

‘New articulations of Irishness and otherness’¹ on the contemporary Irish stage

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Though the choice of 1990 as a watershed year demarcating ‘old’ Ireland from ‘new’, modern, Ireland may be a convenient simplification that ignores or plays down a slow, complex, ongoing process, it is nonetheless true to say that in recent years Ireland has undergone something of a revolution. Economic success, the so-called ‘Celtic Tiger’ phenomenon, and its attendant socio-political consequences, has given the country a new confidence whilst challenging or eroding the old markers of Irish identity. The election of Mary Robinson as the first woman President of the Republic came to symbolise that rapid evolution in the cultural, social, political and economic spheres as Ireland went on to become arguably one of the most globalised nations in the world. As sociologist Gerard Delanty puts it, within a few years, ‘state formation has been diluted by Europeanization, diasporic emigration has been reversed with significant immigration and Catholicism has lost its capacity to define the horizons of the society’.² The undeniable exhilaration felt by many as Ireland set itself free from former constraints and limitations, waving goodbye to mass unemployment and emigration, has nonetheless been counterpointed by a measure of anxiety. As the old familiar landscape, literal and symbolic, changed radically, some began to experience what Fintan O’Toole has described as ‘a process of estrangement [whereby] home has become as unfamiliar as abroad’.³ If Ireland changed, so did concepts of Irishness. The term ‘Irish diaspora’ gained increasing currency in that decade, encouraged no doubt by Mary Robinson’s own emphasis on the Irish nation as expanding well beyond the geographical confines of the island to include all those who had emigrated to the various corners of the world, and for whom she kept a lighted candle in a window of her official residence in Phoenix Park. By the end of the 1990s, emigration had been replaced by

immigration as a burning issue in public debate. Ireland's new-found wealth and well-advertised labour shortage led to the influx of numerous immigrants, an unprecedented and unexpected situation which took Irish people and their government by surprise. Between 1996 and 2002 over 153,000 people moved to the state; the 2002 census returned 5.8 per cent 'non-nationals' and there was a 600 per cent rise in the number of work visas granted between 1999 and 2004. In 2003 alone, 47,000 employment permits were issued.⁴

One major Irish problem that remained to be solved was the continuing violence in Northern Ireland. By 1994, with the help of the USA, an IRA ceasefire had been brokered, soon followed by a similar cessation of violence on the part of the loyalists. In spite of numerous difficulties a fragile peace has been established thanks to the constitutional arrangements contained in the 1998 Good Friday Peace Agreement, opening in Seamus Heaney's words 'a space – and not just in the political arena but in the first level of each person's consciousness – a space where hope can grow'.⁵ In the wake of the Agreement, Irish people were asked to vote in a referendum to modify the two articles of the Constitution which laid claim to Northern Ireland. The new version of article 2, enthusiastically ratified by the voters, enshrined in the Constitution a different conception of citizenship according to which the link between individual and territory was now less strong than that between individuals:

It is the entitlement and birthright of every person born in the island of Ireland, which includes its islands and seas, to be part of the Irish nation. That is also an entitlement of all persons otherwise qualified in accordance with law to be citizens of Ireland. Furthermore, the Irish nation cherishes its special affinity with people of Irish ancestry living abroad who share its cultural identity and heritage.⁶

While it would be naive and still premature to say that no return to violence need be feared and that the Northern Ireland problem has found a definite political solution given that devolved government is yet to be restored, there is no denying that a huge sense of relief now prevails, allowing both parts of Ireland to re-imagine themselves as peaceful societies. This evolution, together with the economic boom and attendant Americanisation and globalisation of the Republic, has brought about a reassessment of the paradigms of Irish identity in which the relationship with England/Britain features far less prominently. Such deep and sweeping changes have led to a re-energising of critical discourse in and about Ireland, with a shift away from colonial/postcolonial models of analysis towards globalisation as the core issue demanding elucidation.

In this process, the image of Ireland as sharing some of the characteristics of the Third World as well as of the First World, one of the tenets of post-colonial theory, has come under much strain. Michel Peillon has argued persuasively that this Third World perception had to be reviewed so as to acknowledge that Ireland today enjoys the agency of a First World power, not the alleged passivity of a colonial victim.⁷

One particularly striking characteristic of the recent analyses pro-
pounded by scholars and observers has been a new focus on immigration, also notable in public discourse and in creative works, most particularly in theatre. A number of recent Irish theatrical productions have engaged with this new phenomenon and its implications for Ireland's identity and self-image and these have, in turn, become the object of critical inquiry. In what follows, I would like to look at a number of plays that engage, directly or indirectly, with the experience of immigration as translated for the stage. I will deliberately frame this study with two plays by the most famous and acclaimed Irish playwright, Brian Friel, in order to show how under the surface of the deceptively 'traditional' subject matter of both *Dancing at Lughnasa* (1990) and *The Home Place* (2005) can be found very topical concerns that testify to the playwright's awareness of the seismic shift affecting Ireland, and to his ability to engage, on his own terms, with the new Ireland's anxieties, hopes and challenges. Beside Friel's two works, other plays under scrutiny will be, in chronological order, *Asylum! Asylum!* (1994) by Donal O'Kelly with reference to other work by Calypso productions, *Treehouses* by Elizabeth Kuti (2000) and *Départ et Arrivée (Departure and Arrival)* (2004), the latter being a collaborative venture involving Dermot Bolger, Kazem Shahryari (an Iranian-born, Paris-based director), and French translator Emile-Jean Dumay, who had introduced Shahryari to Bolger's work. Taken together, these plays by writers of different generations, genders, geographical origins and aesthetic sensibilities amount to a series of interventions aimed at bringing to the consciousness of Irish and international audiences the plight of those many immigrants and refugees seeking a new life in Ireland. They bear out Jason King's contention that 'more than any other literary or performing art form, the Irish theatre has proven highly receptive to the experiences of immigrants in Ireland'.⁸ Some of these works also bring to light the literal and symbolic interconnections between the journeys of the new migrants and those undertaken by several generations of Irish men and women who emigrated to more or less distant and hospitable lands, thus establishing links between a traumatic part of Ireland's past and the challenges and responsibilities it faces in the present.

Brian Friel's *Dancing at Lughnasa* arguably brought the 1980s to a close and set the tone for the new decade, as Terence Brown suggests by beginning his chapter on Ireland in the 1990s ('Revelations and Discoveries') with a discussion of the play in the updated version of his seminal *Ireland. A Social and Cultural History: 1922–2002*. While the play ostensibly deals with Ireland in the 1930s, a number of its ingredients point to more contemporary issues and concerns: modernisation and urbanisation, the emphasis on repressed female sexuality, the challenges to the Catholic Church, the parallels with Africa, the foregrounding of music and of the body on stage, all either anticipated or set the pace for future developments in Irish theatre and society. The retrospective form, as the story of the Mundy sisters is recounted through the consciousness of an adult narrator – Michael, Friel's exact contemporary and a mere child of seven in 1936, the time of the dramatic action – perfectly captures that movement of the mind between past and present while endowing the past with an undeniable 'presence'. Declan Kiberd's insightful and balanced analysis of the play in *The Irish Review* succeeds in pinpointing its many strengths, elucidating how the shifts in rhythm, the acceleration in Michael's narrative, perfectly mirror the acceleration Irish society was being subjected to:

The clinging of the sisters to the present moment is their response to being hurtled into the future at breakneck speed and the uneven pace of the narrator and dramatisation perfectly render the reality of lives lived at different speeds. It is as if the older Michael is impatient to give history a forward shove, while the actual dramatis personae do their utmost to retard it.⁹

The play is too well known and much studied to deserve a lengthy discussion here. For my purpose however I will focus on two related aspects, namely the place afforded to women and the 'elsewheres' of the play, Africa, Wales and London. In the Ireland portrayed and remembered by Michael, the place of women is in the home, tending children and looking after their husbands' needs. As the countryside is rapidly losing its population to emigration, marriage opportunities have become rare in Ballybeg, though marriage is one of the few forms of fulfilment for women officially sanctioned by Church and state. All five sisters have remained and will remain single and it is no wonder that they should break out into a manic dance in the privacy of their kitchen, releasing for one short moment all their pent-up energies and frustrations to the sound of Irish music on the wireless. The respectability of the Mundy household, already challenged by Chris's having had a child out of wedlock, is put to further test by the return of Father

Jack from his mission in Ryanga. Father Jack comes home in disgrace, having 'gone native',¹⁰ a sin that will cost Kate, the bread-winner of the household, her job as schoolteacher. As a result of their failure to procure either husbands or jobs, now that home-knitting will be superseded by machine-knitting at the new factory since the industrial revolution has caught up with Ballybeg and caused casualties, Agnes and Rose feel compelled to leave and seek their fortune in London, as did countless others before and after them. This sacrifice brings little good, though, as the two sisters face anonymity, hard work, homelessness and death in destitution, away from the familial love and solidarity that had made their hard lives bearable, a familiar Friel motif. While Gerry, Chris's lover and father to Michael, seems able to commute between Ireland and Wales, where he has another family (as Michael will discover much later), Agnes and Rose's departure proves final. While London comes to mean erasure and death, and Wales is equated with betrayal, Africa is endowed by Jack with life-affirming possibilities, thanks to its continued link with the sacred, its paganism that has resisted all efforts at Christianisation, his own included. The Irish Catholic Church has sought to repress the pagan rituals of the ancestral Celtic culture, represented in the play by the Lughnasa festival and its bonfires and animal sacrifices, but in Ryanga, pagan rituals and ceremonies still permit a spiritual communion which does not deny the body. Jack's tales of African customs – in which dancing, polygamy and love-children feature prominently – holds out an image of a world in which the sexual energy of women is neither feared nor frustrated, though that image itself may owe as much to Jack's imagination as to fact, as Michael's own memories of that golden summer of 1936 do. It is nonetheless striking that Friel should pit the sterility of Irish culture, deprived of any continuity with its pagan Celtic roots, against the joyous celebrations and dances of Africa perceived as a repository of a universal sense of the sacred. Africa though, is beyond the reach of the sisters, whose only choice appears to be either a frugal, lonely life in Ballybeg or emigration to London. A culture that offered such a bleak alternative to five intelligent and energetic women still in their prime had clearly become unsustainable, and failed the legitimate aspirations of its population.

By 1990, however, Ireland had embarked on a transformative journey, and theatre would record those transformations; more than a few members in the audience of the original production, and of subsequent revivals, may have been willing to make their Michael's comment 'I had a sense of unease, some awareness of a widening breach between what seemed to be and what was, of things changing too quickly before my eyes, of becoming what they ought not to be'.¹¹ In the play, Friel

catches one of those moments of transition and succeeds in conveying with great subtlety and force both the failure of the traditional rural world the Mundy sisters inhabit, and the loss and anxieties entailed in its supersession by a materialistic, increasingly technological modern world that risks destroying the last connection with ritual and the sacred. The play treads a fine line between nostalgia for a culture that had its beauty and value, and a harsh, unsentimental recognition of the inevitability of that culture's demise, a line a number of productions of *Dancing at Lughnasa* have crossed, deliberately or not, usually to err on the side of nostalgia, a temptation that may also tell us something about an abiding need to celebrate what is felt to have been lost.

Africa reappeared on the smaller Peacock stage of the National Theatre with Donal O'Kelly's *Asylum! Asylum!* in 1994, in a changing context just as the new phase of prosperity, soon to be dubbed the 'Celtic Tiger' phenomenon was gathering momentum. In O'Kelly's play, Africa is not the place where contact with the numinous and the sacred has been preserved, but a continent in the throes of violent, internecine conflicts, where barbarous acts of torture and murder are committed. *Asylum! Asylum!* is based on a real horrific event, reported in the 1991 Amnesty International Report. As rewritten by O'Kelly, it becomes the tale of a miraculous conversion, as well as the sad story of a failed escape from the threat of torture and death.¹² Joseph Omara (the name sounds deliberately Irish – O'Meara – to suggest a proximity that the difference in the colour of the skin conceals) is applying for asylum in Ireland, having fled northern Uganda. He must convince the authorities, represented on stage by Pillar Boylan and Leo Gaughran, two Irish immigration officers, that he is not an illegal economic migrant but a genuine refugee. Leo's sister Mary, a newly qualified lawyer, takes up his case and Bill, Leo and Mary's father, offers him shelter while his application is being processed. Thus the whole family becomes implicated in Omara's story.

There is clear, physical, evidence Joseph has been tortured, but Leo refuses to believe his tale of being brutalised by the army because he had refused to set fire to a pit in a village; the flaw in the story is revealed as Joseph, on bail from Mountjoy prison while his case is being examined, attends, at Mary's invitation, the family barbecue organised to mark Leo's promotion to Europol. Leo's eagerness to leave an Ireland he despises as backwards counterpoints Joseph's desire to gain admittance to the country. While Leo dreams of self-fulfillment and better career prospects, in tune with the country's embrace of materialism and of Europe as the exit route, Joseph's only ambition is to make a home in a place where he need not fear for his life. In what might appear as a

somewhat crude parallel, the sight of the barbecue leads Joseph to relive and tell the full tale of what happened in Bucoro, of how the pit he dug was not empty when it was set on fire, but contained five local men, including the local schoolmaster, his own father, about whom he has told so many moving stories and for whom he has expressed much love and admiration. It was Joseph's refusal to light the fire himself which led to his punishment at the hands of the soldiers. His guilt and horror – he could not acknowledge his dying father for if he had, he would have been thrown in the pit himself – which were initially repressed can now be put into words. While Mary and Bill are shocked by the account, it elicits only jeers and applause from Leo who refuses to accept the veracity of Joseph's story. Such callousness causes Bill and Mary to ask Leo to leave: 'Get out! Go to Europe, go to Europol and take your hatred with you'.¹³ Joseph's subsequent acceptance into Bill's home and life is presented as both an instance of genuine Christian hospitality and an opportunity for Bill to mend the fence with his daughter Mary, whom one understands he had neglected as a child because of his wife's premature death. As father and daughter are drawn closer, Bill finds the courage to speak about his wife Helen, herself a refugee of sorts as her parents' home in Dublin was burnt in a 1941 bombing, and recounts that it was thanks to his own parents' invitation to the young girl to stay in their home that their romance blossomed. Meanwhile, Mary and Joseph are increasingly attracted to one another, suggesting a tentative inter-racial romance which Boylan and Leo find distasteful but which Bill condones. In the third act, another few months have elapsed and Joseph's last chance to appeal a deportation order has been exhausted. As Pillar Boylan comes to the house to take away a disbelieving and desperate Joseph who begins to suspect Mary of betrayal, Leo reappears, not in the guise of the heartless law enforcer, but as a man who has been transformed. He explains that, while in Germany a few days before, he witnessed the burning of a hostel full of immigrants by a racist crowd and saw the man he did not believe in, Joseph's father, 'tall like a giant, thin like a leaf'. He stood alone in one of the rooms, uttering the phrase Joseph had seen him utter in the pit, a favourite quotation of his taken from Winston Churchill's *African Journey*, before being engulfed by the flames. Leo's conversion – what Boylan mockingly refers to as a road to Damascus experience – gives him the strength to encourage Joseph and Mary to flee; to no avail, as the African is soon captured and sent back to an uncertain fate in Uganda. Mary, Bill and Leo now share a common purpose: they are all ready to fight an unfair immigration system that relies on fear and allows racism to fester.

While the number of asylum applications was extremely limited in Ireland in the early 1990s, it rose dramatically within a few years, as Terence Brown explains: 'From 39 persons applying for refugee status in 1992 those seeking such status rose to 7,724 in 1999. Forbidden to work, subsisting on small state handouts, often forced to wait years before their cases could be heard, asylum seekers in the 1990s faced hostility in the popular press as they were branded as "fake" applicants'.¹⁴ Shortly before *Asylum! Asylum!* was produced, O'Kelly translated his own commitment to the defence of human rights by setting up Calypso Productions with playwright Kenneth Glanaan. Its mission statement reads:

Calypso's mission is simple, practical and humble. We want to change the world . . . the change we want to effect is small, significant and possible . . . By our future world family, we will be remembered in one of two ways. We will either have been caring guardians who nurtured their inheritance – social, political, artistic, environmental and sacred – or we will have been the parasites who depleted some of the hope and possibility from their lives; we are all world citizens; some of us are lucky enough to have inherited life saving rights, life enhancing social opportunities and life affirming creative possibilities. With those rights and privileges comes a responsibility to defend them for ourselves and for others.¹⁵

Thus Calypso's mission is to 'produce theatre as an intervention in contemporary political and civil life, and to envisage in a new way, the world as a stage, or site of contestation of choices made in the political sphere'.¹⁶ *Asylum! Asylum!* perfectly embodies that desire to move from the actual to the possible and the belief that theatre is the right art form, because of its collaborative, public nature and its capacity to generate empathy, to enact that transformation of hearts and minds. The play was rightly deemed flawed, even by sympathetic observers and critics like Fintan O'Toole. The latter thought the play brave and passionate, in the Shavian tradition of argumentative theatre,¹⁷ but questioned its adherence to realistic conventions which are partly at odds with the contents. Victor Merriman, who has written on various occasions on Calypso's work, also directed a production of the same play in 1997 which tried to eschew the naturalistic trap by using an in-the-round design to bring into sharper focus the strange, magic realist ending.¹⁸ For his part, O'Kelly went on to explore non-western forms of theatre and by 1998, with *Farawayan*, he offered a piece that returned to the central concern of *Asylum! Asylum!*, the plight and fear of the stranger in a strange land. He did so moving beyond language and narrative to make full use of music, sounds and images in what he

described as ‘a non-Irish form of theatre’ before correcting himself and suggesting that Calypso could be, in their own modest way, part of those ‘generating a new Irish form of theatre’.¹⁹ The programme notes outlined Calypso’s belief in the need to change Irish attitudes towards asylum seekers: ‘Asylum seekers and immigrants are not burdens to be borne or invaders to be repulsed. They are human beings with life stories and human rights, with abilities and energies, and with a range of contributions to make. They are to be welcomed’.²⁰ By extension, they also come from countries and cultures with different theatre traditions that are also to be made welcome on the Irish stage as they can help revitalise a theatre reaching its limits after over a century of verbal, naturalistic plays. What is more, as Merriman contends, some forms of experience cannot be conveyed in the language of western drama and need their own, appropriate forms in order not to betray the otherness of lives lived outside the western centre.²¹

In 2000, the same Peacock stage saw the first production of Elizabeth Kuti’s *Treehouses*.²² In this play, a young writer of English–Hungarian origin now based in Ireland ‘explores the dilemma of those whose identity is formed between places’,²³ as Anna McMullan puts it. To convey this sense of in-betweenness, Kuti opts for a largely realist setting with a difference, as she interweaves three stories, each with their own time and space, each featuring a woman at a different stage in her life, adolescent, middle-aged and ageing. The focus shifts constantly from the Irish nursing home where old Magda lives and recalls her past, to the story of her younger self she conjures up, and to a third story, location unclear, which features Eva, whose father has just died and whose thoughts, undramatised but narrated with a stream of consciousness technique, constantly waver between her childhood memories and her current grief and bereavement. The link between Magda’s and Eva’s stories will become manifest only in the ending. Kuti’s fluid to-ing and fro-ing between different times and places as well as between narrative and dramatic enactment of the memories on stage may bring to mind Friel’s *Dancing at Lughnasa*, though there is no single controlling viewpoint but rather a range of female subjectivities.

Old Magda recalls her adolescence on a farm in Eastern Europe. Her father’s decision to give shelter to Joseph, a young Jewish boy whose parents have been deported, marks Magda’s entry into a harsh world from which her father’s love had insulated her. Magda takes increasingly seriously her role as the boy’s protector, though she is unsure what she is protecting him against; as he reveals to her that deportation is but another word for execution, afraid that her father will ask the boy to leave since hiding him has become terribly dangerous, she decides

to run away with him so that his chances of escape may be greater. But Stephen, the young attractive schoolmaster, is in love with Magda and has asked for her hand. He is increasingly jealous of Magda's relationship with the Jewish boy. A mixture of jealousy and concern for Magda's safety motivate his holding her back and ultimately fear and weakness will induce Magda to stay behind, leaving the boy to flee the farm alone. Magda married Stephen and left Eastern Europe to settle in a strange land, but the thought of the boy she failed to save, of the promise she could not keep, has never left her.

Eva's tale is one of filial love for a father, abandoned by his wife, who constructed a treehouse for his beloved child. The treehouse is a symbol of their intimacy and mutual dependence as no outsider was to be allowed in. The arrival of a new neighbour, bearing the Jewish name of Miriam, and the relationship that develops between her and the father, shatter the child's dream of being her father's 'one and only'. On the day the pair got married, Eva remembers, her younger self burnt the treehouse. Now that her father has died, she is left to make her peace with his memory and to come to terms with her feelings:

to say it was a betrayal is too strong too strong of course you reached for what you loved and reached towards the shape of your desire I was not your burden you didn't let me stop you and now I know I'm grateful for that though then I did not could not know it you never promised protection against everything you never promised protection from the dark from alone from death that was not in your gift.²⁴

Thus the inability of Eva's father to protect his teenage daughter echoes Magda's rash promise to protect and keep safe the boy, a promise she failed to keep. Old Magda remains haunted by what she sees as her failure to keep her word and keep the boy safe, returning to the biblical image of Pharaoh's daughter and the baby in the ark. In an ending that is both poetic and deeply moving, our own doubts and fears, if not those of Magda, are finally assuaged as we discover that Eva's father was none other than that same Joseph who had given young Magda the key to his mother's musical box as a keepsake. As Magda rummages through her room with the help of kind-hearted nurse Ger, retrieving the key she feared had got lost, Eva, looking through her father's personal effects, comes upon a musical box that she cannot open as the key is missing. So the boy did escape and made his own way to some hospitable shore, one tale holding the key to the locked world of the other tale. A story of love, filial and romantic, selfish and generous, of secrets and guilt, of promises kept and broken, *Treehouses* invites the audience to empathise imaginatively with those who have found a

new home in a new country, though the ghosts of their past may still haunt them. Kuti's play subtly conveys the horror of the Holocaust and its impact on the survivors. The play repeatedly makes use of the interconnected symbols of the ark and the treehouse. Both evoke sanctuaries, ways of hiding and/or escaping from threats/others. But as Anna McMullan rightly perceives, these interrelated symbols are highly ambiguous as Eva and Magda also use their respective treehouses to keep the others out, to exclude. This prompts her warning:

As Irish society becomes more diverse and new stories, traditions and histories are introduced into the fabric of our culture, the traditional boundaries of the realist room can no longer accommodate the layered and complex experiences of home and identity that inhabit contemporary Ireland. The playwrights whose work has been discussed above have articulated fragmented, splintered identities, which must be patched together if agency is to be recovered, but whose visions and voices offer alternative perspectives and identities questioning the concept of a homogenous, shared world or audience which traditional realism assumes.²⁵

While both O'Kelly's and Kuti's plays foreground the immigrant's experience and difficulties upon getting access to the promised land or the guilt felt by those who left others behind, *Départ et Arrivée* deliberately brings to the fore the parallels between Irish emigration and contemporary immigration. In his article, Jason King underlines the role theatre has played, serving 'to provide both a vehicle and a venue for the enactment of this imaginative space, and the staging of spectacles of intercultural contact, in which the interconnections between immigrant perceptions and Irish historical memory have become dramatized as a recurrent narrative conceit in a number of recent Irish theatrical productions'.²⁶ While he does not discuss *Départ et Arrivée*, this play undoubtedly confirms King's sense that such a connection should be seen as central to the way theatre could address immigration in Ireland, whilst also offering evidence both of the potency and relevance of this parallel, and of its dangers, in terms of the conflation of too disparate experiences.

The genesis of the play is somewhat unusual in that the two playwrights did not share a common language and Dumay, the translator, had to act as go-between, translating Bolger's English into French and Shahyari's French into English. The French version, *Départ et Arrivée*, has been both staged and published, drawing largely positive critical reactions.²⁷ Dermot Bolger, unhappy with the result of their efforts, has so far refused to allow the English version of the play to be staged, though an unpublished version of the script exists and Bolger's 'half'

of the play, 'Departure', originally written as a monologue and then cut up and interspersed with Shahryari's 'Arrival', was broadcast as a one-act play on RTE Radio 1 in December 2004. *Départ et Arrivée* hinges on a device reminiscent of that used by Bolger in the successful *Finbar's Hotel* series of short stories, and consists of two intertwined monologues that should, but do not always, amount to a dialogue across time and cultural barriers. A living pregnant Kurdish woman and the ghost of an Irish pregnant girl share a space, a small room in a B&B in Dublin. Susan's arrival in the room awakens the ghost/memory of Maureen who also occupied that room on her way to England in the 1960s. The image of the ghost is recurrent throughout Bolger's work, and is used in *The Passion of Jerome*, for example, also staged in French by Shahryari. The starting point of the play for Bolger may well have been an incident involving the tragic death of eight Kurdish stowaways found suffocated in a container in Wexford. That Shahryari, who had directed two of the French productions of his plays, should be of Kurdish origin and a refugee from Iranian persecutions prompted Bolger's offer to pen this piece together.

Bolger's character, Maureen, left small-town Ireland after 'getting in trouble' with Michael, a young local man who has migrated to England and has come home for a holiday. The romance involves a dark secret and a crossing over of boundaries. Michael's uncle, branded an informer, was supposedly killed by Maureen's uncle during the civil war. Together the lovers plan Maureen's departure to join Michael in England, but Maureen soon hears of his death on an English building site. Her mother discovers her pregnancy and forces her to leave home rather than face the shame of being branded 'a slut' by the intolerant villagers. Given that all of her many brothers and sisters have also left Ireland for England and America, her going away would only be natural. Yet, rather than enter one of the infamous Magdalene Laundries or follow her parents' advice to go to the Catholic Protection Agency, where her child would be taken from her at birth, Maureen decides to use the money her father has given her, her mother's untouched dowry in fact, to take a boat for England and face up to the challenges of a new life as a single mother in Manchester, the town where the father of her child had worked and planned a future for them. In deference to her love for Michael she will not have the child born of their love grow up unaware of who his parents were. Her departure is thus both an escape from an Ireland that rejects 'fallen women' and an act of affirmation, though her fate in Manchester may be uncertain.²⁸

Shahryari's Susan lives in Turkey but is of Kurdish descent; her encounter in the neighbouring woods with Vedat, a non-violent militant

of the Kurdish cause, enables her to gain access to a whole memory of cultural and political oppression and suppression from which her father had protected her. Susan's decision to accompany Vedat into exile in Paris thus involves an embracing of the cause he defends. It signals a rediscovery of her origins, not an escape from shame or dishonour, as there is no suggestion that her loving father might force his pregnant daughter to leave the house. However, Vedat is killed by Turkish soldiers as he returns to the village where Kurds were murdered and left unburied. The place will be flooded to create an artificial lake, also causing Susan's father to go and make a new home elsewhere. Rather than follow him in his new exile, the young woman chooses to go and look for her elder sister, Kudret, who has settled in Ireland. As the sad stories of the two young women unfold before our eyes, parallels and connections are established for and by the audience, confirming that cultural differences cannot obliterate our shared humanity and the universality of love, filial and romantic, of desire and hope.

As both Emile-Jean Dumay and Victor Merriman have argued,²⁹ Sharhyari's almost 'magical realist' optimism jars with Bolger's darker realism for reasons that may go beyond individual aesthetic choices. Sharhyari places himself on the side of life and survival, endowing his Susan with a resourcefulness and optimism translated through her song of hope and the final image of the dancing girl. Where Sharhyari, understandably given his own life story, can portray emigration as a personal liberation which may herald a future collective liberation, Bolger seems unable to embrace such a positive vision and sees Ireland as still dependent upon its former coloniser for economic survival and in denial of its own limitations and failures.

Meanwhile, the future of the real-life counterparts of Susan and her child were closely bound up with evolutions in Irish legislation on emigration. As Ronit Lentin, a specialist in sociology observes angrily: 'In 2003 96% of all asylum applications were rejected, and according to the Irish Refugee Council, in 2003, 90 people each week were refused entry to Ireland to present asylum applications – no wonder there was a 32% fall in applications in 2003'.³⁰ In line with European directives, Ireland put in place stricter immigration controls, though pressure for limitation of the granting of citizenship to children of non-nationals largely came from within the country. Following upon a Supreme Court decision in January 2003, non-national parents no longer had a case to reside in Ireland to bring up their Irish-born children. A referendum held on 11 June 2004 and carried by a huge majority reversed its *jus soli* citizenship access and removed the birth right to Irish citizenship of those

same children. By establishing parallels between economic migration from Ireland in the 1950s and 1960s³¹ and current immigration to Ireland, the play also suggests that the country has a historical as well as an ethical responsibility to remember and act humanely, generously: a much needed reminder, it seems.

During a panel session on 'Irish Theatre and Globalisation' at the Prague 2005 IASIL conference, two of the participants, Karen Fricker and Patrick Lonergan, argued that Friel's *The Home Place* (2005) raised issues very relevant to today's concern with what constitutes Irish national identity, in the days of asylum seeking and immigration, so that the somewhat clichéd opposition between native Irish and English settler, far from being obsolete, had attained a new importance if one was willing to move beyond the obvious and broaden the spectrum; following upon this insight, I would like to read the play precisely in that light. *The Home Place* is, arguably, Friel's most substantial play for a number of years and a return home to Ballybeg after his recent forays into foreign, mainly Russian/Chekhovian territory. It is worth examining the use the playwright makes of anthropology and anthropometry as a metaphor and to examine how *The Home Place* can be read in terms of contemporary concerns with globalisation, genetics and new markers of identity, as well as the more visible ongoing interrogation of Anglo-Irish relations in the wake of the Good Friday Agreement and the amendments to the Irish Constitution. The play is set in the fictional and emblematic village of Ballybeg in Donegal, the time is 1878, on the eve of the outbreak of the Land War, at a time when the fear of a new Famine caused agrarian violence to resurface on a larger scale; it is also the eve of the formation of a National Land League (August 1879) and its alliance with Parnellism and Fenianism: in short, another of those transitional phases in Irish history that Friel regularly chooses as a backdrop for his plays.

The Home Place shows signs of an indebtedness to the Beckett of *Waiting for Godot*³² and to Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard*³³ but it is also closely related to several other pieces in the Friel canon; it self-consciously both looks back to *Translations* (1980), set in the 1830s when Baile Beag became Ballybeg, and forwards to *Aristocrats* (1979) with its 1970s setting. It can also be linked to *Making History* (1988) by suggesting a parallel between the partly anglicised Hugh O'Neill and the partly hibernicised Christopher Gore, and the difficulties attendant upon this hybridised condition. Like *Aristocrats*, *The Home Place* is strongly indebted to Chekhov and deals with the family, love, loyalty, and the fate of a social group that has become isolated, through wealth

and status when that assumed superiority (political, economic and social) disintegrates. In *Aristocrats*, the key metaphor was the writing of a family biography by an American professor eager to put in writing the truth about the O'Donnell family as representatives of the Catholic upper classes in Ireland. The playwright had stopped short of making his land-owning family Protestants and Anglo-Irish, a step he takes in *The Home Place*, for obvious historical reasons and the sake of verisimilitude. *The Home Place* is also, on another level, a companion piece to *Translations* as the arrival of the two Englishmen, Richard Gore and Perkins, mirrors the arrival of Yolland and Lancey with the British Army. But whereas the earlier play surveyed the situation from the vantage point of the hedge-school, *The Home Place* gives us direct access to the Big House in a radical shift of perspectives. The clearest instance of a deliberate crossover between the two plays is the character of Clement O'Donnell who shares with his ancestor, Hugh, the responsibility of a school, a marked pomposity and a fondness for drink.

The central metaphor for the England/Ireland relationship and ongoing misunderstanding in *The Home Place* is anthropometry, the measuring of man's physical characteristics. This 'scientific' approach will prove as ineffective, in fact as destructive, as the map-making in *Translations* or the academic thesis on upper-class Catholics propounded by Hoffnung in *Aristocrats*. The character of Dr Richard Gore seems partly inspired by the real-life Alfred Cort Haddon (1855–1940). As David McConnell explains in the programme notes, Haddon, a graduate from Cambridge University, was appointed Professor of Zoology at the Royal College of Sciences in Dublin in 1880: 'A follower of Galton he became interested in distinguishing races and sub-races by measuring the shapes of skulls (craniology), and in relating these physical qualities to behaviour'.³⁴ The Gallery Press edition of the playscript features both an extract from 'Studies in Irish Craniology: The Aran Islands, Co Galway', a lecture Haddon gave to the Royal Irish Academy in 1892, and a reproduction of a black and white photograph subtitled 'Anthropometry in Aran'. The photograph shows a person, presumably Haddon, sitting on a chair outside a whitewashed cottage, making notes while in front of him a man in a bowler hat measures the skull of a 'volunteer' as two locals, a man and an elderly woman look on. Unlike Haddon, the fictional Dr Gore has not taken up residence in Ireland but, like Haddon, he is a follower of Galton, an explorer and a cousin of Darwin's, who initiated and coined the term 'eugenics' in 1883. Galton's abiding interest was the hereditary transmission of intellectual capacity, which he studied through anthropometry. To quote McConnell,

Galton postulated that natural selection acted on groups within the human population, favouring the breeding and success of certain races, nationalities, social classes and even families. Such theories became the talk of the great houses in England and Ireland. Notions of genetic, racial superiority reached their awful nadir in Nazi Germany and still reappear from time to time. They were, and are, of course distasteful and in their extreme forms horrible, but they were also scientifically wrong.³⁵

Friel stresses the links between anthropometry as practised by the likes of Richard Gore and colonialist, racist mindsets which led to Victorian suspicion of the Irish, and which have found a new relevance today in the xenophobic discourse of far-right parties. As sociologist Steve Garner reminds us, race is about more than the colour of the skin: 'Races have without fail been constructed as a set of hierarchies, reflecting the dominant relations in the social and political domains',³⁶ a point exemplified by the racialisation of the Irish in Victorian Britain. Friel's Richard Gore is, according to the stage directions, 'a man of resolute habits and Victorian confidence'. Speaking about his earlier visits to the Aran Islands, he comments: 'An awesome place inhabited by a truly remarkable tribe. You must see them. Handsome, wild, courteous and vengeful (because Irish). Extraordinarily long faces and black eyes. And of course addicted to the most extravagant superstitions. A primeval people really'.³⁷ Though he believes his widowed cousin ought to remarry, he has qualms about the suitability – both social and racial one surmises – of a possible union between Christopher and his housekeeper. Yet, his repulsion at what he construes as an inter-racial union and miscegenation is tempered by his admiration for Margaret's physique: 'Pity to see Kent vanish – if he does marry her. Bigger pity though if she were to be diluted. Wouldn't it?' (p. 34). Bringing to mind the mass emigration that resulted from the Famine, he compares the photographs that he will take and give to each subject to glass beads, gratefully accepted by thrilled natives who send them off 'as special trophies to their relatives in America'. As both David and Christopher seem to find his comparison of the Irish to primitive African tribes crude, Richard goes on to elaborate the purpose of his research, claiming that 'a combination of physical features might constitute an ethnic code we can't yet decipher' and that 'an enormous vault of genetic information is only just beyond the reach of our understanding'. Cracking the code 'will reveal to you how a man thinks, what his character traits are, his loyalties, his vices, his entire intellectual architecture'. Fired up by his own dream of total control, he exclaims 'If we could break into that vault, David, we wouldn't control just an empire. We would rule the entire universe'. Here is the ultimate dream of power, and a reminder

that eugenics could prove dramatically attractive to dictatorial, racist regimes like Hitler's Germany. It is an equally potent warning about contemporary abuses as the phrases 'genetic information' and 'crack the code' suggest a very modern understanding and environment, including cloning and work on the human genome, as well as the age-old racist fear of miscegenation and the 'contamination' of the white race.³⁸

Richard Gore's 'measuring business' is brought to an abrupt halt by the intrusion of Con O'Donovan, a local youth with links to the agrarian/political activists, who demands that Gore and Perkins leave. Faced with a direct threat to his life and that of his guest, Christopher gives in. In this short but violent clash between two ideologies, British imperialism and Irish nationalism, Gore's claims are matched by O'Donovan's, and the latter's confidence that he is entitled to say who is Irish or merely entitled to live in Ireland and who must leave or die is as chilling as Gore's imperialist stance. Violent exclusion generates violent rejection. O'Donovan's are no empty threats since he is responsible for the assassination of another landlord, Lord Lifford, a neighbour of the Gores. Though born and brought up in Donegal, Christopher spent his childhood summers in Kent: 'And the truth is I hated being shipped over to the home place every damned summer', he recalls, before admitting 'And I love this place so much, Margaret. This is the only home I've known'. Now, looking at the estate, he becomes lost in the golden memories of the 'home place' in Kent before awakening to the reality of his fate: 'I'm an exile from both that memory and this fact now, amn't I?' (p. 63). Impetuously, he asks Margaret to marry him and make a new life with him somewhere else, 'anywhere where roles aren't imposed on us – where we'll be free of history and heritage and the awful burden of this [house]' (p. 65). Margaret gently refuses him and denies his definition of her as an exile too, though to a large extent she has also crossed borders and ended up in the no-man's land in between Planter and Gael, in between her social origins and the role of chatelaine Christopher would have her play. Margaret will marry neither Christopher nor David, choosing instead to leave the Lodge and return 'home', to her father, in what remains a highly ambiguous move open to different interpretations. As he angrily confronts his situation, any illusion of being 'at home', irrevocably shattered, Christopher expatiates on the plight of his class:

The planter has to be resilient, hasn't he? No home, no country, a life of isolation and resentment. . . . And that resentment will stalk him – and never forget it – down through the next generation and the next and the next. The doomed nexus of those who believe themselves the possessors and those who believe they're dispossessed. (p. 68)

There lies the crux of a play that begs to be read in the context of early twenty-first-century, post-Good-Friday agreement, global, multicultural Ireland.

To conclude, the plays analysed here, in all their diversity, show characters striving to find a place they could call home in the full sense of the word since, as O'Toole reminds us, 'One of the things that culture reminds us of is that home is much more than a name we give to a dwelling place. It is also a whole set of connections and affections, the web of mutual recognition that we spin around ourselves and that gives us a place in the world'.³⁹ Whether globalisation, with its emphasis on the nomadic and its contempt for nostalgia and traditional forms of belonging, can do away with any sense of home or whether it merely translates older allegiances in new terms remains to be seen. In an Ireland that is, albeit reluctantly, coming to terms with its multicultural character, playwrights and artists generally have an important role to play as they explore subjectively, imaginatively the consciousness of others, and produce contact zones⁴⁰ where changing concepts of Irishness and otherness can co-exist and be articulated in meaningful ways.

Notes

- 1 I borrow the phrase 'new articulations of Irishness and otherness' from Ronit Lentin's article, 'Black Bodies and Headless Hookers: Alternative Global Narratives for 21st Century Ireland', *The Irish Review*, 33 (2005), p. 2.
- 2 Gerard Delanty, 'Irish Political Community in Transition', *The Irish Review*, 33 (2005), p. 16.
- 3 Fintan O'Toole, *The Ex-Isle of Erin* (Dublin: New Island Books, 1997), p. 173.
- 4 Figures given by both Terence Brown in *Ireland. A Social and Cultural History: 1922–2002* (London: Harper Perennial, 2004), and Ronit Lentin.
- 5 Seamus Heaney, *Finders Keepers. Selected Prose* (London: Faber, 2002), p. 47.
- 6 Quoted in Brown, p. 395.
- 7 See Michel Peillon, 'Agency, Flows and Post-Colonial Structure in Ireland', *The Irish Review*, 30 (2003): 'The connections between an Irish and a global culture cannot be subsumed under a structural model, which only accounts for the ability of "colonial centres" to constrain and shape Irish culture. It occludes the other side of the story: that Irish culture has contributed, and not only in a subordinate way, to the culture of the "centre", that many cultural forms in Ireland are thriving and occupying the centre. This argument relates to another weakness of the post-colonial

- approach: it does not allow for the possibility of cultural agency, other than unspecified resistance' (pp. 78–9).
- 8 Jason King 'Interculturalism and Irish Theatre: The Portrayal of Immigrants on the Irish Stage', *The Irish Review*, 33 (2005), p. 25. King's article examines Donal O'Kelly's *Farawayan* (1998), Roddy Doyle's adaptation of *Guess Who's Coming for the Dinner* (2002), Maeve Ingolsby's *Mixing in on the Mountain* (2003), Paul Mercier's *Native City* (1998), Joe O'Byrne's *It Come Up Sun* (2000), Charlie O'Neill's *Hurl* (2003), and the work of African Voices in Ireland theatre company (2003).
 - 9 Declan Kiberd, 'Dancing at Lughnasa', *The Irish Review*, 27 (summer 2001), p. 30.
 - 10 Father Jack's improper conduct – there is a hint he may have entertained a close relationship with Okawa, his houseboy and mentor – may echo the various scandals that affected the Irish Catholic Church in the 1990s and contributed to the Church's loss of moral authority.
 - 11 Brian Friel, *Dancing at Lughnasa* (London: Faber and Faber, 1990), p. 2.
 - 12 For an interesting analysis of the play, see also Paul Murphy, 'Inside the Immigrant Mind: Nostalgic Versus Nomadic Subjectivities in Late Twentieth-Century Drama', in *Performing Ireland*, special issue of *Australasian Drama Studies*, 43 (October 2003), pp. 128–47.
 - 13 Donal O'Kelly, *Asylum!Asylum!* in *New Plays from the Abbey Theatre*, ed. Christopher Fitz-Simon and Sanford Sternlicht (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1996), p. 145.
 - 14 Brown, p. 386.
 - 15 Quoted in Victor Merriman, 'Songs of Possible Worlds: Nation, Representation and Citizenship in the Work of Calypso Productions', in *Theatre Stuff*, ed. Eamonn Jordan (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2000), p. 280.
 - 16 Victor Merriman 'Cartographic Connections: Problems of Representation in Calypso Theatre Company's *The Business of Blood*', *The Irish Review*, 22 (summer 1998), p. 29.
 - 17 Fintan O'Toole, review for the *Irish Times*, 9 August 1994, reprinted in *Critical Moments*, ed. Julia Furray and Redmond O'Hanlon (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2003), pp. 126–8.
 - 18 Merriman in Jordan, p. 290.
 - 19 O'Kelly, 'Strangers in a Strange Land', *Irish Theatre Magazine*, 1: 1 (autumn 1998), p. 12.
 - 20 David Storey, quoted in Merriman, 'Songs of Possible Worlds', p. 288.
 - 21 See Merriman in Jordan.
 - 22 Elizabeth Kuti, *Treehouses* (London: Methuen, 2000).
 - 23 Anna McMullan, 'Unhomely Stages: Women Taking (a) Place in Irish Theatre', in *Druids, Dudes and Beauty Queens*, ed. Dermot Bolger (Dublin: New Island, 2001), p. 88.
 - 24 Kuti, *Treehouses*, p. 49.
 - 25 McMullan, p. 90.

- 26 King, p. 14.
- 27 *Départ et Arrivée* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2004); performed in November 2004 in Art Studio Théâtre, Paris.
- 28 In many ways, Maureen's story ends where Felicia's begins in William Trevor's 1994 novel, *Felicia's Journey* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1995).
- 29 At a conference held in Caen (France) on 'Theatrical Adaptation in Ireland since 1970', in September 2007. See also Lara Marlowe, 'Lost in translation', *The Irish Times*, 17 November 2004, p. 14. I am very grateful to Emile-Jean Dumay for giving me access to material relating to *Départ/Arrivée* and to the unpublished script in English.
- 30 Lentin, pp. 4–5.
- 31 Bolger himself emigrated to Germany as a young man and worked in a factory, an experience that influenced the writing of his first successful stage play, *The Lament for Arthur Cleary*.
- 32 See in particular the relationship between Dr Richard Gore and his assistant, the bowler-hatted Perkins, which recalls on a lighter mode that between Pozzo and Lucky. Lucky's barely comprehensible 'speech' on science and metaphysics (among other things) includes a reference to the 'unfinished labours of Testew and Cunard crowned by the Acacacademy of Anthropopometry of Essy-in-Possy' and mentions 'the skull in Connemara', already taken up by McDonagh of course in his own Leenane Trilogy, and here, no doubt, one of those skulls Richard Gore is so eager to measure on the Aran Islands.
- 33 The set of *The Home Place* features 'a crescent of trees' whose symbolic value becomes the subject of the somewhat belaboured final scene which concentrates on the 'doomed trees' marked out for destruction.
- 34 Programme notes to *The Home Place*.
- 35 Ibid.
- 36 Steve Garner, 'Guests of the Nation', *The Irish Review*, 33 (2005), p. 78.
- 37 Brian Friel, *The Home Place* (Loughcrew: Gallery Press, 2005), p. 31. All further references to the play will be to this edition and will be given in the text.
- 38 In 'The Unbidden Ireland: Materialism, Knowledge and Interculturality', *The Irish Review*, 31 (2004), pp. 3–10, Michael Cronin advances the hypothesis that current scientific evolutions (robotics, genetic engineering) should prompt discussions about the 'posthuman' rather than post-nationalism or post-colonialism.
- 39 O'Toole, *The Ex-Isle of Erin*, p. 136.
- 40 Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 1992).

