

Brexlit: Embracing Change, New Beginnings at the Abbey Theatre

Abstract: Conjuring the representation of change, as well as its opposite counterpart, iteration, requires a kaleidoscopic approach to understanding the craving for change both on and offstage in post-Brexit Ireland. This includes examining its presence in the Abbey Theatre, long attuned to questions of borders, identity and sovereignty to explore a vanishing cultural identity overflowed by an increasing process of globalization. We will first see how the representation of change and iteration partake in the shaping of a renewed national post-Brexit identity and focus on the new Irish exploration of Molière’s work exemplified by the latest adaptation of *Tartuffe* by Frank McGuinness in 2023. Then we will explore the riveting mirror to life new production of *The Quare Fellow* in 2024, embracing change and continuing Brendan Behan’s legacy of subversion. And finally, we will examine Marina Carr’s ghost play, *Audrey or Sorrow* (2024) and show how performance and theatre are privileged places for the post-Brexit Irish society to act out the impact of a haunting history.

Keywords: *Brexit, Abbey Theatre, Molière, Frank McGuinness, Brendan Behan, Marina Carr*

The word “iteration” invites us to ponder over the notion of change and the act or process of passing something from one person to another, from one *topos* or one *logos* to another, from a haunted stage to another, and from one parochial memory to a boundless diasporic vision. The notion of iteration in Ireland prompts us to examine translations, borders, boundaries, limits, even hermeneutic crossings that lead to new experiences, new ways of considering, re-imagining and questioning the self and the world. For Michel Foucault, to write is thus “to show oneself, to project oneself into view, to make one’s own face appear in the other’s presence”,¹ which also implies a close link between drama, ethics, poetics and politics. The theatre is “the place where a nation thinks in public in front of itself” according to Martin Esslin in *An Anatomy of Drama*.² And this quote is relevant when we think of the Abbey Theatre, the national theatre of Ireland. Brexit, though primarily a political and economic rupture has yielded powerful cultural and artistic responses, from the translation and adaptation of Molière’s play, *Tartuffe* (1664), by Frank McGuinness in 2023 to the 2024 production of Brendan Behan’s play, *The Quare Fellow* (1954) and Marina Carr’s *Audrey or Sorrow* (2024). Brexit has become a polymorphic palimpsest, taken as both provocation and opportunity. Placing Molière, Behan and Carr in dialogue provides a fertile and thought-provoking framework for examining how the Abbey Theatre responded to Brexit through comedy, satire and tragedy and questioned the themes of truth, hypocrisy and deceitfulness, the contested memory of colonialism, death and political imprisonment with the haunted and haunting voices of history and shifting political landscapes.

1. A post-Brexit *Tartuffe* at the Abbey Theatre

The Abbey Theatre’s Artistic Director Caitríona McLaughlin introduces the 2023 Abbey’s adaptation of *Tartuffe* by Frank McGuinness as an opulent Irish retelling of a true classic. Molière enriched the

¹ Michel Foucault, “Self-Writing”, in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, trans. Robert Hurley, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: The New Press, 1997), 216.

² Martin Esslin, *An Anatomy of Drama* (London: Temple Smith, 1978), 101.

human mind and McGuinness's new adaptation henceforth built bridges in a post-Brexit era where truth and falsity, decency and hypocrisy are intermingled and blurred. For McLaughlin: "Great comic writers go one step further: they encode the DNA of their own anarchic laughter into our present, a present that would be unrecognisable to them apart from a few salient details – the persistence of hypocrisy as a tool for social advancement, for example, and of saying one thing and meaning another".³

The comedy *Tartuffe* was premiered as a three-act play in May 1664 at the Palace of Versailles for King Louis XIV and banned because it was thought to attack the Catholic Clergy and more precisely St François de Sales' definition of a spiritual adviser. In his *Introduction à la vie dévote* (*Introduction to a Devout Life*, 1608), de Sales compared the spiritual adviser to an angel, a companion, a confessor, a guide on every human being's spiritual journey. Molière was accused of mocking Catholic devotion by the Archbishop of Paris, Paul Philippe Hardouin de Beaumont de Péréfixe, who influenced the king's decision to ban the play, and threatened excommunication against anyone who read, attended the play and/or supported the playwright. François de Sales' *Introduction à la vie dévote* was translated into Irish Gaelic in 1650 by Pilib Ó Raghallaigh as *An Bheatha Chrábhaidh*. The key to the appeal of the text in Ireland is, for Charles Dillon, "that it speaks directly to the reader, advising and counselling him on such diverse matters as attendance at mass and frequent communion, on the suitability of friendships and relationships, on the dangers of overindulgence in leisure, and in how to avoid and overcome temptation".⁴

The spiritual adviser is sanctified, capable of miracles and oracles. Dorine mocks this devout relationship between Orgon and Tartuffe. For Orgon, God speaks through Tartuffe because he is his religious teacher. Molière was accused of throwing into disarray the very foundation of the Catholic Church because he mocked the spiritual adviser's religious and sanctified guidance of souls. Hence, to avoid being accused of poisoning the souls, Molière rewrote *Tartuffe*. It was performed as a five-act play on Tuesday, 5 February 1669, in Paris at the Palais Royal Theatre. The title changed from *Tartuffe ou l'Hypocrite* in 1664 to *Tartuffe ou l'Imposteur* in 1669. Tartuffe became more of an imposter than a religious hypocrite, even though in the list of *dramatis personae*, Tartuffe is still described as "un faux dévot" ("a religious hypocrite") in the 1669 version.

McGuinness' new version of *Tartuffe* was first performed at the Abbey Theatre in Dublin on 3 March 2023. His play is based on the 1669 version. It is divided into five acts and is written in verse. In the list of *dramatis personae*, McGuinness chose to describe Tartuffe not as a religious hypocrite but as an imposter. He rewrote the list of characters, dividing it into three sections, the first one entitled "The Family" and starting with Orgon, minutely described as "son of Madame Pernelle, husband of Elmire, father of Mariane and Damis" contrary to Molière, who defined Orgon as Elmire's husband (*Mari d'Elmire*). It is extremely interesting to point out the fact that McGuinness used the heading "The Family" because, when *Tartuffe* was premiered at the Palais-Royal Theatre in 1669, the cast was made up of Molière's own family on stage. Orgon was played by Molière himself, Elmire, by his wife Mlle Molière (Armande Béjart), Dorine by Madeleine Béjart (Molière's first love and Armande's mother), and Mme Pernelle by Louis Béjart (Madeleine's brother). The second section is made up of characters who do not belong to the family *per se* but who are linked to the family either as servants or as suitors, Valere, Mariane's suitor, Tartuffe, the imposter and the two maids, Dorine and Filopote. The last section is linked to law and justice with an Arresting Officer and the ill-named Monsieur Loyal, who works for Tartuffe and embodies his disloyalty and ingratitude towards Orgon. Monsieur Loyal is

³ Caitriona McLaughlin in the programme note to *Tartuffe*: <https://www.abbeytheatre.ie>.

⁴ Charles Dillon, "An Bheatha Chrábhaidh: A 'Popular' Translation", *Revue LISA/LISA e-journal*, III.1 (2005), www.journals.openedition.org.

played by a woman, Amy Convoy, in the 2023 Abbey Theatre adaptation of *Tartuffe*. The question of changing gender identity and performance is also a molieresque feature, since in the *Tartuffe* premiere (1669) Madame Pernelle was played by a man, Louis Béjart.

The Abbey Theatre stage is haunted by Molière's performance. As McLaughlin stated mischievously "Molière probably didn't know he was inadvertently writing about twenty-first century Ireland, but Frank McGuinness certainly did".⁵ Hence, the stage, the text, the production, and the body of the actors are haunted by Molière's ghost and theatrical transmission. As Marvin Carlson highlighted in *The Haunted Stage*, "the need continually to rehearse and renegotiate the relationship with memory and the past, is nowhere more specifically expressed in human culture than in theatrical performance".⁶ "All theatre" for Carlson "is haunted by repetition"⁷ and I would add by transmission, that is to say an Irish cultural and social activity deeply involved with memory and history. McGuinness kept the same names for his characters. He only erased the diacritical marks, the accents, the glyphs added to the letter 'e'. The 'é' with an acute accent for Cléante and the 'è' with a grave accent for Valère. Some French words are embedded in the text creating a feeling of foreign familiarity: from Act One, "ELMIRE *Ma belle mère*, why the haste?"⁸ to Act 5, "Monsieur LOYAL This house belongs to *Monsieur Tartuffe*" (82). Implicitly, the spectator is sent back to a seventeenth century France, and McGuinness' script becomes a paradoxical palimpsest of continuity and change. Transmission and transformation are woven together into fragments of the present and the absent, giving access to experience from different times and space in multiple layers of synchronicity. For McLaughlin, McGuinness "has channelled Molière's comic spirit, alacrity, bite and gameplay ..., underscored with a lash of his Ulster tongue and held within the controlled strictures of rhyming couplets".⁹ McGuinness has indeed imposed formal constraints on his version of *Tartuffe* and the use of Irish colloquialisms is mixed with elaborate metaphors. His rhyming couplets are filled with Hiberno-English expressions like "Great craic" (ACT 1, PERNELLE: The dirty chat that could turn your stomach / That's fare for all in the land of great craic, 18), "Fella" (ACT 2, DORINE: Take up this offer; you've found your fella. / Is he not divine? Is he not swell? 37), or "Eejit" (ACT 4, ELMIRE: Love can make eejits out of one and all, 64; ACT 5, ORGON: Look at my mother, the eejit in the hat. / If she pushes me further, I'll knock her flat, 79).

The action of the play takes place in a partitioned space. There is a large and colourful seventeenth century dining room with a banquet table covered with food and drink and a smaller room, mostly bare save for a charging phone or laptop and a ring light. There are numerous doors in both spaces, allowing eavesdropping and the comic entrance and exit of maids and suitors. This partitioned performing space is the archetypal representation of a divided geographical, physical, social and psychic Irish society. On one side we witness Tartuffe, the hypocrite, the devout spiritual advisor of Orgon, presenting a false and distorted image of himself to the world, and on the other, we face the hidden space of a psyche, the Freudian id, the subconscious part of Tartuffe's mind that is responsible for driving him towards guilty physical desires. In this smaller empty space, he flogs himself in front of a mobile phone camera, illuminated not by a Christian candle but by a twenty-first century ring light. The juxtaposition of these two partitioned spaces unveils the dichotomy between illusion and reality, faith and hypocrisy and makes us ponder over our abusive use of new technologies that put filters on our faces and life, dangerously developing our narcissistic tendencies and hiding our flaws

⁵ Caitríona McLaughlin in the programme note to *Tartuffe*. <https://www.abbeytheatre.ie>

⁶ Marvin Carlson, *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine* (Ann Harbor: Michigan U.P., 2011), 167.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Frank McGuinness, *Tartuffe* (London: Faber & Faber, 2023), 13. Further references to the play appear in parentheses.

⁹ McLaughlin, *Tartuffe*.

and true self. Hence, when we attend McGuinness' version of *Tartuffe*, we stand for the King and Queen in Velazquez's painting *Las Meninas*, who are supposedly outside, yet their reflection in the back wall mirror also places them inside the pictorial space. To quote Michel Foucault:

we are observing ourselves being observed by the painter and made visible to his eye by the same light that enables us to see him. And just as we are about to apprehend ourselves, transcribed by his hand as though in a mirror, we find that we can in fact apprehend nothing of that mirror but its lustreless back. The other side of a psyche.¹⁰

The use of technological device in the partitioned space is a warning. We will not be tartuffed by a man present in our home but worse by countless Tartuffes on our mobile phone in a looming post-Brexit Orwellian dystopia. Because in that space, the screen of our mobile phones and our laptops, the fight against religious hypocrisy, patriarchy and sexual oppression is more relevant than ever. Seventeenth century France and twenty-first century Ireland share the same issues. Molière and his Irish translators transcend time and space because they open a dialogue between their works. They echo one another and their palimpsest feature is a transtextual perfusion that enables the mixture of old and new dramatic blood. To translate is to enter a world of intimacy and privacy because the writer and the translator, like the observer and the observed in *Las Meninas*, are taking part in a ceaseless exchange of permutations. And as Steiner stated in *After Babel*, "the existence of art and literature and the reality of felt history in a community, depend on a never-ending, though very often unconscious art of internal translation".¹¹

In transposing *Tartuffe* into a deregulation of all senses twenty-first century Ireland, McLoughlin harnesses the synesthetic potential of the theatre, bringing together sound, colour, and sensation creating in the audience a neurological condition whereby the stimulation of one sensory modality evokes, as well, a perception in an unstimulated modality. It starts with the stimulation of hearing. The play opens to Azealia Bank's *212*. Then there are songs such as *Slave 4 You* by Britney Spears assisting the transition from one scene to another and music ranging from techno to the Pet Shop Boys and Depeche Mode. Hence, the stimulation of hearing in McLoughlin staging of *Tartuffe* is not only due to the enunciation of speech and text by the actors on stage but also by sounds, noises, and music. Voices, loud music, and technological means, mobile phone device and laptop items create the synecdochic atmosphere of a feverish performance crossing spatial and temporal borders. The staging presents a transcendental vision of a language that brings together sounds, space and images. The stimulation of sight on stage is not only due to the colourful cacophony of Katie Davenport's costumes and set but also by lightning and strobe effects. Strobing images are intermingled with loud sounds, creating synaesthesia, *i.e.* a heightened stimulation of sight and hearing through rupture and deviation. Henceforth, McGuinness' script and McLaughlin's staging send us back to Molière, the playwright, the stage director, the poet and the actor who talked about the dichotomy between the text and the staging. Molière, in his introduction to *L'Amour médecin* (1666), stated: "It is well known that comedies are only made to be performed; and I advise the reading of this one only to those who have the eyes to discover in the reading all the play of the theatre".¹²

Molière thus laid down a fundamental and maybe controversial principle: a good reading of the theatre is one that is done 'with the eyes of the theatre', one that succeeds in visualizing the performance, and thus in mentally reconstructing all the acting and ornaments of the theatre. A synesthetic reading of *Tartuffe* becomes the basis of a renewed deregulation of all the senses staging.

¹⁰ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage Book Edition, 1994), 5.

¹¹ George Steiner, *After Babel* (New York: Oxford U.P., 1975), 31.

¹² Molière, *Œuvres complètes*, éd. Georges Forestier et Claude Bourqui, vol. 1 (Paris: Gallimard, 2010), 603 (my translation).

Once the stage directions have been read, the setting immediately fades into the mental background. In the performance, on the other hand, the setting persists and exerts a continuous pressure on the spectator's perception and interpretation of the scene. The mental background can be forgotten, while the physical background is persistent.

McLaughlin's representation of change and iteration partook in the shaping of a renewed national post-Brexit identity in Ireland by staging Molière's play *Tartuffe* in 2023 at the Abbey Theatre to explore the diachronic theme of truth and falsity. At a time of political upheaval and uncertainties where liars and hypocrites roam the corridors of power, we will now explore the riveting mirror to life production of Brendan Behan's *The Quare Fellow* (1954) directed by Tom Creed at the Abbey Theatre in 2023, embracing change and continuing Behan's legacy of subversion.

2. The Post-Brexit Circle of Thanatos

The contemporary crisis of Brexit offers a provocative opportunity and subversive ways to consider how Ireland continues to negotiate its place in Europe between cultural memory and political change. Brendan Behan's voice from beyond the grave offers a Swiftian lens sharpened by satire, compassion and a deep suspicion of borders both literal and psychological in a post-Brexit Ireland. Behan in *The Hostage* (1958) has one of his characters, Pat, draw a stifling circle of death: "Now, I'm going to draw a circle round you, with this piece of chalk. Now you move outside that circle and you're a dead man. Watch him, Feargus. *He draws a circle round LESLIE WILLIAMS, and the VOLUNTEER points his gun at him*".¹³ Behan exposes in this play the way in which ideological systems produce forms of confinement that restrict not only the bodies but also the imaginations. Brexit, with its emphasis on sovereignty, control and territorial reappropriation represents a contemporary reiteration of these dynamics of imprisonment. Behan draws an Irish thanatopolitical circle whose centre is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere. In *The Hostage* or, recently, *The Quare Fellow* directed by Creed at the Abbey Theatre in 2024, death is inside and outside the circle, it is written on the margins. For Creed:

As ... the offstage death of the quare fellow becomes inevitable, a kind of improvised wake spontaneously takes place in the prison yard. A few bottles of stout are opened, and songs both spiritual and secular are sung. What might we do to stave off suffering? How might we pay tribute to lives lost, however brutal or neglected? *The Quare Fellow* opens a space for us to be together, in joy and hardship, ... to reflect on past, present and future, and what we do to survive.¹⁴

Michael Pierse defined Ireland's 'thanatopolitics' as "the power over life and death and how the struggles of the marginal define the politics of the centre".¹⁵ Theo Dorgan, in "Larkin through the Eyes of Writers", quoted Behan asking in Irish about socialist leader Jim Larkin's funeral, "Was it us in the Coffin?" and answering "No, we were not: we were on the street marching / Alive and grateful for the dead",¹⁶ a clear echo to Padraig Pearse's "life springs from death". Hence,

in unearthing the suppressed histories of the marginal, exposing the systematicity of the necropolitical, and challenging the normalcy of objective violence, Behan locates something emphatically alive in his

¹³ Brendan Behan, *The Complete Plays* (London: Eyre Methuen Drama, 1991), 218.

¹⁴ Tom Creed, *Notes on Survival* (November 2023), www.abbeytheatre.ie.

¹⁵ Michael Pierse, ed., *A History of Irish Working-Class Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 2017), 168.

¹⁶ Theo Dorgan, "Larkin through the Eyes of Writers", in Donal Nevin, ed., *James Larkin-Lion of the Fold* (Dublin: Gill & MacMillan, 2006), 106.

depiction of death, that glimmer of desire Ernst Bloch characterized as the inchoate prefiguration of a post-capitalist figure, an implicit ‘dreaming ahead’.¹⁷

In Behan’s work Pierse therefore unearthed “a leitmotif of the liminal, of the poverty that pushes working-class people to the threshold of death”, calling “attention to structural oppression and to the ‘necro-political’”, the politics for Achille Mbembe, “of differentiating between valued and devalued bodies, of excluding some from life itself”.¹⁸ In Behan’s play, *The Quare Fellow*, directed by Creed, we are trapped in the circle of Thanatos, a graveyard haunted by the dead, the Mountjoy Prison where female and non-binary actors play the part of male characters and exhibit a polyphony of accents and social classes. For Creed: “We draw on the whole tradition of cross-gender casting in the theatre, and a long history of male impersonation, from the trouser roles of baroque opera, and the music hall performances that Behan grew up with, up to contemporary drag kings”.¹⁹

They loiter in jails and poor neighbourhoods and sing a post-Brexit apocalyptic threnody from beyond the grave to the tune of *The Auld Triangle*. But will the dead stifle the living? To quote Jacques Derrida, “we are still in the cemetery, the gravediggers are working hard, digging up skulls, trying to identify them, one by one, and Hamlet recalls that this one ‘had a tongue’ and it used to sing”.²⁰ Art and language become the unique junction between the living and the dead, between the prison and the life outside its walls, crossing borders between France, the UK and Ireland by means of translations that convey forgotten traumas, injustice and murders through a contrasting set of truth and falsity. For Creed, the play is about survival and “and all the things we do to try to survive the systems in which we are required to operate, masking trauma with humour or alcohol, playing out different roles and relationships, carving out space for small acts of rebellion, kindness or solidarity”.²¹ Behan is still singing from beyond the grave and haunting Irish actors like Gabriel Byrne, who in *Walking with Ghosts, A Memoir*, published in 2020, remembered how he had met him when he was almost five years of age on a Dublin bus with his mother. Before getting off the bus, he wished the young Byrne long life to him and Byrne’s mother added that Brendan was a famous writer on the wrong bus and that “God loved him, the creature”.²² If Byrne is walking with Behan’s ghost in 2020, Derrida’s notion of hauntology pervades and intertwines the life and works of Behan because the voices and the evanescent bodies of ghosts fracture linear conceptions of temporality. The ghost and Behan himself desynchronize memories of the past and offers “the furtive and ungraspable visibility of the invisible”.²³

In a post-Brexit era, it is interesting to highlight the fact that Behan risked jail-time to cross the UK to reach Paris where he met Boris Vian, who translated *The Quare Fellow* as *Le Client du Matin*, and that the Abbey Theatre decided to stage his play exactly a century after his birth. Because Behan as a wanderer in Paris crossed hermeneutic and haunted borders with internal reasons, i.e. a subjective literary motivational set, desires, beliefs of freedom, goals, wants as well as external reasons, determined by the socio-economic environment or the relation with this Parisian environment. Behan was perceived as a celestial tramp wandering in Paris because he embodied Victor Hugo’s idea that the spirit is enriched by what it receives and the heart by what it gives. For actor and playwright Georges

¹⁷ Pierse, *A History*, 194.

¹⁸ Ibid., 170.

¹⁹ Creed, *Notes*.

²⁰ Jacques Derrida, *Spectres of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International* (New York: Routledge Classics, 2006 [Paris 1993]), 5.

²¹ Creed, *Notes*.

²² Gabriel Byrne, *Walking with Ghosts: A Memoir* (New York: Picador, 2020), 21-22.

²³ Derrida, *Spectres*, 5.

Wilson, who first directed *Le Client du matin* (*The Quare Fellow*) in France at the Théâtre de l'oeuvre in 1959 and *Un Otage* (*The Hostage*) at the Odéon, Théâtre de France in 1962 and at the Théâtre de la Madeleine in 1984, Behan, whom he met in Paris, was as generous as his plays because “he must have experienced real poverty. He wears nothing but a suit. We’ve never seen him change. Does he have a lot of money? I don’t know. All I know is that he hands it out to the tramps, his mates”.²⁴

As a working-class Irish writer, he took possession of the French cultural capital. For Behan, Paris was haunted by Irish artists, poets, playwrights, revolutionaries, singers and priests, whose steps he followed. For Ulick O’Connor, Brendan “reminded himself too that he was now in the city where Irish revolutionaries traditionally spent their exile scheming for their return to their native land. Wolfe Tone, John O’Leary, James Stephens, and many others have spent a lot of their lives in Paris café making common cause with exiles from other countries”.²⁵

In Paris, Behan encountered the spectres of James Joyce and Oscar Wilde and “jumped in graves” like Seamus Heaney, “dithering, blathering”.²⁶ In his poem “Gratitude to Joyce” (1949), Behan sees the spectre of Joyce in Paris and walks with him in the rue St. André des Arts, but the spectre also sees him and is led to praise him. Behan is not silenced by Joyce or daunted by him, but is defiant, asking to be treated as a peer. He was also haunted by Oscar Wilde, maybe the prime reason for his coming to Paris. He lingered in the street where Wilde passed away and lived in extreme poverty. In Paris, Behan wandered far into forbidden realms, in a linguistic and sexual *terra incognita*. He spoke French but he was said to be “an ungrammatical French speaker”.²⁷ In Paris, Behan became the embodiment of what John Brannigan identifies in his chapter “Bohemian Behan” as “dissidence and the intellectual and sexual freedoms of expatriate life”.²⁸ Because for Derrida: “a genius always resists and defies after the fashion of a spectral thing. The animated work becomes that thing, the thing that, like an elusive spectre, *engineers* a habitation without proper inhabiting, call it a *haunting*, of both memory and translation”.²⁹

Away from Ireland, Behan wrote in Gaelic and English, spoke French and found in Paris according to John Brannigan “an outlet for exploring the idea that sexuality and morality are social conventions”.³⁰ Behan danced and sang for all the outcasts. His depiction of prostitutes and gay men in *The Hostage* or prisoners in *The Quare Fellow* returned Irish writing to the margins, what Pierse calls “his dance for all the outcasts” against what Foucault has termed “state racisms”.³¹ The 2024 production of *The Quare Fellow* at the Abbey Theatre is also a dance for all the post-Brexit outcasts. In Behan’s work and life in Dublin and Paris, it is the beggar, the prostitute, or the petty thief (Lumpen for Marx) who represent the more general plight of the poor, occupying a threshold space: where according to Pierse “devalued lives expire at the edge of human society”.³² What Behan discovered in Paris was a way to give a voice to the disempowered. Behan’s sensitivity to the marginal and the condemned offers a powerful counterpoint to the Brexit’s rhetoric of hatred and intolerance. For

²⁴ Georges Wilson answering Guy Verdot for the *Figaro littéraire* (10 février 1962), entitled *En attendant Behan* (my translation).

²⁵ Ulick O’Connor, *Brendan Behan* (London: Abacus, 1993), 136.

²⁶ Seamus Heaney, “Viking Dublin: Trial Pieces”, in *North* (London: Faber & Faber, 1975), 21-24.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 137.

²⁸ John Brannigan, “Bohemian Behan: Late Modernism, Sexual Politics, and the ‘Great Awakening’ of Brendan Behan”, in John McCourt, ed., *Reading Brendan Behan* (Cork: Cork U.P., 2019), 52.

²⁹ Derrida, *Spectres*, 20.

³⁰ Brannigan, “Bohemian Behan”, 59.

³¹ Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France 1975-76*, eds. Mauro Bertani and Alessandro Fontana (New York: Picador, 2003), 191.

³² Pierse, *A History*, 171.

Pierse, “In Irish working-class writing, necropolitics is repeatedly the site of a radical contestation that refuses silence, ... that urges the ‘social consecration’ of the poor”.³³ In Paris, Behan met intellectuals like Albert Camus who shared this vision. In the RTE Radio 1 documentary, *Brendan Behan in Paris*, produced by Dierdre McMahon we can hear Behan in a recorded archive praise Camus’ Nobel Prize speech: “When Camus got the Nobel Prize, he said the duty of a writer is not to those in power but to those who are subject to them”.³⁴ In French newspapers, Behan was celebrated or caricatured. Maurice Ciantar in *Paris Jour*, compared Behan to the Elizabethan playwrights. Robert Kaners for *L’Express* compared him to Sheridan, Wilde, Shaw, O’Casey, and Shakespeare. And Bertrand Poirot-Delpech in *Le Monde*, said that Behan offered an “Irish-style Shakespearean cocktail” which plunged “the mind and all the senses into the best of theatrical intoxication”.³⁵

The adaptation of Behan’s play offers “splendid spectres” in a post-Brexit Ireland because for Steiner in *After Babel*, “[i]t is not the literal past, the ‘facts’ of history, that shape us, but images of the past embodied in language. ... we must never cease renewing those images; because once we do, we fossilize”.³⁶ Because Creed stated that “[f]or this new production, we have tried to imagine spaces which vibrate between past and present, letting the play resonate with its own place and time and also across time and space to include other spaces in which people of all genders have been and still are incarcerated and institutionalised”.³⁷

Behan’s drama comes with mastery to the threshold of changes where discourses of inclusion, gender identity and marginalisation need not exclude the past but are bound to reinterpret it. Behan’s play about confinement, liberty, gender issues, truth and violence provokes reflection by bringing together Irish parochial anecdotes and universal heart-wrenching sufferings through mnesic and haunting voices.

3. Women as Post-Brexit Haunted and Haunting Voices

In her play *Audrey or Sorrow*, first performed at the Abbey Theatre on 23 February 2024 and directed by McLaughlin, Marina Carr also presents haunting voices, ghosts on stage before the appearance of living characters, creating an Artaudian language of ghostly blows and screams; hence echoing Antonin Artaud’s ideas in *The Theatre and Its Double* that the stage should disclose a mythic world, peopled by “monsters of the primitive imagination seen through the primitive mind”.³⁸ Brexit too has summoned ghosts, memories of the Troubles, border issues, dispossession, fear of re-militarisation and anxiety about identity. Marina Carr’s characters suggest that such ghosts cannot be ignored. Ghostly possibilities are triggered by the eponymous Audrey, who first enters like an injured and innocent woman being victimised by her three repellent relatives: Purley, Mac and Grass “*hold Audrey and lay in to her with a tin foil. It is vicious. Blood everywhere. Screams and swoons. Audrey in pitch battle against the three. She succumbs. They stop exhausted. Music to underscore*”.³⁹

Then Audrey, the spectre mystifyingly transmutes into a vile and infamous monster role, a liar full of rage and hate and overbearing meanness who haunts her sister Maria. Audrey tries to blur the distinction between the world of the living and the world of the ghosts. Tormenting her sister and her

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ *Brendan Behan in Paris* (2019) www.rte.ie.

³⁵ Bertrand Poirot-Delpech, *Le Monde* (19 February 1962) (my translation).

³⁶ Steiner, *After Babel*, 445.

³⁷ Creed, *Notes*.

³⁸ Antonin Artaud, *The Theatre and Its Double*, trans. Victor Corti (London: Alma Classics, 2013), 67.

³⁹ Marina Carr, *Audrey or Sorrow* (London: Faber & Faber, 2024), 34. Further references to the play appear in parentheses.

nephews and niece, Audrey explains that “Ghosts often act like they’re living. They get a bit mixed up” (56), and then adds that “Death doesn’t last very long” (65). Audrey swaggers with sound and fury. The seductive nightmarish child becomes a fiendish ghost, harnessing the soul’s dark energies in a breathtaking violence. To paraphrase Samuel Beckett in *Waiting for Godot* (1953), Carr gives “birth astride of a grave” because *Audrey or Sorrow* exemplifies Peggy Phelan’s powerful idea of the ontology of performance as disappearance.⁴⁰ Through the spectre of Audrey, spectators are put into a contagious state of trance. Following Derrida, we may add that Carr challenges the idea that performance vanishes through the theatrical act itself, the spectre becomes the theatrical self. For Rebecca Schneider:

in the theatre as in the archive, it is only the spectre that can “see but not be seen”: it is (also and already) the live body bearing the spectre across the space, the place, of its consignment. The spectre, by virtue of a coup de théâtre, can “see but not be seen” thanks to our embodied knowledge of how to attend to appearances: our collective and skilful forgetting of the actor – the fool or clown chasing trippingly the “question of the play” – who enables, gently, the manipulation of error (in the meantime between the dead and the live) that is an act of transmission, transmutation and transfer.⁴¹

Hence in *Audrey or Sorrow* the stage is haunted by grown-up ghosts, representing Maria and David’s dead or unborn children, Mac, Grass and Purley. Dividing the world of the living and the dead, there is a stairway, or liminal portal between worlds. Darkness descends as a child’s coffin is carried downstairs by David followed by Maria dressed in black, veil over her face. Buried at the heart of *Audrey or Sorrow* are the death of new-born children, just like in James Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1922) and Brian Friel’s play *Faith Healer* (1979). Indeed, in *Faith Healer*, the wandering triptych, Frank Grace and Teddy, offers a striking resemblance with Leopold Bloom, Molly and Stephen Dedalus, the Joycean triptych of *Ulysses*. The characters are haunted by the death of a child. In “Hades”, as a child’s coffin goes past him, Bloom thinks of his dead child, Rudy: “A dwarf’s face, mauve and wrinkled like Little Rudy’s was ... Our. Little. Beggar. Baby. Meant nothing. Mistake of nature. If it’s healthy it’s from the mother. If not from the man”.⁴² Grace in *Faith Healer* thinks of her “black-face, macerated baby that’s buried in a field in Kinlochbervie in Sutherland in the north of Scotland”⁴³ whereas for Teddy, the manager, it is a thing, “that little wet thing with the black face and the black body, a tiny little thing, no size at all ... a boy it was” (363), but for Frank, it meant nothing, it never existed: “I would have liked to have a child but she was barren” (372). There is a taboo secret in *Audrey or Sorrow*, echoing Grace and Frank’s divergent account in *Faith Healer*. In Carr’s play, the coffin falls from the stairs in a Beckettian way. In *All That Fall* (1957), Beckett’s first play for radio, Dan asks his wife if she has ever felt the desire to kill a child to “nip some young doom in the bud”.⁴⁴ Beckett implies that Dan is in fact involved in the accident of a child falling from a carriage onto the line and under the wheels. Is Maria in *Audrey or Sorrow* a child killer like Dan in *All That Fall*? Were her children’s deaths natural? Were they caused by the ghost of her dead sister, Audrey, fulfilling an ancient curse? Was her own mother a child killer?

In *Audrey or Sorrow*, Carr confronts the dangerous realm of transformation and forges a new identity in an encounter with eternity. The dead influence the living and determine who among the

⁴⁰ See Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

⁴¹ Rebecca Schneider, *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment* (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), 110.

⁴² James Joyce, *Ulysses* (London: Penguin, 2000 [1922]), 119-120.

⁴³ Brian Friel, *Faith Healer*, in *Selected Plays* (London: Faber & Faber, 1984), 349.

⁴⁴ Samuel Beckett, *All That Fall* (London: Faber & Faber, 1957), 77.

unborn should visit the living. There is also a mediatory world or area of transition between worlds, what Wole Soyinka calls “the chthonic realm”⁴⁵, a place of really dark forces and dark spirits that serves as the staging ground for cosmic monsters. Through her ghosts as cosmic monsters, Carr captures the Artaudian notion of theatre as plague defined in *The Theatre and its Double* and glorifies the infectious nature of violent tragic passions as a redemptive force and the principle of creativity.⁴⁶ William Butler Yeats was hoping that the dead could manifest themselves to the living because for him, the principle of creativity derived from the world soul or *anima mundi*. Tragic art, for Yeats moves us by alluring us almost to the intensity of trance. This trance is allowed in Carr’s play with the characters appearing on a haunted ground. For Ngamaru Raerino, “the power of the performance emanates from the ground, the literal ground on which the performances take place”⁴⁷ and it entails “the active participation of non-human entities (ancestors, rocks and earth) in the human performance act, with other non-humans (walls and floors) as intermediaries”.⁴⁸ The stairway in *Audrey or Sorrow* leads to two haunted cots and two empty chairs. They become icons which are for Maragret Werry “objects that materially mediate the presence of a supernatural entity”.⁴⁹ The cots and the chairs are the archival pieces of evidence that a child once lived upstairs. Carr uses vivid stage images, and ritual patterns to explore a dark, disturbing view of motherhood using Brechtian *Verfremdung* or alienation effects to allow the theatrical audience to reappropriate the process presented to them on the stage so that they can deconstruct the events. She exemplifies Brecht’s idea that to alienate an event or a character simply means to take away from the event or character what is self-evident, familiar, obvious and to generate astonishment and curiosity about it.

Carr’s drama is haunted by ghosts from *By the Bog of Cats* (1998) to *Audrey or Sorrow* in 2024. In an arborescent conceptualization of performance using the concept of the rhizome defined by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus*, which is characterized by six principles: connection, heterogeneity, multiplicity, a signifying rupture, cartography and decalcomania,⁵⁰ we can draw a parallel with Akimoto Matsuyo’s concern with the issue of death. From *Mourning Clothes* (1949) to *Keison the Priest of Hitachi* (1964), Akimoto took up in play after play, the various solutions the Japanese had devised for conquering death. Carr’s digging into the issue of death connects her plays to Thanatos and Greek gods but also in *Audrey or Sorrow* she throws her reference net further afield to include Henrik Ibsen, August Strindberg, *The Tibetan Book of The Dead*, Irish mythology, Catholic practices along with various cultural references to the Underworld from the Māori to the Japanese. *Audrey or Sorrow* ends in front of the sea with Maria diving into the dark and threatening waters. The sea becomes an amniotic fluid and a journey to the Isle of the dead, a clear reference to the last stage direction of Strindberg’s play, *The Ghost Sonata* (1907): “*The room vanishes. Böcklin’s painting The Isle of the Dead appears in the background; music, soft, tranquil, and pleasantly melancholy is heard from the island*”.⁵¹

In a prologue written for the opening of his Intimate Theatre, Strindberg refers to the journey that mankind must undertake “from the isle of the Living to the Isle of the Dead” and Carr focuses on the

⁴⁵ See Wole Soyinka, *Myth, Literature and the African World* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1976).

⁴⁶ Artaud, *Theatre*, 34.

⁴⁷ Ngamaru Raerino, cited by Margaret Werry in “Decolonising Theatre History: Ontological alterity, acting objects, and what Theatre Studies can learn from Museums”, in Tracy C. Davis and Peter W. Marx, eds., *The Routledge Companion to Theatre and Performance Historiography* (London and New York: Routledge, 2021), 206.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 2005), 1.

⁵¹ August Strindberg, *The Ghost Sonata* (1907), www.gutenberg.org.

journey that mothers must undertake when their children die. The tragedy of Helen Alving, widow of Captain Alving, late Court Chamberlain, in Ibsen's play *Ghosts* (1881), is akin to Maria's fate in *Audrey or Sorrow*. They both feel haunted. Helen is unable to protect her son Oswald, a painter who has just arrived from Paris, just like Maria or her mother are unable to protect their children. But voices from an everlasting silence are loud.

Voices from beyond the grave are deafening in the aftermath of Brexit. Irish playwrights like McGuinness, Behan and Carr embody silenced traumas and unveil the burdens cast upon a language and a nation that have long been subject to colonisation and patriarchy. Directors like McLaughlin and Creed carve out space at the Abbey Theatre for open-mindedness, rebellion, empathy or solidarity because theatre is a privileged *topos* for the post-Brexit Irish society to act out the impact of a haunting history and to highlight uplifting changes. In post-Brexit Ireland, staging Molière's comedies, like *Tartuffe* (1664) at the Abbey Theatre in 2023 exposed the political hypocrisy and self-deception that shaped the Brexit narrative itself. Alongside the seventeenth century French playwright, Behan's play, *The Quare Fellow* highlights the issue of political imprisonment, i.e. the circle of Thanatos through a sharp satirical lens that reflects the tensions about sovereignty and belonging that resurfaced during the Brexit debate, especially in relation to Ireland, Northern Ireland and the Good Friday Agreement (1998), while Carr's tragedies like *Audrey or Sorrow* (2024) capture fractured identities and haunted pasts. Taken together, the works of Molière, Behan and Carr reveal compelling historical continuities in how drama questions hypocrisy, identity, power and haunted past and provide the framework for understanding Brexit, not only as a political and momentous event but as a dramatic expression of enduring human conflicts. Through comedy, satire and tragedy, Molière, Behan and Carr reveal patterns of division, illusion and self-justification, and how moments of rupture expose both the vulnerability and the performative nature of discourse on national identity. Brexlit on stage reflects the Wildean concept of the impermanency of our human nature because to change is to survive. Permanency entails fossilisation and change gives birth to creativity and fiery life.