon weighed heavily on a programmer’s response to new scripts in Chapter One. This chapter will explore how new plays also have systemic connections to the canon through their basic structures of form and story. It will reveal the impact that each of these elements has on the evaluation of plays through their implicit recruitment to the imagined production blend and will show how these forms work unconsciously on the programmer, shaping and prompting their reactions to the script.

Basic Structures & Women’s Plays

Returning to the structure of the imagined play blend established in Chapter One, we see that both form and basic stories are situated in the generic space that informs both the script and the programmer:
While the fact that basic forms and basic stories inform the writing of a script may seem obvious, the ways that these structures affect the programmer reading the script is less well understood. Both elements operate on the unconscious mind of the programmer and will shape their expectations and evaluations while reading. Both elements also create links with canonical conventions and thus construct the evaluative parameters through which the play’s merit will be judged. This is not to say that all programmers read in the same way, nor that the impacts of basic forms and stories are prescriptive; a key element each individual programmer brings to the blend is their own unique personal experiences.

**Figure 10. Play blend**
*Adapted from The Way We Think by Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner, copyright © 2003. Reprinted by permission of Basic Books, an imprint of Hachette Book Group, Inc.*
However, analysing the impact that basic forms and stories have on the play-reading process helps to explain why a tendency emerges to favour certain kinds of scripts over others. Barbara Herrnstein Smith emphasises the interdependency and interactivity at play in critical evaluations:

> All value is radically contingent, being neither a fixed attribute, an inherent quality, or an objective property of things but, rather, an effect of multiple, continuously changing, and continuously interacting variables or, to put this another way, the product of the dynamics of a system, specifically an economic system.356

The contingency of this system stems from the cognitive impulse for classification, affiliation, and pattern recognition, processes which are influenced by both learned conventions and personal experiences. In order to understand why trends emerge in theatre programming, it is the shared aspects of this process, rather than the distinct ones, that are of primary concern. In what follows I will outline how these shared structures manifest and how they shape the reading process for the programmer.

By analysing form and story systemically the following discussion will uncover the ways in which they work on the unconscious during the reading process, creating connections to canonical texts and other variants in the system against which they will be assessed. It will explore how these unconscious comparative and referential connections can position women’s plays in discordance with the standardized norms of the patriarchal canon, resulting in their categorization as dissimilar to the prototypical model of good writing and therefore worthless within a male-defined classification of value. In selecting the plays for consideration for this chapter, I have chosen those that were produced by some of Britain’s most reputable new writing companies, including Out Of Joint, The

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Royal Court Theatre, The Bush Theatre, the Traverse Theatre, and the Hampstead Theatre, as well as looking at plays premiered by important smaller-scale companies known for discovering new writers, including Papatango Theatre Company and Theatre 503. Plays produced by these companies offer viable alternatives for the Abbey Theatre and those other Irish companies whose representation of female playwrights in their programmes was low during these years. In order to continue my exploration into playwrights whose work was discussed in the previous chapters, I am also including plays by Stacey Gregg and Lucy Caldwell that were produced by the culturally important Oval House Theatre, Watford Palace Theatre and Birmingham Rep. Together these plays present a compelling and varied list of plays by women that could have been produced by Irish theatres. The argument that basic forms and stories carry unconscious associations that create implicit comparisons to a male-defined canon also applies to any of the plays discussed in the previous chapters. The implicit recruitment of form and story to the blend occurs simultaneously with the recruitment of language and is another part of the complex process by which unconscious associations are made with past plays, the programmer’s personal history, and social context of the play’s production. By highlighting both the potential and limitations of various forms and stories, this chapter will reveal the role they play in contributing to biased responses to women’s plays.

As outlined in the introduction, this chapter will draw on Jane Alison’s list of seven basic forms, Waves, Wavelets, Meanders, Spirals, Radials/Explosions, Networks & Cells, and Fractals, which are drawn from recurring patterns in nature. Echoing the work of philosophers George Lakoff and Mark Johnson,357 who have shown how the human body structures our cognition and language, Alison notes that these patterns

structure our bodies too: “We have wiggling meanders in our hair, brains, and intestines; branching patterns in capillaries, neurons, and lungs; explosive patterns in areolas, irises, and sneezes; spirals in ears, fingertips, DNA and fists.” These patterns represent the inevitable shapes that emerge because they are both the easiest and the only shape that could emerge. Stevens explains that:

> With regard to how patterns and shapes come into being, we can readily accept the fundamental idea of the theory of evolution, that things evolve to their fittest form; we can accept the principle that things tend towards a configuration with the least energy, […] we can even accept the theory that the existing forms of nature are exactly those that are most likely to exist – taking into account all possible possibilities.\(^\text{359}\)

Patterns, therefore, evolve through a dynamic interaction between their material, the environment, and their natural tendency to pursue the path of least resistance (conserve energy). It’s important to note that Alison has drawn attention to the etymology of the word pattern. She found that “it was a doublet of patron and thus born of pater: father” however the word also has a maternal origin stemming from “matrix, an archaic sense of pattern. From mater: mother.”\(^\text{360}\) According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the matrix is “a supporting or enclosing structure.” Its historical meaning is of “the womb, the uterus of a mammal.” It is also “a place or medium in which something is originated, produced or developed; the environment in which a particular activity or process begins; a point of origin or growth.” The trace of this generative element betrays the way that the shape of the work determines its meaning. The form is not only an outline or template, but a mould that defines its creation. Drawing an analogy with modelling a bird out of clay, Alison says “That lump has the potential to look like a bird, but only if, along with clay, there

\(^{358}\) Alison, Meander, Spiral, Explode, 22.
\(^{359}\) Peter S. Stevens, Patterns in Nature (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), 37.
\(^{360}\) Alison, Meander, Spiral, Explode, 69.
exists the abstract idea, or *form*, of “bird” [...]. The *form* that it could be has actualized the potential existing in that matter.”

Not only does form actualize the potential of the story, but there are stories that only exist because of the form through which they are told: were they told through a different form, the story itself would change. Once the form has realized the story, it effectively disappears. It is absorbed implicitly during the act of reading, unconsciously shaping the reader’s interaction with the text.

These basic forms work with the basic stories to create the underlying structures on which a new play rests. The nine basic stories outlined by Jeffreys are “The Love Story” (Romeo and Juliet), “The Gift That is Lost” (Orpheus), “The Rival Siblings” (Jacob and Esau), “The Spider and the Fly” (Circe), “The Love Triangle” (Tristan and Isolde), “The Fatal Flaw” (Achilles), “Good Triumphs in the End” (Cinderella), “The Hero Who Keeps Going” (Hercules) and “The Debt That Must Be Paid” (Faust). John Yorke explains that the persistence of basic stories throughout the history of human civilisation derives from their appeal to shared life experiences:

Stories strive for meaning, for resonance [...]. And when they achieve meaning, they are repeated and become embedded in our collective consciousness. Stories about mothers, fathers, burgeoning sexuality and the passing of life from one generation to the next will always resonate and for that reason those stories will tend to survive because they tap into our universal desires, feelings and symbols.

York continues to say that the “Stories that *do* last, then, are the ultimate result of the free market. [...] A free market keeps both things we know to be true, and things we want to believe, alive [sic].” Historically, that free market has been created and controlled by

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men and many of the best-known versions of the stories reinforce male dominance within patriarchal societies. Many of the authors who have schematized story, structure, and genre, (e.g., Christopher Booker, Martin Meisel) develop their arguments by focussing almost exclusively on texts by men. Jeffreys, with his editor Maeve McKeown, makes a greater effort to use plays by women in his examples, however, there is no doubt that these stories which have persisted in human culture for millennia are often deeply imbued with patriarchal ideology. While it would be an interesting exercise to isolate works by women and examine their basic stories for comparison, it would not reflect the biases of the culture. Jeffreys discusses the nine basic stories with the aim of helping playwrights to write plays, however, these familiar narratives are also critical for the act of reading.

In order to delve deeper into the canon of works which contextualize the evaluative process in theatres, it is important to understand the basic narratives underlying that canon, even when those narratives reinforce perspectives that keep women in subordination to men. While the stories themselves may not be patriarchal in essence, they often propose difficulties for feminist retellings because the imbued patriarchy of their originals has become so deeply engrained in the cultural consciousness. Any deviation from the ideology implicit in the story will be seen as a transgression of these norms and will position the play outside of the stereotype of “good theatre.” These stories, therefore, act as touchstones that standardize canonical narratives and shape biases. Their power is derived from the invisibility that accompanies such standardization. Their pervasiveness makes them difficult to detect and makes their influence implicit, unconscious, and universal.

365 The repetitive cycles of erasure of women’s writing across literary genres also means that the weight of influence of one generation of writers on the next is also greatly diminished. This means that if there are a parallel and distinctive set of recurring stories repeated throughout women’s writing over centuries, it is more likely to arise from their similar life experiences than from the familiarity of the stories.
Of the nine plays discussed in the previous two chapters, four are shaped by the Wave (Shush, Best Man, Leaves, The House Keeper), with two by a Radial/Explosion (Shibboleth, Lally the Scut) and one each by the Wavelet (Strandline), Meander (Scorch) and Spiral (B For Baby). Of the thirteen plays discussed in this chapter, four are shaped by the Wave, with two Wavelets, two Spirals, two Networks & Cells and one each by Meanders, Radials/Explosions and Fractals. Although the samples are small, they indicate that there isn’t a major preference for one form over another in the two territories; however, across the board in scripted theatre the preference for plays shaped by the Wave is persistent. The following analysis will explore how the basic form and story structure the plays considered below. A diagram depicting these structures pictorially for each play is available in Appendix III.

Waves

The Wave is the most familiar structural form. Usually referred to as the dramatic arc, its strong connections with theatre can be traced to the writings of Aristotle in the fourth century BC. According to Alison, the wave occurs when “disturbance rolls through a medium (seawater, characters), pushing everything to a wobbling peak until it all collapses, and calm returns.”366 The classic wave structure as exemplified in Freytag’s pyramid (below) has a rising action, a climax, and falling action and release.

366 Alison, Meander, Spiral, Explode, 73.
This symmetry of this structure has been explored by John Yorke, who argues that dramatic art, whether in a two, three, four, five or even seven act structures, always develops along the path of the wave.\textsuperscript{368} It always has a turning point that acts as an inciting incident, a midpoint at which the direction of the action changes course, and a final turning point that acts as the crisis to the whole action. For the reader, the wave structure is familiar territory. The experience of reading plays shaped along the path of a wave is of growing tension until a peak and then release. Because of the familiarity of this form, readers will sense when the climax is approaching and will expect some kind of denouement after it. Four of the plays under consideration here, \textit{Override}, \textit{Our New Girl}, \textit{Futureproof} and \textit{Coolatully}, are structured along the path of the wave; however, each is based on a different basic story. In the four examples below, I will show how both form and story interact to direct the reader’s attention in different ways depending upon the pairing. Despite their differences, the affordances of the form determine certain structural points in each play (inciting incident, midpoint, climax, resolution) and, by comparing

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{freytag_pyramid.png}
\caption{Freytag's Pyramid\textsuperscript{367}}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{367} Yorke, \textit{Into The Woods}, 36.
\textsuperscript{368} Yorke, \textit{Into The Woods}, 226.
how this plays out in different stories, I will show how the form dictates certain kinds of responses from readers.

**Override**

Although Stacey Gregg was one of the few playwrights with a sustained relationship with the Abbey during Mac Conghail’s tenure, premieres of her plays *Lagan* and *Override* in Britain were important in the early stages of her career development. *Override* premiered at the Watford Palace Theatre (Artistic Director: Brigid Larmour) in 2013, in a production directed by Selina Cartmell.\(^{369}\) The play explores the boundary between human life and artificial intelligence in an unidentified time close to the present. In *Override*, two of the best-recognised basic structures, the Wave and “The Love Story,” combine to form the play’s hidden skeleton, implicitly constructing the programmer’s experience with it. Through their recruitment to the imagined production blend, they carry biases that include a compulsion towards resolution driven by the form of the Wave, alongside heterosexual and gendered expectations of the lovers’ roles in “The Love Story.” While *Override* generally conforms to these expectations, the play’s cognitively challenging subject matter provides originality and curiosity for the programmer reading.

*Override* begins in the middle of an argument, which the programmer learns has been caused by Vi’s revelation that she found a licence for technological augmentation in her mother’s will. This disclosure describes the play’s inciting incident, which has happened before the play begins. Act One proceeds like a pressure-cooker: Mark interrogates Vi for information on this enhancement, while Vi argues about the classist way in which technological enhancements were sold to working class people as “aspirational.” At the end of Act One, Mark, who has campaigned against biotech,

\(^{369}\) Its first Irish production was produced by White Label at the Project Arts Centre in 2016.
overrides Vi’s enhancements without her consent. Unknown to him, but suspected by the programmer, and known to Vi, this will profoundly affect her health. This is the play’s midpoint. It marks the end of the rising action and after this, events take a downward turn. The escalation of the consequences of this action are marked temporally in Act Two through its series of shorter scenes that capture key moments in the fallout of this decision over the succeeding weeks. This act opens with Vi miscarrying their baby and reveals the degeneration of her human body until the play’s crisis point when Vi’s existence becomes entirely technological. This crisis forces Mark to abandon his past convictions and get an illegal bio-implant which allows him to interact with Vi in virtual reality. The play ends with the couple reunited in cybernetic union. The arc of the play goes from Mark and Vi living in an “organic” coupling, to Vi revealing that she has biotech, to both existing in virtual reality. The structure is also reflected in the arc of each character: Mark’s character begins in clinical, dogmatic, rationalism and finishes more emotional, messy, and human, while Vi is earthy, sensual, and emotional in the beginning and ends the play as a piece of technology. The forward momentum of the wave propels the action into the future, and so reflects the journey of the characters from humanity to hybridity, from organic matter to virtual reality. As the programmer reads the play, the wave structure will create anticipation about the impending crisis and its resolution. Their experience of past plays with a similar form will implicitly inform how well they judge the new script has dealt with the pacing of the inciting incident, midpoint, crisis, and resolution.

When you map “The Love Story” onto the wave structure, the points join up as follows: the inciting incident occurs when the girl meets the boy (happened before the play begins); the climax happens at the point when the girl loses the boy (Vi’s degeneration); and the resolution occurs when the girl gets the boy back again (Mark’s capitulation to a technological implant). Unlike the classic love story, the opposition to
the couple’s relationship comes from their own values rather than familial opposition, and the final union is virtual rather than legal (marriage). Despite this, the underlying thrust of the story remains the same. Both “The Love Story” and the dramatic arc carry biases unconsciously within their structure. The canonical example of *Romeo and Juliet* places self-sacrifice at the heart of common conceptions of romantic love, and this will fuel the programmer’s understanding of Mark’s decision: he loved her enough to sacrifice his own beliefs to be with her. The archetypal love story is heterosexual and carries deeply stereotyped gender roles that assign pursuit and power to the male, and resistance and passivity to the female. In *Override*, this manifests in Mark’s violation of Vi’s privacy and bodily autonomy through the override which is committed without her consent. The dramatic arc, on the other hand, is biased towards resolution (either open or closed). When Mark’s override kills Vi’s human body, the structure compels him to act in response to this action. His choices are limited to either continuing to live within the bounds of the law and communicating with Vi online or seeking an illegal implant that will allow him to hold her virtually. Dramaturgically, there was only one choice, because had he chosen the former option, he would have shown no character growth which would leave the overall action feeling stunted and inert. These biases that accompany both story and form work on the unconscious of the programmer by determining their horizon of expectations as they read, and *Override*’s meeting of those expectations makes the play conform to canonical standards of good writing.

Gregg’s classic pairing of story and form follows the well-trodden path of heterosexual romances. Its original thematic topic also provides a compelling hook for the play, bringing a refreshing intellectual depth to a story that could otherwise fall into sentimental cliché. The key moment of Mark’s override of Vi’s enhancements, however, is the one in the play most open to a feminist revelation, yet Vi’s response to his apology
is to absolve him from responsibility: “It was no one’s fault.”\(^{370}\) In every way, this play conforms to normative values, normative structures, and normative stories, despite being written by one of the most radical playwrights under discussion here. Herrnstein Smith reveals, however, that the dominant model of artistic excellence not only affects those consuming art, but those making it also:

> Every literary work – and, more generally, artwork – is thus the product of a complex evaluative feedback loop that embraces not only the ever-shifting economy of the artist’s own interests and resources as they evolve during and in reaction to the process of composition, but also the shifting economies of her assumed and imagined audiences, including those who do not yet exist but whose emergent interests, variable conditions of encounter, and rival sources of gratification she will attempt to predict – or will intuitively surmise – and to which, among other things, her own sense of the fittingness of each decision will be responsive. [my emphasis]\(^{371}\)

The susceptibility of the playwright to conceding to the biases of programmers may not only be evident in this play but may be necessary for the progression of their career. As mentioned previously in Chapter Two, Gregg wrote the “paint by numbers social realist” play, *Perve*, as a concession to the demands of potential producers.\(^{372}\) This makes the calculated conformity of *Override* appeal to its potential programmer and provides a useful model of normative value against which some of the more radically structured plays in this chapter can be compared. The programming of *Override* in Great Britain suggests a resistance of the part of Irish programmers to produce work concerned with a technological future. While Nancy Harris’ *No Romance* (Abbey Theatre, 2011) was concerned with the impact of the internet on modern relationships, its storyline was grounded historically by recurring motifs from Irish mythology. Gregg’s previous play, *Stacey Gregg, Override* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2013), 49.

\(^{370}\) Herrnstein Smith, *Contingencies Of Value*, 45.

Scorch (Prime Cut 2015) is also concerned with the technological present, yet through its immediate relationship with contemporary cases of gender fraud, it doesn’t have the future reach of Override. The overwhelming sense from plays such as Strandline, Leaves, Lally the Scut and Shibboleth is the weight of history on present lives, while the plots of plays such as The House Keeper and Shush are propelled by past events. Override therefore further emphasises the biases of Irish programmers by showing the vast difference in the kind of work being programmed in Great Britain in comparison to Ireland, north and south.

Our New Girl

The theme of romantic love so central to Override is also prominent in Nancy Harris’ Our New Girl, which premiered at The Bush Theatre (Artistic Director: Madani Younis) in 2012, in a production directed by Charlotte Gwinner. Despite the success of No Romance’s premiere at the Abbey Theatre, a new play by Harris was not seen again in Ireland until after #WakingTheFeminists. This is despite the literariness of her writing and preference for social realism, which would suggest a good fit for programmes at the Abbey in particular. Both qualities can be seen in Our New Girl which explores the dynamics of modern relationships through a structure that pairs the form of the Wave with the basic story of “The Love Triangle.” I have already discussed in Chapter One, how “The Love Triangle” carries implicit biases about the gender and sexuality of the roles of faithful spouse, cheating spouse, and mistress. However, while Winters’ challenged the stereotypes through inversion, Harris disturbs the basic story by shifting the perspective from the cheating spouse’s choice, to the faithful spouse’s burden.

Following the opening scene, which shows a boy, Daniel, attempting to cut his ear, the play then goes back in time to reveal the series of events that led to this point.
The first scene after this prologue sees a new nanny arrive at Hazel’s house: this is the inciting incident for the play’s action. The nanny has been hired by Hazel’s absent husband Richard, in order to help his pregnant wife care for their son, Daniel. Hazel’s already fraught relationship with Daniel worsens throughout the first act as the nanny, Annie, earns Daniel’s trust and becomes his confidant. However, when Act Two begins, the programmer learns that Annie has betrayed this trust by telling Richard about the secret pet tarantula that Hazel bought for Daniel. This is the play’s midpoint, which has happened during the interval and changes the direction of the action by shifting alliances from husband and wife to husband and nanny. In Act Two, the first turning point comes when Daniel witnesses Richard having sex with Annie on the kitchen table. Events quickly lead to the climax when Richard leaves, and Hazel fires Annie, leaving Daniel and Hazel alone together. Daniel’s attempt to cut his ear (shown at the beginning of the play) is revealed to have been an attempt to attract the attention of his father (a surgeon), but Hazel interrupts and the formerly fractured bond between mother and son is repaired. The wave structure here reflects the narrative closure typical of middle-class social-realist drama, with all loose ends satisfactorily tied up at the play’s close. The expectations raised by the form are met, resulting in the formal structure feeling complete and conclusive at the play’s close.

The love triangle in *Our New Girl* follows a classic pattern; Richard loves two women: his wife, Hazel, and his nanny, Annie. This plot maps onto the Wave fairly straightforwardly: the inciting incident is the arrival of the nanny, the midpoint occurs when she aligns herself with Richard, the crisis is their sexual union, the climax occurs when knowledge of the affair emerges and Richard leaves, while the final resolution comes when Hazel forces Annie out of the house and rekindles her relationship with her son. Unlike *Best Man*, the story of *Our New Girl* plays out in line with the stereotype:
Richard’s insatiable sexual appetite draws him towards Annie’s adoration and while Hazel was willing to endure Richard’s philandering overseas, she cannot bear it within her own home. The resolution of this kind of triangle normally results in the person at its centre making a choice between two love interests; but in this case, the resolution is in favour of maternal rather than romantic love. Harris’ depiction of Richard is almost wholly unsympathetic and, unusually for a play based on “The Love Triangle,” his dilemma is not prominent within the play’s action. Rather, the spotlight is firmly focussed on Hazel’s struggle to reconcile her varying roles as entrepreneur, wife, and mother, and her desperate attempt to get her husband to play his role within the family. In fact, it becomes clear from the diagram below that there are actually four love triangles at work in the play: the overarching triangle between Hazel, Richard, and Annie, and three smaller triangles that reflecting the shift of parental roles throughout the play.

![Figure 12. Triangular structure of relationships in Our New Girl](image-url)
Moreover, with the framing of the play by Daniel attempting to cut his ear, his role as central to the triangle becomes more prominent, and the final reunion of him with his mother makes the play about how she lost her son and got him back, rather than about her husband’s affair. This shift of attention away from the central character in “The Love Triangle” places the play at odds with prototypical versions of the story. Harris goes against the norm by resolving the triangle in a way that places the emphasis on the competing demands of work, marriage, and motherhood for the wife, rather than on the husband’s dilemma between remaining faithful and leaving his marriage. The centring of women’s experiences, particularly in relation to the gendered struggle of the working mother, have long been considered niche and not universally applicable to all humans. Concealing those perspectives has the effect of obscuring the inequality of patriarchy even further, which in turn perpetuates the idea that these experiences are not widely shared. The fact that biases self-perpetuate to hide alternatives from view, ensures “the continuity of mutually defining canonical works, canonical functions, and canonical audiences.”

373 The stable referent of the prototype perpetuates archetypal narratives that reinforce dominant ideologies and fortress their boundaries.

While this shift away from the male perspective reflected a general tendency of women’s writing to favour female viewpoints, its dislocation from the archetypal plot may influence biased reactions against such plays. Like Override, Our New Girl does not engage with the historical political context favoured by Irish theatres. Rather, its political context is that of contemporary feminism and its action is embedded almost entirely in the present with only the character’s psychological motivation coming from the past. The shift in perspective of the love triangle from the male perspective to the female may provide a clue as to why this play was not produced in Ireland until Selina Cartmell

373 Herrnstein Smith, Contingencies of Value, 44.
assumed directorship of the Gate Theatre.\textsuperscript{374} \textit{Our New Girl’s} London premiere provides another example of the importance of the British theatre ecology in supporting the development of Irish writers.

\textbf{Futureproof}

Unlike Gregg and Harris, who both received early commissions by the Abbey, before continuing their careers in Britain, Lynda Radley (1980-) was one of the founding members of Cork theatre company, Playgroup, for whom she wrote her early plays, including \textit{Integrity} (2002), the live opera \textit{Soap!} (2003) which was co-written with Ciarán Fitzpatrick, and the award-winning \textit{The Art of Swimming} (2006). Having moved to Scotland in 2005, Radley’s career developed there with her most prominent success being the 2011 play, \textit{Futureproof}. Although Radley’s relocation to Scotland was for personal reasons, her absence from Irish theatres during these years is illustrated by an anecdote relayed at the Irish Women Playwrights and Theatre-makers conference where she “described flying from Scotland for a meeting with the Abbey Theatre. When she arrived at the theatre doors she found them closed and locked – they had forgotten about her. Radley recalled the moment as emblematic of the larger ethos of theatre in Ireland for women artists: “Here I am, knocking at a door that doesn’t seem open to me.”\textsuperscript{375} Like \textit{Our New Girl}, \textit{Futureproof} didn’t receive an Irish premiere until after #WakingTheFeminists.\textsuperscript{376}

\textit{Futureproof} was originally co-produced by Dundee Rep (Artistic Director: James Brining) and the Traverse Theatre (Artistic Director: Dominic Hill) in 2011 in a

\textsuperscript{374} \textit{Our New Girl’s} Irish premiere opened at the Gate Theatre on 3 March 2020.
\textsuperscript{376} \textit{Futureproof}’s Irish premiere was produced by The Everyman, in association with Cork Midsummer Festival and Project Arts Centre on 13 June 2017.
production directed by Hill. It expands the number of characters contained within the Wave further, by combining this form with the inversion of the “The Rival Siblings” story: “Siblings United.” *Futureproof* follows a group of performers in a travelling freak show as they face growing antipathy from their audiences. Running out of money and having already eaten their horse, the show’s caller, Riley, decides that they need to reinvent the spectacle by creating narratives of change to hook their audience’s interest once again. This is the play’s inciting incident. The rising action of the first seven scenes shows the initial success of this idea: Tiny the fat man loses weight and Marketa, the bearded armless lady, shaves and covers her arms. However, in Scene Eight, at the play’s midpoint, Riley proposes getting a doctor to look at the Siamese twins, Lillie and Millie, and George/Georgina, the hermaphrodite. The course of the action then turns. Millie doesn’t want the operation to separate her from her twin, so Lillie drugs her and Riley drags them both to the doctor. The play’s climax occurs when the operation fails and Millie dies, however this is not shown directly to the audience but mediated by George/Georgina’s dream. The play’s resolution is determined by this quandary: do the remaining characters stay and risk their lives for the show or leave? Tiny, Marketa, and Lillie remain but George/Georgina leaves and, by walking away, performs an act of self-definition.

The narrative of “Siblings United” is mapped onto the Wave as each part of the story is carried by a different character. Riley is the inciter, Tiny and Marketa’s success mark the turning points in the first half of the play, before Riley again takes the baton to switch the direction of the action at the midpoint. Then Lillie and Millie carry the falling action of the second half while George/Georgina’s story carries the conclusion. Like many of the team stories based on “Siblings United” narrative, the characters believe they are competing for the prize of top billing in the show, but what they actually win is self-
knowledge. The interest for the programmer reading such narratives is in how the collective works together, however in *Futureproof*, Radley’s curiosity lies in how far an individual will sacrifice themselves for the greater good of the collective. The moral dilemma each individual performer faces becomes the focus of the play: whether to sacrifice the strange piece of themselves in order to become more like everyone else. While on a macro level, the troupe are in a battle against the rest of the world, internally there is a hierarchy between performers, both on the billing and in their appraisals of each other’s acts. Jeffreys cites classic versions of the “Siblings United” narrative that include team narratives like *A League of Their Own* as well as musicals like *The Commitments*. He emphasises that in these narratives the team is always greater than the sum of its parts, making *Futureproof*’s plot a diversion from the norm. The foregrounding of the collective in this play also presents a challenge to the reader used to following a single protagonist or couple, while the sharing of the story among individuals within the group unsettles the unity of plot so often privileged within the canon. Of course, the space of the freakshow is also a queer territory and every inhabitant of that space challenges the strict boundaries of our instinct for essentialist classification. Each of these elements contributes to a feeling of strangeness that pervades the play, that emerges from its comparison with a form, story, language, and canon that privileges patriarchal binaries and results in its placement outside of normative standards of value. Although its setting is the historical Victorian freakshow, the play’s outlook is entirely future-oriented. The cast are a motley crew of colleagues rather than a family and their home is not rooted by place but changes as they move from camp to camp. In these ways they play’s concerns radically differ from those usually seen on Irish stages. This not only reveals the biases of Irish programmers, but the affordances of productions in the larger British market, which are less tied to notions of nation and national identity.
While rival siblings also play a minor role in Fiona Doyle’s *Coolatully*, it is the story of “The Fatal Flaw” that drives the play’s action. *Coolatully* was winner of the 2014 Papatango New Writing Prize, and was produced by Papatango Theatre (Artistic Director: George Turvey) in association with Finborough Theatre (Neil McPherson) in 2014, directed by David Mercatali. Set in a rural village in Ireland, this play explores the devastating effects of recessionary economics and depression among the community’s young generation. It uses the basic story of “The Fatal Flaw” within the form of the Wave to explore the feeling of imprisonment caused by economic austerity. Kilian’s fatal flaw is depression, triggered by his brother’s suicide, that has resulted in an inability to move on with his life. Again, the play follows the classic wave: the inciting incident occurs when an older friend, Jimmy, offers Kilian money from a pile he has hidden under the floorboards to allow Kilian to move to Australia; the midpoint is when Kilian returns to Jimmy’s house and steals the rest of the money so that he can bring his friend Paudie with him; the crisis occurs when Paudie berates Kilian because Jimmy will suspect him of the theft. The structure then impels Kilian to make a decision: does he admit his crime to Jimmy, or flee to Australia with the money? The play’s ending shows Kilian, drunk, leaving with his mother’s car keys which suggests that he has found a third way out: suicide.

*Coolatully* takes the form of the first category of stories based on “The Fatal Flaw” described by Jeffreys, that of the flaw that is perceived as a weakness in an otherwise stable personality. Jeffreys notes that narratives derived from this strand of the story are noted for their slowness as “the action of the play shows the flaw slowly
destroying the protagonist’s character.”377 For Kilian, the effects of his grief and depression are deeply paralysing. He is incapable of moving forward with his life. Unlike the characters of the previous plays, Kilian, as protagonist of “The Fatal Flaw” narrative is stuck. His flaw impedes him from making the decisions that would allow his life to progress. While in common versions of “The Fatal Flaw” narrative, the flaw is either a weakness exploited by an enemy (Achilles’ heel, Superman & kryptonite) or one perceived by society (autism in The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night Time, stuttering in The King’s Speech), in Doyle’s version, the flaw is a personal crisis. The battle associated with the soldiers or superheroes of past versions is made internal in Coolatully, although the causes for the crisis are deeply connected with the circumstances of the economic climate within which Kilian finds himself. The internal psychological flaw calls to mind Shakespearean heroes like Hamlet, whose flaw derives from a crisis of conscience rather than a physical disability. Coolatully is one of the most classically written plays among those discussed here, which makes it, like Override, an example of normative canonical values rather than an outlier. This makes the absence of Doyle from the Irish theatre scene even more surprising; despite living in Kerry and writing in a literary style favoured by the Abbey, Doyle has never been produced in Ireland.

The structure of the wave has been criticised for its association with the singular climax of the (male) orgasm. In the Poetics, Aristotle defined the dramatic arc as the structure best suited to tragedy, which Sue Ellen Case describes as “a replication of the male sexual experience. Tragedy is composed of foreplay, excitation and ejaculation (catharsis).”378 Jane Alison also refers to the sexual connotations within the form of the Wave. She quotes Robert Scholes, who demonstrates his own phallocentrism in the

377 Jeffreys, Playwriting, 234.
378 Sue-Ellen Case, Feminism and Theatre, reissued ed. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 129.
following definition: “The archetype of all fiction is the sexual act …. For what connects
fiction – and music – with sex is the fundamental orgastic rhythm of tumescence and
detumescence, of tension and resolution, of intensification to the point of climax and
consummation.” To which Alison responds: “Is this how I experience sex? It is not.”
Case has also drawn from the testimony of Monstrous Regiment’s Gillian Hanna to
suggest the link between the Wave’s linear progression and men’s experience of time.
Hanna points out that “men build a career for life and proceed through school to work in
their professions, while women interrupt those processes with child-bearing, child-
rearing and so on.” Although this connection is well-argued, its effect has been to
alienate many women from the form itself by assigning the male gender to it. In fact, the
form of the Wave, simply explained as a linear narrative with a beginning, middle and
end, is one all humans experience: it is a form well suited to describing a fragment of
experience, such as making dinner. In this scenario the food is gathered (inciting
incident), prepared (climax) and eaten (resolution). The order in which these tasks are
completed cannot be mixed up or reversed; it would be impossible to eat the food before
it is gathered. The Wave, therefore, is a basic script which provides a template and
structure for basic tasks which can then be employed easily when required.

The Wave is also closely associated with realism, and the alienation of women
from this form due to the association has been compounded by the narrative closure which
always seems to serve the interests of male characters and reflect the norms of patriarchal
society. However, Ann Marie Adams draws on the work of Sheila Stowell to comment
that “Many critics of realism would do well to recognize […] that their own readings of
realism are not really analyses of form, but [...] analyses of character representation.”

She goes on to say that “the narrow definition of the realist character as a reactionary and conservative entity on stage does much more than just stereotype what characters realism can purportedly represent; it actually renders static a flexible form.”

Adams’ point that this restricts the available uses of the form aligns with my own perspective on the matter: the major issue is not that this form is exclusively representative of a masculine perspective on the world, but rather its perpetuation as the only legitimate form. While the isolated incidence of preparing a meal can be described in the form of a Wave; the repeated preparation of many meals throughout a day may transform the narrative to a Wavelet; while the cyclical repetition of distinct meals to mark special occasions could be described through a Spiral. The Wave then emerges as one of the many possible ways of representing an experience, depending on the perspective the writer takes. Although it may be argued that the preference for the Wave by theatre managements is a reflection of their male bias, there is no doubt that this preference has precluded certain stories from reaching the stage. This bias has been particularly damaging for female playwrights whose tendency to prefer representations of multiplicity rather than singularity, of context rather than isolation, makes virtually every other form better suited to their ends. Despite the form being used by many of these playwrights working in Britain, the gap between their stories in these plays and the prototypical narratives on which they are based creates the gap in which biases are likely to have infiltrated programmer’s evaluations of this kind of work. However, their programming by high-profile British companies attests to

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the merits of the work, while revealing a wider range of thematic concerns than when Irish productions alone are considered.

**Wavelets**

The dramatic arc may also be experienced in a repeated pattern with less intense peaks and troughs. Wavelets are smaller waves that create “dispersed patterning, a sense of ripple or oscillation, little ups and downs.”\(^\text{384}\) The repetition of the arcs radically transforms the experience of reading the play from singular to multiple climaxes. Alison suggests that the form may be more true to everyday human experience, that one might feel “some tension, a small discovery, a tiny change, a relapse. The same epiphanies every week…”\(^\text{385}\) Such a form has been described as having closer resonances with the repeated climaxes of women’s sexual experience, and when Case says that “A female form might embody her sexual mode, aligned with multiple orgasms” she is, in fact, describing a wavelet.\(^\text{386}\) This less familiar form creates a different reading process for the programmer as the action progresses in a series of tensions and releases, gently rising and falling in a steady pattern that ruffles, without overwhelming, the reader.

**Lagan**

Perhaps, unsurprisingly, Stacey Gregg’s *Lagan* is structured in this manner. Taking its title from the name of the Belfast river, *Lagan* follows the lives of the people of Belfast who live on its banks. Despite its Belfast setting, it was co-produced by Oval

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\(^{384}\) Alison, *Meander, Spiral, Explode*, 95.

\(^{385}\) Alison, *Meander, Spiral, Explode*, 96.

\(^{386}\) Case, *Feminism and Theatre*, 129.
House Theatre (Artistic Director: Deborah Bestwick) and Root Theatre Company (Livvy Morris and Jane Fallowfield) in London in 2011 as part of the “Lady-Led” season, directed by Jane Fallowfield. Like *Lally the Scut* and *Futureproof*, *Lagan* dramatizes the life of a community, rather than an individual. The characters of the play belong to four families; however, their connected lives provide only a secondary structure to the play. The primary structure is that of the wavelet, which reflects the regular but profound crises that shape people’s lives. Although these crises would usually be considered significant moments in the life of an individual, they are relatively immaterial events for the society, that reflect the minor peaks and troughs of its existence. The first climax occurs when the Taximan finds his dead father’s body. This is quickly followed by Aoife telling her brother Ian that she wants an abortion. The next crisis comes when Terry phones Aoife’s house. At this point in the script, the reader is unsure of exactly why this is a crisis but feels the moment’s tension through the characters’ actions. It comes following a lengthy monologue by Aoife’s mother Anne, which is interrupted when “The phone rings. / AOIFE answers. / A voice. / AOIFE freezes. / The OTHERS watch.” Following this, Siobhán collapses after eating the nuts in Anne’s cake; then, Joan has a panic attack in the shopping centre and is killed by falling scaffolding. This is the play’s worst point. After this the crises have a different tone: Emmet and Fiona finally sleep together, their bed becomes a raft that keeps them safe from the world, the Taximan saves his daughter Tracey from the scary film, and Aoife asks Ian if he thinks abortion

is murder. The story reflects the natural high and low points of people’s lives and the experience for the programmer reading is a series of oscillating periods of tension and release. Because there isn’t a singular narrative or protagonist to follow in Lagan, the programmer must yield to the energy of the form and allow the waves of each episode wash over them. In this way, the energy of the wavelet passes not only through the characters in the play, but through the programmer reading about those characters also. Reviewing the macro structure of Lagan reveals that the action generally rises to the point of Joan’s death and then falls into the calm of the final scene in the park. The beginning and end are punctuated by scenes on the ferry which gives the structure a sense of the symmetry of the Wave, and John Yorke argues that all forms in the end resolve themselves into this pattern. However, the experience for the programmer in reading a play based on the Wavelet is radically different from that based on the Wave. Formally, the Wavelet denies the singularity of the climactic wave, in favour of communities of experience which provides a direct challenge to canonical preferences for unity, singularity and individualism in a script.

Lagan is a rare example of a play based on the “Good Triumphs in the End” story, and it falls into the strand of descendants of the basic story that shows how “goodness is recognised, but at a cost.” While the early episodes show death, personal crises and parents failing to protect their children, the latter episodes show love, resolution to crises and parents protecting their children. The fact that goodness triumphs in the end is epitomised by two of the play’s storylines. In the second half of the play, we meet Fiona, whose father Terry has abused her, is a rumoured paedophile, and the likely father of Aoife’s child. Fiona finds love with Emmet and thinks “This town’s pock-marked with

396 Gregg, Lagan, 55.
397 Yorke, Into the Woods.
398 Jeffreys, Playwriting, 236.
stale fairytale. But there’s dying all over. What do you do with it? Sink or Swim”\textsuperscript{399} To which Emmet responds “We’re swimmin away on an IKEA bed…”\textsuperscript{400} Their relationship epitomises the hope that children are not punished for the sins of their parents, that the goodness of the next generation will be rewarded. This is mirrored in the reparation of Aoife’s relationship with her mother in the final scene. Earlier in the play, it is suggested that Aoife’s pregnancy was caused by abuse at Terry’s hands, yet her mother Anne refuses to heed the rumours about Terry and continues their friendship. However, the transgression of her failure to protect her daughter is resolved in the final scene as she sends Ian to the park with gloves for Aoife to fend off the cold. This small protective gesture contributes to the shift of fortunes generally present at the play’s end. Aoife’s goodness is finally being rewarded, but with full knowledge of the cost that had to be paid to get here. This type of story carries within it a strong sense of justice, and the programmer will be unconsciously seeking for it to be meted out fairly. The presence of the basic story is barely perceptible within Gregg’s play as it is more usually associated with ugly duckling stories that tend to focus on individuals rather than communities. The emphasis on community, combined with a form that decentres singular experience, places the play at odds with historical conceptions of good writing and within a more avantgarde classification. It is this modification of classification that creates tension between this play and the canon.

The play’s setting and thematic concerns make it surprising that it was not first performed in Northern Ireland, with the Lyric Theatre’s setting on the banks of the Lagan making it the most obvious location for an Irish production. Yet, it seems the form here is the primary barrier to an Irish production as even the previous plays shaped by

\textsuperscript{399} Gregg, \textit{Lagan}, 43.
\textsuperscript{400} Gregg, \textit{Lagan}, 43.
Wavelets, such as *Strandline*, or those based on communities, such as *Lally the Scut*, had characters to hinge the action on. Characterisation and individualised identities are less clear in *Lagan*, and this, combined with the play’s wavelet structure may be why it was favoured by a queer arts company in London. Gregg describes the play as a “halfway house” written after *Shibboleth* had been rejected and *Perve* had been programmed. Presenting the play as a compromise between the kind of work they wanted to write, and the kind of work programmers wanted to produce, Gregg said: “I wanted to somehow [...] invoke the sound and the feel and the clamour and the dissonance of what it felt like to be in post-conflict Belfast [...] even as I was aware I was writing in a more traditional form than I had up to that point.”\(^{401}\)

In the context of this interview with Gregg, Alexander Coupe describes *Lagan* as a response to “the penchant in London for Irish monologue drama,” which again reveals the power of programmer’s biases on shaping the kind of work presented to them.\(^{402}\)

**Dreams of Violence**

While communities of experiences were spread across four families in *Lagan*, Stella Feehily (1969-) shows in *Dreams of Violence* how communities of experience can reside in one individual. Although Feehily grew up in Bundoran and spent her early career working as an actor in Dublin, her first full-length play, *Duck*, premiered at the Theatre Royal, Bury St Edmunds, in 2003, in a production directed by Max Stafford-Clark. Subsequent plays, including *Dreams of Violence, Bang Bang Bang*, and *O Go My Man* were also directed by Stafford-Clark, whom Feehily married in 2010. A play about a woman at breaking-point, *Dreams of Violence* was originally produced by Out of Joint

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\(^{402}\) Coupe, “Defiantly Mercurial: An Interview with Stacey Gregg.”
Combining the structure of the Wavelet with the basic story of “The Hero Who Keeps Going,” it shows the sacrifices a woman makes to protect the people around her. At home, Hildy is responsible for the well-being of her elderly father, her drunken mother, her addict son, and her ex-husband. At work, she advocates for the rights of cleaners. Kept busy supporting the many people in her life, Hildy’s Herculean labours form the play’s peaks and troughs. At the first peak, she brings flowers to her ex-husband, Ben, and hands him divorce papers. This is followed by a trough in which she recruits two cleaners to her advocacy organisation while her mother gets drunk in her house. The second climax occurs when she has sex with her ex, Ben, in his hallway, which is followed by the trough when his girlfriend, Honey, finds them there. Hildy’s speech at a political demonstration forms the next climax, while an argument with her mother at home forms the trough. Following two short scenes containing a voicemail from her new recruits, and Honey’s voice protruding through the letterbox, the next peak comes when Hildy has a heart-attack following a visit from her son who has just been released from rehab. The final peak is not a moment in Hildy’s life but reflects the impact of her work: her two recruits, Annie and Bea, take a banker hostage in an attempt at revenge for their disenfranchisement. The structure moves through each of Hildy’s labours: dealing with her ex, working for the disadvantaged, supporting her son, housing her drunken mother, washing her invalid father, until she finally breaks under the pressure. While the form has been associated with the multiple climaxes of the female orgasm, Dreams of Violence’s rhythm of contraction and release resembles the work of the heart which eventually arrests at the play’s climax.

Although on the surface “The Hero Who Keeps Going” is associated with masculine labours of physical strength, this is perhaps the basic story that best represents
the reality of women’s lives. *Dreams of Violence* shows us that to be a woman in patriarchy requires a hero’s labour. The most famous example of this story structure may be Brecht’s *Mother Courage and Her Children*, and it is a narrative that speaks to popular conceptions of women’s resilience and stoicism. Yet rather than the mercenary labours of Brecht’s heroine, the labours of Feehily’s Hildy are better situated within a socialist feminist discourse about the second shift many women who are also carers are required to do. Although Brecht foregrounded the financial struggle of the working classes within the national narrative of war, Feehily centres the feminist juggle of home and work life within the broader narrative of capitalism’s economic inequality. This places gender at the heart of the story in a way that Brecht evades, making this play’s politics as much about gender inequality as class struggles. It also makes Hildy’s labours emotional, rather than physical, which places the play in contrast not only with the archetypal labourer Hercules, but with Mother Courage also. The combination of Feehily’s feminist re-envisioning of “The Hero Who Keeps Going” with the form of the Wavelet transforms the gentle lapping of crises in *Lagan* into an intense crashing of catastrophes. *Dreams of Violence* thus reveals the possibility for the Wavelet to not only diffuse the singular climax but to magnify the effect of each swell in the resultant rippling structure.

The Wavelet differs from the Wave because its focus shifts from a singular climactic episode to several climaxes and declines. This diffuses the process of meaning-making in the play away from absolutes and towards contexts, prompting a greater emotional engagement from the programmer. This kind of process is of course accompanied by value-judgements that are implicitly informed by their distance from canonical norms. Its form interacts with basic stories to explore their underlying emotional pulse, which appeals to the basic emotions they contain that are shared by all humans. Associated with women’s forms of writing, the Wavelet presents a challenge to
the Aristotelian concept of unity of time, place and action that has been privileged by the Western canon. This challenge places plays based on this form outside of the categorization of “good” plays that has emerged during the twentieth century. Falling outside of this classification, the tension between plays based on Wavelet and their comparative counterparts reflects a bias towards canonical norms that are bounded, hegemonic and self-replicating. This bias, emerging from the unconscious impact of the form can provide the nudge that pushes such plays into the categories of non-canonical, avant-garde and niche, which have always been detrimental to the progression of the careers of women playwrights. This is not to say that plays based on this form are not produced. Of those plays discussed in the previous chapters, Spallen’s Strandline is structured in this manner, with the receding energy of each of its scenes fuelling the crash of another wavelet in the next. It is rather the combination of the form with the linguistic structures discussed in Chapter Two and a general tendency to shift the focus in plays to reflect women’s perspectives on the world, that combine to trigger biased reactions to women’s plays.

Meanders

The structure of a Meander is that of a story that “begins at one point and moves toward a final one, but with digressive loops.”403 Meanders are found in the natural world

403 Alison, Meander, Spiral, Explode, 117.
in the path a river carves through a landscape and in the movement of snakes. Alison describes how there is a deliberate slowness in a meander, it is the kind of structure that is purposefully delaying getting to the end. She says: “A digressive narrative meanders; at times it flows quickly and at times barely at all, often loops back on itself, yet ultimately it moves onward.”\textsuperscript{404} Although Alison notes that novels are particularly suited to this form, most playwrights will know that a well-timed delay can increase the tension in a scene. The challenge for playwrights will be to keep the attention of their audience for as long as possible during these digressions in order to hold them in the intensity of the moment.

Notes to Future Self

This meandering pattern structures Lucy Caldwell’s 2011 play, \textit{Notes to Future Self}, which was produced by Birmingham Repertory Theatre Company and directed by its Artistic Director, Rachel Kavanaugh. Following the premiere of \textit{Leaves} in 2007, Caldwell’s \textit{Carnival} was produced by Kabosh in Belfast for the 2008 Ulster Bank Festival at Queen’s, but it was 2016 before her work was seen again in Ireland, when her new adaptation of Chekhov’s \textit{Three Sisters} premiered in Belfast’s Lyric Theatre. \textit{Notes to Future Self} blends the Meander with a story based on “The Gift That Is Lost” by interspersing what is essentially a monologue play with dialogic moments. The world of the play emerges from the mind of thirteen-year-old Sophie, who recalls episodes from her childhood during the final weeks of her life. Sophie’s gift was life, but now that she is terminally ill with cancer it is being taken away from her. In the opening sequence, Sophie tells her reader “these are the last weeks of my life. It’s Monday the seventh of September and by the time you see this I won’t be here any more.”\textsuperscript{405} So, the reader

\textsuperscript{404} Alison, \textit{Meander, Spiral, Explode}, 23.
\textsuperscript{405} Lucy Caldwell, \textit{Notes to Future Self} (London: Faber and Faber, 2011), 15.
knows from the beginning what the end of the play will be, and Sophie’s digressions into her family’s past life in various communes around the world are an attempt to delay the inevitable. For the programmer reading the play, this meandering structure unwinds slowly before them while the rate of Sophie’s treatments speeds up. She began the play needing one transfusion per week, and by the end of the play requires new blood almost daily. The journey through the meandering play involves luxuriating in the characters, ideas, and emotions that the playwright engages in. It pairs well with “The Gift That Is Lost” because in these kinds of stories too, the emphasis is on the journey. The Meander is, by definition, a slow form, and this slowness allows for contemplation on the textures of the play. Its lackadaisical progress facilitates reflection and meditation, relying on the associative workings of the unconscious to feel out meanings from its winding digressions.

Canonically, the Meander is associated with the stream-of-consciousness style novels of Virginia Woolf and the structure reflects her conception of the feminine sentence. Although Woolf doesn’t offer a clear definition of the female sentence, it emerges in opposition to her descriptions of men’s which are “so direct, so straightforward” yet lacking the “power of suggestion.”\textsuperscript{406} Drawing on this argument, Rubin and Greene describe the woman writer as “indirect rather than confrontational, seemingly digressive rather than linear, allows the reader to draw her own conclusions, uses first-person voice and second-person address, and depends a great deal on narrative and implicit analogy.”\textsuperscript{407} In \textit{A Room of One’s Own}, Woolf describes the frustration of reading a woman writer who had broken the male form:


the effect was somehow baffling: one could not see a wave heaping on itself, a crisis coming round the next corner. Therefore I could not plume myself either upon the depths of my feelings and my profound knowledge of the human heart. For whenever I was about to feel the usual things in the usual places, about love, about death, the annoying creature twitched me away, as if the important point was just a little further on.408

Woolf’s frustration at the deferral and indirectness of women’s writing reflects her own bias for the narrative arc that emerged from its prevalence in her reading life to this point, a bias that is shared by anyone educated to value canonical literature. Woolf describes how women’s writing is often referred to derogatively as “flowery”409 and in the meandering form, more than any other, the female playwright is most liable to accusations of effluence. Despite its links with a feminine writing style, the Meander has become prevalent in an Irish context in monologue plays by Samuel Beckett, Brian Friel, Mark O’Rowe, Conor McPherson and Eugene O’Brien. This prevalence may arise from the suitability of the form for capturing the speech patterns of Irish-English and for the particularly Irish preference for a good yarn. This makes it, along with the Wave, one of the most familiar and established forms and canonically associated with some of the most successful Irish plays in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century.

Like Override and Futureproof, Notes to Future Self is oriented towards the time to come. The shortness of Sophie’s life makes her grieve the future she has been denied, as she anticipates a new life through reincarnation. The momentum of the play is a rush towards its end and its final gesture propels its protagonist towards her future life, which recurs in many of these plays that premiered in Great Britain. Caldwell’s absence from the Irish theatre scene, despite the success of Leaves, is particularly lamentable given her

408 Woolf, "A Room of One's Own," 2202.
409 Woolf, "A Room of One's Own," 2196.
growing status as a fiction writer in recent years. For #WakingTheFeminists in 2015, she wrote that “It’s all too easy for playwrights to be lured away to the worlds of TV and film, which offer more opportunities (not to mention more money) or – like me – to find it far easier to publish novels and stories than get plays produced.”\footnote{410} Despite the early success of *Leaves*, Caldwell is now better known for her prose writing, and this statement attests to the difficulties faced by women trying to get plays produced in the years preceding #WakingTheFeminists.

\textbf{Spirals}

Spirals occur throughout the natural world, from the shape of a snail’s shell to hurricanes and whirlpools. They structure our DNA and form the shape of galaxies. Alison reminds us of the many words for spirals “coil, corkscrew, helix, vortex, whorl, swirl, twister, gyre.”\footnote{411} A spiral has a definitive momentum; it “begins at a point and moves onward, not extravagant or lackadaisical like a meander, but smooth and steady, spinning around and around that central point or a single axis.”\footnote{412} Alison explains that “a

\footnote{411} Alison, *Meander, Spiral, Explode*, 143.
\footnote{412} Alison, *Meander, Spiral, Explode*, 143.
spiraling narrative could be a helix winding downward – into a character’s soul, or deep into the past – or it might wind upward, around and around to a future. Near repetitions, but moving onward.” In the plays structured by this narrative discussed below, the main characters are obsessive about pursuing their goals, even in the face of protestations by those around them. The spiralling narrative reveals the hold that an idea or objective has over these characters, and their progression through the play moves deliberately around that.

**Bang Bang Bang**

Stella Feehily’s *Bang Bang Bang* was first co-produced by Out of Joint (Artistic Director: Max Stafford-Clark), Curve Theatre (Paul Kerryson), The Octagon (David Thacker), and Salisbury Playhouse (Gareth Machin) in association with The Royal Court (Dominic Cooke) in 2011 and was, as already noted, directed by Stafford-Clark. It uses the structure of the Spiral to explore the lives of NGO workers in the Democratic Republic of Congo. The play’s prologue reveals an attack on an NGO compound during which two human rights defenders, Sadhbh and Mathilde, anticipate that they will be raped. The first act then moves back in time to Sadhbh and Mathilde’s meeting in London before their journey to the DRC. Following a couple of scenes in London, the action moves to the compound in North Kivu, and then to the camp where the women collect interviews from survivors of violence committed by Colonel Mburame’s soldiers. The act culminates in a meeting between Mburame and Sadhbh in the Colonel’s military headquarters. The movement of the scene is from Europe to Africa, however, because the dialogue always revolves around their work in the DRC, the movement feels helical rather than linear. During their conversation at a dinner party in London, Sadhbh’s

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partner, Stephen, experiences a flashback to an incident in the DRC where they were held up by a child soldier.\textsuperscript{414} Such slippages in time help add to the swirling feeling that despite being far away, their minds cannot escape the pull of the Congo.

Act Two begins with the women on leave and partying in Goma. Following the intensity of Sadhbh’s meeting with Mburame, this allows the action to spiral out momentarily. However, shortly after they return to work, their compound is attacked and the prologue scene is repeated, pulling the focus of the action back to the ever-present threat of Mburame. The action then moves to Goma, where the programmer learns that Mathilde was raped and Sadhbh, although not sexually assaulted, suffered significant injuries and a miscarriage. The next scene takes the action forward in time, to Sadhbh’s thirtieth birthday party in Donegal. This is followed by an Epilogue where Sadhbh once again returns to the DRC. In summary: the action of Act Two spirals inwards to the attack on the compound and back out again to Ireland. Again, the ever-presentation of the Congo is represented through a flashback that Sadhbh experiences in Donegal of a soldier pointing an AK-47 at her.\textsuperscript{415} The Congo is the eye of the storm around which the action of the play swirls. The structure represents the continual presence of the threat of violence in a conflict situation, but also the strong pull that the NGO workers experience to return again and again. For the programmer reading the play, the attack on the compound is constantly on their mind, and they understand every other event and action within the play in terms of the threat it poses.

Because of the obsessive nature of the Spiral, it pairs well with stories based on “The Fatal Flaw.” In Bang Bang Bang, Sadhbh’s flaw is her dogged belief that she can make a difference in the DRC. Despite the apparent futility of her work, she returns to

\textsuperscript{415} Feehily, Bang Bang Bang, 100.
the DRC again and again while her personal relationship dwindles away. Her flaw then,
aligns with the central core of the spiralling structure. It is a constant presence as the story
moves to multiple locations across continents, and it persists to the end of the play. The
attack on the camp and the losses of both her baby and her relationship do not change
Sadhbh; she returns to the camp to finish her work. If the play were to continue into a
third act, it would likely become about “The Hero Who Keeps Going,” but because it
stops at Sadhbh’s return it is about “The Fatal Flaw.” As already mentioned, stories based
on this plot tend to centre around masculine conceptions of heroism associated with the
figure of the soldier. This implicit gendering of the prototype makes Sadhbh’s story not
immediately interpretable to the reader of this play because of the vulnerability of her
gender in a conflict that victimizes women. This makes her exceptionalism difficult to
conceptualize because the framing of both the context and popular culture places
weakness as synonymous with femininity. In fact, the lack of social recognition of her
heroism is repeatedly portrayed in the play as she is questioned about her pursuit of her
job in ways that suggest its inexplicability. The work that a programmer reading this
script has to do to adjust their instinct for the basic story creates the gap where biases can
slip in. It isolates this play from a canonical norm that joins heroism to masculinity and
the fatal flaw to the battlefield.

The setting and content of this play, through its exploration of the plight of NGO
workers in Africa, will be familiar to many Irish people because of the country’s twinned
histories of both emigration and international charity work. Yet, the programming of this
work in Britain makes the bias in Irish theatre clear. It is far more common to encounter
plays dealing with an emigrant’s return, than their actual work overseas. While Irish
theatres typically favour work concerned with narrow depictions of Irish identity that are
historically contextualised within narratives of national politics, reviewing the work
being programmed in Great Britain suggests the wider concerns of playwrights like Feehily with the impact of Irish aid missions internationally.

**Deluge**

Fiona Doyle’s *Deluge* combines a double-spiral structure with a story based on “The Spider and the Fly.” *Deluge* premiered at the Hampstead Theatre (Artistic Director: Edward Hall) in 2015 and was directed by Anna Ledwich. Set amidst rapidly increasing threats from climate change, the play follows two intertwined storylines that centre around the death of Kitty’s husband Joe. Increased flooding has led to a shortage of animal feed for farmers to feed their cattle in rural Ireland. This has led to financial trouble for Joe and Kitty, and a constant threat from unknown forces beyond the world of the farm. Joe’s father had repeatedly reported seeing things moving about the farm, but it is not until after his death that Joe starts to see them, and then after Joe’s death that Kitty does. Described by Flan as “the shadows,” these presences are accompanied by a series of silent phone calls, the sounds of birds shrieking unnaturally and dogs barking.

The play opens with a scene in a police interview room, where Kitty is being questioned. It then returns to the farm to the day of Joe’s father’s funeral, over a year earlier. The two strands of the story progress jointly, with the storyline in the past moving from Joe’s father’s death, to Joe’s death, to Kitty’s attempt to suppress any knowledge of it, while the interviews move forward in time as they mine the past. The structure of the double-spiral reflects the interwoven way these two strands are organized in the play, while the movement towards the central point of Joe’s death illustrates the campaign of the interviewer (the spider) as she tries to catch Kitty (the fly).

Of course, *Deluge* transforms the traditional gender dynamic of “The Spider and the Fly” narratives, which are typically found in detective stories where the spider is a

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male detective, while the fly is a male killer. In Doyle’s play, both roles are played by women. *Deluge* falls into the strand of such stories where the culprit is known from the beginning. In *Deluge*, the action starts with Kitty being interrogated; the play is about explaining why. The programmer reading does not discover until the very end of the play that she is suspected of murdering her husband and neglecting her child who behaves like a dog. Although the twin plots make this structure slightly different to that seen in *Bang Bang Bang*, the intensity of the experience of the play remains the same. In this case, it is the intensity of the chase to catch the criminal, and the programmer reading the script will gather clues as they read to make sense of what happened and why Kitty is being interviewed. However, the Spiral does not have the same sense of impending resolution as the Wave. The play ends with Kitty’s confession, but the loose ends are not all tied up. Rather what her confession offers is a consolidation of the sense of horror that has been building throughout the play. This distillation of a feeling is at the core of what the spiralling narrative offers; but it is a distillation of something inarticulable. That is why the story must weave around the core because what lies at the centre is an absent presence.

The experience of reading plays structured by a spiralling pattern is intense, as the form allows the playwright to circle a concept repeatedly without breaking away. Spiralling narratives are constantly moving, changing perspectives, and shifting time. Never stagnant, they move onwards either inwards or outwards from the narrative core. Their perpetual motion requires a nimbleness from the programmer reading, to move with the changes as they come about. However, in order for the programmer to do this, the hook holding the play’s core must be sufficiently compelling to keep their attentive focus as they read. Cyclical in nature, the spiral has close connections not only with the natural rhythms of menstruation, but with the common symbol of women’s creativity, the spinning wheel. Alison also notes the importance of the Spiral in witchcraft, and Mary
Daly has drawn links between each of these elements. Drawing on the story of the Spider Woman from the Navaho myth of the Twin Warriors, she says:

“\[\ldots\]\n
Spinsters possess the inner capacity to spin, spiral, dance and sing.”\(^{417}\)

The chaotic nature of the whirling, swirling, spiral represents the antithesis of the Wave’s linearity and emerges as the form most divergent from the dramatic arc. Its form emphasises spirituality and magic, and therefore opposes what Stacey Gregg has described as “the dominant mode of communicating: to be logical and lucid.”\(^{418}\) At odds with canonical norms, the spiral reflects a world where the ground is never sure underfoot, where time is cyclical, and events happen for mysterious reasons. It requires a reader who is willing to relinquish control and to be led by the play, rather than presiding detachedly over it. The submission required by this form of its reader makes it difficult to assume authority over the material from which to judge it, while the unfamiliarity of the experience itself denies the programmer an established standard against which to compare it.

I have already mentioned that Doyle’s writing style aligns with that preferred by the Abbey. However, like Feehily, her plays are often concerned with subject matter that reaches beyond a narrow obsession with national identity. Like *Override*, and the other plays already discussed, *Deluge*’s subject matter is concerned with the world in a

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projected future. Its theme of the impact of climate change on rural communities, again shows the possibilities offered by a British commission which allows writers, whether consciously or unconsciously, to tackle topics not being seen on Irish stages. Despite its national and global significance, plays confronting the impending climate catastrophe have been rare in Irish theatre over the past number of years, which makes Deluge an especially lamentable absence from the Irish stage.

Radials/Explosions

Like Spirals, Radials or Explosions also revolve around a key central incident; however, unlike a spiralling narrative, these kinds of structures are more static and intense. While the core of a Spiral is unknowable, the centre of the Radial or Explosion is a coherent, identifiable matter. Their central core holds the action in attachment to a particular moment, and while the intensity of that moment can increase or decrease, the action never quite manages to move on from it. Radials or explosions are “born of a nucleus, kernel, black hole, whether they spoke outward or circle.”\(^{419}\) They can be found in tree rings, or the explosion of fireworks, in the rays of the sun or the petals of a daisy.

\(^{419}\) Alison, *Meander, Spiral, Explode*, 165.
Narratives based on this structure, according to Alison, are ones in which “a powerful center holds the fictional world.”

That center could be a crime or trauma or something a figure wants to avoid but can’t help falling into: something devastatingly magnetic. Unlike a spiral, the story itself – the incidents we see dramatized – barely moves forward in time. Instead a reader might have a sense of being drawn again and again to a hot core – or conversely, of trying to pull away from that core […] Radials can be centrifugal or centripetal, but linear they are not.

Heat provides a good metaphor for how the experience of reading plays based on this structure feels. Scenes closest to the core are hot and have high levels of tension, while those furthest away are cooler. While all the other forms are vectored in a way that is felt structurally, the radial or explosive play may not have a clear sense of directionality. Despite this, the demands of the theatrical form require scenes to be experienced in some kind of sequence that will impose a temporal arrangement on the play. Like the Spiral, plays shaped by Radials or Explosions will feel intense, enclosed, and constricted. Such plays will not have a sense of release in the way that those shaped by the Wave do but will hold their reader within the intensity of the moment.

**The Dark Things**

Like Lynda Radley, Ursula Rani Sarma (1978-) began her theatrical career by co-founding Djinn Theatre Company in Cork in 1999. With Djinn, she premiered her early plays *...touched...* (1999), *Blue* (2001) and *The Magic Tree* (2008). Both *...touched...* and *Blue* toured to Great Britain, and over the following years Rani Sarma worked with Paines Plough Theatre, the New Theatre Company and The Royal National Theatre

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421 Alison, *Meander, Spiral, Explode*, 166.
before premiering *The Dark Things* at the Traverse Theatre in Edinburgh in 2009. Despite international success in the years that followed, Rani Sarma’s work was not seen in Ireland after 2008 until *Evening Train*, a musical based on the Mick Flannery album of the same name, premiered at the Everyman Theatre in Cork in 2019. Her absence during these years led Brenda O’Connell to describe her as a playwright who “remains practically unproduced and unknown in Ireland.”  

Like Doyle, Gregg, and Feehily, the subject matter of Rani Sarma’s plays reveal a widening of the common thematic trends associated with Irish theatre. *The Dark Things*, which premiered at the Traverse Theatre in 2009, tells the story of two survivors of a bus crash through the structure of the Explosion. While Daniel walked away from the crash completely unscathed, LJ, a former dancer, lost both her legs. Daniel’s fame as the unscathed survivor is fuelled by his return to the accident repeatedly in his work as a visual artist. This keeps the accident in the news, and keeps the characters trapped in a kind of stasis focussed on that moment. None of the characters can leave behind the trauma of what happened, and they are constantly being pulled back to the guilt, suffering and anger caused by the crash. Fifteen scenes emerge from this core, creating a radial structure protruding from it. Images serve an important function as punctuation in the play, both those visually represented on stage (the paintings) and those verbally conjured (story of being trapped in the lake told by Daniel and Steph). Their repetition gives the reader a sense of frozen time that reflects the feeling of being stuck that permeates the play. This torpor is also reflected in the set design which is a wasteland that contains debris from the crash which remains visible at all times. For the reader, the fascination

with the omnipresent bus crash is what holds their interest. The characters do not progress much linearly or temporally, but the reader’s understanding of what happened and why they are the way they are is always increasing as more details emerge each time they return to the moment of the accident.

Rani Sarma pairs the radial structure with the story of “The Debt That Must Be Paid” to explore survivor guilt following a disaster. The Dark Things is in fact based on the inversion of this plot, which Jeffreys calls “Getting Away With Murder.” Daniel has escaped unharmed from an accident that should have killed him; he has evaded death. Throughout the play, the programmer may expect fate to catch up with him, either by death or by a gesture of gratitude for the escape he has been given, but the debt is never called in. The anticipations of the reader are never met, and the feeling of stasis extends from the characters into the reading experience. The inverted plot reinforces the inertia of the form: because the debt is never called in, the play never breaks out of its enclosure towards resolution. Form and story combine to prevent the characters from achieving transformation. In the final scene, this inertia is immortalised by LJ as the video recording of her suicide attempt is played in the gallery. Daniel and Gerry’s conversation reveals that her attempt was unsuccessful, and she is in hospital on a life support machine – literally ensnared between life and death. Trapped by the machineries of medicine and film, her story illustrates the impossibility of release for these characters. With them, the programmer is held in the imprisonment of Rani Sarma’s world and release only comes after the play’s ending. Based on the inversion of the “The Debt That Must Be Paid,” The Dark Things already sits at odds to canonical norms. The play’s links with the film Unbreakable are marked explicitly in its dialogue as the film becomes the frame of reference for Daniel’s survival in the media. The impetus behind the plots of both film and play is that extraordinary survival must be counteracted by exceptional victimhood.
However, unlike the film, in which one man’s susceptibility to injury is counteracted by another man’s superhuman resistance to it, the meting out of invincibility and vulnerability in *The Dark Things* happens along gender lines. Of course, the concept of “Getting Away with Murder” is one deeply associated with the cis, straight, white, man’s position in the world from a marginalised perspective. The fact that justice is not done in this play can be seen as a feminist viewpoint on the world, but the possibility remains that the programmer may miss the irony of that perspective.

Plays structured by the Radial or Explosion work actively against the prevalent thrust of dramatic art which is towards change and transformation. In doing so, they may create a sense of frustration for the programmer by denying the release of narrative closure. The script structured radially or explosively is the closest that a programmer will get to an immersive experience within the conventions of the fourth wall. However, that immersion is not in the theatrical experience but in the feeling created by the narrative. These kinds of narratives therefore play on the emotions of the programmer reading, requiring them to connect affectively rather than intellectually with the play’s material. The very stillness of the form rejects the impulse for change that drives the Wave by binding the action to a single moment. Immobile, yet potentially electric, the Radial or Explosion rejects transformation in favour of intensity, frustrating the impulse for formal closure which renders it incomparable with normative standards of theatrical excellence.

The weight of normative dramaturgies has been remarked upon by Rani Sarma, who has commented on her own struggles with lengthy dramaturgical processes that involved “fixing” plays to an established mould: “Increasingly, there's this belief that there’s a blueprint for a well-made play, and so an awful lot of plays begin to look the
Not only do many plays begin to look the same, but many plays are rejected for not conforming to this blueprint. In the same interview Rani Sarma also candidly noted the importance of international producers in her career: “the companies that have been fostering and nurturing me are abroad.” The availability of British productions for Irish writers like Rani Sarma was essential when Irish theatres weren’t producing women, yet even within the British context, the pressure once commissioned to make a play fit an established mould remains.

**Networks & Cells**

Networks and cells are prevalent throughout the natural world and can be traced in the structure of honeycomb, the patterns of cracked earth, spiders’ webs and in a foam of bubbles. Alison tells us that “You can call the pattern cellular if you focus on the shapes (bubbles, chips of bark); or you can focus on the lines defining those shapes and call the pattern nodular, a network.” For the reader, she says, “you gaze upon many segments, or a web. Instead of following a line of story, your brain draws the lines, makes connections.” This type of structure requires very active participation from its reader. Because character is such an essential part of dramatic art, plays tend to favour the cellular

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426 Sara Keating, “Back to her roots via ‘The Magic Tree.’”
428 Alison, *Meander, Spiral, Explode*, 188.
pattern, which allows a deep dive into the psyche of the character. However, the nodular model, which allows the playwright to depict a connected society, although rarer, is also possible. The two plays discussed below illustrate each type of pattern. The cellular structure of Abbie Spallen’s *Pumpgirl* facilitates an exploration of violence in relationships through the prism of the disparate perspectives of its three characters, while the nodular structure of Stella Feehily’s *O Go My Man* invites its audience to take a kaleidoscopic look at monogamy through brief glimpses of love and lust in the lives of connected strangers.

*O Go My Man*

*O Go My Man* was scheduled by Ben Barnes to premiere at the Abbey Theatre in 2005, however, when the financial crisis became clear, the play was removed from the programme. In an interview in *The Irish Times*, Feehily said,

> It was all set to go on at the Abbey in March but the deal fell through, something to do with the losses which were discovered. Fiach Mac Conghail said ‘no we can't do it - it's too expensive.’ It was all signed, sealed and delivered to go ahead, which was frustrating.\footnote{\textcopyright{}Brian O’Connell, “Off the stage but on the up,” *The Irish Times*, 18 February 2006, https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/off-the-stage-but-on-the-up-1.1017323.}

*O Go My Man* was ultimately produced in 2006 by Out of Joint (Artistic Director: Max Stafford-Clark) in association with The Royal Court (Ian Rickson) and directed by Stafford-Clark. The play has a nodular structure that constructs an overview of twenty-first century relationships through the fragments of its disparate scenes. In the first scene, Neil makes a telephone call from Sudan to report to an unknown listener that he got the “money shot” he needed.\footnote{Stella Feehily, *O Go My Man* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2006), 3.} The action then shifts to a Dublin flat, where Sarah tries to get ready for an audition while her partner, Ian, takes photos of her. This is followed by Neil’s arrival into Dublin airport, where he is met by his wife, Zoe. As the play
progresses, the programmer will encounter Neil and Sarah in love scenes together, Ian hooking up with a producer, Elsa, and Neil’s wife, Zoe, recording a video for internet dating. The programmer will begin to make connections between the characters in differing scenes. In scene three, they will learn that Neil is having an affair when Zoe reveals that she went through his correspondence and says “Your Visa statements list hotels. / The Conrad? The Shelbourne? Nights you were supposed to be away working.” However, it is not until Sarah emerges from the bathroom of Neil’s hotel room in Scene Six, that they will realise the affair is with her. In Scene Fifteen, Reg relays a phone message to Elsa: “The Clydesdale Bank. They want to withdraw funding from the Chad documentary.” Jim then refers to this documentary in Scene Seventeen as a potential alternative to Neil’s return to Darfur. This web of connections builds towards the final scene in which all the characters meet at a gallery exhibiting the photos Ian took of Sarah at the start of the play.

This structure pairs well with the basic story of “The Love Triangle,” which is used in O Go My Man to explore the concept of monogamy. While Our New Girl was based on the A loves B and C type of story, O Go My Man expands it to A loves B and C, B loves A and D and D loves B and E. The complex web of love and affairs in this play begins in chaos, but gradually resolves itself into happiness, for one of the couples at least. This story gives the action extraordinary momentum and Jeffreys points out that plays with this plot are defined by their middle, because that is where “people are endlessly, relentlessly pursuing each other.” Unlike Our New Girl, the programmer’s

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431 Feehily, O Go My Man, 14.
432 Feehily, O Go My Man, 65.
433 Feehily, O Go My Man, 81.
434 A (Neil) loves B (Sarah) and C (Zoe), B (Sarah) loves A (Neil) and D (Ian), and D (Ian) loves B (Sarah) and E (Elsa).
435 Jeffreys, Playwriting, 232.
input to the story of *O Go My Man* involves working out who is with whom, rather than who should be with whom and the play’s ending brings all the connections together and carries the problem to its resolution. Although, the play has a linear progression, its mode of telling the story is fragmented. The separation of these moments in the character’s lives allows the programmer to compare one relationship with another in order to explore the theme of monogamy of which the play’s title is an anagram. None of the characters in the play operate as individuals, rather it is their many and complex connections with the other people in their lives that is its focus. This is why the use of this structure to tell this story is important; it shifts attention away from the character’s motivations to their interactions. It makes the link between actions the focus rather than the actions themselves.

Virtually every review of the play likened it to Patrick Marber’s *Closer*,\(^{436}\) and there are obvious connections between the two plays. Both are based on an expanded version of “The Love Triangle”, both feature a photographer, and both sets of characters gather in a gallery for an exhibition of photographs taken earlier in the play. However, *O Go My Man* differs from Marber’s play in significant ways. While *Closer* focussed on the disconnect at the heart of the relationships between the four people at its core, Feehily dramatizes the connectedness of the daughter, work colleagues and other people affected by *O Go My Man*’s affairs. Emerging during a decade in which British theatre seemed obsessed with masculinities, *Closer*’s depictions of femininity are exceedingly stereotypical and male-defined. Feehily, on the other hand, gives greater agency to her female characters which allows them to transcend a gendered role within the narrative by engaging in the full gamut of human actions and desires. I have already discussed how the story of “The Love Triangle” carries power dynamics that are reflective of normative

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gender roles. While *Closer*’s intense focus on the play’s central characters reinforced those norms, in *O Go My Man*, the structure of the network undermines the accumulation of power along stereotypical lines. Because characters are seen only briefly, any stereotypes attributed to them have little time to take root, resulting in a diffusion of stereotyped reactions to their behaviour. This makes the play unusual when compared to both the basic story on which it is based and with the canonical text which it most closely resembled. However, it is not simply the play’s difference from the canonical norm that makes it diverge from normative standards of good writing, but it is the nature of that difference that matters. Feehily’s rearrangement of both form and story not only reorients the dominant perspective of modern relationships away from the misogyny of Marber’s version, but it disempowers the monopoly of the individualistic story favoured by the canon. The comparative structure of the network means that the programmer is more likely to focus on the concept under observation by the playwright than the individual character’s stories and this has a profound impact on the kinds of meanings they can draw from the play.

Despite being set in Dublin, *O Go My Man* has never been produced professionally in Ireland. This is due in part to its form. In a different context, Stafford-Clark commented on the difficulty he found trying to bring plays to Ireland “Fiach MacConghail in the Abbey has a particular taste, and in my experience Michael Colgan at the Gate is more interested in who is going to be in the play than the play itself.”  

Plays structured in a nodular form rely on an ensemble, and with many programmers, like Colgan, preferring a star vehicle, the kinds of companies willing to produce such work

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become more limited. This is less of an issue with plays structured by the cellular pattern, which provide greater scope for a deep dive into character.

Pumpgirl

As with Feehily’s *O Go My Man*, *Pumpgirl* by Abbie Spallen was scheduled for a production by Tinderbox Theatre Company in Belfast, but, Spallen said, “they hit some kind of funding hiccup and I had to go with the Bush.”438 The Bush Theatre premiere in 2006 was directed by its Artistic Director, Mike Bradwell. *Pumpgirl*’s cellular structure condenses that seen in *O Go My Man* in order to delve deeply into the cells of the network, rather than focus solely on the connections between them. In *Pumpgirl*, the three monologues are all telling the same story from different angles, and the programmer reading the play will seek clues that allow them to connect different moments described by the characters. For instance, when Pumpgirl (Sandra) first talks about Hammy she emphasises how close their relationship is: “Hammy’s pure class […] There isn’t a person in the whole world I can talk to like Hammy.”439 Whereas when Hammy sees her father, his description suggests only a passing acquaintance: “Her da’s in. Oul’ man-woman’s da. Oul Pumpgirl from the garage’s da is at the bar.”440 The juxtaposition of opposing perspectives develops to reveal clues about the sequence of events which provides important connective information that allows the programmer to draw links between one story and the other. When Hammy describes the performative boasting of sexual conquests that the men engage in in the pub, he says that Shawshank refers to “some housewife he’s left not two hours ago with a smile on her face like Liberace in a

locker room.” Over the next few scenes, descriptions of the gang-rape are interlocked with descriptions of Sinead and Shawshank’s more loving sexual encounter. It is only when Sinead says that Shawshank left early: “He says he’s sorry he has to go but he has friends to meet;” and that “It’s a quarter past seven, the kids’ll be home soon” that the programmer realises that she is the housewife he was boasting about to Hammy. As in *O Go My Man*, these clues allow the programmer to participate in the construction of the story by making connections between one monologue and the next. The programmer’s brain reading such a play will be working in much the same way that it would when reading detective fiction or even watching many soap operas: it will rely heavily on memory to determine the relationships between people, the sequence and location of events and key distinguishing features of their actions. This makes the structure remarkably similar to many classics of Irish theatre, most notably Brian Friel’s *Faith Healer*.

The three interlocking monologues in *Pumpgirl* form the triad typical of the first mode of telling “The Love Triangle” story: A loves B and C. While it isn’t quite love, Hammy is in a relationship with two people: his wife, Sinead, and lover, Sandra. Because the dynamics of the relationships in this play revolve around hatred and dominance rather than love, the story plays out in tragic rather than comic or romantic form. In fact, for a play structured by the archetypal love triangle, there is remarkably little love, romance, or passion in the play. Sandra, “Pumpgirl,” is obsessed with Hammy, and when the story begins, the programmer reading might expect, based on stereotypical versions of this story, that it will end with Hammy leaving Sinead to be with her. However, things do not progress along romantic lines. The crime Hammy (with his friends) commits against

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442 Spallen, *Pumpgirl*, 27.
Sandra is unbearable for him and drives him to suicide by the play’s end. His death releases Sinead from their deeply unhappy marriage, but at a terrible cost. For Sandra, Hammy’s inability to protect her from being raped, and his active participation in it, destroy her resilience and self-confidence in her own identity. The tragic ending stands in contrast with traditional manifestations of this kind of story in being absolutely devoid of any love, sentimentalism or romanticization of death. The world of the play makes clear that there will be no redemption, no happily ever after for any of these characters. The best they can hope for is survival. Canonical versions of “The Love Triangle” are derived from a patriarchal economy where the woman is passed between men (e.g., Tristan and Isolde) and the story is inevitably imbued with patriarchal ideology where the resolution favours a return to the status quo in the form of the retention of male power. *Pumpgirl* works against this, however, by positioning the women as survivors of male violence, and Hammy as the victim of patriarchy’s macho culture.

The structure of Networks & Cells has the power to disrupt the monolithic narrative impulse of the traditional dramatic arc by shattering coherency into fragments. Such forms require active engagement from the programmer who must work to connect the pieces to form an elaborate puzzle. This work relies heavily on the workings of both short and long-term memory as the scenes progress without the stable referents of place or time. Although rigidly constructed, this creates a feeling of variability in the plays, of chaos within the order. The role of the reader is to make those connections, meaning that this kind of structure imposes less control over the kinds of meanings a reader can make. While the cellular structure is associated with classic plays in the Irish canon, the nodular structure is less well favoured by the establishment and through its emphasis on connection, relationships, and community, favours a social mode typically associated with women’s art.
The importance of British theatres for playwrights during this period is made evident from a comment made by Spallen on the occasion of *Pumpgirl’s* Irish premiere at the Lyric Theatre in 2008. Spallen commented “I was upset when I heard a report last year that the Abbey had said it was not putting on any new writing, because there wasn't any. And there was I with a new play going on - in London.” Years later, as the anger over the “Waking The Nation” programme was beginning to emerge online, Spallen responded to a tweet from Brian F. O’Byrne on 28 October 2015, saying “Being a female playwright in Ire is like having someone yell over and over into your face: ‘why can’t I see you?’” (@spallenabbie, 7.19pm). The wilful blindness of Irish theatre to women is made even more frustrating when considered in light of their successes internationally.

Fractals

Fractals are patterns that replicate themselves at different scales. They can be found in the branches of trees, in Russian dolls, in capillaries of blood and in hurricanes. Emma Dabiri discusses in detail how, before there were “discovered” by Europeans, fractal designs were in use across the African continent, from the design of villages to

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444 Spallen has since deleted her Twitter account.
sculpture and cloth design.\textsuperscript{445} The replicating pattern of the fractal is closely linked to mathematical conceptions of infinity and Dabiri emphasises the “frequency with which this evidence of fractals and concepts of infinity appears in traditional African hairstyles.”\textsuperscript{446} What is of particular interest is Dabiri’s comment that “African hairstyling culture is a place where maths is unconsciously applied in each step of the process.”\textsuperscript{447} When she asked her stylist how she created such intricate patterns, her response was “I design it as I’m going along. I just know.”\textsuperscript{448} This kind of intuitive knowledge also informs the fractal structure of literary narratives where Alison describes the pattern in evidence in “texts that start with a ‘seed’ or blueprint that spawns several more.”\textsuperscript{449} Reading fractally structured narratives involves shifting focus from tiny things which appear whole, to larger things which are extremely detailed. The shift in scale facilitates a shift in perspective that actually changes the story being told. It highlights the context that scale provides and the connections between micro and macro in the nested structure. For the programmer, the experience of reading such narratives involves jolts from one scale to another which are akin to the shift from close-up to a wide shot in film.

**Desolate Heaven**

Ailís Ní Ráin (1974-) is a composer and writer from Co. Cork. Her first play *Tilt* was co-produced by Cork’s Granary Theatre and the New Works Company, Liverpool in 2007. Following this, Ni Riain’s career developed in both Ireland and Great Britain simultaneously. However, with Irish productions all occurring in Cork, the reach of this

\textsuperscript{445} Emma Dabiri, *Don’t Touch My Hair* (London: Penguin Books, 2019), 224-32. Dabiri also reminds us that “Fractals are found throughout indigenous African design yet were only ‘discovered’ by Europeans in 1975, when a Polish mathematician, Benoit Mandelbrot, invented the word.” Dabiri, *Don’t Touch My Hair*, 224.

\textsuperscript{446} Dabiri, *Don’t Touch My Hair*, 227.

\textsuperscript{447} Dabiri, *Don’t Touch My Hair*, 222.

\textsuperscript{448} Dabiri, *Don’t Touch My Hair*, 222.

\textsuperscript{449} Alison, *Meander, Spiral, Explode*, 223.
work was limited. *Desolate Heaven* premiered in 2013 at one of London’s most important venues for discovering new-writing, Theatre 503, in a production directed by the theatre’s Artistic Director, Paul Robinson.\(^{450}\) It is the only play among this group with a fractal structure, which works in this play to illustrate the gap between childhood fairy tales and lived reality. *Desolate Heaven* follows the story of two young girls who are carers for their parents. They run away from home and on their journey meet three women who give them food, shelter, and protection. Each of these women tells them part of a story about a young girl, Ciara, who goes to work in a palace as a weaver. Unable to spin, Ciara spends her first night worrying about what will happen when the Queen discovers her secret. Luckily, the following morning a fairy appears and completes the work for her. This action is repeated three times by three different fairies. The structure of the story told on a small scale within the play is reflected in the story that gives the play its macro shape. Of course, the two are not perfect matches. Ciara finds happiness, enjoying “all the finery and luxury her life as a Princess bestowed on her”\(^{451}\) while the two young girls do not; but the interest in the play lies in the gap between the stories we tell and the reality of the world we live in. Stevens explains that in the natural world, “in order to maintain the same structural characteristics a difference in size must be accompanied by a difference in shape.”\(^{452}\) The shift in the shape of the stories then, directly results from the shift in scale and the programmer reading a play with this structure will be required to adjust to the scalar fluctuations from micro to macro narratives.

In *Desolate Heaven*, Ní Ríain combines the fractal structure with the inverted version of the story of “The Rival Siblings:” “Siblings United.” Stories based on the

\(^{450}\) *Desolate Heaven* received its Irish premiere at The Everyman Theatre in 2014, directed by Tony McCleane-Fay.


\(^{452}\) Stevens, *Patterns in Nature*, 16.
“Siblings United” plot see the siblings unite against a common enemy, and are best represented by buddy movies, making Sive and Orlaith’s journey resemble that of *Thelma and Louise*. Sive and Orlaith unite over a shared frustration at their role as carers for their parents. Their decision to escape is fuelled by a desire to find heaven which, according to Orlaith, is “a decent beach.” Once on the road, they enter the dream phase of the story where they are helped by three strangers to avoid their common enemy – the public search to find them. The final helper, Bridie, offers the use of her cottage by the sea, which marks the turning point into the nightmare stage of the story. It is here that the story’s divergence from classic conceptions of the “Siblings United” narrative emerges, as the girls develop a romantic relationship, which although initially blissful, quickly turns sour. Sive feels like Orlaith is constantly frustrated and angry with her. She says “Now what I’ve run from seems less confusin’ – […] Than where I’ve run to.” Sive’s death at Orlaith’s hands is the worst possible manifestation of Orlaith’s desire to take control of her relationship and it kills something in her too: “A piece of my heart trails her body closely, further and further towards the horizon. / Towards heaven itself.” Unlike *Thelma and Louise*, there is neither freedom nor redemption at the end of *Desolate Heaven*; the devastating shock of its ending reveals the destruction of the sisterhood itself. While intimate partner violence is a common trope in heterosexual relationships, its representation in a teenaged lesbian relationship resists a popular cultural comparison through which it might be understood. Consequently, the play’s plot opposes not only common conceptions of the “Siblings United” narrative, but common conceptions of the love story too. Unlike the other famous teenage love story, *Romeo and Juliet*, Orlaith’s act of violence is motivated not by love but by jealousy and possessiveness, making

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453 Ní Ríain, "Desolate Heaven," 293.
454 Ní Ríain, "Desolate Heaven," 338.
455 Ní Ríain, "Desolate Heaven," 345.
Desolate Heaven’s conclusion not only distressing but indecipherable from a canonical perspective. Without a canonical or cultural understanding of intimate partner violence within lesbian relationships, the story’s merit as a great version of this story becomes unmeasurable, which makes the play’s worth more difficult to gauge. For plays by women in general, the invisibility of a historical and contemporary body of work creating a cultural discourse on a range of subjects can leave many new pieces isolated and perceptually abnormal in relation to the work that is remembered, reproduced and salient.

John Yorke has convincingly argued that all plays are structured fractally. He says “fractal theory dictates that every act will contain all the essential elements of story: protagonist, antagonist, inciting incident, journey, crisis, climax and – occasionally – resolution.”\(^{456}\) He illustrates how every beat, every scene, every act and every play is structured along the lines of a narrative arc with its own beginning, midpoint and climax: “Stories are built from acts, acts are built from scenes and scenes are built from even smaller units called beats.”\(^{457}\) The linking of a series of beats, scenes, or acts, changes what we see as the midpoint, or what we see as the climax (one midpoint becomes an inciting incident, one climax becomes a midpoint): “simply structured cells merge together organically to build units of striking complexity.”\(^{458}\) The pattern repeats from a microscopic scale up to the macro level. Yorke says: “That’s what story structure is – single units of perception, endlessly seeking to mimic each other as they build into one giant version of their constituent parts.”\(^{459}\) Although all plays contain fractals, the play that is structured fractally creates a different reading experience for the programmer. Repeating the same story shape on micro and macro levels prompts the programmer to

\(^{456}\) Yorke, Into the Woods, 80.
\(^{457}\) Yorke, Into the Woods, 78.
\(^{458}\) Yorke, Into the Woods, 83.
\(^{459}\) Yorke, Into the Woods, 225.
view the story in different scales, which changes the story’s meaning. Smaller scaled stories invite a perspective of the shape in totality, while the macro story forces you to pay attention to its details. The comparison between the two incites a more nuanced perspective than if the story was only told in macro scale. The most famous fractal structures are, of course, the plays-within-the-plays that proliferate in Shakespearean theatre, making the Fractal almost as canonical as the Wave, but perhaps less recognisable. This makes the reading of plays structured by this device easy for the programmer, who will have already developed the appropriate cognitive strategies for nesting one story within another.

The forms and stories described as the primary shapers of these plays represent the most salient ones in operation; however, many plays will blend more than one form or story within their structure. All of these forms and basic stories work on the programmer’s unconscious as they read, to classify the play within a basic category from which comparisons will be made with canonical texts. Categorization also facilitates a congruity test to see how well the new script matches the ideal function of the form or story. While non-canonical forms offer opportunities for feminist articulations of women’s stories, when judged in relation to a patriarchal canon those plays that foreground women’s issues may not meet its predefined standards. Similarly, basic stories, although flexible to new renderings, carry the patriarchal gender roles of their originals implicitly within their structure. This positions any reinterpretation of the basic story as such, a reinterpretation, which in turn implicitly situates it outside of normative models. Both of these elements perform an important role in creating canonical comparisons for new plays which implicitly invite judgements calibrated against them.
Conclusion

Reviewing this group of plays that premiered in Britain reveals thematic concerns that mark such a striking contrast with programmes at Irish theatres where concerns of our technological future, climate change, and gendered labour issues rarely feature. There is also a futuristic outlook in many of these plays that marks a distinction from the historical obsession of Irish work. These differences point towards the biases of Irish programmers for certain outlooks, structures, and themes. Even if some of these biases are conscious, their sentient articulation will have been fuelled by unconscious cognitive comparisons with the Irish canon that are triggered by the basic structures of form and story. That our minds are biased towards making meaning out of the world through storytelling has been illustrated through the following experiment by Daniel Kahneman, who invites readers to observe the words below:

Bananas          Vomit

He predicts that the words create a mild nausea in the reader, which has physiological symptoms: “Your heart rate increased, the hair on your arms rose a little, and your sweat glands were activated.”\(^\text{460}\) Kahneman describes that “There was no particular reason to do so, but your mind automatically assumed a temporal sequence and causal connection between the words *bananas* and *vomit*, forming a sketchy scenario in which bananas caused the sickness.”\(^\text{461}\) Yorke writes: “the idea that because something occurs after

\(^{460}\) Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, 50.  
\(^{461}\) Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, 50.
something else, the former has caused the latter is not only a common logical fallacy, it is of course the wellspring of narrative too. Narrative is cause and effect, linked into a chain.462 And, as he puts it more succinctly: “we can’t help but impose story on everything.”463 While this is the fundamental tendency that leads to bias (e.g., because Jane is a woman then she should be weak/emotional/maternal/caring), it is also critical for the act of reading. Writers rely on readers’ abilities to connect the dots, to make inferences, and fill in blanks.

The process of making connections has been identified by Stephen Jeffreys in terms of the six kinds of logic available to the playwright when writing plays. Two of these, deductive and inductive logic, are only relevant to the writing process. Deductive logic is used when a writer “begins with an idea, concept or an intellectual notion” and builds “the action of the play in order to support the theory.”464 On the other hand inductive logic is used when a playwright works “from a series of fragmentary insights towards a position where [they] have some kind of drama.”465 While the first kind of logic is driven by an intellectual reasoning that can be clearly iterated through language, the second kind of logic is more intuitive and emotional, it may be strongly felt, but difficult to describe. Jeffreys makes it clear that most writers use both of these processes but may favour one as their go-to method when developing new work. While these processes may be detectable from the finished script, they are not the procedures that structure the development of the play’s action. The four kinds of structural logic used to connect the play’s actions are:

1) causal logic: “things happen because of something else”466

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463 Yorke, Into the Woods, 216.
464 Jeffreys, Playwriting, 135.
465 Jeffreys, Playwriting, 136.
466 Jeffreys, Playwriting, 139.
2) **off-the-wall logic**: “things happen by coincidence; there is a deliberate absence of connection”\(^{467}\)

3) **dialectical logic**: opposing concepts are set in opposition to each other\(^{468}\)

4) **poetic logic**: establishes “a hidden link between something literal and something metaphorical”\(^{469}\)

Each of the four kinds of structural logic outlined above will require a different reading strategy from the programmer. The act of reading here resembles the act of writing as most readers will use either deductive or inductive logic as they read. Plays structured by causal and dialectical logic generally tend to rely heavily on the programmer’s working memory to remember causal connections or to keep opposing concepts in mind. Such plays rely on the ability of the reader to employ deductive logic to connect the dots. Detective stories are the most obvious example of this process, where the reader will be engaged in remembering a series of clues which they link together and use to figure out who the perpetrator of the crime is. Poetic and off-the-wall logic, however, usually rely on emotional connections between the play’s events. Plays that utilise these kinds of logic rely more heavily on metaphor, or on the juxtaposition of different stories, images, or scenes, and thus require their reader to use inductive logic to make connections between them. This kind of reading experience is more intuitive and emotional than one relying primarily on the use of deductive logic, however this does not mean that it is not intellectually engaging with profound ideas or concepts. Rather, it means that the understanding of such ideas and concepts is arrived at experientially as opposed to rationally.

\(^{467}\) Jeffreys, *Playwriting*, 139.

\(^{468}\) Jeffreys, *Playwriting*, 142.

\(^{469}\) Jeffreys, *Playwriting*, 145.
The programmer’s approach to the evaluative process will be in part determined by the way that they are positioned by the play’s form. While forms like the Wave, Networks & Cells and Fractals tend to suit plays structured by causal or dialectical logic, forms like the Wavelet, Meander, Spiral and Radial/Explosion tend to favour poetic or off-the-wall logic. This means that Waves, Networks & Cells and Fractals will require the programmer to use deductive logic, while Wavelets, Meanders, Spirals and Radials/Explosions will call for the use of inductive logic. Of course, these tendencies reflect the most prevalent associations between form and logic; but plays often work on multiple levels of sensibility. These forms invite readers/spectators not only to use certain kinds of logic, but to perform specific roles. Elin Diamond has noted that within realist modes, “The spectator takes on the role of seeker/knower, is assured of completing the narrative, of discovering the secret, of judging its truth.” This positioning of the spectator as Seeker/Knower within realism’s most popular form, the Wave, positions the spectator as a judger of either the actions of the characters onstage or of the truth of the representation. This positioning is closely related to that prompted by Networks & Cells and Fractals, which place the spectator in the role of the Solver. The Solver’s job is that of a detective; they make connections between the scenes or actions presented on stage. This role has more involvement than that of Knower but remains at some remove from the play’s action. Forms like Meanders, Wavelets, Radials/Explosions and Spirals position the spectator as a Feeler. The Feeler’s role is experiential: they feel the emotional tone of the display, rather than analyse its events. The experience of the Feeler is more immersive than that of Knower or Solver, and a conscious recognition of their response to the work may not come until sometime after the experience of reading or spectating has finished.

Diamond, Unmaking Mimesis, 20.
The familiarity of the programmer’s role of Knower, and its accompanying tests of the plausibility of causal links and the clarity of character’s motivations in plays shaped by the Wave, may easily be transferred to the role of Solver for Networks & Cells and Fractals. Yet, it is important to note that the judgement of the rationality of a play’s causal or dialectical logic may be subject to the cultural context in which the playwright writes, and the programmer reads. The director of Rosaleen McDonagh’s play *Mainstream*, Jim Culleton, has described his discovery that his interrogation of the play’s logic revealed his own biases as a settled person. He remarked: “Sometimes I would query something in the script, or in rehearsals, and Rosaleen would say, “are you worried that it’s confusing, because I don't think Travellers will find it confusing.””

It seems evident that causal logic itself can be seen to be contingent on the social and cultural milieu of its employment and that what is logical in one cultural context, may be illogical in another. Jill Dolan has outlined how canonical systems of value not only privilege certain kinds of critique, but consequently make non-conforming subjectivities aberrant:

> “Cultural authority and power constructs the ideal reader and critic from a group of similar subjects, for whom the canon meets its personal

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contingencies of value. The value systems of other, less powerful or authoritative subjects are then characterized as ‘pathological.’”

These tests of causality will pose further problems when the programmer assumes the role of Feeler for plays shaped by Wavelets, Meanders, Spirals and Radials/Explosions. When a play is driven by poetic logic, which positions the programmer in the role of Feeler, their judgement of the merit of the play’s progression may be driven by the levels of comfort or discomfort they experience in immersing themselves in the feelings aroused by the play. If the play poses a challenge to the integrity of their subjectivity or to their perception of the morality of their self-image, then their feeling of discomfort towards the subject matter may influence their judgement of the play’s material.

When a play written by a woman foregrounds feminist issues or women’s experiences, the programmer will alternatively be asked to know, solve, or feel those issues and experiences. The detachment of the position of the Knower places the programmer above the events of the play, and they will evaluate the merits of the text from a comfortable distance. The Solver’s position is closer to the work, as they are required to provide greater input into constructing the play’s plot from its fragments. There still, however, remains a critical distance from the work that protects the programmer from an intimate encounter with the play’s central themes. This is in marked contrast to the role of Feeler, which requires the programmer to fully immerse themselves in the emotional world of the play. Their relationship to the play’s themes will be highly involved, and their evaluative position will be from within the play’s world rather than without. While the programmer may resist assuming the subject position of the Feeler, the play’s immersive structure will leave little room for detachment. With no standardized

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system of evaluating a play’s emotional development that compares with that that
appraises its causal development, the role of the Feeler is the most subjective of the three.
For many programmers, regardless of their gender, the experience of being asked to
evaluate an emotionally driven play, particularly if it is centred on women’s experiences,
will prompt biases about the merit of the work when judged against a canon that favours
logic and rationality. Emotions are not value-free entities in themselves, and the extent to
which the work’s emotional drive is seen as valid or invalid will itself be subject to
cultural biases.

The human instinct for categorization has a profound effect on the evaluation of
new plays. Form and story are two of the basic ways that the programmer’s encounter
with a new play is linked to canonical norms of value. A play’s form provides the
schematic frame that positions the programmer in relation to the text, while its story
provides the prototypical script which will influence the programmer’s anticipations and
expectations while reading. Because both basic forms and stories are intuited by the
programmer, they provide unconscious directions to information stored in their memory
that connect the new script to memories of plays based on the same basic form and story.
The comparisons implicated by this connection will guide the programmer’s response to
the new play as well as their decisions about its value. While non-canonical forms may
reveal opportunities for female playwrights to exploit their novelty for feminist ends, the
analysis of the basic stories reveals the inherent patriarchal norms they imbibe, and that
readers and audiences bring to their interpretations. As we have already seen in relation
to language, the obstacle facing the woman writer is how to twist these established plots
to represent her perspective on the world.

Unconsciously, the programmer will categorize a new play as part of the in-group
or out-group and plays by women who write at a slant to the canon carry the risk of being
categorized as non-standard. The relativity of the processes of evaluation has been described by Barbara Herrnstein Smith, who notes that art is judged not only in comparison to art but also in relation to what works of its kind should achieve. She says: “Of particular significance for the value of “works of art” and “literature” is the interactive relation between the classification of an entity and the functions it is expected or desired to perform.”

Typically, plays are expected to have linear logic, clear character progression and a discernible narrative thread driving the action. They are expected to have focussed plots and conclusive endings that provide resolution. However, it is clear that many forms are driven by poetic rather than causal logic, communities of experience rather than individualised progression and weave a pattern from images and emotional fragments rather than a single story. When playwrights abandon normative narrative expectations, their abnormal plots defy traditional tests of consistency because of their lack of precedence, which results in their classification as non-canonical rather than authoritative, unorthodox rather than normative, and particular rather than universal.

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473 Herrnstein Smith, *Contingencies of Value*, 32.
CHAPTER FOUR: #WAKINGTHEFEMINISTS – THE AFTERMATH

Introduction

The impact of #WakingTheFeminists spread beyond Ireland and beyond theatre, as international theatre organisations and other artforms nationally began to seriously reconsider gender inequality as an urgent issue. Within the Irish theatre industry, one of its most lasting legacies was the “Eight Guiding Principles for Gender Equality” published by the Abbey Theatre in 2016 and the subsequent launch of Gender Equality Policies by ten leading theatre organisations in 2018. While the previous chapters have shown how biases infiltrate the reading and evaluation processes, this chapter will examine the steps theatres have taken to address their biased programming in light of the knowledge that bias begins with the reading process. This chapter will, therefore, interrogate the details of those policies in relation to their approach to play programming before turning to the plays themselves in order to explore the dominant programming trends among Irish companies and to identify the extent to which the kinds of plays shown have changed in comparison to the previous period. In November 2020, on the five-year anniversary of the first #WakingTheFeminists’ Public Meeting, 5 Years On: Gender in Irish Theatre – An Interim View was published. A follow-up to Gender Counts, the report focusses on how companies have fared with tackling gender inequality in the years since its publication through analysis of self-reported statistics for productions presented in 2017, 2018 and 2019. In keeping with 5 Years On, this chapter will focus more closely
on the new plays premiered by companies in the Republic of Ireland during this period. The reasoning for excluding plays premiered in 2016 is twofold. Firstly, these funded theatre companies would have committed to their programmes for 2016 before the announcement of the “Waking the Nation” programme and the consequent emergence of #WakingTheFeminists. Secondly, although #WakingTheFeminists would have prompted companies to review their 2016 programmes and make adjustments with gender inequality in mind, the capacity to make changes to planned plays and personnel would have been limited. It is also important to note that, while the Abbey’s “Eight Guiding Principles for Gender Equality” was published in 2016, the remaining organisations’ gender equality policies were not published until 2018. Although the impact of these policies may not be fully assessed for some years, the aim here is to show some of the trends emerging in the immediate aftermath of #WakingTheFeminists, when the pressure to improve gender equality is greatest. My focus throughout this thesis has been on original plays written in a traditional way by a playwright. While changes in the Abbey’s programming have made it necessary that I provide some commentary on productions that have been adapted from either novels, films, or personal testimonies, my focus remains with new plays written by women. The reason for this focus is because I am seeking to address the biases that occur when a programmer assesses a new script, however I will delve further into the way biases infiltrate programming decisions for other kinds of work in the Conclusion.

Before turning to the gender equality policies adopted by Irish theatres, it is important to first review the objectives and recommendations of #WakingTheFeminists’ campaign. Originally published on 8 November 2015, the campaign’s objectives for every publicly funded theatre organisation were:

1. A sustained policy for inclusion with action plan and measurable results
2. Equal championing and advancement of women artists
3. Economic parity for all working in the theatre\textsuperscript{474} 

#WakingTheFeminists also published a list of nine recommendations for organisations, including recommending the introduction of gender equality policies and diversity policies with implementation plans; commitments to gender-balanced board membership; publication of gender statistics; commitments to re-evaluations, equity assurances, and public transparency of pay scales; a re-evaluation of the varied implications of parenthood and introductions of practical support for parents; the introduction of robust sexual harassment and dignity at work policies for both staff and contract workers; and a commitment to good quality unconscious bias training with a person trained and responsible for monitoring gender balance and diversity in every department.\textsuperscript{475} The recommendations were followed by the distribution of “Lian’s List” at the One Thing More event at the Abbey Theatre on 14 November 2016. The List is a compilation of seventy practical actions to combat sexism and unconscious bias in theatre, with steps 17 – 22 illustrating the practical nature of the advice:

17 Make a commitment. Quotas and targets may work for you.
18 Make it public.
19 Stick to it.
20 Set a time frame for progress on gender equality.
21 Make it public.
22 Celebrate and mark when it happens.\textsuperscript{476}

These steps reflect the evidence that having targets, deadlines, and an awareness that people are watching make commitments to gender equality more likely to be adhered to.

Both #WakingTheFeminists’ recommendations and “Lian’s List” reflect the awareness

within behavioural economics that systemic change is required to address the biases that cause gender inequality.

At the end of *What Works*, Iris Bohnet outlines her advice for organisations seeking to address gender inequality using the acronym DESIGN: D is for data, E is for experiment, SIGN is for signpost. She says: “collect data to understand whether and why there is gender inequality; experiment with what might close gender gaps; and informed by behavioural insights to create signposts, nudge behaviour toward more equality [my emphasis].”477 The first step, producing the data, is critically important for convincing organisations that the problem exists and for quantifying its severity. This is why #WakingTheFeminists feature having an action plan and measurable results as one of their core aims, and why throughout their recommendations, the emphasis on ongoing monitoring of gender balance and publication of statistics is so important. While #WakingTheFeminists’ research conclusively presented data that showed there was gender inequality in Irish theatre, the need to continue to monitor and measure these metrics is critical to ensuring that gender equality remains a serious consideration in programming. Less well understood in Irish theatre are the reasons why this inequality has come about, and the previous chapters in this thesis contribute to the ongoing exploration of its causes. The road to gender equality does not have a clear map. Sexism is a deeply engrained and highly adaptive cultural belief that can manifest in unexpected ways even after attempts to address it. Experimenting with organisational designs to combat it is therefore necessary to adapt to its new forms and to ensure its eradication from the workplace. Such experimentation only works when based on the findings of the quantitative and qualitative data and part of this experimentation should be a continual process of reviewing current methods to measure their effectiveness and impact, checking

for any unexpected consequences, and making the appropriate changes. Bohnet mentions that throwing money at the problem is often a costly solution that does not always yield favourable results; rather, experimenting creatively with behavioural interventions can have less expensive, but more effective results. Finally, the design of signposts to monitor or change behaviour should be creative and flexible to accommodate fluctuating methods of funding, generating, and making theatre. Signposts can include interventions such as the curtain at orchestra auditions that focusses the selection committee on the player’s performance. The curtain is a signpost that directs decision-makers towards the actual attribute they want to assess – the performance – and away from other attributes, such as gender, race, age, or impairments, that might cloud their judgement.

Abbey Theatre

The Abbey’s “Eight Guiding Principles for Gender Equality,” published on 30 August 2016, contain a commitment to putting gender equality as a stated goal within the theatre’s mission and memorandum and articles of association, to making gender equality a permanent board agenda item, to achieve gender equality in all areas of the artistic programme over five-year periods and to report on progress on these initiatives in their Annual Reports. They also included a commitment to gender equality in the play commissioning process, but significantly did not include any commitments addressing the problems of bias in play selection. Providing an example for the rest of the Irish theatre sector, the eight principles in full were:

1. Update the mission statement and other key documents within the Abbey Theatre to specifically reflect a goal of gender equality. The key documents include:
   a. The Mission Statement of the Abbey Theatre
   b. The Memorandum and Articles of Association

478 Bohnet uses the example of how deworming programmes for children in developing countries had a greater impact on attendance and performance in school than scholarships. Bohnet, What Works, 185.
2. To put gender equality as a key board priority and responsibility, meaning that gender equality will become a permanent board agenda item with immediate effect.

3. The Abbey Theatre commits to continued gender equality at board level.

4. To achieve gender equality in all areas of the artistic programme over the next five years by presenting more work led by female theatre practitioners. Gender equality will be measured in five year periods starting from 2017. There will be ongoing flexibility within programming for a given year but over the course of each five year period the artistic programme will achieve gender balance.

5. The Abbey Theatre commits to gender equality in the play commissioning process.

6. The Abbey Theatre undertakes to deliver a workshop programme for all employees, examining issues of gender equality in the workplace.

7. With a view to raising awareness of the career opportunities for women in theatre, the Abbey Theatre will create an annual programme for second level students within the National Theatre.

8. Progress made by our gender equality initiatives will be specifically reported in the Abbey Theatre’s Annual Report. This recommendation will ensure that both the focus and progress on achieving gender equality at the national theatre will be documented and detailed within the Annual Report thus ensuring that there is clear visibility on this journey. The 2016 Annual Report will contain the first update on gender equality.  

The publication of these principles was welcomed by #WakingTheFeminists and the theatre community more broadly and has had a significant impact on increasing the number of plays by women being programmed at the theatre. However, the absence of specific and concrete actions addressing pay, play selection and equitable access to bigger stages, longer runs and revivals raises concerns about the reliance of the theatre on the good will of its Artistic Director(s) for the implementation of these principles. The principles also included a commitment to deliver a workshop programme for employees on gender equality. While implicit bias workshops may be useful for educating people

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about how bias works, their effectiveness in actually addressing the issue is unproven. Iris Bohnet summarises that “at this point we have to conclude that diversity training either does not work or, at the very least, that we do not have enough evidence to know whether and under what conditions it does any good.” In fact, Iris Bohnet cautions against their use in isolation of systemic change due to the tendency to view the workshop as the solution to the issue which results in a failure to change behaviour. She says: “Diversity training programs may lead to moral licensing, where people respond to having done something good by doing more of something bad.” Jennifer Eberhardt agrees with Bohnet, describing the effect of bias training in terms of the “‘some of my best friends are black hall pass.’ If you’ve stored enough credit in the bank of equality, you’re entitled to behave badly.” This human tendency to view an isolated action as evidence of changed behaviour means that bias training can lead people to believe that, by completing the training, they have addressed inequality and their confidence in being “cured” of bias may manifest in displays of even more strongly biased behaviour than before. These principles did, however, show the national theatre in a leadership position on the issue of gender equality and provided a benchmark from which other companies could derive their own policies.

The principles were published during an interim period at the Abbey when Graham McLaren and Neil Murray were already in place as directors designate, but before Fiach Mac Conghail’s departure the following October. McLaren and Murray’s tenure at the Abbey saw a radical change in the production model, with greater numbers of productions on both the Abbey and Peacock stages annually facilitated by increased co-productions with both Irish and international theatre companies. The co-producing

model saw the Abbey expand its programming for the first time to include forms of theatre beyond the literary play. This move was facilitated by a restructuring of the Literary Department into a New Works Department and was reflected in the changes made to the theatre’s mission during this time. Under the previous directorship, the theatre’s mission stated its policy of “placing the writer and theatre-maker at the heart of all that we do.” However, during McLaren and Murray’s tenure, the mission committed to producing “ambitious, courageous and new theatre in all its forms.” The embrace of devised, post-dramatic and site-specific theatre offered opportunities to artists who never would have had their work welcomed by the Abbey previously, however, alongside a notable reduction in revivals of plays from the Irish canon and a dramatic increase in adaptations, the move was seen not as inclusive, but as a departure from the playwright-led theatre for which the Abbey was known. Many of the initiatives to broaden access to the theatre, including through the creation of the New Works Department, increased touring, and the introduction of initiatives such as Free First Previews, 5x5, 20 for 20 and Young Curators were admirable parts of the theatre’s response to the criticism it faced following the announcement of the Waking The Nation programme. However, the reduction in the status of the playwright that resulted from some of these measures may have been an unintended consequence of #WakingTheFeminists’ criticism: the answer the Abbey provided to the problem of the scarcity of female

487 20 for 20 brought twenty theatre makers to see twenty shows at the Abbey in 2019 for free. Annual Review 2018, 23.
488 Young Curators gave five 18 - 25 year olds the opportunity to programme a two-week festival at the Abbey. Annual Review 2018, 20.
playwrights in their programme was to radically reduce the number of the playwrights they employed. If women are only occupying one tenth of the pie, and the size of the pie is reduced dramatically, then the percentage of female playwrights in comparison to men should show dramatic improvements.

During these years the number of playwrights under commission dropped significantly. This was in part due to the extended vacancy for the position of literary manager between Jessica Traynor’s departure as Literary Manager at the end of 2016 and Louise Stephens’ hiring as Dramaturg in September 2018. In the final three years of Mac Conghail’s directorship the numbers of playwrights under commission rose from sixteen in 2014, to twenty-six in 2015 and twenty-nine in 2016. In the annual reports for Murray and McLaren’s tenure, the number of commissions are not detailed, however in a conversation with the author on 23 July 2020, Dramaturg, Louise Stephens said that everything she had commissioned to that point had been programmed. The Abbey produced twenty-one new plays (including new adaptations) between 2017 and 2019. Even if all of these were commissions (and they were not), this would still represent a 70% reduction in comparison with the previous three-year period. Although the expansion of the theatre’s remit offered opportunities to those who had never dreamed of accessing it, the cost of that expansion has had a major impact on the livelihoods of Ireland-based playwrights. Within the Irish theatre ecology, no other organisation had the financial resources to commission widely. In the past, Abbey commissions might have been produced by other independent theatre companies, so when the Abbey’s commissioning capacity is reduced, or removed, the entire system is affected.

The reality of the new programming model can be traced through the increased number of co-productions and adaptations being produced by the theatre. Of the Abbey’s eight in-house productions between 2017 and 2019, five (62.5%) were by women and
three (37.5%) were by men. Three (60%) of the five mainstage plays were by women. Further detail on new plays at the Abbey during this period is listed in Table 6.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Play</th>
<th>Playwright</th>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Stage</th>
<th>Credit</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2018</td>
<td>Porcelain</td>
<td>Margaret Perry</td>
<td>New play</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Peacock</td>
<td>An Abbey Theatre production.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2019</td>
<td>This Beautiful Village</td>
<td>Lisa Tierney-Keogh</td>
<td>New play</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Abbey</td>
<td>An Abbey Theatre production.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In their self-reported figures published in #WakingTheFeminists’ 5 Years On, the Abbey reported an increase in women in the role of ‘Creator’ from 17% between 2006 and 2015 to 35% between 2017 and 2019. However, this somewhat masks the position of playwrights at the theatre. Between 2017 and 2019 the Abbey self-produced three new plays: Porcelain by Margaret Perry (Peacock, 2018), This Beautiful Village by Lisa Tierney Keogh (Abbey, 2019) and Last Orders at the Dockside by Dermot Bolger (Abbey, 2019). This represents one-third of the number of new plays produced in the previous three-year period between 2014 and 2016. Yet, when plays by women are isolated for both periods, the numbers are the same: two new plays by women between 2014 and 2016, and two new plays by women between 2017 and 2019. The loss to male playwrights of new plays is significant (reducing from seven new plays to one), yet women are not seeing the gains.

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
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<th>Playwright</th>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Stage</th>
<th>Credit</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2017</td>
<td>Two Pints</td>
<td>Roddy Doyle (Roddy Doyle)</td>
<td>New adaptation</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Site-Specific</td>
<td>An Abbey Theatre production.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2018</td>
<td>The Unmanageable Sisters</td>
<td>Deirdre Kinahan (Michel Tremblay)</td>
<td>New adaptation</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Abbey</td>
<td>An Abbey Theatre production.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Between 2014 and 2016, the Abbey self-produced three new adaptations, one (33%) by a woman and two (67%) by men.\(^{490}\) This rose to five between 2017 and 2019, with three (60%) by women and two (40%) by men (see table 7). The increase in adaptations by women marks a notable difference to the previous administration which had exclusively programmed adaptations by men until Marina Carr’s *Anna Karenina* in 2016.\(^{491}\)

The Abbey co-produced a further thirteen new plays (including new adaptations) during this period, six of which were written by women, six by men, and one was created by ANU, which is led by a male-female artistic directorship. Of the four mainstage co-productions, two were by women, one was by a man, and one was by ANU. A breakdown of co-productions of new plays is provided in Table 8.


\(^{491}\) Carr’s adaptation of Tolstoy’s novel was part of the attempt to redress the imbalance of the “Waking the Nation” programme, which ran from January to September, with more productions by women towards the end of the year. Carmel Winters’ *The Remains of Maisie Duggan* was also produced in the latter part of 2016.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Play</th>
<th>Playwright</th>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Stage</th>
<th>Credit</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2017</td>
<td>Fire Below (A War of Words)</td>
<td>Owen McCafferty</td>
<td>New play</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Peacock</td>
<td>Co-produced by the Abbey Theatre and the Lyric Theatre, Belfast in association with the Belfast International Arts Festival.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2018</td>
<td>Not a Funny Word</td>
<td>Tara Flynn</td>
<td>New play</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>The Complex</td>
<td>Co-produced by THISISPOPBABY and the Abbey Theatre.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2019</td>
<td>Dublin Will Show You How</td>
<td>Tracy Martin</td>
<td>New play</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Peacock</td>
<td>Co-produced by the Abbey Theatre and The Complex.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Of the seven new plays co-produced by the Abbey, three (43%) were by women and four (57%) were by men. Only one of these co-productions was presented on the main stage, Dylan Coburn Gray’s Citysong. Tara Flynn’s Not A Funny Word was presented off-site at The Complex, with the remaining five plays appearing in the Peacock space.

The Abbey co-produced a further six new adaptations, bringing the total number of new plays co-produced by the national theatre to thirteen, which means 62% of the total number of new plays and new adaptations produced between 2017 and 2019 were co-produced. A full list of the new adaptations the Abbey co-produced is provided in Table 9.

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492 Although there was a work-in-progress presentation in the Peacock, the final production was not shown at the national theatre. The play went on to play for one night each at The Everyman, Cork, The Mick Lally Theatre, Galway and the City of Dublin Working Men’s Club.
### Table 9. Abbey Theatre co-productions: new adaptations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Play</th>
<th>Playwright</th>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Stage</th>
<th>Credit</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2017</td>
<td>Room</td>
<td>Emma Donoghue (Emma Donoghue)</td>
<td>New adaptation</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Abbey</td>
<td>Co-produced by the Theatre Royal Stratford East and the Abbey Theatre in association with National Theatre of Scotland and Covent Garden Productions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2018</td>
<td>The Patient Gloria</td>
<td>Gina Moxley (Shostrom’s Three Approaches to Psychotherapy)</td>
<td>New adaptation</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Peacock</td>
<td>Co-produced by the Abbey Theatre and Gina Moxley in association with Pan Pan Theatre.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Of these six new adaptations co-produced by the Abbey, three (50%) were by women, two (33%) were by men and one (17%) was by ANU who have a male-female artistic leadership. Both of the two main stage productions were by women, one of the three Peacock productions was by a woman, while ANU’s *The Lost O’Casey* was a promenade performance that moved through and beyond the theatre building. The final major adaptation presented at the Abbey during this period was the adaptation of Louise O’Neill’s *Asking For It*, however this show was not an Abbey production, but produced in association with the theatre.

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Adaptations include those plays that were inspired by or are modern interpretations of classics as well as more traditional adaptations. Even when the resultant play is radically different form the starting point (e.g. *It Was Easy (In The End)*), the fact that the play was commissioned and marketed as an adaptation has implications for how the work is understood and referenced by both programmers and spectators alike.
While these tables focus on the new work presented at the Abbey, in *5 Years On*, they report the average percentage of women in the role of Creator for all productions between 2017 and 2019 at 35%. So, although they achieved a slightly higher representation of women in their new work (twelve out of twenty-two plays, or 54.5%), their productions of existing plays still favoured revivals of men’s work over women’s which brought the overall percentage down.

That the impact of the new programming policy was being seriously felt by the sector is evident from a letter from over 300 artists published in the Irish Times in 2019 lamenting the fact that there were “five and a half months without an Ireland-based actor directly employed by the Abbey” and that “Not a single national-theatre contract has been given to an Irish-based set designer on the main stage in either 2017 or 2018.” This letter prompted a further reaction from writer, Jimmy Murphy, the following week that confronted the Abbey’s disengagement with playwrights; he wrote that “confusion now abounds as to whether the national theatre has a functioning literary department that engages with playwrights to discuss commissioning new works.” From Murphy’s perspective “All that appears to exist is an email address to an ”ideas” department where everyone is asked to submit scripts anonymously and from where they will be assessed

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494 Murphy et al., *5 Years On*, 5.
495 Deirdre Falvey, “‘The situation in which the Irish theatre community finds itself is now critical’: More than 300 Irish theatre practitioners pen an open letter of concern to Minister Josepha Madigan regarding the Abbey Theatre,” *The Irish Times*, 8 January 2019, ProQuest.
496 Jimmy Murphy, ”Abbey forgets its remit is to hold a mirror up to society: If any cultural institution in Ireland has an obligation and is best suited to re-examine our past, it’s the Abbey,” *The Irish Times*, 15 January 2019, ProQuest.
by a committee; none of whom, it appears, has any significant experience in developing playwriting at a standard demanded by a national theatre.”

While Murphy’s latter comment may appear disrespectful, the inexperience of the new directors was commented on a year before, when Emer O’Kelly remarked that they were “unfamiliar with the Irish scene,” “have no experience of running a building-based theatre, or of literary theatre,” and “have never had to contend with the duty of re-staging a national archive, and being required by statute to nurture new talent, whether writing, directing or acting.”

The picture that began to emerge through the complaints of artists was that “the management's strategy of offering diversity to their own audiences” had actually caused “less diversity, and reduced employment, not more.”

Reflecting on the controversy a year later, Fintan O’Toole articulated that at the core of the issues emerging from the Abbey was the loss of its fundamental status as a literary theatre: “Why was the Abbey ever in any meaningful sense "world-class"? The answer is simple enough - the writers. For almost all of its existence, what people in Ireland and around the world primarily associated with the Abbey was the literary play.”

Such radical change at the theatre was inevitably going to bring disappointments for those who had been part of its old guard, but for the theatre community to unite in such large numbers to express their worry about this new direction signalled serious issues. Amidst these complaints, the diminishment of the literary play from the theatre’s stages may have helped to massage its statistics with respect to gender equality. It would seem that having been criticised for a lack of female playwrights in the 2016 programme, the theatre stopped programming plays altogether.

497 Murphy, "Abbey forgets its remit is to hold a mirror up to society."
498 Emer O’Kelly, "Theatre of dreams set to become reality: 2017 may prove to be a revolutionary year for Irish theatre," Sunday Independent, 1 January 2017, ProQuest.
499 Falvey, “'The situation in which the Irish theatre community finds itself is now critical': More than 300 Irish theatre practitioners pen an open letter of concern to Minister Josepha Madigan regarding the Abbey Theatre.”
500 Fintan O’Toole, "Asking the National Question: If the Abbey is not a world-class theatre, is not interested in the canon of Irish drama and has been worsening the conditions for most theatre practitioners, what is it for?", The Irish Times, 15 June 2019, ProQuest.
Adaptations such as Kinahan’s *The Unmanageable Sisters* with its cast of fifteen women makes the presence of women highly visible onstage, giving the impression of radical change. However, the numbers cited in *5 Years On* reveal a different story. This is why continuing to count is of critical importance to ensuring that gender equality is a long-term commitment.

**Fishamble: The New Play Company**

Following the publication of the Abbey’s “Eight Guiding Principles,” ten Irish theatre organisations launched their gender equality policies at an event in The Lir in July 2018. Along with the Abbey Theatre were Cork Midsummer Festival, The Corn Exchange, Druid, Dublin Theatre Festival, The Everyman Theatre, Fishamble: The New Play Company, The Gate Theatre, The Lir Academy and Rough Magic. In keeping with the primary impulse of my argument, I will analyse the policies of Druid, Fishamble and Rough Magic in greater detail as these are the theatre companies who have literary managers or dramaturgs on staff and are actively reading new plays on an ongoing basis.

Fishamble’s *Gender Policy Document* provides some interesting examples of active interventions into decision-making procedures. In their artistic programme, Fishamble commits to “gender balance in the production of new work by male and female writers, balanced over a five-year period.”\(^{501}\) While they do not “propose gender equality with regard to written parts” they do recognize that “the budget, scale, touring, audience ambition, publication and individual number of performances for each production are relevant factors with regard to gender equality.”\(^{502}\) Some of their most thoughtful and interesting interventions are specifically for their multi-writer projects in which they

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commit to “consider gender equality in creating a diverse programme.” Here their strategies for achieving this aim include:

a) Taking expert advice in the field during preparation;

b) Communicating clearly with artists and the public about how diversity is to be achieved;

c) Including elements in the process, such as bias assessment, considered use of language in project descriptions, ‘see it to be it’ practical initiatives, and gender neutral elements when appropriate;

d) Checking programme choices before public announcements;

e) Post project assessment to inform future projects.

Not only are the inclusion of bias assessment, considered language, ‘see it to be it’ initiatives and post project assessment evidence that the team at Fishamble have been paying attention to bias research, but they have also appointed responsibility for overseeing their implication to a specific member of staff – the Literary Manager. Communicating with artists and the public about how diversity is to be achieved, post project assessment and appointing a member of staff to make and track changes and report the results not only makes accountability central to the process but also makes the effectiveness of such measures easy to calibrate. The only issue, and it is a significant one, is that the measures outlined above are only applicable to one programme, and not to the larger productions of plays by a single author that offer the most important opportunities for playwrights to develop their craft as well as representing the most significant financial investment of the company.

The impact of this policy can be traced in both their premiered and touring productions since #WakingTheFeminists. The number of new plays by women produced

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by Fishamble rose from two between 2014 and 2016\textsuperscript{505} to three between 2017 and 2019.\textsuperscript{506}


\begin{table}
\begin{center}
\caption{Fishamble Playwrights by Gender 2014-2016 and 2017-2019} \\
\begin{tabular}{|c|c|c|}
\hline
 & Playwrights of New Plays & Playwrights of Touring Plays \\
\hline
 & Female & Male & Female & Male \\
\hline
2014 - 2016 & 2 & 5 & 0 & 4 \\
 & Rosaleen McDonagh & Colin Murphy (2 plays) & Pat Kinevane (3 plays) & Donal O’Kelly \\
 & Deirdre Kinahan & Gavin Kostick & & \\
 & & Donal O’Kelly & & \\
 & & Pat Kinevane & & \\
\hline
2017 - 2019 & 3 & 4 & 4 & 7 \\
 & Karen Cogan & Pat Kinevane & & \\
 & Eva O’Connor & & Colín Murphy & \\
 & Deirdre Kinahan & & Sebastian Barry & \\
 & & & Michael Patrick & \\
 & & & & Oisín Kearney \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\end{center}
\end{table}

Prior to #WakingTheFeminists, Fishamble had programmed just two new plays by women in the previous ten years: Abbie Spallen’s \textit{Strandline} in 2009 and Deirdre Kinahan’s \textit{Spinning} in 2014. They also co-produced Rosaleen McDonagh’s \textit{Mainstream} with Project Arts Centre in 2016, following a reading of the play during the 2014 Dublin Theatre Festival. Between 2017 and 2019, the number of new plays by women increased to three, while the company also took four plays by women on tour. Of these, Noni Stapleton’s \textit{Charolais} and Margaret McAuliffe’s \textit{The Humours of Bandon} were those chosen from the “Show In A Bag” initiative, self-produced plays that the company took on after they had already proven themselves at the Dublin Fringe Festival.\textsuperscript{507} Despite these increases, the company still fell short of parity among the authors of plays both 

\textsuperscript{505} I am assuming here that Fishamble’s 2016 programme was already in place before the first #WakingTheFeminists meeting in November 2015.

\textsuperscript{506} Data extracted from a list of “33 Years of Fishamble” available on their website https://www.fishamble.com/archive.html.

\textsuperscript{507} Although Fishamble played a prominent role in the selection of plays for the scheme, and in providing dramaturgy by Gavin Kostick and mentoring for the artists throughout the rehearsal period, their financial investment during the scheme was minimal due to its mission to empower actors to self-produce their own work. When Fishamble then decides to tour one of the plays, their financial investment into the production is significant.
receiving premieres and going on tour. This is in part due to the company’s long-standing relationships with Pat Kinevane and Colin Murphy, with whom they have worked on multiple projects over a number of years. For *5 Years On*, Fishamble presented statistics for 2018 and 2019 only, reporting 34% women writers of full productions/tours (a combination of those figures I’ve represented above) and 57% women writers of other initiatives/commissions.\textsuperscript{508} This reflects the trend traced in their plays before #WakingTheFeminists in which parity is often evident in short play initiatives such as the *Tiny Plays* while the main programme of full-scale productions lags behind. It also reflects the effectiveness of their interventions for the schemes and the impact of the absence of such interventions for the main programme.

One recent initiative, launched in 2017, was “A Play for Ireland.” Partnering with six venues, Fishamble issued a call for submissions of ideas for one big ambitious play. From 370 submissions, each venue selected five plays to develop to a full draft. One play was then chosen from each venue and optioned by Fishamble. These six shortlisted plays were further developed through readings and discussions before a final draft was submitted. From the shortlist, *The Alternative* by Michael Patrick and Oisín Kearney was selected as A Play for Ireland. It was commissioned, developed, and produced by Fishamble and premiered during the 2019 Dublin Theatre Festival. Of the thirty ideas originally selected, fifteen were by women, twelve were by men and three were co-written, one by two female writers, one by two male, and one by a man and a woman. Of the six shortlisted plays, three were by women, two were by men, and one was by the all-male co-writing duo. Although the male duo won the final production with Fishamble, the company also committed to producing Caitríona Daly’s *Duck, Duck, Goose*, which premiered in 2021. The care that Fishamble took to ensure gender equality throughout

\textsuperscript{508} Murphy et al., *5 Years On*, 11.
the process is evident not only in their selections, but in the panels of guest directors, designers and judges employed to develop and evaluate the plays.\textsuperscript{509} This process makes clear the success of prioritising gender equality for a single programme element. However, the company have still not managed to achieve parity in their annual programmes and the challenge lies in transferring the learning from the delimited projects into their regular programming.

**Druid**

While Fishamble’s issues lie in transferring the success of this commissioning process to their regular programming, for Druid, the journey to parity is less straightforward. Druid’s gender equality policy begins by acknowledging that women have been underrepresented in Irish and global theatre and committing to addressing this inequity in a way that is sustainable for the company. It then says: “we must further recognise that we have financial, programming, and capacity constraints which mean that change will not be immediate but will be time-bound and sustainable.”\textsuperscript{510} Although such a statement may appear sensible, it raises concerns because of the history of organisations blaming their exclusion of plays by women from their repertoires on a perception of their relatively poor performance at the box office. The subsequent inclusion of a description of the canonical and social contexts for gender inequality reads like an apologia and raises doubts about the sincerity of the company’s commitment to changing their practice. However, the policy that follows contains well-researched and sound commitments that not only outline objectives for change but include the checks and balances that will make the achievement of those objectives tangible and measurable. Druid’s gender policy is

\textsuperscript{509} These included Annabelle Comyn, Oonagh Murphy, Lynne Parker, Maree Kearns, Niamh Lunny, Saileóg O’Halloran and Ruth Little.

\textsuperscript{510} Abbey Theatre et al., *Gender Equality in Practice in Irish Theatre: The Policies*, 10.
built on three pillars: gender neutrality, gender mainstreaming and gender equity. It explains that:

**Gender neutrality** means not being associated with either women or men and may refer to various factors such as concepts or style of language.

[....]

**Gender mainstreaming** requires the assessment of the implications for women and for men of any planned action, including policies or programmes, in all areas and at all levels.

[....]

**Gender equity** means fairness of treatment for women and men, by taking into account their different needs, cultural barriers and past and present discrimination against one gender grouping.\(^ {511}\)

The policy made a commitment to develop an Action Plan with clear measurables and timelines, which was published on their website in 2018. The published plan includes the company’s commitments under the three headings outlined above, and measurables with deadlines for each commitment listed. Of relevance to play selection are the commitment that “all new scripts will be subject to Blind Reading by a gender-balanced group.”\(^ {512}\) It also commits to a “5-year plan to examine work from the female canon with a view to full production.”\(^ {513}\) The initial stages of this plan included a series of readings of six plays by Irish and international women as well as a commitment to work with the Druid Academy and NUIG to promote the female canon through three masterclasses and one special event. They also “commit that over 50% of new commissions will be from female writers.”\(^ {514}\) Despite these firm commitments, the expression of caution and level of contextual

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\(^{511}\) Abbey Theatre et al., *Gender Equality in Practice in Irish Theatre: The Policies*, 11.


\(^{513}\) DRUID Gender Equity Policy - 2018 Action Plan.

\(^{514}\) DRUID Gender Equity Policy - 2018 Action Plan.
information within this document reflects the very slow start Druid showed in addressing gender equality following #WakingTheFeminists.

Druid’s record of producing plays by women was exposed as one of the worst among those studied by #WakingTheFeminists at 13%, only marginally beating the Gate’s 6% to avoid the bottom of the table.\textsuperscript{515} Their most recent production of a play by a woman before #WakingTheFeminists was the touring productions of Geraldine Aron’s \textit{My Brilliant Divorce} in 2009, which had been on the road since 2007. In 2016, they premiered Meadbh McHugh’s \textit{Helen and I}, which ran for one week in Galway and for four nights in Dublin and was not revived. When the company then announced an entirely male-authored programme for 2017, there were vociferous objections online. Druid’s apologetic start to their gender policy was in part a response to the criticism for that programme which included plays by Mark O’Rowe, Eugene McCabe, Martin McDonagh and Samuel Beckett. Hynes responded to the criticism by saying,

I fully accept and continue to affirm my responsibility as an artistic leader, to work towards gender equality in Druid and in the wider theatre profession. That does not mean I believe that it is logical to expect that any one programme at any one time can have exact gender parity, much less any one speciality in any one programme. [….] Real change will not be immediate nor can it be a simple matter of ticking individual boxes; it is not simple statistics.\textsuperscript{516}

Although this was not a great start for the company post-#WakingTheFeminists, in 2018 they premiered two plays by women: Sonya Kelly’s \textit{Furniture} and Cristín Kehoe’s \textit{Shelter}. These plays were performed in rep in Galway in the summer of 2018 in a programming decision that reflects the distrust of the potential for female playwrights to attract audiences. In 2019, they premiered \textit{The Beacon} by Nancy Harris. And 2020 saw

\textsuperscript{515} Donohue et al, \textit{Gender Counts}, 33.
their much-awaited production of five one-act plays by Lady Gregory. These plays brought Druid’s average percentage of women writers up to 30% for 2017 – 2019. With no plays by women programmed at all in 2017, the 40% and 50% representation of women in 2018 and 2019 programmes was not enough to bring their average to parity for the three-year period but shows that dramatic improvement can in fact be made quickly.

Rough Magic Theatre Company

According to 5 Years On, Rough Magic have the best representation of female Creators between 2017 and 2019; however, at 37% this remains far from parity. The introduction to Rough Magic’s gender equality policy states that “Gender equality is in Rough Magic’s bones […] What began as an instinctive ethos has been refined over time into a considered position that this policy will further establish.”517 The policy lists nine commitments that begin with the promise to continue to “produce plays that feature challenging roles for women,” a concern that appears foremost throughout the document.518 None of the commitments address the commissioning or play selection processes directly. However, they do include their self-reported statistics for 2016, 2017 and 2018, which show that they employed high numbers of women as directors (av. 70%), set (av. 93%), lighting (av. 87%) and costume designers (av. 100%), but not in the areas of sound design (av. 19%) or as authors (av. 31%). In 5 Years On, their average percentage of female Creators for 2017 – 2019 is reported at 37%, so despite having strong female representation in other areas, they still lag below parity when it comes to plays.519 Unlike Druid, they do not have clear milestones or timelines stated within the document. The effect of the absence of a stated policy of gender equality in their

517 Abbey Theatre et al., Gender Equality in Practice in Irish Theatre: The Policies, 34.
518 Abbey Theatre et al., Gender Equality in Practice in Irish Theatre: The Policies, 35.
519 Murphy et al., 5 Years On, 9.
commissioning process can be seen by the absence of a premiere of a new play by a woman in their repertoire since #WakingTheFeminists\textsuperscript{520} (for context, there were two world premieres of plays by men, Shane Mac an Bhaird’s \textit{Melt} in 2017 and Fergal McElherron’s \textit{Cleft} in 2019).

Of the ten organisations whose gender equality policies were launched in 2018, only the training academy, The Lir, included a dedicated section for “Facilitating Non-Binary Students.”\textsuperscript{521} Each of the other policies have been written using binary terms which, although perhaps revealing a generational difference in gender expression as well as reflecting the gendered composition of Irish theatre at that time, clearly exposes a blind spot which should be addressed sooner rather than later. Many organisations have chosen to highlight gender-blind casting as a solution to the visibility of women on Irish stages. Although this does address the issue of employment inequality for actors and would improve the overall gender balance on individual productions, it brings both possibilities and limitations for the kinds of roles women can play. Furthermore, if gender-blind casting is not accompanied by a resolution to the problem of gendered authorship inequality, it could be seen as an attempt to paper over the absence of women’s plays by making women’s bodies more visible on stage.

During the lockdowns imposed because of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, organisations including Fishamble and the Abbey turned to short play initiatives to fill the gap in their programming. In each iteration of these productions, the gender of the playwrights was balanced, which proves the effectiveness of their strategies for their short play initiatives. Their strategy for achieving gender equality for full productions is unclear. The effect of this unclarity can be traced in the figures published by

\textsuperscript{520} Their last world premiere of a play by a woman was Hillary Fannin’s \textit{Famished Castle} in 2015. \\
\textsuperscript{521} Abbey Theatre et al., \textit{Gender Equality in Practice in Irish Theatre: The Policies}, 31.
#WakingTheFeminists in which none of these companies had achieved parity, or close to it, among creators since 2016. Between 2017 and 2019, for the role of Creator, the Abbey Theatre reported women at 35%, Druid had women at 30% and Rough Magic had 37%. Fishamble, only reporting on 2018 and 2019, had female writers of full productions and tours at 34%. The problem with the five-year target for parity is the ability for companies to postpone addressing the issue until a later date. Unlike the short play initiatives when the entire programme is settled at the same time, the five-year programming terms traverses not only multiple programmes but may traverse changes of staffing, producing climates, and even pandemics. What this means is that the decision to commit to gender equality must be made repeatedly, which increases the likelihood of failure. For companies like the Abbey, whose programme for 2019 for instance, included eleven mainstage productions (six by men, four by women, and one by a mixed gender creative team), a commitment to gender equality in a single year seems both achievable and more manageable. While this may be more difficult to achieve for smaller companies, with only a handful of new productions a year, even reducing the timeline to every two years would make the aggregate target clearer. Advocating for smaller, interim goals, Bohnet explains that “Setting sub-goals has been found to have positive effects by increasing a sense of accomplishment, interest in a task, and persistence in achieving it.” She also observes that “variety is more likely to emerge when people make multiple decisions simultaneously rather than sequentially.” The benefits of grouping decision-making is already in use in helping people to eat healthier: most nutritionists now advocate for meal-planning and advance prepping to avoid people reaching for the take-

522 A mixture of self-produced work (*Drama at Inish - Is Life Worth Living?*, *Last Orders at the Dockside, The Country Girls, The Unmanageable Sisters, This Beautiful Village, Two Pints*) co-productions (*Citysong, It Was Easy (In The End), The Hunger*) and presentations (*Glasgow Girls, Ulster American*).


away menu after a long day of work. The same principle applies: choosing a healthy food option every day, three times a day is hard, but having the food already prepared makes eating healthier easier. While quotas are essential tools in the fight against gender equality, Bohnet points out that they are “not behavioral interventions.” Quotas can be seen as ideals to aim for, rather than necessary baselines, and in the absence of policing can easily be ignored. Despite these issues, these policies represent an important step forward in ensuring that a commitment to gender equality is engrained within the structure of these organisations. What remains to be seen is whether these policies have affected the kinds of plays being programmed, and in the second part of this chapter, I will explore the major trends arising in women’s plays from this period.

The Plays

Because of a combination of Arts Council policies, new administration at the Abbey Theatre and the long-term effects of reduced funding during the recession, the number of co-productions increased dramatically since 2016, making it difficult to separate the Abbey’s programme from that of other companies. Beyond the Abbey, the co-producing climate not only blurred the boundaries between the work of companies, but created greater fluidity between artforms as the Irish theatre industry saw greater collaborations between companies known for traditional plays and those specializing in dance, music, opera and site-specific work. The move towards co-productions that fused previously separate forms had a knock-on effect for the status of the playwright and the notion of sole-authorship in general which, although artistically exciting, could prove problematic for measuring gender representation. In the second part of this chapter, I will therefore look at the common threads running through the programmes of the Abbey, Fishamble, and Druid. As Rough Magic did not premiere any new plays by women during this period, they do not feature in this analysis. Focussing on the dominant trends of the new plays by women premiered during this period reveals how the biases of programmers converge around particular topics which inform the language, themes, and form of many of these plays. In total, there were sixteen new plays by women produced by these companies and their partners between 2017 and 2019.

526 See for example, Rough Magic’s collaboration with Opera Theatre Company on The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny (2014), Fishamble’s collaboration with CoisCéim and Crash Ensemble on Invitation to a Journey (2016), Landmark’s collaboration with Emma Martin on Arlington (2016), and ANU’s work with the Abbey Theatre on The Lost O’Casey (2018) and with the Gate Theatre on Faultline (2019).

527 I’m defining new plays as sole-authored scripts, including new adaptations, which were submitted to the theatre in advance of the start of rehearsals. The sixteen plays under consideration are: Asking For It, Drip Feed, Dublin Will Show You How, Furniture, Josephine K and the Algorithms, Maz and Bricks, Not A Funny Word, Porcelain, Rathmines Road, Room, Shelter, The Beacon, The Country Girls, The Patient Gloria, The Unmanageable Sisters, This Beautiful Village. Although Grace Dyas was commissioned by the Abbey to write It Was Easy (In The End), due to the devised nature of THEATREclub’s process, the
As a group, the most striking feature is the extent to which these plays articulate and dramatize the central concerns of contemporary feminism as it was demonstrated in protests, courtrooms and on social media during these years. Of the sixteen plays under consideration, eight (50%) contained incidents of sexual violence or discussion of the #MeToo movement, five (31%) are concerned with or referenced abortion or the Repeal The Eighth campaign, while five (31%) were also concerned with or referenced LGBTQ+ lives. Six (38%) of the sixteen plays featured songs and music prominently in a formal development that echoed the #WakingTheFeminists events themselves. The main body of this section will examine how these dominant themes manifest in plays both at the Abbey and beyond. It is important, however, to note that the other dominant social movement during these years, Black Lives Matter, was only referenced in one play, Lisa Tierney-Keogh’s *This Beautiful Village*. This is despite the fact that while #WakingTheFeminists focus was on the underrepresentation of women in Irish theatre, it also impacted the industry’s awareness of the underrepresentation of various other minority groups. At the first public meeting, and on numerous occasions afterwards, Rosaleen McDonagh reminded #WakingTheFeminists not to repeat the mistakes of the patriarchal model by ensuring to include disabled women and women from marginalised backgrounds: “As feminists in the arts, let’s not replicate male behaviour by excluding certain categories of women.”528 Also at that first meeting, playwright Mary Duffin recounted her experience of racism when trying to get her work on: “I wanted to do plays with Black people in, but I was told, it’s been done.”529 In Ireland, the Black Lives Matter

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movement gained traction not only in relation to the Black, Asian and other immigrant communities, but to the native Irish Traveller community also. Although the Black Lives Matter movement has received comparatively little notice in Ireland in comparison to the feminist and LGBTQ+ movements, the fact that in this three-year period there was no play premiered by writer from a minority racial or ethnic background is concerning.\footnote{Although my focus in this chapter has been on plays produced between 2017 and 2019, it is important to point out two plays that bookend this timeline. In 2016, Fishamble produced Rosaleen McDonagh’s \textit{Mainstream}, a play that confronts the discrimination, sexual harassment and abuse faced by disabled people, gay people, and Travellers. In 2021, the Abbey Theatre produced their first ever play by a Traveller, McDonagh’s \textit{Walls and Windows}, on the main stage.} None of the Gender Equality Policies analysed above explicitly mention race and of the ten organizations who published gender policies only the Gate Theatre and The Lir mention race or ethnicity, the Gate in relation to equal pay, and the The Lir in relation to bullying. Ireland lags behind other countries when it comes to considerations of racial discrimination and without concerted efforts to address systemic racial bias alongside gender bias, it is difficult to see the future progression of women playwrights of colour or of Traveller women.

It is important to also note the three (19\%) outliers that fail to conform to any recognisable pattern. Stacey Gregg’s \textit{Josephine K and the Algorithms} (Abbey Theatre) was a contemporary adaptation of Kafka’s \textit{The Trial}, that explored the impact of the internet and algorithms on the life of the individual. Cristín Kehoe’s \textit{Shelter} (Druid) was concerned with a group of homeless people squatting in the former site of the Jacob’s Biscuit Factory which was seized by members of the Irish Volunteers during the 1916 Rising. Edna O’Brien’s \textit{The Country Girls} (Abbey Theatre) is a coming-of-age narrative that follows the lives of two teenage girls in the West of Ireland and then Dublin in the 1950s. Although this play does represent aspects of the power dynamics at play within sexual relationships, it remains ambiguous about the morality of these interactions and
therefore feels tonally different to the other plays confronting issues related to #MeToo. As my purpose here is to uncover the biases influencing programming decisions through an analysis of the dominant trends emerging from those programmes, I will not discuss these plays in further detail. However, it is interesting to note briefly how they are rooted by canonical literary and historical references; despite being outliers, their connections to familiar narratives are strong.

Because of the importance of the positioning of companies within the co-producing partnerships in the play analysis that follows, I will indicate the producing relationships in parenthesis following mention of each play, using the shorthand “and” to denote a co-producing credit and “with” to denote the “in association with” credit. While the co-producing credit indicates an equal relationship between partners, financially, if not artistically, the “in association with” credit usually indicates the contribution of in-kind support to the production, often in the form of venue-hire, marketing services, and publicity support.

#MeToo

One of the most dominant trends in plays at the Abbey and beyond during this period was the thematic prevalence of sexual violence, including rape, sexual assault, child sexual abuse, incest, trafficking and sexual harassment.531 At the final #WakingTheFeminists’ public meeting, “One Thing More,” Joanna Crawley issued a caution to Irish theatre, based on her perception of the mistakes the theatre community in Poland made when they decided to “defend the female cause.”532 Crawley says this “political, mad, male-dominated theatre” did so by “showing graphicly how brutalised

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532 Joanna Crawley, “First half of ONE THING MORE #WakingTheFeminists Abbey Theatre 14.11.16,” 14 November 2016, video, 0:30:30, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GX_ZSayp1tQ.
and victimised the women are [...] Actresses in Poland became experts in being spectacularly, dramatically, hurt."  

Crawley concluded her depiction of the flaw in Polish theatre’s embrace of feminism with her hope that Irish theatre would avoid a similar fate: “Repeating the gesture of abuse doesn’t erase it. [...] mainstreaming this practice of staged violence against women is one thing that I would like to spare Irish theatre.” These words were spoken on the Abbey’s mainstage where over the following two years, major productions of Emma Donoghue’s *Room* (Theatre Royal Stratford East and Abbey Theatre with National Theatre of Scotland and Covent Garden Productions), Marina Carr’s *On Raftery’s Hill* (Abbey Theatre) and Meadhbh McHugh and Annabelle Comyn’s adaptation of Louise O’Neill’s *Asking For It* (Landmark and The Everyman with Abbey Theatre and Cork Midsummer Festival), would place sexual violence against women centre-stage. While the number of plays by women premiered during Fiach Mac Conghail’s tenure were small, the female characters within those plays were both dynamic and powerful, even if they operated within male-defined worlds. In contrast, during McLaren and Murray’s tenure, the volume of plays exploring trauma and abuse was staggering, resulting in a series of plays on both stages of the theatre portraying female characters who were victims of male violence. The dominance of this trend was in part a reaction to the social moment of #MeToo, Repeal the Eighth, and #WakingTheFeminists and was reflected not only in the programmes of the Abbey, but in those of their producing partners also. In her analysis of British productions staged between 2016 and 2019, Elaine Aston notices that “what crashes through the performances case-studied in the chapters is a wave of feminist-political anger.”

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533 Joanna Crawley, “First half of ONE THING MORE #WakingTheFeminists Abbey Theatre 14.11.16,” 14 November 2016, video, 0:30:30, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GX_ZSayp1tQ.
534 Joanna Crawley, “First half of ONE THING MORE #WakingTheFeminists Abbey Theatre 14.11.16,” 14 November 2016, video, 0:30:30, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GX_ZSayp1tQ.
similar trend in Irish theatre can then be seen as part of a broader impetus within theatre and within the global re-ignition of the feminist movement during these years.

The resurgence of feminism in the 2010s reached its zenith with the explosion of stories of everyday sexism and sexual violence that ignited social media channels under the hashtag #MeToo. While The ‘me too.’ Movement was founded by a black woman, Tarana Burke, in 2006, it was not until 15 October 2017 when a white actress, Alyssa Milano @Alyssa_Milano, shared a message on Twitter saying, “If you’ve been sexually harassed or assaulted, write ‘me too’ as a reply to this tweet,” that it was brought to global attention. Burke’s organisation is a “movement against sexual violence, led by survivors of sexual violence.”

Burke herself has described it as

an iteration of a decades-old fight to end sexual violence, but what makes it so different, powerful and effective is that it speaks to the needs of all survivors. It addresses sexual violence as a systemic issue — and it explains how other systemic issues, such as anti-black racism, capitalism and classism, poverty and housing impact survivors.

The global scale of the #MeToo movement and the sheer numbers of women who described encounters of sexual harassment and violence that encompassed a spectrum from everyday catcalling to rape and murder made the systemic nature of such harassment impossible to ignore and brought a consciousness of rape culture to the fore. Concerned with the systemic nature of sexual violence, The ‘me too.’ Movement defines rape culture as

the systems, beliefs, and behaviors rooted in patriarchy that allow for its [rape’s] prevalence in society. Remember that rape culture goes beyond an act of sexual violence—it can also be subtle and live in the ways we

536 Milano inadvertently used the phrase “me too” without knowing of Burke’s work which was only acknowledged after being called out online. The pair have since worked together to advance the cause of the organisation jointly.


think, speak and act that ultimately undermine our autonomy and consent.\textsuperscript{539}

Elsewhere it has been described as emerging from “a society where violence is seen as sexy and sexuality as violent.”\textsuperscript{540} It is “a culture where we are inundated, in different ways, by the idea that male aggression and violence toward women is acceptable and often inevitable.”\textsuperscript{541} What the millions of tweets and Facebook posts using the hashtag, #MeToo, made evident was the frequency, scale and social acceptance of sexual violence towards women in workplaces, on the street and in a variety of public settings. As Elaine Aston explains, “The phatic ‘me too’ establishes that what the speakers have in ‘common’ is the injustice of an abusive system of masculinist power.”\textsuperscript{542} This shift from an individual, if not isolated, experience to collective iterations of the spectrum of sexual violence was facilitated by the connective power of social media that created a marked difference from the consciousness-raising movements of the previous decades. Women across the globe\textsuperscript{543} were now making connections between their experiences in a variety of contexts and, aided by a theoretical understanding of the systemic nature of misogyny and sexual violence, were mapping the phenomenon publicly for the first time.

Stories of sexism and harassment both in the workplace and on the street were an important part of #WakingTheFeminists from the very beginning. At the International Women’s Day meeting in 2016, Kate Ferris described the harassment female technicians are subjected to, Sonya Kelly gave humorous tips on how to avoid harassing people, while Una Mullally gave an impassioned speech driven by the violent assault of her

\textsuperscript{540} Emilie Buchwald, Pamela R. Fletcher Bush, and Martha Roth, \textit{Transforming a Rape Culture}, rev. ed. (Minneapolis, Minn: Milkweed Editions, 2005), xi.
\textsuperscript{542} Aston, \textit{Restaging Feminisms}, 63.
\textsuperscript{543} While the movement reached across continents, the most visible and salient testimonies were those of white women in the Global North.
roommate the previous weekend. While these testimonies began to lift the lid on women’s experiences in misogynistic environments, it was not until the #MeToo movement that women began to name their abusers and attempt to force them to account for their actions.

In Ireland, the #MeToo movement emerged in the context of years of silence-breaking surrounding abuses of power in religious and state-run institutions. On 27 October 2017, twelve days after Milano posted the first #MeToo message, seven Irish theatre organisations issued a joint statement in response to #MeToo allegations levelled against Harvey Weinstein in the US (first aired in The New York Times on 5 October) and Max Stafford Clark in the UK (reported in The Guardian on 20 October).544 The same evening, Grace Dyas published a Tumblr post about her experience of sexism and harassment from the former Director of the Gate Theatre, Michael Colgan. In it Dyas described an incident at the Dublin Theatre Festival launch the previous year in which Colgan told her: “You’ve lost so much weight, I’d almost have sex with you.”545 When Dyas confronted him about the inappropriateness of his comments, Colgan rose to his feet: “She’s a pig, she’s a pig, I’d never ever, ever want to have sex with her” he said. He was very angry. He screamed and shouted more. “I wouldn’t say that about that woman she’s a big woman I would never say that about a big woman.”546 Dyas’ post was actually the fulfilment of a promise made at the first #WakingTheFeminists’ meeting, when Dyas said, “I’m making a pledge here right now that I will hold people to account for misogyny, for bias, for inequality.”547 Deliberately placing her unwillingness to put up with Colgan’s misogyny as a direct result of #WakingTheFeminists, Dyas wrote: “It

544 The statement was signed by Graham McLaren & Neil Murray from the Abbey Theatre, Garry Hynes from Druid Theatre, Kris Nelson from the Dublin Fringe Festival, Willie White from Dublin Theatre Festival, Selina Cartmell from the Gate Theatre, Cian O’Brien from Project Arts Centre and Lynne Parker from Rough Magic Theatre Company.
546 Dyas, “I’ve been thinking about Michael Colgan a lot lately...”.
wasn’t the same anymore. I couldn’t accept those comments anymore. Wow, #WTF might not have changed Michael, but it has changed me.”

Her post prompted a flurry of support online under the hashtag #MeTooMC and incited a number of other women to come forward with their stories. Among those was Ciara Elizabeth Smyth, a former Casting and Production Assistant at the Gate, who also worked as Company Manager for a touring production of *The Importance of Being Earnest*. In testimony published on Dyas’ blog she described the constant sexual harassment, physical intimidation, and emotional manipulation she endured while working there. She detailed how, during auditions in front of two prominent Irish actors and the play’s director, Colgan had “walloped [her] on the ass.” She said “It caught me off guard and [the] force of the slap caused me to stumble forward […] I checked later that day and Michael had slapped me so hard it had left a red mark on my skin.” The level of public pressure created by #WakingTheFeminists had fostered a sense of urgency that any scandal relating to issues of gender inequality be dealt with swiftly and in November, the Gate Theatre commissioned an independent review into the allegations. The findings of that review were published in a report by the reviewer Gaye Cunningham on 1 March 2018, which found that Colgan “has a case to answer in respect to dignity at work issues, abuse of power and inappropriate behaviours.” However, as Colgan had already retired and was no longer an employee of the organisation, there was little action the theatre could take against him. Ciara Elizabeth Smyth subsequently lodged a complaint with the High Court in May 2018 claiming damages from the Gate for alleged

548 Dyas, “I’ve been thinking about Michael Colgan a lot lately...”.
550 Smith, “Through the Gate: Ciara Elizabeth Smyth & Ruth Gordon experiences with Michael Colgan.”
“assault and battery, including sexual assault.”\textsuperscript{552} It was reported in January 2019 that the claim was settled out of court.\textsuperscript{553} On 21 March 2018, just three weeks after Gaye Cunningham found Colgan had a case to answer, the Irish Theatre Institute presented a draft Code of Behaviour for the theatre sector that dealt with bullying, harassment, and abuse in the workplace. This discussion document was subsequently ratified by the theatre sector at an event at Project Arts Centre on 31 October 2018. Amid the backdrop of the #MeToo movement, which was impacting working practices in the sector, the programming of plays confronting the topic of sexual harassment in their content can be considered as bold and timely but also, dangerous.

While Dyas, Smyth and others were revealing the prevalence of sexual harassment offstage, on Irish stages, the space created for women after #WakingTheFeminists provided an opportunity to articulate the reality of women’s experiences of sexual violence. A review of the work by women produced on Irish stages during these years reveals a preoccupation with trauma, particularly from sexual abuse, that resonates with the #MeToo moment. The concept of a continuum of sexual violence ranging on a scale from inappropriate comments to rape, was reflected throughout the new work at the Abbey Theatre where the everyday nature of sexual harassment infiltrated much of the programme. #MeToo, as a cultural phenomenon, pervades the most mundane social encounters, as evidenced in \textit{This Beautiful Village} (Abbey Theatre) when Dara says: “Paul Me Too’d Grace.”\textsuperscript{554} The incident Dara refers to occurred when Paul spilled wine on Grace and proceeded to wipe her chest without her permission. The issue of consent is also reflected in the treatment of the eponymous character in Gina

\textsuperscript{552} Mark Tighe, "Colgan PA lifts curtain on Gate culture with sex assault case," \textit{The Sunday Times}, 5 May 2018, ProQuest.
\textsuperscript{553} Mark Tighe, "Colgan's PA settles with Gate: Colgan PA in Gate settlement," \textit{The Sunday Times}, 1 January 2019, ProQuest.
Moxley’s *The Patient Gloria* (Abbey Theatre and Gina Moxley with Pan Pan), who participated in a series of filmed psychotherapy sessions designed for educational purposes. Moxley tells us that Gloria “was fairly surprised a year or so later to see her interview with Dr Perls on TV and then to learn that the films were going to be shown in full in cinemas.”

Gloria’s consent for the film’s commercial distribution was never sought, however in Moxley’s play this is shown to be a consequence of a culture that saw women as objects for men’s control. In a section titled “Dickologue,” Moxley says: “The world is awash with unasked-for dicks. I have a lifetime of dicks I never asked to see.” Her litany of moments of non-consensual sexual exposure includes “The dick I put my hand on by mistake in the cinema. Or was put into my hand I should say. I was around eleven.”

The prevalence of what Moxley calls the “Dick at the Ritz” is evident from its repetition in Deirdre Kinahan’s adaptation, *The Unmanageable Sisters* (Abbey Theatre), where Marie recounts her recent visit to the cinema:

> “Well, all of a sudden, doesn’t this smelly auld lech in a trench coat sit down beside me and he starts sliding his hand over my knee so he does. Well, it took me a minute to realise that it wasn’t an accident and I nearly died so I did. I stood up, there and then, took a swing of me handbag and smashed him right in his ugly mug so I did!”

The more serious end of the spectrum of such non-consensual interactions is explored in Tracy Martin’s *Dublin Will Show You How* (Abbey and The Complex) in which the

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558 The play was created from “a concept by Vanessa Fielding, Artistic Director of The Complex, and inspired by workshops with women from the north inner city of Dublin as part of the Browbeating Project, a collaboration between the Abbey Theatre and The Complex.” "Dublin Will Show You How," accessed 30 April 2021, https://www.thecomplex.ie/test-events-page. Tracy Martin. Martin “attended a number of meetings and workshops with women from the inner city. These meetings were invaluable in informing the writing, giving me permission to hear stories that would otherwise be impossible to access.”2019 Annual Review, Abbey Theatre (2020), https://www.abbeytheatre.ie/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/AbbeyTheatre2019AnnualReview.pdf. Phil Kingston described how: “Tracy listened to their lives. She turned their experiences into a specific story, without being specific about who had told them. Because even though philosophically you sometimes you have to create fiction to tell a truth more deeply, practically it is still dangerous for many of our collaborators to be identified.” “Dublin Will Show You How: theatrical tales of inner-city survival,” RTÉ Culture, updated Tuesday, 9 April
combination of flattery and threats characteristic of coercive control is dramatized when Shane forces his partner Marie into the sex trade. His control manifests through a mixture of intimidation, degradation, threats of murder, and professions of love: “It’s not forever. Just until we raise a bit of money. I love you Marie, you know that. You’re the only one who can do this for me.” The combined effect of these various non-consensual encounters reflects the continuum of harassment articulated by the #MeToo movement and shows how micro-aggressions contribute to what South African artist Nondumiso Msimanga describes as the “female fear factory.” She writes that “In a world where rape is normalized, the work rape does in the manufacture of female fear is economical and invisible.” Part of the work these plays are doing is to expose the invisible workings of the rape culture and reveal them as part of a system of oppression operating throughout women’s lives.

The routine nature of non-consensual sexual encounters, intimidation and sexual harassment emerges through the repetition of linguistic phrases that were part of the cultural zeitgeist of the #MeToo moment. One of the galvanising moments of that movement in Ireland was what became known as the “Belfast Rape Trial,” in which a young woman accused Irish rugby players, Paddy Jackson and Stuart Olding, of raping her at a party in 2016. Two other men were also tried for exposure and perverting the course of justice. The accused were all found not guilty, prompting thousands to attend

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559 Tracy Martin, Dublin Will Show You How, February 2019.
561 The case was tried during the Six Nations rugby tournament during which the Irish rugby captain, Rory Best, attended to provide a character witness. The accused were all found not guilty. In text messages read out during the trial, the woman responded to friends encouraging her to report the crime that she was “not going up against Ulster rugby.” Susan McKay, ”How the ‘rugby rape trial’ divided Ireland,” The Guardian, 4 December 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/dec/04/rugby-rape-trial-ireland-belfast-case.
#IBelieveHer rallies in Cork, Dublin, Waterford, and Galway as well as in Belfast. The question of belief is addressed in the final lines of *Asking For It* (Landmark and The Everyman in association with Abbey Theatre and Cork Midsummer Festival), as Emma pleads with her family internally, “I want you to say you believe me. Do you believe me? Did you ever believe me?” The programming of the play, which also deals with the gang-rape of a girl by the town’s local football stars, just three months after the Belfast trial made its association with these protests explicit. However, *Asking For It* was not the only play that resonated with the Belfast trial. WhatsApp messages between the accused submitted as evidence in that trial had an enormous effect on the lexicon of gang-rape, which was reiterated throughout these plays on the Abbey stages. Susan McKay reported on the content of these messages for *The Guardian*:

[Stuart Olding] boasted: “There was a bit of spit-roasting going on last night fellas.” Jackson said: “There was a lot of spit roast last night.”

[...]

On Wednesday, McIlroy continued boasting on WhatsApp: “Spitroasted a bird with Jacko. Roasted her. Another on Tuesday.”

The term, “spit-roast” emerges during an exchange about porn and youth culture in *This Beautiful Village* (Abbey), where the characters indirectly reference the Belfast trial:

PHILIP: Spit-roast. That’s what all the young-fellas at work do be banging on about.

MAGGIE: That’s an awful term. Young people have no self-respect, talking about gang bang orgies and What’s Apping about spit-roasting girls. It’s a bloody disgrace.

Although Philip and Maggie speak about spit-roasting with disgust, the term emerges again in the defiant voice of Gina in *The Patient Gloria* (Abbey and Moxley with Pan

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563 McKay, “How the ‘rugby rape trial’ divided Ireland.”
564 Tierney-Keogh, *This Beautiful Village*, 58.
Pan): “As soon as they learn to suck their own fucking dicks and cut the woman out of
the spit-roasts and fuck each other, the better.” Linguistically as well as thematically,
these plays were echoing the cultural zeitgeist and resonating with the major trials that
were consuming the national discourse.

The dilemma faced by women when weighing the impact of reporting sexual
assault was the focus of Deirdre Kinahan’s Rathmines Road (Fishamble: The New Play
Company and Abbey Theatre). Premiering just a few weeks after Dr. Christine Blasey
Ford’s testimony about her attempted rape by US Supreme Court nominee Judge Brett
Kavanaugh, Kinahan’s play explores the reasons why women don’t talk about rape. In a
sequence in which Sandra imagines speaking out, she explains to her husband why she
didn’t tell her parents:

I couldn’t
I could never tell, Ray.
I could never tell anyone ever.
You need to understand that.
I hope you understand that.
Because…
Because I couldn’t bring it home.
Bring that home… here.

Sandra is also goaded by the wife of her rapist about how admitting it now will affect her
marriage: “He’ll never look at you in the same way.” In the end, Sandra decides not to
speak out:

I can’t do it.
I can’t.
It will destroy everything.
I will destroy everything if I…
[....]
I can’t…
If I lose Ray, I’ll lose me.

567 Kinahan, Rathmines Road, 89.
And I don’t have the strength. I don’t have the strength to start again.\(^{568}\)

The burden of testifying on the survivor is not only felt within the moment but places ongoing weight on their personal relationships. What Sandra’s concerns illustrate is what Sara Ahmed describes as the stickiness of disgust, which affects not only Sandra’s relationships with her husband and family, but those of the rapist with his wife and family also.\(^{569}\) Ahmed writes that “stickiness depends on histories of contact that have already impressed on the surface of an object”\(^{570}\) and that “what sticks ‘shows us’ where the object has travelled through what it has gathered onto its surface, gatherings that become a part of the object, and call into question its integrity as an object.”\(^{571}\) Sandra’s fear is that Ray will feel disgust towards her, because of the residue the historical rape has left on her body, a trope common in the depictions of sexual violations in multiple plays.

Throughout these plays the residues of a Catholic association of defilement with uncleanness emerges both through language and through acts of washing. The act of washing as a cleanser of violence and familial transgression re-emerges in *The Patient Gloria*, as Moxley remembers “my friend scrubbing her vulva with a Brillo Pad after her brothers abused her.”\(^{572}\) Cleanliness is seen as an obsession of the victim of sexual abuse which is fuelled by the dirtiness associated with the sexually available woman. This link between uncleanness and female sexuality appears linguistically in the graffiti that has prompted the action of *This Beautiful Village* (Abbey): “Jessica is a filthy fucking

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\(^{568}\) Kinahan, *Rathmines Road*, 98.

\(^{569}\) *Meat* by Gillian Greer explores the link between rape, feelings of disgust, and food, which Ahmed describes as “the very ‘stuff’ of disgust.” Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), 83. The play sees a writer visit her ex-boyfriend in his restaurant in order to confront him about the night he raped her and inform him that she’s writing about it in her forthcoming book. The conversation they have about the incident is punctuated by the offering, refusal, gorging and vomiting of food. *Meat* premiered at Theatre503 in London in 2020.


slut,”573 a phrase echoed by Tara Flynn’s opening of *Not A Funny Word* (THISISPOPBABY and Abbey Theatre) when she introduces herself: “Hi, everyone! I’m Tara and I’m a filthy slut!”574 The effect of rape culture is made audible through language that associates female sexual promiscuity with soiling; its omnipresence evident through the linguistic echoes that recur throughout these plays. What emerges from an analysis of these productions as a group is the effect of many voices engaged in one conversation; rape and rape culture seemed to be the dominant discourse of Irish theatre.

Although the first decades of the twenty-first century produced a flurry of reports and inquiries into rape and sexual abuse in the Catholic Church and in Irish state-run institutions, these plays bring the rape narrative into everyday life and portray rapists not as evil monsters, but as ordinary men living ordinary lives. The staging of these plays is a defiant rejection of the culture of silence that had been enforced upon them and therefore resists any simple narrative of victimization of women. In her study of how the British justice system fails women, Helena Kennedy QC says that the #MeToo phenomenon was about “women having had enough and actually refusing to be victims.”575 Of the plays dealing with sexual harassment and sexual violence before #MeToo, legal or state intervention is entirely absent from *On Raftery’s Hill, Pumpgirl, Lagan, B for Baby* and *Shibboleth* while *Perve* and *Scorch* show the police pursuing false claims of abuse. The post #MeToo plays, however, focus on the failures of the state, police, and society to believe survivors of rape and to prosecute rapists. The depictions of sexual violence in the plays shift from testimony to critique of the inadequacy of the social, community and legal response to the crime. The shift in focus towards the flaws in legal and social responses to sexual violence chimes with a broader backlash to post-

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feminism and the neoliberal effort to “replace the concept of structural oppression with
the concept of personal responsibility.”576 In Maz and Bricks (Fishamble), Maz reveals
she was raped many times by her mother’s boyfriend before finding herself pregnant on
her seventeenth birthday. She went to her mother and remembers “she spat on me when
I told her.”577 Although she doesn’t iterate the lack of intervention of social services in
what is a case of statutory rape, she tells Bricks: “I’m just sick of being angry. At my
mam, at him. At this country. Because they all fucked me over and somehow made me
feel like I deserved it.”578 In Rathmines Road (Fishamble and Abbey), Sandra’s decision
not to go to the police is an attempt to save her family from the pain and shame. She tells
Ray: “Of course I didn’t tell them. I might have had to go to the police. And they might
have called to the house. How could I do that to Mammy?”579 In Dublin Will Show You
How (Abbey and The Complex), the leniency of the prison system is relied upon when
Shane threatens Marie as he dresses her before pimping her:

I promise you that if you don’t do this for me I will kill you. I will stamp
on your head til your fucking eyes pop out. Yeah then I’ll do time. But
not much. Six to eight year probably. Six years rent free, smacked out
of my brain. Then I’ll get out and I’ll call straight over to your Ma’s.
And I’ll kill her. I promise you that Marie. Fuck me that looks gorgeous
babe!580

In Asking For It, Emma does go to the Gardaí, and although the DPP takes on her case,
it is the weight of social pressure in the form of her father being demoted in work, her
brother losing his relationship, the priest preaching “about not judging others, about being
‘innocent until proven guilty,’”581 a source from the Garda station telling a journalist “that

576 Rebecca Stringer, Knowing Victims: Feminism, Agency and Victim Politics in Neoliberal Times,
578 O’Connor, Maz and Bricks, 51.
579 Kinahan, Rathmines Road, 57.
580 Martin, Dublin Will Show You How.
581 McHugh, Comyn, and O’Neill, Asking For It, 85.
the alleged victim was well known locally for her promiscuous behaviour," and former schoolfriends wearing t-shirts supporting the boys who raped her, that force her to withdraw her complaint. The failures of society, including the legal system, to support survivors from intimidation and public shaming by fairly prosecuting crimes of sexual violence is reiterated again and again.

The plays of this period of vociferous feminism were a strong reflection of the cultural zeitgeist in which women were, yet again, being forced to relive personal trauma for public consumption. This link to the broader feminist movement is salient to programming decisions for three reasons. Firstly, it made these plays topical. #MeToo brought the extent of sexual violence faced by women daily out of feminist communities and into the broader cultural consciousness. This gave a renewed relevance to these stories and created an appeal for them for large swathes of the general public. Secondly, through the sheer vastness of its reach #MeToo gave many men an insight into the lived experience of navigating the world in a woman’s body while offering everyone a perspective of the scale of the problem that allowed it to be viewed systemically and annihilating arguments that such incidents were exceptional. This meant that a programmer reading a script based on a narrative of sexual violence had immediate salient examples of such narratives that would resonate with the play before them. So, even if a programmer (of any gender) had no direct or recent experience of sexual violence, the salience of #MeToo would make the story crackle in a way that it might not have five years previously. As already discussed in Chapter One, plays that reference contemporary social narratives bring rich associations to their blends because of the salience of the topic within cultural consciousness. Thirdly, the narrative of rape is a canonical narrative and therefore has a grounding in theatre history that, for instance, a

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582 McHugh, Comyn, and O'Neill, * Asking For It, 70. 
play about female voyeurs does not.\textsuperscript{583} That rape has been a staple of the Western canon has been acknowledged by Lisa Fitzpatrick,\textsuperscript{584} who draws on the story of the Levite’s concubine from the Bible which demonstrates common literary and dramatic representational strategies that use rape and sexual violence to communicate an idea or message that may have little to do with rape \textit{per se}. These include the silencing of the victim’s voice, the erasure of her subjectivity, the use of her body as a site for the enactment of conflict between male protagonists, and the use of rape as a metaphor (for war, defeat, political oppression, colonization, and so on), that frequently displaces the ‘realness’ of rape as a lived, personal, embodied experience.\textsuperscript{585} Msimanga writes that, in contemporary theatre, “Focus on rape not as a metaphor is crucial. Focus on rape and what it does in our daily lives could reveal its invisible performativity.”\textsuperscript{586} In each of the plays under discussion here, the rape narrative is literal, not figurative, and what is under examination is the culture of rape itself, rather than its incidental placement within a political or social system. One of the complementary issues within this discussion is the corresponding state control of women’s bodies under the strict abortion laws of 1983–2018.

\textbf{Repeal the Eighth}

While #MeToo was the dominant global manifestation of feminism, the campaign to repeal the Eighth Amendment to the Constitution and therefore legalize abortion was its dominant Irish expression and was reflected in the plays of this period. The two issues of the prevalence of sexual violence and the ban on abortion are linked by the idea that women’s bodies are perceived as public property, subject to public use, abuse and

\textsuperscript{583} Jodi Gray’s \textit{Peep} was independently produced by its actors Alexandra Conlon and Emily Fox and premiered at Bewley’s Café Theatre in 2018.
\textsuperscript{584} Lisa Fitzpatrick, \textit{Rape on the Contemporary Stage} (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 15.
\textsuperscript{585} Fitzpatrick, \textit{Rape on the Contemporary Stage}, 2.
\textsuperscript{586} Msimanga, ““Bite the Bullet”: The Practice of Protest as a Coping Mechanism,” 37.
policing. The narrative threads emerging in response to the Repeal campaign form a continuum with those already discussed under the theme of #MeToo. Not only is the issue of abortion linked to that of rape through characters like Maz in Maz and Bricks (Fishamble), who needed an abortion as a result of rape, but the issue of the Eighth campaign was that of respecting women’s bodily integrity.

On 25 May 2018, the Irish people were called to vote on a referendum to remove the Eighth Amendment to the Constitution in which “The State acknowledges the right to life of the unborn and, with due regard to the equal right to life of the mother, guarantees in its laws to respect, and, as far as practicable, by its laws to defend and vindicate that right.” The referendum passed and the Thirty-Sixth Amendment was made to the Constitution: “Provision may be made by law for the regulation of termination of pregnancy.” The campaign to Repeal The Eighth relied heavily on the personal testimonies of women who had travelled abroad to terminate their pregnancies, lifting the taboo around the topic that kept many women silent. However, even before the Eighth Amendment was inserted into the Constitution in 1983, the history of censorship of talk about abortion can be traced to the 1950s when not only books that were deemed to be obscene were banned, but those that advocated for contraception and abortion also. Writing before the referendum in 2015, Ailbhe Smyth comments that

In Ireland, the very word ‘abortion’ is unspeakable, shunned as too shocking, shameful, stark – and true. Not only is abortion exiled so that it doesn’t happen here […] it has been banished form the discursive hubs of our society, including academe, the media, and the Dáil, and effectively paraphrased out of conceptual existence.

587 Eighth Amendment of the Constitution Act, (7 October 1983).
588 Thirty-Sixth Amendment of the Constitution Act, Irish Statute Book (18 September 2018).
589 The rights to travel outside the state for an abortion, and to obtain information about services available internationally, were made available by the thirteenth and fourteenth amendments to the Constitution in 1992.
Before Repeal, the dialogue around abortion was almost exclusively undertaken by politicians, the clergy and members of the legal profession; “the space for the personal testimony of women who had actually undergone the experience was never filled, not in public and frequently […] not even privately among family and friends.”\textsuperscript{592} Lifting the veil of secrecy helped to broaden the conversation to include not only women who had been raped or were carrying a foetus with fatal foetal abnormalities but those who sought abortion as a choice.

One of the campaign’s most visible manifestations, its Repeal the Eighth marches became important to the process of breaking this taboo and provides the unlikely setting for budding romance in Eva O’Connor’s \textit{Maz & Bricks} (Fishamble) as sparks fly between a pro-choice marcher and a young father fighting for access to his five-year old daughter. When Maz first meets Bricks on a train to the city centre, the inviolable nature of abortion is made clear as Bricks, commenting on her participation in the march, says: “The dirty A-word. I’d keep your voice down if I was you, there’s old people on this train, they might get offended.”\textsuperscript{593} Breaking the taboo, Maz responds with defiant sarcasm: “I love a good abortion so I do. Normally I have one in the morning over a nice strong espresso. Then later on around 3pm I’ll start to crave another. I have my last one whilst watching Netflix, just before I go to sleep.”\textsuperscript{594} Although Maz can now ironically critique the silence, it engulfed her when she had her own abortion: “I had to travel in secret to get it done, and for months afterwards I didn’t tell a soul, until I thought I was going to explode if I held it in any longer.”\textsuperscript{595} The importance of telling this story lies amid the historical ban not only on abortions, but on the distribution of information about abortion in Ireland.

\textsuperscript{592} Gráinne Griffin et al., \textit{It's a Yes!: How Together for Yes Repealed the Eighth and Transformed Irish Society} (Dublin: Orpen Press, 2019), 16.
\textsuperscript{593} O'Connor, \textit{Maz and Bricks}, 5.
\textsuperscript{594} O'Connor, \textit{Maz and Bricks}, 7.
\textsuperscript{595} O'Connor, \textit{Maz and Bricks}, 7.
between 1986 and 1995, a point referenced by Moxley in *The Patient Gloria*, who remembers “ads for women’s health clinics being blanked out of imported UK magazines.” Abortion was unmentionable, something to be whispered about with close friends, but never discussed openly, frankly, or publicly.

The taboo around talking about abortion is broken in Tara Flynn’s *Not A Funny Word* (THISISPOPBABY and Abbey) which tells Flynn’s personal story of her journey to have an abortion, motivated by choice. *Not a Funny Word* (THISISPOPBABY and Abbey) combines Flynn’s personal story with an ironic critique of the patriarchal structures of Irish society through comedy and songs. In the opening song, Tara calls on the figure of the pagan goddess Brigid as emblematic of the freedom and strength of Irish womanhood before the arrival of Catholicism which brought shame. She sings the chorus: “Shame, shame the state of our shame / Shame, shame’s, the way / Shame, shame the state of our shame / Shame, shame’s, the way.” Undermining the authority of St Patrick by reverting to the older mythology of Brigid, Flynn not only critiques patriarchal Catholicism but establishes a matriarchal heritage with which to transplant it. Towards the end of the play, she reminds the audience that Brigid “performed an abortion. A young nun in trouble came to her and Brigid made her womb empty again. They called it a miracle then.” Flynn intermingles her own story of finding herself pregnant despite taking the morning-after pill with ironic critiques of the Irish legislation that forces her to travel overseas to seek a termination. Adopting the voice of the Irish establishment, she admonishes herself and women like her who experience unwanted pregnancies: “If you’re not happy about your pregnancy, NOT YOU. I’m afraid you’ll have to turn that

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598 Flynn, *Not A Funny Word*.
599 Flynn, *Not A Funny Word*. 
frown upside down and get on with it. You’re pregnant now, that’s your fault, and you’re nowhere near as valuable as whatever’s inside you, you big oven.” The metaphorical oven is a scathing critique of the Eighth Amendment which was interpreted as valuing the life of the unborn child over the health of the mother. Flynn’s jocular, entertaining style of address embeds critique within the laughter: laughter is a primary mode of connection, and if you’re laughing at her criticism, then you must agree with it. Laughter also makes the less palatable emotions of anger, incredulity and frustration hidden beneath the joking exterior more agreeable, protecting the angry feminist from accusations of not having a sense of humour.

Popular iterations of the abortion storyline in soap operas, television and film drama, often approach the issue, in much the same way as the Irish government did, as a philosophical dilemma, rather than as a practical health service that many women undergo on a daily basis. What the Repeal campaign did was to reorient the discourse towards personal testimonies and away from the religious discussions of its morality. When Irish people have been subject to abortion narratives, it has typically been filtered through the lenses of British or American television. Its illegality means that we don’t often have abortion narratives set in Ireland and when we do, they involve a journey overseas. Unlike the mythological miracle, modern abortion mythology is shrouded in the language of a journey – “she travelled” or “she went to England.” The peculiarly Irish abortion story that emerged during the Repeal campaign was a classic inversion of “The Gift That Is Lost:” the protagonist receives an unwanted gift and goes on a quest to get rid of it. The quest element is particularly salient in Not a Funny Word as Flynn narrates the details of the trips to the pharmacy, the flight, the train, and her attempt to find information about overseas clinics in the idiom of a spy drama. Flynn says “I’m on my

600 Flynn, Not A Funny Word.
own. I am a secret agent. […] I cycle, like Michael Collins I cycle through the streets of Dublin to Dublin Castle. […] I meet the woman with the information. We speak in code. Nods and winks and euphemisms, both tense, both afraid to break first and say the word.”\textsuperscript{601} The woman tells her “Here’s a leaflet. Eat it when you’ve read it. Tell no one you were here.”\textsuperscript{602} The quest structure allows Flynn to mock the criminalisation of women seeking abortions in Ireland before 2018 while acknowledging the genuine difficulty in accessing information about abortion services. Canonically abortion has functioned as a tragedy in narratives, usually accompanied by a sense of guilt, shame, or in more modern iterations, as a creator of drama through debate. However, the plays premiered in the lead up to the referendum presented abortion as a normalised, mundane experience; neither a grand tragedy nor salacious plot point but an everyday occurrence made sad by its illegality.

That the Abbey co-produced the play is significant, however, they did not programme it in their own theatre. Not A Funny Word premiered at The Complex as part of “Where We Live,” a festival curated by THISSISPOPBABY as part of the St Patrick’s Festival. Although the play did some one-night stands in Cork and Galway, \textsuperscript{603} Flynn noted the trouble in finding venues that would programme the play in an interview in An Áit Eile on 5 May, “We’ve found this really difficult, even now trying to look for venues for Dublin, maybe even some unusual venues. People are not willing to book us…”\textsuperscript{604} The problems in securing touring venues reveal just how radical the play’s material was.

\textsuperscript{601} Flynn, Not A Funny Word. Collins famously used a high nelly bicycle to travel through Dublin in secret as part of the guerrilla warfare against the British forces between 1919 and 1921.
\textsuperscript{602} Flynn, Not A Funny Word.
\textsuperscript{603} It played one night each at The Everyman, Cork, The Mick Lally Theatre, Galway and the City of Dublin Working Men’s Club.
Flynn’s play and her work as an activist played an important role in normalising the perspective of abortion as a common consideration for many women which became the core strategy of the referendum campaign. However, it also manifests in other plays of this period. In Margaret Perry’s *Porcelain* (Abbey Theatre), it is the first thing London-based Hat thinks of when she realises that she’s pregnant: “I’ve been turning it over since I found out and I know what would be the sensible thing to do. Abortion. When we get home, obviously. Get on with our lives…”

Its ubiquity is also referenced in *The Patient Gloria* (Abbey and Moxley with Pan Pan), when Moxley remembers “being able to finally spend [her] abortion fund at menopause.”

The abortion fund was, of course, necessary because of the expense of having to travel abroad for the procedure and both Moxley’s play and Deirdre Kinahan’s *The Unmanageable Sisters* (Abbey) provide important historical reference points for the scale of the obstacles to making that journey when travel was less affordable and convenient than it is today. In *The Unmanageable Sisters*, when Lisa reveals to her friend Linda that she’s pregnant, their whispered conversation with Linda’s wayward Aunt Patsy is weighed by the enormity of the journey for a young woman in Dublin in the 1970s:

LISA:  
[…] I’ve thought about it already, but I don’t know where to go. There must be someone here, Patsy, I’ve never been out of Dublin…

PATSY:  
It’s safer in England, Lisa. Much safer than here. You’ll go to a proper hospital. I can help you arrange it if you like. A week from now it could be all over.

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The production of these plays is deeply tied to the broader feminist movement in Ireland and to the increased visibility of feminist issues facilitated by the fourth-wave’s use of social media and other internet sites to reach mass audiences. It also reveals the power of that movement to make stories mentioning abortions, if not about abortion, palatable to programmers. There can be little doubt that without the referendum, without the public spectacle of thousands of people marching for constitutional change, and without the many personal stories being shared online and in the media, this trend would not be emerging so prominently in theatre. Yet the prominence of this theme also suggests a reactionary impulse from these programmers and evidence of a latent fear that plays concerned with women’s stories must be dominating national conversations in order for them to attract an audience.

**LGBTQ+**

While the plays concerning #MeToo and Repeal the Eighth were mostly produced, if not by the Abbey, then at the Abbey, beyond its stages, companies were programming plays by women concerned with queer lives. The months leading to the Marriage Equality referendum in 2015 brought the issue of homophobia to the national conversation. Following an interview with drag queen, Panti Bliss, on an evening talk-show the nation’s broadcaster, RTÉ,

paid out a total of €85,000 to six people, including the journalists John Waters and Breda O’Brien of the Irish Times, David Quinn, head of the Iona Institute, and other institute members over a claim on the Saturday Night Show that they were homophobic.608

Panti (Rory O’Neill) was subsequently invited to the Abbey Theatre to give a Noble Call (an Irish tradition where people are called on to give a song, story or dance as

entertainment) following a performance of The Risen People. A video of Panti’s speech, which described the impact of homophobia on the everyday lives of queer people, went viral, resuscitating the cultural awareness of latent homophobic abuse. The impact of the overlapping sexism and homophobia that lesbian couples face is referenced in This Beautiful Village (Abbey), as Liz explains “I’m simply trying to live my life without constant discrimination or harassment. I’d like to do and go anywhere without having to worry about being called a slut, or a dyke, or a whore.”

However, it is beyond the Abbey that plays exploring queer lives emerge as a salient trend.

The tone of the Marriage Equality campaign in the months leading to the 2015 referendum was predominantly positive and, with its passing, the celebratory mood was evident through the national self-congratulation on the country’s liberalism. This, to a certain extent, masked the latent homophobia that continues to be experienced by the LGBTQ+ community in Ireland, particularly in rural areas. It also obscured the very recent history of exclusion, discrimination, and harassment faced by this community on a daily basis through the patronising attitude of the country’s benevolent granting of equal rights to its homosexual citizens. Amid this buoyant celebration of being the first country in the world to legalize gay marriage by popular vote, Karen Cogan’s Drip Feed (Fishamble and Soho) performs an act of censuring its audience with reminders of the reality of lesbian life in Ireland in the 1990s. The obscurity of the lesbian perspective within the gay movement in Ireland was due in part to its dominant focus on “service provision around the HIV/AIDS crisis and on rights-based activism (principally the campaign for the decriminalization of male homosexuality).”

Although many lesbian and bisexual women worked for the gay rights movement, its public face was male, a

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609 Tierney-Keogh, This Beautiful Village, 48.
610 Connolly and O’Toole, Documenting Irish Feminisms: The Second Wave, 172.
norm reflected in the dramatic canon which reveals a disproportionate focus on gay men. This has had a consequential effect on the level of academic criticism devoted to queer women, with Cathy Leeney noting the omission of Emma Donoghue from Patrick Lonergan’s *Theatre and Globalization* which limits its “discussion of the ‘queering’ of Irish stages to male homosexuality, and confines detailed discussions to homosexuality on the Abbey Theatre stage.”611 Janelle Reinelt has also commented on her “search for the missing lesbians” from the edited collection *Women in Irish Drama*, noting that “The Irish main stages have not fully explored the theme of women’s sexual love for women.”612 Oonagh Murphy also notes that despite the prominence of gay characters in Irish theatre, particularly since 1993, in the work of Gerry Stembridge, Loughlin Deegan, Brokentalkers and THISISPOPBABY, there is an “under-representation of certain kinds of female perspectives and representations, included cisgendered, transgendered, straight, lesbian and bisexual women.”613 Despite these omissions, there have been plays concerned with LGBTQI+ lives. Carmel Winters’ *Best Man*, Stacey Gregg’s *Scorch*, and Ailís Ni Riain’s *Desolate Heaven* have already been discussed in previous chapters, while Amy Conroy’s *I (Heart) Alice (Heart) I* played an important role in the referendum campaign.614 Presenting the lives of an elderly lesbian couple in a pseudo-documentary format, the play demonstrated Louise O’Shea’s point that “The power of re-enactment, of seeing images of your own reality being reflected outside of yourself is fundamental to any community of people, marginal or otherwise.”615 O’Shea quotes an interview with

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Carmel Winters who says “there is a ‘psychological infancy that you are detained in’ if you never get beyond your own immediate experience and see it reflected in a wider sense.” Prominent productions of plays foregrounding lesbian experience therefore become important not only in addressing the imbalance in representation but in reflecting the community back onto themselves.

Although the male-authored monologue play was an exceedingly well-worn format by the time of *Drip Feed’s* (Fishamble and Soho) premiere in 2018, the foregrounding of the lesbian body within the monologue play offered a fresh take on this tired form. The play’s lesbian perspective is established on the twelfth line of dialogue, as protagonist Brenda tells us that her ex, Olivia “wanted to see me when my head was between her legs […] I thought I was going to get lockjaw trying to do the deed with my mouth and make sultry eyes at the same time, I looked demented. But it did the trick.”

If a programmer reading this script had expected the usual routine of a journey containing drinking, drug-use and clubbing from a monologue, the perspective of the woman performing cunnilingus would quickly jolt them out of their preconceived notions. The play does go on to follow Brenda through a drink and drug-fuelled weekend, as she stalks Olivia, who has moved on with her new girlfriend, Sam. Both through its setting in Cork in the 1990s and through specific locations Brenda visits, including Sir Henry’s nightclub, the play bears strong resemblances to Raymond Scannell’s *Deep*. However, it is the distinctive articulation of lesbian autobiography that distinguishes the play from its male counterparts.

Homophobia infiltrates the play through Brenda’s observances of the absence of queer lives from popular culture and through the persistent harassment she has faced on

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the street that ranges from casual ignorance to violent attacks. As she imagines the home-life of her ex and her new lover she compares them to couple on a Super Valu ad, before quickly correcting herself: “You’d never see gay couples in an ad for picking up bread in the morning. But, if you did.” 618 The devastation of her inability to allow her imagination to run unencumbered by the public invisibility of gay relationships is followed by a series of public encounters focussed on her sexuality that reveal the social source of her internal censorship. Walking the city, she meets John Morley, “One of the lads from around who is obsessed with me going out with girls.” 619 He asks her a string of questions about her girlfriend: “And tell me this, will ye be life partners now? Will ye live together as if yer a married couple? Yer comforting to each other are ye? Must be good to share dresses and and and and moisturiser with each other.” 620 Although rude, insensitive and marked by the stereotypical representation of the lesbian couple as “sisters,” Morley’s inquisition is tame in comparison to the random harassment Olivia and Brenda experienced when out together in public. Brenda describes how men driving past will ask: “Heading home for some fun? I know what yer up to. Room for one more? Can I watch? Can we watch? Can we film it?” 621 The litany of abuses culminates with the skinny man who spat in her face. He shouted: “DYKES. And spat. I sniffed his spit as I wiped it away, couldn’t help it.” 622 The act of spitting is degrading, but the sniff that follows is grotesque. Brenda goes on to say “It was almost yellow, that’s not right. He’d be better off down the doctor’s like.” 623 Tactically, Brenda’s depiction of the colour and smell of the phlegm reverses the

618 Cogan, Drip Feed & The Half Of It, 8.
619 Cogan, Drip Feed & The Half Of It, 9.
620 Cogan, Drip Feed & The Half Of It, 9.
621 Cogan, Drip Feed & The Half Of It, 10.
622 Cogan, Drip Feed & The Half Of It, 10.
623 Cogan, Drip Feed & The Half Of It, 10.
object of degradation. Challenging Ahmed’s conception of the process of disgust moving from the powerful to the powerless, Lisa Fitzpatrick notes that in cases of rape,

women dramatists frequently subvert the phallocentric nature of this form of violence to mock and abject the rapist’s penis, denying it status as an overwhelming weapon, and thereby reclaiming some of the victim’s agency and sense of bodily integrity.\(^{624}\)

In a similar way, Brenda’s reversal of the object of disgust from herself, to the skinny man’s spit makes him grotesque, diseased, and repulsive. By making his spit the object of revulsion, Brenda undermines the violence of the action by exploiting the fact that it is he who has exposed himself, not her. Although the homophobia Brenda experiences on the street is appalling, it is her rejection from her family home that stings the most. On discovering her kissing Olivia in the street, Brenda’s sister Rita drags her home to tell her “Get out Brenda. I’m sorry. You’re not welcome. Get Out.”\(^{625}\)

Expulsion from the family home leaves Brenda rootless, yet constantly dreaming of escaping the repression of Catholic Ireland. The exiled queer subject is a familiar trope in Irish history as many gay and lesbian people fled abroad to escape the parochialism and intolerance of the country. This, however, is a trope associated with the past. The queer stories set in the present claim their turf in Irish society through characters who are home, rooted and attached.

Druid’s *Furniture* was one such story in which its characters are firmly located in specific environments. A play about chairs and the meanings people ascribe to them, its triptych structure begins in an art gallery where straight couple Alex and Ed argue about the utilitarian versus artistic merit of an Eileen Gray Bibendum chair. The following two scenes feature gay characters who, unlike *Drip Feed’s* Brenda, are anchored by their

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\(^{624}\) Fitzpatrick, *Rape on the Contemporary Stage*, 80.

\(^{625}\) Cogan, *Drip Feed & The Half Of It*, 13.
attachments to their homes and their furniture. The shift in the status of LGBTQ+ lives is evident in an interchange between Dee and Stef in the second play, “Lay-Z-Boy”:

DEE: Stef, the neighbours.
STEF: Fuck ‘em they’re all queer.
DEE: Yeah?
STEF: You’re in the hip district now Dee, even the straight ones are queer.
DEE: Yeah?
STEF: Yeah. You have to pass a special test to get in the building.626

The test includes questions about when Versace was shot, what Doris Day’s real name is, and to name the girls in Pussy Riot. Queer culture is not only cool, it’s mainstream. Although the tertiary play does reference the disparity in the treatment of gay people by the legal system, it is presented in historical terms. Michael tells his uncle:

Because of you I knew that there were laws in our own country that made criminals out of innocent people. And that’s why you went away. And that was unjust. And if I wanted to change it, for my own children, I should do something about it. So I studied law.627

The pastness of homophobia is referenced in another Druid play, Nancy Harris’ The Beacon (Druid and Gate Theatre); however, in this instance, the sentiment, although stated, is subsequently questioned.

COLM. Oh for fuck’s sake, Donal, it’s the twenty-first century, gays could not be more celebrated now, especially here – where they voted for you to get fucking married. People like you are not victims any more
DONAL. People like me?
COLM. I know you want to be, but you’re not. It’s over.

626 Sonya Kelly, Furniture, 2019.
627 Kelly, Furniture.
DONAL….Easy for you to say.\textsuperscript{628} 629

As with the #MeToo movement, the Marriage Equality referendum piqued interest in queer lives, creating space in which plays centring on queer stories can move into the mainstream. However, the comparatively fewer numbers of these plays, and the absence of lesbian stories being centralized at the national theatre (Liz’s partner is absent from \textit{This Beautiful Village} and their story is a subplot)\textsuperscript{630} reveals a certain degree of latent lesphobia continuing to operate in theatre programming.

While the Marriage Equality campaign engaged the national conversation in the lead up to the referendum, the Gender Recognition Act 2015, which did not require a public vote, passed through the Dáil with inevitably less public debate. The Act has facilitated the greater visibility and acceptance of transgender people in Irish society by providing “a process enabling trans people to achieve full legal recognition of their preferred gender and allow[ing] for the acquisition of a new birth certificate that reflects this change.”\textsuperscript{631} The production of \textit{Rathmines Road} (Fishamble and Abbey) in 2018 was an important moment for Irish theatre as it was the first time a transgender actor, Rebecca Root, appeared in a professional production on the Irish stage.\textsuperscript{632} 633 One of the subplots of Kinahan’s play dramatizes the bigotry many transgender people face, but importantly

\textsuperscript{628} Nancy Harris, \textit{The Beacon} (Nick Hern Books, 2019), 86-7.
\textsuperscript{629} Erica Murray’s \textit{All Mod Cons} (Lyric Theatre, 2019) expresses similar sentiments when Gary assures his transgender sister, Jean, that “people are more accepting here than you think […] It’s a very different country now than it was when you left.” Erica Murray, \textit{All Mod Cons} (London: Samuel French, 2019), 9.
\textsuperscript{630} Philip McMahon’s \textit{Come On Home} (2018 dir. Rachel O’Riordan) was an Abbey mainstage premiere that concerned homosexuality among clergymen.
\textsuperscript{633} Trans characters have featured prior to this in plays including Una McKevitt’s \textit{The Big Deal} (2011), Elaine Murphy’s \textit{Ribbons} (2013), and Amy Conroy’s \textit{Luck Just Kissed You Hello} (2015). In each case, a cis woman played the trans role. Following \textit{Rathmines Road}, the 2019 production of Erica Murray’s \textit{All Mod Cons} at the Lyric Theatre featured a trans actor, Mariah Louca, playing the role of ‘Jean.’
gives Root’s character, Dairne, the opportunity to respond. When Ray suggests that Dairne’s true identity is male, she is quick to correct his mistake.

    RAY: I don’t even know you… and you’re… you’re actually a man.
    DAIRNE: No. I’m not.
    RAY: You were a man when you went out with Sandra.
    DAIRNE: I wasn’t. I amn’t and I never went out with Sandra…

Later, when Linda accuses her of not knowing what it’s like to grow up experiencing constant sexual harassment, Dairne defends herself, saying: “I’ve been spat at, ridiculed, punched and buggered, Linda. All because I refuse… All because I feel… I know… that I am a woman like you.” Root’s appearance in the play is important for the visibility of transgender people in Irish theatre, however, to my knowledge, there has yet to be a major professional production of a play written by a transgender playwright. Although LGBTQ+ concerns were similarly dominant in national conversations over the past number of years, plays centralizing queer lives were relatively fewer than those concerning the more canonical topic of violence against women. Arguably, the sheer numbers of plays concerning rape culture reflect the biases of programmers towards the topic during this period when compared with other major newsworthy social movements.

Form: music & songs

The spirit of protest ignited by #WakingTheFeminist carried through to many of those plays programmed by the Abbey. One of the major formal shifts of McLaren and Murray’s tenure was the increase of plays with music and songs on the Abbey’s stages, however in the plays by women, these songs often act as moments of rebelliousness from

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634 Kinahan, Rathmines Road, 62.
635 Kinahan, Rathmines Road, 77.
the trauma that preceded them. Of those plays under consideration here, Donoghue’s new adaptation of *Room* (Theatre Royal Stratford East and Abbey with NTS and Covent Garden Productions) was a play with songs; in both *Not a Funny Word* (THISISPOPBABY and Abbey) and *The Patient Gloria* (Abbey and Moxley with Pan Pan), a female musician was present onstage throughout; while *The Unmanageable Sisters* (Abbey) and *Furniture* (Druid) both ended in song. The combination of protest and music is most evident in *This Beautiful Village* (Abbey) which opens with political activist Malvina Reynolds’ satire of suburbia, “Little Boxes.” However, it is the call and response of the play’s closing drumming music (Tierney-Keogh suggests Sergio Mendes ‘Fanfarra’) that invokes the audience to respond to the play’s political instigation. The music is preceded by the “sound of flies swirl[ing] into the auditorium, loud, everywhere, overwhelming.”

The sound of the swarm melts into the drumming music which gets louder as the lights rise to brightness over the auditorium before the blackout. The combination of the sound of the flies, which have come to represent the patriarchy in the play, the drumming and the changes in lighting implicate the audience in the play’s final movement before its close. Audience invocation also occurs at the end of *The Patient Gloria* (Abbey and Moxley with Pan Pan), as Gloria calls for a renaming of the female body parts that have been named after men, including the G spot. She calls the audience to “hit that spot as often as you can. And call it what it is: Gloria. The Gloria spot […] Hit that G spot and sing out GLORIA.” Jane then plays “Gloria” by Van Morrison and she, Gloria, Gina and the cast of young women onstage sing. The call is one of defiance and of reclamation of a female sexuality that throughout the play had been shown to be hijacked by men. In a similar vein, the end of Tara Flynn’s *Not a Funny Word*

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636 Tierney-Keogh, *This Beautiful Village*, 76.
(THISISPOPBABY and Abbey) is a song that calls for an end to the shame: “Ride for Ireland.”

We are some sexy bitches/ no longer curtain twitchers
You’d rather stigmatise/ than look us right between the thighs/
well that’s your loss/why don’t you come with us?
There’s gold at the end of our rainbows/ Through our magic doors
Unchain us from the kitchen table let’s do it on the floor

(Chorus) Ride, for Ireland
Get down on your knees
Ride, for Ireland
Who cares if someone sees
Ride, for Ireland
Might as well in this weather
Ride for Ireland
And maybe we will come...together

The first #WakingTheFeminists meeting ended with the entire assembly at the Abbey Theatre on their feet singing and dancing to Aretha Franklin’s “Respect.” While the use of music has long been associated with women’s plays, its prevalence in the plays that followed #WakingTheFeminists functions, much as “Respect” did at that first meeting, as a form of catharsis from the trauma of what had gone before, and an act of defiance, self-determination, and empowerment. In Not a Funny Word (THISISPOPBABY and Abbey) and The Patient Gloria (Abbey and Moxley with Pan Pan), it is also a rejection of the shame that has been women’s burden to carry in favour of a celebration of female sexuality. In programmes in which the victimization of women approaches overwhelming levels, these songs are important in offering moments of disobedience, rebellion, and power.

Conclusion

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638 Flynn, Not A Funny Word.
639 Flynn, Not A Funny Word.
It’s clear that the kind of plays by women being programmed in Ireland after #WakingTheFeminists became more overtly political about feminist issues such as rape culture, abortion, homophobia, and racism. In many ways this shift veered towards a truer reflection of women’s lived reality than previously seen on Irish stages, due in no small part to the license given to women at this time to author those representations of their own reality. However, the content of this group of plays appears remarkably homogenous when compared with the variety of thematic concerns emerging from the plays discussed in Chapter Three. With only on average 34% of plays by the Abbey Theatre, Rough Magic, Fishamble and Druid being written by women, and a major proportion of the new plays featuring women who have been raped, abused, spat on, forced into prostitution, or forced to travel in secrecy for abortions, the suggestion that the programmers in these companies share certain cultural biases about the ways women are viewed seems plausible. While the introduction of gender policies was an important step forward for each of these companies, the lack of detail on specific interventions to address modes of assessment may be responsible for the homogeneity of their decision-making. I have already outlined some of the gaps and issues within these policies; in the conclusion which follows I will detail proposals for amendments to these policies to improve the quantity of plays by women being programmed and the content of those plays.
CONCLUSION: TOWARDS EQUITABLE READING AND SELECTION STRATEGIES

“If not now, when? If not me, who?”
Lian Bell, quoting Joan O’Clery, One Thing More, Abbey Theatre, 14 November 2016

“Being fair takes work”
Cáitríona McLaughlin, #WakingTheFeminists Public Meeting, Abbey Theatre, 12 November 2015

At #WakingTheFeminists’ “Spring Forward” event in Liberty Hall on 8 March 2016, Sarah Durcan announced to the crowd that “biases are culturally transmitted diseases.” The conceptual blending model used to frame this argument has shown exactly how cultural biases can infiltrate a programmer’s conceptualisation of a new play, influencing their assessment of it. In Chapter One, I discussed the role that memory and emotion play, not only in creating blends between new plays, the canon, and real-world events, but in moderating programmer’s decision-making processes based on feelings about their outcomes. The ways in which wordplay, dialect and collaborative dialogue patterns require the creation of complex blends that carry implicit associations about the merit of certain kinds of writing was argued in relation to plays premiered at the Abbey in Chapter Two, which found that a programmer’s unfamiliarity with certain kinds of

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dramaturgical structures associated with women’s writings could have a detrimental impact on their conception of the plays construction. Like language, form and story were shown in Chapter Three to not only create unconscious connections between new scripts and the canon, but to shape the kinds of interactions programmers have with those plays through the use of deductive or inductive logic. Although the evaluation process for new scripts in theatres is the best possible place in the programming process to implement structural changes to counteract the impact of biases, the review of their gender policies in Chapter Four reveals that none of the companies considered have addressed this process specifically. Chapter Four has also shown the dominance of certain trends between 2017 and 2019 in Irish theatre which suggests not only the ongoing presence of unconscious biases informing programming decisions in Ireland, but the existence of groupthink across the sector.

Although this thesis’ concern has been with the biases faced by playwrights submitting scripts to theatres, in recent years the number of plays emerging from devised, adapted, documentary, testimonial and other non-traditional play-making processes have increased in Ireland. The vast majority of this work is self-generated or self-funded by the lead artist through a project grant or through their own company. When such work is programmed or commissioned by another theatre, the assessment of its suitability for programming is often at the “idea” stage and occurs through face-to-face meetings. In the case of the Abbey Theatre, McLaren and Murray’s reconfiguration of the Literary Department into a New Works Department split the department between scripts and ideas: artists were invited to email ideas for new non-scripted work to a specific “ideas” email address, while scripts were to be sent to a “scripts” email address. Assessing an outline of an idea in this format creates further opportunities for bias to infiltrate the assessment as the outline proposals rely more heavily on the programmer’s ability to
infer, intuit and imagine. Through the findings of the first three chapters of this thesis, it is evident that even when theatres conduct blind readings, biases can inform their assessment of the play’s value. However, for both script-originated and non-script-originated theatre, programming decisions are typically preceded by a face-to-face meeting in which the Artistic Director, Literary Manager or Dramaturg gets to know the artist personally. Face-to-face meetings are more prone to gender, race, and age biases as well as beauty, weight, and accent biases. Jennifer Eberhardt summarises that “reams of studies have shown that judgments of women in the labor market are more likely to be based on factors that have little to do with professional competence: weight, appearance, hairstyle, style of dress, perception of personality.”\textsuperscript{641} That the biases generated by knowledge of a writer’s face can impact on the assessment of their writing was made evident in an experiment summarized by Pragya Agarwal. Two groups of participants were asked to grade two essays, one of which was linked to a photo of an attractive writer and the other to an unattractive one. Although the essays themselves were identical, “the person in the attractive photo was consistently evaluated to have written a better essay.”\textsuperscript{642} Furthermore, “when the researchers replaced the essays with truly awful essays, the difference was magnified. The people perceived as being attractive scored much higher, while the other person was penalised much more harshly, hence showing that we expect more from beautiful people but also forgive them more easily.”\textsuperscript{643} These examples provide further evidence that biases about the writer infiltrate evaluations of their writing. Discussing the attractiveness halo effect, Bohnet tells us that “attractive people are not only assumed to be more honest and responsible, they are also perceived as more intelligent.”\textsuperscript{644} However, when researchers look at beauty bias specifically in

\textsuperscript{641} Eberhardt, \textit{Biased}, 273.
\textsuperscript{642} Agarwal, \textit{Sway}, 296.
\textsuperscript{643} Agarwal, \textit{Sway}, 296.
\textsuperscript{644} Bohnet, \textit{What Works}, 130.
relation to women, the results are less straight-forward. Attractive women do benefit from the halo effect generally, however, notions of attractiveness are more narrowly proscribed, and women must navigate the stereotypes of the “bimbo” and the “femme fatale.”

Among the most prominent appearance-related biases are those related to weight. Placing the reality in stark terms, Agarwal says “Women face obesity penalty. Men are less likely to do so.” She explains that

Weight bias is an implicit attitude that occurs when we categorise and identify people based on their body weight, and then attach certain characteristics to them without much conscious rational thought such as ‘they must be lazy,’ or ‘they’re not very clever’ or ‘they lack willpower.’

Unlike most other biases already discussed, “the bias against excessive weight is formed primarily because this is seen as a personal responsibility issue, and people are often stereotyped as lazy, gluttonous, unattractive, intellectually slow, socially inept and lacking in self-esteem.” Agarwal cites a Yale study published in the International Journal of Obesity that “showed that weight discrimination, particularly against women, is as common as racial discrimination.” Evidence of this bias in Irish theatre has already been seen through the comments made by Michael Colgan to Grace Dyas quoted in Chapter Four. These appearance-related stereotypes are deeply intertwined with gender biases, and in an industry as social as theatre, where personal relationships are often pathways to work, these can have a substantial impact on how playwrights are perceived and how their work is valued.

Alongside appearance, biases triggered by a person’s accent can profoundly affect impressions of their intelligence, creativity, and “fit” within a particular community.

645 Agarwal, Sway, 305.
646 Agarwal, Sway, 312.
647 Agarwal, Sway, 306.
Agarwal writes that “research has shown that it takes us less than 30 seconds to linguistically profile a speaker, and to make quick decisions – on their ethnic origin, socio-economic class and backgrounds – called ‘linguistic first impressions.””649 I have already discussed in Chapter Two how the dialect used in a script can prompt biases about its merit. In person, accents work with a person’s dialect to signal their belonging, prompting biases about their geographical origin, their class, sexuality, impairments etc. Accents are a primary signal of whether a person belongs to an in-group or out-group, making it even harder for women with foreign, working-class, or rural accents to be accepted as having a rightful place within the male-dominated, middle-class and Dublin-centric Irish theatre community. Agarwal explains that, in general, “we tend to gravitate towards those with a similar accent to ours.”650 All of this research shows the impact of the effects of biases arising from face-to-face meetings. While Bohnet advocates for the implementation of defined structures to offset biases from formal interviews, this is more difficult to apply for informal meetings. However, programming decisions are not made on meetings alone, and in the following section, I will outline steps programmers can take to reduce the impact of biases on script assessments.

A 2017 study, involving interviews with eighteen artistic directors, literary managers, dramaturgs, and directors of new works from regional theatres in America, found that “when selecting plays to produce, very few interviewees follow a set list of criteria. Instead, they judge scripts based on “feeling” or “intuition.””651 Intuition is a product of the unconscious mind. Tilmann Betsch describes it as a process:

The input to this process is mostly provided by knowledge stored in long-term memory that has been primarily acquired via associative learning. The input is processed automatically and without conscious

649 Agarwal, Sway, 333.
650 Agarwal, Sway, 331.
651 McConarty and Rose, "Beyond the 22%: Gender Inequity in Regional Theatres’ Show Selections,” 217.
awareness. The output of the process is a feeling that can serve as a basis for judgements and decisions.\textsuperscript{652}

When programmers say that intuition has led them to choose a play for production, I would suggest that usually means that the play has conformed to the pattern of “good plays” that exists in their memory. While there may be occasional exceptions, typically this means that the script has followed a pattern defined by the theatrical canon of what society will agree is of value and is worth producing. Robin Hogarth describes the “inventories of intuition” that people have at their disposal as their “cultural capital” and suggests that the “preferences that people exhibit are clear manifestations of tacit or intuitive learning.”\textsuperscript{653} Hogarth goes on to explain that “The learning of intuitions takes place largely in the absence of explicit attention. It is also constrained by the characteristics of the environment […] one can only learn intuitively from data that is seen.”\textsuperscript{655} For a programmer, their concept of what makes a good play has been influenced by implicit learning of a male-defined canon, and new plays by women will be unconsciously judged in comparison with this referent. Intuitive decision-making is inherently biased, and theatre must take steps to clarify and justify their evaluative procedures in order to avoid it.

**Recommendations**

The first three chapters of this thesis have shown how even blind readings of women’s plays can be biased by the canonical norms of the culture in which the reader is


\textsuperscript{655} Hogarth, “On the Learning of Intuition,” 98.
situated, while Chapter Four revealed that quotas alone have not yet ensured gender equality in Irish theatrical programming. I will now outline some recommendations for theatre programmers, based on findings from research experiments on bias, that will address the unconscious influences of gender biases in the reading process.

Establish criteria

Establishing a set list of criteria against which scripts are assessed is the most important change theatres can make to ensuring their evaluative processes are equitable. The impact of biases on intuition is pervasive and structuring the assessment process is widely established as the best way to offset intuitive biases. Many theatre practitioners often proclaim that criteria are a limiting and reductive force on artistic assessments, however, this is the fault of the criteria design, rather than of having criteria themselves. Each theatre should have its own list of criteria that respond to each company’s individual mission and artistic vision, and the process of creating criteria should be a creative one. How many categories are included and whether or not each category is weighted should also be decided upon by the organisation and these categories should be subject to periodical review and revision. Such lists have already been in use at the Abbey Theatre during the international assessment of the theatre’s performance that culminated in the Bonnar-Keenleyside report of 2014. Internal assessors were invited to evaluate plays at the Abbey on a scale from one to five according to the following criteria: The Abbey’s Mission, Ambition, Execution, Effectiveness, Excellence and Quality of New Writing.\(^656\)

A sample list of five criteria is also included in the Arts Council’s *Weighing Poetry* document by François Matarrosso. These are: Technique, Originality, Ambition,

Matarosso explains the importance of such criteria for “a funding body operating with limited funds in such a personal and subjective area as the arts” is that “with clear funding criteria, the way in which those judgements are reached can be properly justified.”  

Alex Madva unequivocally states that “our decisions are less biased when we make them on the basis of clear criteria [sic]” and that “working with clear decision-making criteria allows greater transparency for everybody involved about the reasons and procedures behind our decisions [sic].” He also points out that “criteria also promote accountability. It is much easier to hold ourselves and others accountable for our decisions when we can justify them by reference to reasonable, mutually-agreed-upon standards [sic].” In light of the evidence that criteria have helped to offset biased intuitions and improve transparency in many other sectors, it seems extraordinary that many theatres have not already adopted this approach. As with many other protective measures in creative arenas, well-designed criteria should promote creativity in decision-making, not suppress it. The trick to making evaluative criteria work is through its smart and creative design.

Move the name

While many theatres read their unsolicited scripts blindly, that is, with the playwright’s name omitted, in the case of commissioned and solicited scripts, the playwright’s name is typically known to the programmer. Moving the playwright’s name

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to a separate page at the back page of the script is one of the simplest interventions that can help to prevent biased readings. Madva explains that “anonymous review seems especially well-suited to reducing prestige bias, when people assume, for example, that a paper must be high quality because it was written by an Ivy League professor.”

Or, in the case of theatre, a high-profile playwright. Even when the script has been preceded by a meeting with the writer, and therefore the writer is known to the programmer in advance of reading, moving the name to the end prevents the effect of priming biases immediately preceding the script’s evaluation. In some cases, seeing the name written down may prime certain aspects of a person’s identity, that might not be salient in person, such as names that are typically “Irish” sounding, like Ailís Ní Ríain, or names with “international” markers, like Ursula Rani Sarma. The spelling of names, particularly in an Irish context will also prompt associations of “Irishness” or “Anglicisation,” as is made clear by the variant spellings of names like Orlagh, Orla, Orlaith, Orfhlaith, or Eoin, Eoghan, Owen. Drawing on Iris Bohnet’s research, I would suggest incorporating an anonymized reading into the overall evaluation process of the play. By moving the playwright’s name to the back page, the programmer can initially assess the play using the criteria established by the organisation and then revise those criteria based on their knowledge of the playwright’s work. This both allows the programmer to assess each play fairly yet does not disregard their own substantial knowledge of each individual artist and their body of work. Rather, it incorporates this knowledge after the initial assessment has been made, which may revise their overall estimation of the play’s merit. For instance, if the play were to receive a score of three out of five on an individual criterion, e.g., formal innovation, this score may be revised when the programmer reassesses the mark based on their knowledge of this particular playwright’s work.

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initial score however provides the anchor from which this score is revised and may be markedly different from an initial score based on a knowledge of the playwright’s work from the outset. This represents an occasion in which anchoring bias, which is “the common tendency to rely too heavily or ‘anchor’ on one trait or piece of information when making decisions”\textsuperscript{663} is actually useful, as it grounds an evaluation in relation to an unbiased assessment, rather than a biased one. The value of this two-part assessment strategy is that it incorporates the programmer’s expertise into a de-biased reading. However, blind readings are not without their drawbacks. Madva draws on the work of Rebecca Kukla, who “suspects that anonymous review is an essentially ‘conservative’ policy that privileges people who write in a ‘mainstream’ and ‘conventional voice,’ and may disadvantage people with less conventional styles or more radical ideas.”\textsuperscript{664} In order to prevent implicit privileging of mainstream voices, this approach should be accompanied by comparative evaluations.

Read comparatively

Moving the playwright’s name may work to deemphasise the qualities associated with the name, including gender and status, and replacing the focus on the script itself. However, as scripts are most often read following discussions with the playwright and as a series of drafts, and as playwrights and programmers usually know each other, often very well, further action must be taken to avoid evaluations based on the writer’s identity and past form. Bohnet advises: “to guard against evaluation biases, frames, and anchors, evaluate candidates comparatively.”\textsuperscript{665} As has already been shown through Fishamble’s strategy in assessing plays for “A Play For Ireland,” gender equality is easier to enforce

\textsuperscript{663} Ross, \textit{Everyday Bias}, 56.
\textsuperscript{664} Madva, “Individual and Structural Interventions,” 251.
\textsuperscript{665} Bohnet, \textit{What Works}, 141.
when plays are read and assessed in a group. The value of group assessment is evident from an experiment Bohnet and her colleagues undertook which sought to counteract the impact of stereotypes on hiring. They found that

comparative evaluation focused evaluators’ attention on individual performance instead of group stereotypes. When candidates were evaluated comparatively, not only did the gender gap vanish completely, but basically all evaluators now chose the top performer.666

Rather than reading plays vertically, which would involve reading a single script and making an assessment on its merits alone, scripts would be read horizontally, which would mean reading scripts in groups and making assessments using the established criteria by comparing one script to another. This creates an internal benchmarking system among the group which calibrates the assessment according to the group standard. Although Bohnet’s examples are based on job interviews, the process also works when evaluating a piece of writing. She uses comparative evaluations for grading essays, by grading “all students’ answers to Question 1, then their answers to Question 2, and so on” to prevent a great first impression from the first question impacting her evaluation of the second.667 For commissioning theatres, there may be two points in the year in which commissioned scripts are read comparatively and assessed. For others, the comparative strategy could be employed as the company prepares to programme their next season.

In July 2020, I distributed a questionnaire to the theatre companies discussed in this thesis to find out more about how they assess new scripts.668 Of the fourteen companies and venues approached, eight agreed to participate in the research. As this was conducted during the pandemic, when many theatres were closed, furloughed, or operating with extremely limited staff, the participation of representatives from these

666 Bohnet, What Works, 127.
667 Bohnet, What Works, 141.
668 Companies in Republic of Ireland were contacted in July 2020, while those in Northern Ireland and Great Britain were contacted in January 2021.
companies was generous. The questionnaire included questions about the journey of the script through the literary department, how the theatres make their assessments, and the steps they have already taken to address gender inequality (see Appendix IV). The eight companies who responded were the Abbey Theatre, Gúna Nua Theatre Company, Rough Magic Theatre Company, Fishamble: The New Play Company and Project Arts Centre from the Republic of Ireland, the Lyric Theatre, Belfast from Northern Ireland and the Traverse Theatre and Bush Theatre from Scotland and England respectively. Currently, none of these theatres use set criteria to evaluate plays for production, although some do provide structured informal criteria to guide their assessments. Making these criteria formal, reading plays comparatively, and assessing them against each criterion using a scoring system could dramatically help to remove biases from evaluations.

Fishamble: The New Play Company has already encompassed some of these strategies into their approach to reading unsolicited scripts. At Fishamble, scripts are read by the Literary Intern who writes a report that includes an assessment of the play’s strengths and weaknesses and a score on a scale from one to four to give a sense of the quality of the work. Literary Interns are instructed to read a selection of Fishamble’s previously produced plays, which act as a benchmark against which the new script is evaluated. This system already has good structures in place and with some tweaks, such as making the evaluative criteria more specific, scoring each item of criteria rather than an overall score, and making those evaluations in comparison with other unsolicited scripts as well as the company’s repertoire, the process could be made clearer and more equitable. Their processes for solicited and commissioned scripts remain informal, although they do discuss the plays in light of the quality of works produced by
Fishamble. Formalizing their criteria and assessing new plays together, rather than in comparison to their past repertoire will help to make this process fairer and to make their own decision-making more transparent.

At the Traverse Theatre, unsolicited, solicited, and commissioned scripts are read according to similar criteria, although by different member of staff at different stages. Readers are asked to consider the play’s form/style; character; story/content; and dialogue and are instructed to answer the following questions: Is the writing ambitious or innovative? Is the story new or urgent? Is the form theatrical? Will this engage an audience? They are also instructed to consider whether the script is urgent, accessible, and entertaining. Again, the foundations here are robust, and the Traverse’s questions and considerations could provide the basis for strong evaluative criteria. As with Fishamble, the existing structure could be improved by adding a scoring system for each criterion (which could be descriptive rather than numerical) and a horizontal reading structure. Once these systems are established, companies like these could then assess plays horizontally according to each criterion, as Bohnet did when grading assignments. This way, the plays could be assessed as a group for ambitious or innovative writing, before they are all approached together again to consider whether their stories are new or urgent. Making this work explicit may not only throw some surprising results for the readers but may help to expose the biases that have infiltrated their evaluations.

Whether or not these interventions will work for other underrepresented groups is unclear. As with all procedures to address biases, the inclusion of time-limits, regular reviews, and re-designs when necessary are essential to ensuring that interventions are

669 Gavin Kostick (Fishamble) response to “Literary Department Questionnaire,” Google Forms, 13 August 2020, https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAlpQLSeef-bqap4bPTpv5a-x4PsAYbWYRnHGKFWEvbnnqVm8xAjHiA/viewform?usp=sf_link
working. However, one of the concrete actions programmers can take that is known to work is to immerse themselves more widely in the communities and culture of underrepresented groups. The more plays, films, literature, music, and visual art the programmer engages with by (and not just about) artists who are women, Travellers, Black, disabled, working class, refugees, LGBTQI+ and/or from minority religious backgrounds, the more likely they are to bring rich references to plays by these artists when they read them.

The decision to programme a play is just one of numerous decisions about the play’s productions including decisions around the space it is to be programmed in, the length of the run, the composition of the artistic team and their rates of pay and the budget allocated to that production. One example of the impact of that such decisions can have on both the production and the writer arises from the case of Margaret Perry’s *Porcelain*, which was the first unsolicited play the Abbey Theatre had programmed since Christopher Lee’s *The Electrocution of Children* in 1998.\(^670\) The decision to produce the script was made amid a rush to get plays by women onto the Abbey’s stages, however this rush seems to have been detrimental to the production. In an interview for the *Making It With Temi Wilkey* podcast, Perry described how the Abbey told her in October 2017 that the play would go on in February 2018. She said that they paired her “with this director called Cathal Cleary”\(^671\) and that she “wish[ed] we had more lead in time”\(^672\) “to chat and to get to know, like, a writer-director collaboration.”\(^673\) This disconnect between the writer and director was evident in the production in which the play’s twin storylines failed to cohere, and the pacing of the action inexplicably slowed at the end. Reviews by

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\(^670\) “The world’s a stage Katie Donovan goes behind the scenes at the Abbey Theatre,” *The Irish Times*, 12 December 1998, ProQuest.


\(^672\) Wilkey, *Making It With Temi Wilkey*, podcast audio.

\(^673\) Wilkey, *Making It With Temi Wilkey*, podcast audio.
Chris O’Rourke and Chris McCormack both commented on the slack pacing, while Emer O’Kelly described Cleary's direction as "rather scattered, and one can't help feeling that he too was bewildered by the text presented to him." Of the gender policies discussed in the previous chapter, only Fishamble’s addresses the importance of reviewing these production decisions for biases. While the emphasis here is on the steps theatres can take to reduce the impact of biases from play assessments, it is important to remember that this is only one small part of a broader gender equality policy, and theatres should remain vigilant about designing smart interventions for every stage of the decision-making process.

As the theatre industry emerges from the Covid-19 pandemic into a period of financial, political, and global instability as the world hurtles towards the impending doom of the climate crisis, it is important to remind ourselves that gender inequality is not a secondary concern, but a primary contributor to the causes of the catastrophe. Theatre has an important role to play in the fight to save the world from the worst effects of the climate crisis, as the major problem facing the world in reducing global warming is not one of science, but of culture. But theatre will fail in this fight if, as an industry, it cannot save itself first. The work to combat gender inequality did not end with #WakingTheFeminists’ final meeting, it did not end with the publication of gender equality policies, and it did not vanish during the pandemic. Caitríona McLaughlin said at the first #WakingTheFeminists’ meeting that “being fair takes work.”

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interventions can make this work easier and sustainable by embedding it within our organisations now. The only question remaining is “If not now, when? If not you, who?”
APPENDIX I: PLAYS BY WOMEN AT THE ABBEY THEATRE 2005-2015

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Play Title</th>
<th>Playwright</th>
<th>Length</th>
<th>Stage</th>
<th>Perfs.</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>Enlightenment</td>
<td>Shelagh Stephenson</td>
<td>Full Length</td>
<td>Peacock</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>1st female British playwright to be commissioned by the Abbey Theatre.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>Two Houses</td>
<td>Belinda McKeon</td>
<td>Short</td>
<td>Project Arts Centre</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>Received reading at Peacock Theatre in 2008 as part of 20: Love. Produced by ThisIsPopBaby in association with the Abbey Theatre.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>Marble</td>
<td>Marina Carr</td>
<td>Full Length</td>
<td>Abbey</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>An Abbey Theatre commission.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>B For Baby</td>
<td>Carmel Winters</td>
<td>Full Length</td>
<td>Peacock</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>An Abbey Theatre commission.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>No Romance</td>
<td>Nancy Harris</td>
<td>Full Length</td>
<td>Peacock</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>An Abbey Theatre commission.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>Perve</td>
<td>Stacey Gregg</td>
<td>Full Length</td>
<td>Peacock</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>An Abbey Theatre commission.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>16 Possible Glimpses</td>
<td>Marina Carr</td>
<td>Full Length</td>
<td>Peacock</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>A double bill of short plays.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>Ribbons</td>
<td>Elaine Murphy</td>
<td>Short</td>
<td>Peacock</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>A double bill of short plays.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>Shush</td>
<td>Elaine Murphy</td>
<td>Full Length</td>
<td>Abbey</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>An Abbey Theatre commission.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>Shibboleth</td>
<td>Stacey Gregg</td>
<td>Full Length</td>
<td>Peacock</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>A co-commission between the Abbey Theatre and the Goethe-Institut.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Irish Playography (www.irishplayography.com) and Abbey Theatre Archive (https://www.abbeytheatre.ie/about/archive/)
### Abbey Theatre 2005 - 2015: Rest of Programme

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Play Title</th>
<th>Playwright</th>
<th>Length</th>
<th>Stage</th>
<th>Perfs.</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>Portia Coughlan</td>
<td>Marina Carr</td>
<td>Full Length</td>
<td>Peacock</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>A Number</td>
<td>Caryl Churchill</td>
<td>Full Length</td>
<td>Peacock</td>
<td>27</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>Woman and Scarecrow</td>
<td>Marina Carr</td>
<td>Full Length</td>
<td>Peacock</td>
<td>35</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| 2009 | Seven Jewish Children     | Caryl Churchill  |                | Peacock | 3      | Late night performance after Ages of the Moon by Sam Shepard, free admission. | A Gúna Nua/Civic Theatre production
| 2010 | Little Gem                | Elaine Murphy    | Full Length    | Peacock | 41     | International and national tour.                                     |
| 2011 | B For Baby                | Carmel Winters   | Full Length    | Tour    | 44     |                                                                        |
| 2011 | B For Baby                | Carmel Winters   | Full Length    | Peacock | 18     |                                                                        |
| 2012 | I (Heart) Alice (Heart) I | Amy Conroy       | Full Length    | Peacock |        | Presented by HotForTheatre.                                           |
| 2015 | By The Bog Of Cats         | Marina Carr      | Full Length    | Abbey   | 30     |                                                                        |

Source: Irish Playography (www.irishplayography.com) and Abbey Theatre Archive (https://www.abbeytheatre.ie/about/archive/)
APPENDIX II: PLAYS BY WOMEN OUTSIDE THE ABBEY THEATRE 2005 - 2015
**Full-Length Single-Authored Original Plays by Female Playwrights produced outside of the Abbey 2005 – 2015**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Play</th>
<th>Playwright</th>
<th>Producer</th>
<th>Venue</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>A Very Weird Manor</td>
<td>Marie Jones</td>
<td>Lyric Theatre</td>
<td>Lyric Theatre Belfast</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>Dandelions</td>
<td>Fiona Looney</td>
<td>Landmark Productions in association with MCD</td>
<td>Olympia Theatre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>Sarah’s Comfort</td>
<td>Niamh McGrath</td>
<td>Yew Tree Theatre</td>
<td>Linenhall Arts Centre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>The Sugar Wife</td>
<td>Elizabeth Kuti</td>
<td>Rough Magic Theatre Company</td>
<td>Project Arts Centre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>Girls and Dolls</td>
<td>Lisa McGee</td>
<td>Tinderbox Theatre Company</td>
<td>Drama and Film Centre, Queen’s University Belfast</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>Less than a Year</td>
<td>Helena Enright</td>
<td>Island Theatre Company</td>
<td>Georgian House, Pery Square, Limerick</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>O Go My Man</td>
<td>Stella Feehily</td>
<td>Out of Joint in association with The Royal Court</td>
<td>The Royal Court Theatre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>Play About My Dad</td>
<td>Michelle Read</td>
<td>Living Space Theatre</td>
<td>Project Arts Centre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>Pumpgirl</td>
<td>Abbie Spallen</td>
<td>The Bush Theatre</td>
<td>Traverse Theatre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>The Bonefire</td>
<td>Rosemary Jenkinson</td>
<td>Rough Magic Theatre Company</td>
<td>Project Arts Centre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>Waiting</td>
<td>Jennifer Johnston</td>
<td>Eska Riada Productions and Pavilion Theatre</td>
<td>Pavilion Theatre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>Woman and Scarecrow</td>
<td>Marina Johnston</td>
<td>The Royal Court Theatre</td>
<td>The Royal Court Theatre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>Grounded</td>
<td>Róise Goan</td>
<td>The Ark, A Cultural Centre for Children in association with Dublin Fringe Festival</td>
<td>The Ark, A Cultural Centre for Children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>Leaves</td>
<td>Lucy Caldwell</td>
<td>Druid &amp; The Royal Court</td>
<td>Druid Lane Theatre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>Rock Doves</td>
<td>Marie Jones</td>
<td>Irish Arts Centre, in association with Georganne Alrich Heller and Anita Waxman</td>
<td>Irish Arts Centre, New York</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>Stuck</td>
<td>Rosaleen McDonagh</td>
<td>Project Arts Centre</td>
<td>Project Arts Centre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>They Never Froze Walt Disney</td>
<td>Jody O’Neill</td>
<td>Theatre Makers</td>
<td>Unitarian Church</td>
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<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>Brendan at the Chelsea</td>
<td>Janet Behan</td>
<td>Riverside Studios, Hammersmith</td>
<td>Riverside Studios, Hammersmith</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>Carnival</td>
<td>Lucy Caldwell</td>
<td>Kabosh</td>
<td>Custom House Square, Belfast</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Irish Playography (www.irishplayography.com)*
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Play</th>
<th>Playwright</th>
<th>Producer</th>
<th>Venue</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>Johnny Meister and The Stitch</td>
<td>Rosemary Jenkinson</td>
<td>Jigsaw Theatre Productions</td>
<td>Old Museum Arts Centre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>Little Gem</td>
<td>Elaine Murphy</td>
<td>Civic Theatre in association with Gúna Nua Theatre Company</td>
<td>Civic Theatre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>Married to the Sea</td>
<td>Shona McCarthy</td>
<td>Dragonfly Theatre</td>
<td>Town Hall Theatre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>Reptilian</td>
<td>Shona McCarthy</td>
<td>Dragonfly Theatre</td>
<td>Nuns Island Theatre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>The Cordelia Dream</td>
<td>Marina Carr</td>
<td>Royal Shakepeare Company</td>
<td>Wilton’s Music Hall</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>The Crumb Trail</td>
<td>Gina Moxley</td>
<td>Pan Pan &amp; Forum Freier Theater</td>
<td>Forum Freier Theater, Dusseldorf</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>The Legend of Lola Montez</td>
<td>Sylvia Cullen</td>
<td>NTC Touring Theatre Company</td>
<td>Newton &amp; Bywell CM, Northumberland</td>
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<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>The Magic Tree</td>
<td>Ursula Rani Sarma</td>
<td>Djinn Productions</td>
<td>Granary Theatre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>The Winners</td>
<td>Rosemary Jenkinson</td>
<td>Ransom Productions</td>
<td>Old Museum Arts Centre</td>
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<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>You Are Here</td>
<td>Ioanna Anderson</td>
<td>Living Space Theatre &amp; Bedrock</td>
<td>An apartment in Millenium Walk, Dublin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>Cell</td>
<td>Ails Ni Riain</td>
<td>24/7 Theatre Festival</td>
<td>The Printworks</td>
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<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>Dreams of Violence</td>
<td>Stella Feehily</td>
<td>Out of Joint in association with Soho Theatre</td>
<td>Soho Theatre</td>
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<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>Excess Baggage</td>
<td>Mary Coll</td>
<td>Belltable Arts Centre</td>
<td>Belltable Arts Centre</td>
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<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>Four Last Things</td>
<td>Lisa Tierney-Keogh</td>
<td>Lisa Tierney-Keogh</td>
<td>Smock Alley Theatre</td>
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<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>Guardians</td>
<td>Lucy Caldwell</td>
<td>High Tide Festival</td>
<td>The Cut</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>Haunted</td>
<td>Edna O'Brien</td>
<td>The Royal Exchange Theatre</td>
<td>The Royal Exchange Theatre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>Jesus Has My Mom In There And Has Beat Her up Real Bad</td>
<td>Deirdre Roycroft</td>
<td>Loose Canon Theatre Company</td>
<td>Smock Alley Theatre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>Life After Love</td>
<td>Billie Traynor</td>
<td>Bewley's Café Theatre</td>
<td>Bewley's Café Theatre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>Moment</td>
<td>Deirdre Kinahan</td>
<td>Tall Tales Theatre Company</td>
<td>Solstice Arts Centre</td>
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<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>October</td>
<td>Fiona Loomney</td>
<td>Landmark Productions in association with MCD</td>
<td>Olympia Theatre</td>
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<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>Rough</td>
<td>Grace Dyas</td>
<td>THEATREClub</td>
<td>Players Theatre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>Strandline</td>
<td>Abbie Spallen</td>
<td>Fishamble: The New Play Company</td>
<td>Project Arts Centre</td>
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</table>

Source: Irish Playography (www.irishplayography.com)
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Play</th>
<th>Playwright</th>
<th>Producer</th>
<th>Venue</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>The Dark Things</td>
<td>Ursula Rani Sarma</td>
<td>Traverse Theatre</td>
<td>Traverse Theatre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>The Fisherman's Son</td>
<td>Ciarda Tobin</td>
<td>Belltable &amp; Amalgamotion Theatre Company</td>
<td>Belltable Offsite @ 36 Cecil Street, Limerick</td>
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<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>Transparency</td>
<td>Suzie Miller</td>
<td>Ransom Productions</td>
<td>Old Museum Arts Centre</td>
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<td>2009</td>
<td>Walnuts Remind Me of My Mother</td>
<td>Elizabeth Moynihan</td>
<td>Elizabeth Moynihan in association with Focus Theatre</td>
<td>The Cobalt Café and Gallery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>Bogboy</td>
<td>Deirdre Kinahan</td>
<td>Tall Tales Theatre Company in association with Solstice Arts Centre</td>
<td>Solstice Arts Centre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>Dear Frankie</td>
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*Source: Irish Playography (www.irishplayography.com)*
APPENDIX III: CHAPTER THREE FORMS
WAVE: Override

Inciting incident = girl meets boy

Mark gets a VR implant

Vi degenerates into a hub

Midpoint = end of Act One

Mark gets a VR implant

Climax = girl loses boy

Turning point

Resolution = girl gets boy back again = end of Act Two

Crisis
WAVE: Our New Girl

Annie tells Richard about the spider

Midpoint = interval

Turning point 1

Richard and Annie have sex

Turning point 1

Daniel says he saw R and A have sex

Climax

Richard leaves

Resolution

Hazel kicks Annie out

Hazel and Daniel agree to work together

Act One

Act Two

1. Inciting incident
2. Turning point 1
3. Turning point 2
4. Crisis
5. Climax
6. Resolution

Hazel makes to hit Daniel

Annie arrives

Richard comes home

Spider

Annie tells Richard about the spider

Turning point 1

Midpoint = interval

Turning point 1

Daniel says he saw R and A have sex
WAVE: Coolatully

Inciting incident: Kilian steals the cash

Kilian steals the cash

Midpoint

Paudie is furious, thinks he’ll be blamed

Anniversary – Kilian gets the keys

Worst point

Eilish leaves Kilian

Resolution

Climax

Jimmy falls

Turning point

Turning point

Paudie says he’ll try for a job in Dublin

Jimmy offers to pay for Kilian to move to

Inciting incident: Jimmy shows Kilian the cash

Jimmy offers to pay for Kilian to move to

Paudie says he’ll try for a job in Dublin
WAVELET: Lagan

Taximan finds Trevor’s body
Aoife tells Ian she wants an abortion
Phonecall from Terry
Siobhán collapses
Joan dies
Emmet and Fiona in bed
Bed is a raft
Scary film
Do you think I’m a murderer?
Park
Ferry, taxi
Car
Cake
Safeway
Bus, cafe
Wake, Chemist
Tracey, Taxi
Sexing
Phil & Aoife, videos, ferry
Park

Keogh 323
WAVELET: Dreams of Violence

- Dream
- Divorce papers
- Sex in the hall
- Speech at rally
- Heart attack
- Hostage
- Prison dream, Hospital
- Shirley, phone message, Honey through the letterbox
- Honey through the letterbox, washing Jack
- Two bankers
MEANDER: Notes to Future Self
SPIRAL: Bang Bang Bang
SPIRAL: Deluge
RADIAL: The Dark Things
NETWORKS & CELLS: O Go My Man
NETWORKS & CELLS:

Pumpgirl
Keogh 331

FRACTAL: Desolate Heaven

Heaven

Tragedy

Woman 3 helps them

Woman 2 helps them

Woman 1 helps them

Fairy 3 saves her

Fairy 2 saves her

Fairy 1 saves her

Comedy

Wedding

Queen sees aunties

Ciara never has to spin again

Ciara can’t spin

Disillusionment
– Sive now feels trapped by Orlaith

Orlaith kills Sive

Sive and Orlaith decide to run away

Woman 1 helps them

Woman 2 helps them

Woman 3 helps them
FRACTAL: Desolate Heaven
APPENDIX IV: LITERARY DEPARTMENT QUESTIONNAIRE
Literary Department Questionnaire

https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1139CXRQ_dakcwIfcuPNbp3aDlu3iLP450K6vSru1gE/edit 1/18

This questionnaire has been designed to collect data about the processes of reading and assessing new plays in theatres in Ireland and the UK. It is divided into 5 sections: Unsolicited Scripts, Solicited Scripts, Commissioned Scripts, Readers’ Panel and Equality Actions. It contains a maximum of 54 questions and should take no more than 30 minutes to complete. Should you have any issues with the form, or would like to get in touch with further information, please contact Claire Keogh by email at ckeogh4@tcd.ie or by phone at +353 (0)85 707 6144.

*Required

1. Name *
2. Theatre *
3. Position *

Unsolicited Scripts

4. Does your theatre accept unsolicited scripts? *

Mark only one oval.

☐ Yes  Skip to question 6

☐ No  Skip to question 17

☐ Sometimes

5. Please give further information on when your theatre accepts unsolicited scripts.

____________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________

6. Please describe the sequence in which unsolicited scripts are read. For example: 1. Readers’ Panel, 2. Literary Manager, 3. Artistic Director, 4. ...
7. Do unsolicited scripts always progress through each stage of the process outlined above? For example, could a negative response from the Readers' Panel prevent the script from being read by the Literary Manager? *

Mark only one oval.

☐ Yes, unsolicited scripts always progress through each stage  
☐ No, unsolicited scripts do not always progress through each stage

8. What are the conditions unsolicited scripts must meet in order to progress to the next stage of the process previously described? For example, what are the conditions unsolicited scripts must meet in order to progress from Readers' Panel to Literary Manager and/or from Literary Manager to Artistic Director.

_____________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________

9. Do you have a set list of criteria you use to evaluate unsolicited scripts? *

Mark only one oval.

☐ Yes

☐ No  Skip to question 11

10. Please list the criteria you use to evaluate unsolicited scripts.

_____________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________

Skip to question 12

11. Please describe how you evaluate unsolicited scripts (e.g. describe the informal criteria you
12. Are unsolicited scripts considered for production? *

*Mark only one oval.*

☐ Yes

☐ No  *Skip to question 16*

13. Please provide the Job Title of the person who makes the final decision on which new unsolicited scripts are produced.

____________________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________________

14. Is this decision made in consultation with any other member of the team? *

*Mark only one oval.*

☐ Yes

☐ No  *Skip to question 17*

15. Please provide the Job Title(s) of team member(s) consulted.

____________________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________________

*Skip to question 17*

16. Please describe the purpose(s) for which unsolicited scripts are read.

____________________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________________
Solicited Scripts

17. Does your theatre solicit scripts? *

Mark only one oval.

☐ Yes  Skip to question 19

☐ No  Skip to question 28

☐ Sometimes

18. Please give further information on when your theatre solicits scripts.

____________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________

19. Please describe the sequence in which solicited scripts are read. For example: 1. Readers’ Panel, 2. Literary Manager, 3. Artistic Director, 4. ...
If this is the same sequence as that previously provided for unsolicited scripts, simply enter "Same as Unsolicited" in the box below.

____________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________

20. Do solicited scripts always progress through each stage of the process outlined above? *

Mark only one oval.

☐ Yes  Skip to question 22

☐ No

21. What are the conditions solicited scripts must meet in order to progress to the next stage of the process previously described? For example, what are the conditions solicited scripts must meet in order to progress from Readers’ Panel to Literary Manager and/or from Literary Manager to Artistic Director. If these are the same conditions as those previously provided for unsolicited scripts, simply enter "Same as Unsolicited" in the box below.
22. Do you have a set list of criteria you use to evaluate solicited scripts? *

*Mark only one oval.*

☐ Yes

☐ No  *Skip to question 24*

23. Please list the criteria you use to evaluate solicited scripts. If these are the same criteria as those previously provided for unsolicited scripts, simply enter "Same as Unsolicited" in the box below.

__________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________

*Skip to question 25*

24. Please describe how you evaluate solicited scripts (e.g. describe the informal criteria you use). If these are the same informal criteria as those previously provided for unsolicited scripts, simply enter "Same as Unsolicited" in the box below.

__________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________

25. Please provide the Job Title of the person who makes the final decision on which new solicited scripts are produced.

__________________________________________________________________________

26. Is this decision made in consultation with any other member of the team? *

*Mark only one oval.*
27. Please provide the Job Title(s) of team member(s) consulted.
_____________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________

**Commissioned Scripts**

28. Does your theatre commission scripts? *

*Mark only one oval.*

☐ Yes  *Skip to question 30*

☐ No  *Skip to question 39*

☐ Sometimes

29. Please provide further details on when your theatre commissions scripts.
_____________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________

30. Please describe the sequence in which commissioned scripts are read. For example: 1. Readers’ Panel, 2. Literary Manager, 3. Artistic Director, 4. ...
If this is the same sequence as that previously provided for solicited scripts, simply enter “Same as Solicited” in the box below.
_____________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________

31. Do commissioned scripts always progress through each stage of the process outlined above?
32. What are the conditions commissioned scripts must meet in order to progress to the next stage of the process previously described? For example, what are the conditions commissioned scripts must meet in order to progress from Readers’ Panel to Literary Manager and/or from Literary Manager to Artistic Director. If these are the same conditions as those previously provided for solicited scripts, simply enter “Same as Solicited” in the box below.

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

33. Do you have a set list of criteria you use to evaluate commissioned scripts? *

Mark only one oval.

☐ Yes  Skip to question 34

☐ No  Skip to question 35

34. Please list the criteria you use to evaluate commissioned scripts. If these are the same criteria as those previously provided for solicited scripts, simply enter “Same as Solicited” in the box below.

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

Skip to question 36

35. Please describe how you evaluate commissioned scripts (e.g. describe the informal criteria you use). If these are the same informal criteria as those previously provided for solicited scripts, simply enter “Same as Solicited” in the box below.

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
36. Please provide the Job Title of the person who makes the final decision on which new commissioned scripts are produced.

__________________________________________________________________________________

37. Is this decision made in consultation with any other member of the team? *

*Mark only one oval.

☐ Yes  Skip to question 38

☐ No  Skip to question 39

38. Please provide the Job Title(s) of team member(s) consulted.

__________________________________________________________________________________

Readers’ Panel

39. Does your theatre have a Readers’ Panel? *

*Mark only one oval.

☐ Yes

☐ No  Skip to question 56

40. How many people are on your current Readers’ Panel?

__________________________________________________________________________________

41. Please tick the boxes below to describe the AGE of your current panel (to the best of your knowledge). You may tick as many boxes as are appropriate.

*Tick all that apply.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age range</th>
<th>0 - 14</th>
<th>15 - 24</th>
<th>25 - 44</th>
<th>45 - 64</th>
<th>65+</th>
<th>Unknown</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

42. Please tick the boxes below to describe the GENDER of your current panel (to the best of your
knowledge). You may tick as many boxes as are appropriate.

_Tick all that apply._

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Non-binary</th>
<th>Transgender</th>
<th>Other</th>
<th>Unknown</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

43. Please tick the boxes below to describe the ETHNICITY of your current panel (to the best of your knowledge). You may tick as many boxes as are appropriate.

_Tick all that apply._

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White Irish/British</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other White</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gypsy or Irish Traveller</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed/multiple ethnic groups</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian/Asian British</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black/African/Caribbean/Black British</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other ethnic group</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

44. Please tick the boxes below to describe the SEXUALITY of your current panel (to the best of your knowledge). You may tick as many boxes as are appropriate.

_Tick all that apply._

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sexuality</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Asexual</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bisexual</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heterosexual/straight</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gay</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesbian</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pansexual</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Queer</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
45. Please tick the boxes below to describe the CLASS of your current panel (to the best of your knowledge). You may tick as many boxes as are appropriate.

Tick all that apply.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class</th>
<th>Working class</th>
<th>Middle class</th>
<th>Upper class</th>
<th>Refugee/Asylum seeker</th>
<th>Other</th>
<th>Unknown</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

46. Please tick the boxes below to describe the ABILITY of your current panel (to the best of your knowledge). You may tick as many boxes as are appropriate.

Tick all that apply.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ability</th>
<th>Abled</th>
<th>Physical disability</th>
<th>Intellectual disability</th>
<th>Other</th>
<th>Unknown</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

47. Please tick the boxes below to describe the RELIGION of your current panel (to the best of your knowledge). You may tick as many boxes as are appropriate.

Tick all that apply.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Religion</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Church of Ireland</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Church of England</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roman Catholic</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Catholic</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muslim</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jewish</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buddhist</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hindu</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sikh</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other religion</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No religion</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
48. Please tick the boxes below to describe the EXPERTISE of your current panel (to the best of your knowledge). You may tick as many boxes as are appropriate.

*Tick all that apply.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Expertise</th>
<th>☐</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Playwriting</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acting</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Set Design</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Costume Design</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sound Design</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lighting Design</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dramaturgy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Directing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Producing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Casting</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stage Management</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spectating</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

49. How are scripts assigned to readers? *

*Mark only one oval.*

- ☐ Every reader reads every script  
  *Skip to question 51*

- ☐ Scripts are randomly assigned to readers  
  *Skip to question 51*

- ☐ Scripts are assigned to readers based on readers’ expertise  
  *Skip to question 51*

- ☐ Other

50. Please provide further information on how scripts are assigned to readers.
51. Do you provide a set list of criteria to the Readers' Panel to guide script evaluations? *

*Mark only one oval.*

☐ Yes

☐ No  Skip to question 53

52. Please list the criteria provided to the Readers' Panel to guide script evaluations. If these are the same criteria as those previously provided for unsolicited/solicited/commissioned scripts, simply enter "Same as Unsolicited/Solicited/Commissioned" (delete as appropriate) in the box below.

_____________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________

53. Please provide the instructions (if any) offered to the Readers' Panel for evaluating scripts.

_____________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________

54. How do the Readers' Panel give their feedback? *

*Mark only one oval.*

☐ Script report  Skip to question 56

☐ Meeting  Skip to question 56

☐ Script report & Meeting  Skip to question 56
☐ Other

55. Please describe how the Readers' Panel give their feedback.
__________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________

Equality Actions

56. Does your theatre conduct blind readings? *

Mark only one oval.

☐ Yes

☐ No  Skip to question 58

57. Please specify at which stages of the process scripts are read blind and at which stages the playwright’s name is known to the reader.
__________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________

58. If your theatre has taken any other practical steps to address issues of gender equality, diversity and inclusion when reading and assessing new scripts, please describe them below.
__________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________

59. If you have any additional information on how your organisation assesses scripts, please feel free to include it here.
Bibliography


Moffatt, Michael. “Shush would do better to quieten down a bit more,” review of *Shush* by Elaine Murphy, directed by Jim Culleton, Abbey Theatre, Dublin. *Mail on Sunday*, 16 June 2013. ProQuest.


O'Toole, Fintan. "Asking the National Question: If the Abbey Is Not a World-Class Theatre, Is Not Interested in the Canon of Irish Drama and Has Been Worsening the Conditions for Most Theatre Practitioners, What Is It For?" *The Irish Times,* 15 June 2019, 5. ProQuest.


