

Scenographic Interactions: 1950s’ Ireland and Dublin’s Pike Theatre

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The limits of scenography – like the limits of performance – are being continually expanded so that it is no longer contained within the theatre but can refer to the performative environments beyond. In this context, Ireland of the 1950s can be seen to have undergone significant scenographic changes, in which visual culture was harnessed to improve Ireland’s performance on the international stage. This essay engages both established and emerging definitions of scenography. It explores how the pioneering work of the Pike theatre, Dublin, can be seen to endorse a ‘stage of revision’ within Irish theatre of the 1950s. However, I also examine the ways in which the Pike’s scenographic aesthetics interact complexly with the changing scenography of Ireland at large. In doing so, I aim to illuminate the ways in which Ireland’s increasingly image-conscious culture can be seen to impact on the visual and performative character of Irish theatre.

Introduction

In 1949, Ireland moved out of the British Commonwealth to become an independent republic. The following decade was characterized by ideological conflict: while conservative Catholic patriarchy continued to be reinforced top-down through state policy, Ireland’s political establishment also instigated efforts to modernize and internationalize Ireland. The prospect of change was met with resistance from those espousing more traditional nationalist ideals based on cultural and economic isolationism. From 1958, the government’s implementation of its Programmes for Economic Expansion consolidated the shift to an export-driven, inward capital investment economy. However, this state drive towards furthering Ireland’s positioning within an internationalized modernity had already been underway from the late 1940s. The interactions of design, performance and space were key to these efforts, as exemplified in the formation of several outward-looking initiatives including the Irish Arts Council in 1951, Córás Tráchtála (the export board) in 1952, An Tóstal (a series of festivals celebrating Irish culture) in 1953, Bord Fáilte (the tourist board) in 1955 and the Dublin Theatre Festival in 1957. These organizations harnessed visual and theatrical culture to enhance Ireland’s performance on the international stage, and to promote what can now be seen as a revisionist questioning of established national constructions.

Considering these developments, Ireland of the 1950s can be conceptualized both *at* (temporally) and *as* (performatively) a ‘stage of re-vision’ – a word that I hyphenate because Ireland’s performance of revision was often played out at the level of visual culture. This involved a kindling of industrial design, advertising, public art, crafts, the fashion industry, theatre, pageants and festivals. Shannon Jackson’s claim that ‘visual culture seems to require performance for its seeing to be shown’ elucidates my conception of 1950s’ Ireland as ‘a stage of re-vision’.¹ Within the initiatives described above, aspects of the broad disciplines of performance studies (encompassing theatrical, cultural and economic performance) and visual culture can be seen to interact. Jackson offers a comparative analysis of these contemporaneous fields, arguing that this ‘provides a way of foregrounding the stakes and obstacles faced in their shared consolidation’.² Building on Jackson’s insightful comparisons, my interpretation situates scenography at the *interface* between performance studies and visual culture.

Scenography has traditionally been associated with scenic and atmospheric design for theatre productions. However, its remit has undergone an expansion in line with the turn to ‘performance’ in cultural studies. The limits of scenography – like the limits of performance – are being continually extended. Scenography is no longer contained within the theatre but can refer to the environment beyond it. This comprises a landscape with structures and décor of varying levels of permanence, impacted on by the actions of those who pass through it, and permeated by politics. Introducing a special issue of the journal *Performance Research* entitled ‘On Scenography’ in 2013, editors Sodja Lotker and Richard Gough use definitions that reflect the plurality of contemporary scenographic theory:

They [scenographies] are framed and designated – places, series of spaces, points of perspective, ways of looking and routes that provide points of view, frames of vision and vantage points to look from. [...] The looking happens with the whole body, the movement through space and the kinaesthetic experience of space together with a sense of movement inside oneself as an experience of the scenographic.³

Scenography, whether within or beyond the theatre, may also be seen as a collaborative *doing* that incorporates diverse contributions: it is both kinetic and

kinaesthetic. The publication of a *Performance Research* special issue on scenography, in addition to the recent emergence of international journals dedicated exclusively to the discipline including *Scene* and *Theatre Arts Journal*, evidences the ‘research and creative endeavour that is being pursued to advance its purview, reach and application within and beyond theatre and performance design’.⁴

Understood in these broader ways, scenography becomes a useful theoretical framework for examining Irish cultural change during the 1950s. The present article discusses aspects of Ireland’s scenographic histories, locating the Pike theatre, founded in Dublin in 1953, within contemporaneous shifts in Ireland’s visual-performative ethos. I engage with more established as well as emerging applications of scenography to survey the drive towards design innovation that characterized 1950s’ Ireland, in addition to issues concerning space and design at the Pike theatre specifically. Considering the Pike’s inventive approaches in these areas, it can be situated within wider concerns with the performance of visual culture. Indeed, by regularly producing challenging plays from abroad, this theatre club has often been seen to support aspects of the state’s modernizing agenda. Additionally, the frame of scenography reveals collaborative working processes as active in the innovation offered by the Pike. The club’s pioneering work arguably promoted a ‘stage of re-vision’ within Irish theatre. However, in the Pike’s scenographic interactions with the wider culture, it also can be seen – somewhat paradoxically – to interrogate the concurrent commodification of visual culture in Ireland. To explore these connections and tensions, I will start by outlining shifts in Ireland’s wider cultural scenography pertinent to the Pike’s era; then I will move on to analyze the interactions of space, design and performance at the Pike theatre itself; finally, I will examine the scenographic interrelationships of theatre and culture. In doing so, I hope to shed light on how Ireland’s increasingly image-conscious values can be seen to impact on the visual and performative character of Irish theatre.

Ireland’s Shifting Scenographies

Ireland’s emergence as (and at) a ‘stage of re-vision’ during the 1950s was motivated by governmental objectives for improved economic performance on the wider world stage. Jon McKenzie’s seminal book, *Perform or Else: From Discipline to Performance* (2001) seeks to theorize the interconnections of organizational, technological and cultural performance by arguing that ‘performance’ in its various

guises can take on a Foucaultian disciplining in the context of globalization. McKenzie argues, for example, that the employee-assessment model of ‘performance management’, which has proliferated since the end of the Second World War, ‘attunes itself to economic processes that are increasingly [...] globally oriented’.⁵ While some argue that McKenzie’s overall thesis self-consciously fails, claims such as the above can illuminate changing attitudes towards design and visual culture within Ireland’s political establishment from the late 1940s on.⁶ Diarmaid Ferriter, drawing on Bernadette Whelan, contends that:

[S]tatistical reviews and planning exercises which were a compulsory part of the process of the European Recovery Programme [1948] and the Organisation for European Economic Co-operation [also 1948] exposed fundamental weaknesses of the economy and forced economists into making comparative analyses with other countries that were out-performing Ireland’.⁷

Transnational economic comparisons also impacted on Irish creative and cultural activities, which were increasingly valued for their international competitiveness, leading to ideals of ‘artrepreneurship’ disseminated mainly through developing tourism and export industries.⁸ The Irish Arts Council, for example, was set up in response to Thomas Bodkin’s *Report on the Arts in Ireland* (1949). Bodkin, former director of the National Gallery of Ireland, was at the time manager of the Barber Institute, Birmingham. The Department of Industry and Commerce of Ireland’s first coalition government (1948-51) commissioned Bodkin’s report, insisting that it assess industrial design as part of its remit. In response to the department’s commercial agenda, Bodkin judged that there ‘never has been a sustained alliance between the arts and industry in Ireland; and little has been done in the last fifty years to promote such a desirable aim’.⁹

The report was the first of many initiatives that could be seen to push a ‘performance management’ agenda in relation to Irish visual culture. The Arts Council incorporated the promotion of industrial design as part of its aims and sponsored the International Design Exhibition in 1954 with a view to impressing upon Irish people ‘the vital importance of attractive craftsmanship in our industrial products [...] because without it our exports cannot compete in world markets’.¹⁰ Following this, the 1956 Irish Design Exhibition toured the major urban centres of each

province, presenting the work of leading Irish designers and design-conscious industries. Each exhibition was produced by the Design Research Unit of Ireland (established by the Arts Council) with prominent British design theorist, Misha Black, as consultant. Throughout the 1950s, a range of developments pushed visual culture to the forefront of modernization, industrialization and internationalization. Signa Design Consultants was founded by architect Michael Scott and visual artist Louis Le Brocquy in 1954. There were efforts to invigorate the fashion industry headed by London-trained Sybil Connelly, and to revitalize craft-training for industry at the National College of Art in Dublin. A group of Dutch graphic designers began to work in Ireland. First commissioned by Aer Lingus in 1951, they went on to implement their Bauhaus principles in other Irish advertising projects. One of these graphic artists, Guss Melai, for example, designed the harp symbol for the first Tóstal festival in 1953. By 1959, An Córás Tráchtála had taken over responsibility for design promotion with its leader, William H. Walsh, commissioning in 1961 ‘a panel of distinguished Scandinavian designers [to] visit Ireland to advise on what had to be done’.¹¹ As such, Walsh and his international allies were instrumental in engineering what has been termed the ‘Irish Design Reform Movement of the 1960s’.¹²

The above discussed shifts in cultural and political attitudes also contributed to an alteration of urban landscapes, particularly Dublin. While Dublin retained much of its elegant Georgian and Victorian buildings throughout the 1950s, the advent of more minimalist, modernist aesthetics was evident in public advertising through billboards as well as advertisements and signage in shops and offices.¹³ The RTÉ documentary, *In Flags or Flitters: Pictures of Dublin*, originally broadcast in 1991, showcases changes in the cultural and physical landscape of Ireland’s capital city from the 1950s on, illuminating what could be referred to as the shifting scenography of Dublin city. It includes such images as Nelson’s Pillar, which visitors paid money to climb during the 1950s, but which was demolished by an IRA bomb in 1966, as well as the transformation of O’Connell Street into ‘a honky-tonk freeway’ of commercial outlets, modernist office blocks and derelict sites between 1965 and 1985.¹⁴

Cities, their architecture and broader performative activities have entered the discourse of scenography, and currently proliferating theatre forms such as site-specific work and promenade pieces often harness the scenographic potential of urban spaces. To return to 1950s’ Ireland, An Tóstal also allows us to look at urban space through the lens of scenography. This series of festivals, which took place between

1953 and 1958, had Dublin city decked out with public art and decorative structures as part of the events, and ‘featured historico-religious spectacles with a strong patriotic flavour’.¹⁵ With its nation-branding pageantry, An Tóstal had an agenda comparable to ‘The Gathering 2013’ – a series of Irish occasions and festivals held throughout the year aiming to celebrate Irish culture and to attract visitors including tourists and the Irish diaspora. Similarly, An Tóstal sought to promote Ireland as a tourist destination, as well as to entice the return of Irish emigrants.

Ireland’s post-Second World War drive towards internationalized modernity would gain momentum in the decades leading up to the ‘Celtic Tiger’ era (which took place approximately between 1994 and 2008), but it was only nascent in the 1950s.¹⁶ As such, during the 1950s, the desire to progress towards international economic competitiveness was kept in check by anxieties concerning the sociocultural consequences of modernization. Ernest Blythe’s policies as managing director of the Abbey theatre between 1941 and 1967 can be seen in some ways to epitomize the struggle to maintain an established national identity. Contemporaries such as Tomás Mac Anna defend Blythe’s role as managing director, arguing that he kept the Abbey afloat during the commercially difficult periods of ‘Emergency’ (Ireland’s terminology for the Second World War, used to reflect the country’s neutrality) and recession, as well as after the original theatre building and much of its equipment were destroyed by a fire in 1951.¹⁷ More recent scholarship has contended that the period of Blythe’s reign, due to his championing of theatre that showcased ‘representative nationalism’¹⁸ and ‘the values of a rural, Catholic Ireland, as interpreted by Fianna Fáil’,¹⁹ was a rather stale one for the Abbey.²⁰ Meanwhile, from the 1940s on, small theatre companies emerged including Globe, Studio, 37 Club, Pike, Orion and Gemini. These offered alternatives to the seemingly tired images of Irishness played out on the Abbey’s national stage.

The Pike Theatre: Space, Design and Innovation

From the above list of emergent companies, the Pike is best remembered for making controversial interventions in Irish theatre of the 1950s, particularly in relation to its 1957 production of Tennessee Williams’ *The Rose Tattoo*, which had opened on Broadway in 1951 and was released as in film adaptation in 1955. The Pike’s production, charged with indecency and profanity, famously led to the arrest of Pike co-founder, Alan Simpson and – eventually, due to legal costs and a lapse in public

support – contributed to the demise of this important theatre club. The Pike aimed to, and succeeded in becoming, a revolutionary force in Irish theatre and can be seen as part of ‘a “new wave” of theatrical experimentation that was also taking place in London and Paris.’²¹ The club appeared to covet controversy in its efforts to ‘stir up the theatrical lethargy of post-war Ireland’.²² This is evidenced by its performative image both on and off-stage: the Pike supported the work of those who, at the time, could be seen as national and Abbey exiles (Samuel Beckett and Brendan Behan respectively);²³ several of its productions seemed almost to fetishize foreignness and, as Lionel Pilkington has rightly argued, heterosexual bodies;²⁴ meanwhile, the club is simultaneously remembered for hosting decadent parties.²⁵ Within a nation struggling to emerge from sexual repression and persistent isolationist attitudes, the Pike certainly appears as ‘a cultural phenomenon that celebrated the arrival of a new, urban, liberal elite and a social space in which audience members could perform with brio this new identity’.²⁶ However, examining the Pike’s history through the lens of scenography reveals the complexity of its aesthetic processes and political engagement. Reading historical source material concerning the Pike theatre from scenographic perspectives illuminates the company’s inventive working processes, its modernizing strategies, its engagement with visual culture at a time when this was achieving an elevated cultural position, and its paradoxical championing and critique of internationalized modernity.

Space featured centrally in how co-founders Simpson and Carolyn Swift envisioned the Pike from the outset, as well as in their aspirations towards breaking new ground. Swift tells in her autobiography of how Simpson did not want the Pike’s home to be ‘another little theatre’ in the style of Studio or 37 Club; these, while staging new and challenging works, were located in Georgian basements, ‘merely [offering] stages at the end of a large room’.²⁷ Swift and Simpson decided that a former coach house would be ideal; these buildings could be bought cheaply since they were generally used for storage, or as workshops or garages. After six months of searching, Swift and Simpson found the building that was to become the small Victorian-style Pike theatre on Herbert Lane.²⁸ The founders made the theatre a ‘club’, as this provided them a way to avoid ‘complying with certain statutory regulations’,²⁹ so technically a non-member could attend only as the guest of a paying member. Space also became an important factor in the company’s artistic manifesto,

which was printed in the first instalment of a regular newsletter that was sent out to its members:

As our theatre is a small, intimate one, we intend to avail of the opportunities afforded to stage productions which, for various reasons, would not be seen on either the larger or smaller commercial stages, and we hope to give theatregoers opportunities to see more of the struggle going on at present in the world of theatre to introduce new techniques and new subjects in play writing. On the lighter side, we intend presenting late-night, intimate revue during Christmas and other holidays.³⁰

Here, the spatial difference of the Pike is positioned as key to the intervention its founders sought to make in Irish theatre. In retrospect, Swift believes that the company carried out to the letter its opening manifesto. Drawing on Micheál Mac Liammóir, she adds that if ‘the Abbey showed Ireland to herself, [...] [and] the Gate showed the world to Ireland’ then the Pike ‘wanted to show aspects of Ireland and the world which other theatres in Ireland were afraid or unable to show’.³¹ Both spatially and in terms of its goals, the Pike sought to occupy a productive middle-ground.

The size of the stage space (twelve foot squared) had its limitations but this also inspired fruitful scenographic developments and effects.³² According to Simpson, the smallness of the acting area prevented the Pike from presenting the first English language production of Ionesco’s *The Chairs*; though a small portion of additional space could when necessary be borrowed from the scene dock, the stage was still not big enough to hold the amount of chairs necessary to produce this work.³³ However, the Pike’s small stage within its fifty-five seat auditorium also incited resourcefulness on Simpson’s part in his regular role as lighting designer. Once the founders had their own premises, they were able to arrange for some of the floor of the room above the auditorium to be cut out in order to allow for a precisely-calculated throw of light.³⁴ Due to these renovations, Simpson claims that he was able to have much more lighting equipment than would have been possible in the larger theatres; through its use, he could curtail ‘the difficulties caused by the close proximity of the audience to the stage and the smallness of the stage itself’.³⁵ He continues:

I used a method of lighting which I learnt from watching ballet: this was to light from directly overhead and from the side, only using sufficient front lighting to heighten slightly the amount of light on the actors’ faces. All the lighting I used was directional: that is to say, there was no spilling or flooding of light over the stage and, by this method, I achieved a three-dimensional emphasis on the actors which made the stage look bigger than it really was.³⁶

This three-dimensional emphasis became a recurring feature throughout the Pike’s repertoire. It is evident in several production photographs held in the Pike Theatre collections at Trinity College Library, Dublin, including images from *The Quare Fellow* (1954), *The Respectable Prostitute* (1956), *Posterity be Damned* (1959) and *The Solid Gold Cadillac* (1959).³⁷ These images showcase the chiaroscuro effect of Simpson’s lighting, which sculpted definition on the actors’ faces and bodies, and cast ominous shadows on the backdrop.

As Simpson reveals in his reference to ballet, the use of light to give the impression of amplified spatial dimensions, as well as to sculpt objects and actors’ body-parts, was by no means new. The achievement of depth through the interplay of light and shadow actually characterizes some of the major innovations of twentieth-century scenography. Adolphe Appia, for example, began working on Richard Wagner’s operas in the early twentieth century and is now considered a pioneer of modern scenography. He rejected flat scenic painting in favour of a more dynamic ‘rhythmic space’, created through the interactions of music, moving bodies, ‘architectonic mass (steps, platforms, pillars, walls) and light’.³⁸ Appia harnessed lighting not just for its use value of enabling visibility but for its aesthetic function in also creating productive shadows and, as such, the depth that characterized his conception of rhythmic space. Simpson’s lighting design, however, not only locates several of the Pike’s productions within important twentieth-century developments in theatre scenography but within a zeitgeist in international visual culture at the time. Cinema was a popular recreational activity in 1950s’ Ireland and film noir was a genre that Hollywood had popularized from the early 1940s on. One of its characteristic features – later to become clichéd – was its use of chiaroscuro lighting, a term appropriated from the work of Renaissance painters such as Caravaggio. Here, shadow was as important as light in constructing dramatic patterns of darkness and illumination to heighten suspenseful atmospheres.



Fig. 1: Pat Duggan, Derry Power, Austin Byrne, Dermot Kelly, John McDarby and Pat Nolan in the premiere of *The Quare Fellow* (Act 1) at the Pike Theatre in 1954. Alan Simpson’s lighting design often achieved a chiaroscuro effect. Here, this added to the sense of claustrophobia that characterized this production. Photograph by Andrew Flynn, courtesy of Manuscripts and Archives, Trinity College Library, Dublin.

While Simpson’s approach to lighting appears to have been initially motivated by practicality rather than aesthetics (in that he sought at the outset to compromise for the smallness of the stage), for the Pike, the interplay of light, shadow and intimate space also helped to achieve sensual effects and make even more palpable intense dramatic moments, for example in its world premiere of Behan’s *The Quare Fellow*. Although Simpson began by aiming through his lighting to make the stage area appear larger, many who attended this production commented on a sense of claustrophobia, which they attributed to the smallness of the theatre. Yet, according to Swift, this assumption ‘does not give due credit to Alan’s [Simpson’s] production and lighting methods, deliberately designed to produce exactly that result’.³⁹ She exemplifies a moment in the play in which the prisoners speculate on what the Quare Fellow (the eponymous unseen convict who awaits execution) will be fed for his final meal. This scene was ‘isolated in the Pike production by dimming the lights’.⁴⁰ The stark, simple set, consisting of five white door frames with plain black numbered doors constructed by Sean O’Shea, in conjunction with Simpson’s lighting and the limited space both on stage and in the auditorium, must have added to the feeling – expressed by many of Behan’s ex-prisoner friends who attended the production – of being back ‘inside’.⁴¹

Christopher Baugh theorizes the interconnections of theatre technology and the advancement of scenography in the twentieth century, arguing that developments such as electric power underpin the scenographic approaches of Appia, Caspar Neher, Josef Svoboda and others.⁴² The ‘technologies’ that the Pike used were far from advanced, but they showcase the theatre company’s collective ingenuity. Although the Pike did have a few new spotlights, much of the lighting equipment consisted of old arena floods. The innovation lay in converting these into lanterns for the acting area through the addition of spill rings, while new floods were made using ‘old biscuit tins’ and ‘operated from a second-hand dimmer board on which the dimmer was constantly jammed’.⁴³ The Pike was also inventive in its sound design. *The Quare Fellow* opened with a recording of Behan singing a rendition of ‘The Ould Triangle’, a prison song rumoured to have been written for the play by Behan’s brother Dominic, who never actually claimed credit for it. The Pike hired a sound engineer who went, along with Behan and Rosamund Stevens (the theatre’s publicity officer, who also worked as a performer) to a large, empty hall to make the recording. Here, the natural echo of a prison, with its steel and concrete structures, could be replicated.

Swift and Simpson both credit Stevens with this achievement, ‘a very resourceful lady, capable of fulfilling the most difficult and improbable assignments’.⁴⁴ In this case, the improbable assignment included not only directing the recording, but ensuring that Behan had consumed just the right amount of liquor:

Calculating carefully the amount of alcohol required to lubricate Brendan’s tonsils without slurring his speech, she [Stevens] obtained a unique recording – on disc, for tape machines were still a thing of the future for Dublin theatres.⁴⁵

The song itself, later made popular by the band The Dubliners, is already quite haunting. That quality must have been intensified by the distinctive sound of the Pike’s recording filling its small and dimly lit auditorium as *The Quare Fellow* opened.

Scenographic Interactions

The scenography of the Pike theatre emerged through collaborative activities in which discrete professional roles and responsibilities became blurred. Simpson’s army colleagues, who served with him in the Second Field Engineers from Clancy Barracks, made a vast contribution to the year-long renovation and refurbishment of the building, as well as the subsequent running of the theatre. Sergeant Edmund Kelly, for example, was the Pike’s ‘stage carpenter, electrician and resident stage manager all rolled into one’ and so he was ‘deservedly made a director of the theatre’.⁴⁶ Simpson, whose educational background was in engineering, had also worked with architects and building contractors in London.⁴⁷ Like many in the company, his role was that of a ‘jack of all trades’, working as director, set and/or lighting designer, and occasional writer and performer of deadpan comedy as part of the *Follies* – the name that the company gave to its late-night revue series. Swift worked as a performer, writer and director; painter Pauline Bewick began as a scenic designer but also became a star of the *Follies*; and Sheila Duncan doubled as costume-maker and choreographer. In *The Cambridge Introduction to Scenography* (2009), Joslin McKinney and Philip Butterworth position scenography as a collaborative process involving the interactions of any combination of individuals including but not limited

to visual artists, designers, directors, lighting and sound specialists as well as performers, within a space and before an audience:

The concept and practice of scenography does not promote existing hierarchies of roles and functions in the creation of theatre, dance or performance. Scenography and its production sit uneasily within the existing functions of writer, director, choreographer, designer and performer because each, or any combination, of these roles is capable of producing scenography in ways that will not accept restriction implicitly imposed by such singular identities.⁴⁸

From this perspective, scenography is a useful term because it is broader in its implications than ‘theatre design’, ‘stage design’ or ‘mise en scène’.⁴⁹ Since it encompasses more of an inclusive, collaborative practice than singular, limited roles, it offers a way to reconsider the highly stratified value-structures of Irish theatre history. To acknowledge theatre scenography as a collective achievement is particularly useful when focusing on smaller theatre companies, as well as on a time and place in which very few professional stage designers were at work. In 1950s’ Ireland, there were no educational institutions that provided professional training in stage design, and notably, the Abbey was without a resident designer from 1951 to 1964.

The Pike’s *Follies*, in particular, were characterized by the spirit of collaboration. Swift led the *Follies* project, writing a significant portion of shows which invariably contained sketches devised by other members of the production team, as well as musical scores written or adapted by pianist George Desmond Hodnett. The *Follies* provided light entertainment and at times biting humour. Fittingly the scenic design made no attempt at realism, often featuring cloth backdrops painted in abstract or expressionistic designs by artists including Bewick and later Reginald Gray. Although it was arguably through these late-night revues that the Pike first established popularity and went on to ensure steady commercial stability, few scholarly works have discussed them in detail so far. Pilkington is a notable exception, offering some textual and scenographic analyses of the *Follies* in his book, *Theatre and the State* (2001),⁵⁰ and for context in his essay on the Pike’s production of *The Rose Tattoo*.⁵¹ There, he argues that:

The Rose Tattoo, and the ideological effect of its performance, makes overt that which the satirical action of the popular ‘follies’ had only hinted at: that a somatic Irish modernity, so necessary and so reassuring to Ireland’s new climate of modernization, could spill over into the erotic.⁵²

Indeed, photographs held in the Pike Theatre collections evidence the ways in which women’s costumes in particular became progressively skimpier from *The Follies of Herbert Lane* (1953) to *Pike Follies the Sun* (1959). Here, women’s bodies exhibited a potential eroticism that threatened long-held nationalist conceptions of Ireland as sexually pure. Nevertheless, this was not the only way in which the *Follies* wrestled with the tensions of the period.

By 1957, the Pike ‘had become the darling of Bord Fáilte, sponsors of the [Dublin Theatre] Festival, who kept ringing to request seats for distinguished foreign journalists’.⁵³ The Pike’s programme of high modernist works from Europe and America, and support for new writing that helped to reimagine Ireland, certainly seemed to parallel the outward-looking, modernizing agenda of such government-sponsored initiatives as Bord Fáilte, An Tóstal and the Dublin Theatre Festival (which grew out of An Tóstal and aimed to foster intercultural tolerance). Trish McTighe aptly places the Pike’s 1955 production of Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* ‘in the context of a time when Ireland’s tourism industry was at a very nascent stage, at the beginnings in Ireland of a determined and focused strategy of rural place and landscape marketing’.⁵⁴ McTighe focuses on the corresponding ‘evocation of landscape’ in the Pike’s production of *Godot*.⁵⁵ Images of the West of Ireland became central to Bord Fáilte’s branding. Indeed, Swift reveals that, with *Godot*, the Pike deliberately pointed to the West of Ireland through its set design:

We used clothes, but painted in a mixture of browns and greens in blobs and sponges which, when lit, gave the effect of a continuous vista of what might be a bog, with a pathetic little willow in the foreground, its growth weakened and warped, as it would be in such a place, with nothing to shield it from the force of the west wind carrying rain clouds from the Atlantic.⁵⁶

Judging by Swift’s description, the Pike’s scenographic interpretation of *Godot* appears both to initiate a process of reclaiming Beckett for Ireland that would culminate in the Gate’s Beckett Festival in 1991,⁵⁷ and to reflect marketable, visual images of the rustic, romantic Irish West propagated by Bord Fáilte’s rural place marketing.

The *Follies* responded differently to Ireland’s expansionist engagement with the international. These revues mocked Blyth’s preference for actors who could speak the Irish language at the Abbey. Meanwhile, many of the revues’ acts seemed to revere foreignness. *Say it with Follies* (1956) featured Clare Dean, who was half-Indian, in two such numbers: ‘Rum and Coca-Cola’, a Cuban dance spot co-devised by Dean and Simpson in which Dean was adorned with plastic tropical fruit; and a performance of the Can-Can which accompanied Stevens singing ‘But You Can in Cannes’, a song by Swift that listed activities frowned upon or absent in various parts of Ireland that were possible in Cannes.⁵⁸ This awe for all things foreign bordered, at times, on racial fetishism. ‘The Lotus Flower Dance’, for example, was presented as a serious number, choreographed by June Fryer and performed by Swift in *Further Follies* (1955). Here, Swift wore an elaborate costume based on Kathakali male attire complete with a papier-mâché headdress made by Desmond McNamara, to perform a dance derived from a mixture of Bharata Natyam steps. Swift herself admits that she was fortunate that her audience knew little enough about Indian dancing to figure out that the performance was, in fact, an inaccurate cultural mishmash.⁵⁹ Nevertheless, despite the sometimes unwitting caricaturing of other cultures, it appears that acts such as these aimed to further the Pike’s support for internationalized modernity.

Yet the *Follies* also used satire to criticize the internationalization of Ireland and its move towards an export-driven economy. This was most evident in its engagement with scenographies outside the theatre. From the outset, the *Follies* showcased the interactions between scenography within and beyond the stage. For example, the first revue, *The Follies of Herbert Lane*, which premiered in December 1953, featured Michael Murray in mock ballet choreographed by Duncan dancing the role of the General Post Office’s Statue of Cuchulainn. The most popular sketch that year was a satire on An Tóstal, which had been launched the previous April. Its subject was ‘The Bowl of Light’, erected by Dublin Corporation in an effort to decorate O’Connell Bridge in time for the festival. Intended to be a permanent structure, it consisted of a large octagonal basin containing multicoloured, plastic

rotating flames. Some members of the public saw the structure as a monstrosity and, a few days after its unveiling, boisterous protests erupted. Weeks later, a student ended up breaking off the flames and throwing them in the river Liffey. The structure subsequently became known as ‘the tomb of the unknown gurrrier’, and was eventually removed in 1963.⁶⁰ The Pike’s first *Follies* presented Milo O’Shea as a personification of the Bowl of Light as it had been in all its glory. Playing the Ghost of the Tóstal flame, he wore a flaming headdress and surveyed Tóstals past and future, reciting:

I’m the Ghost of the Tóstal Flame,
And next Easter I’ll add to my fame,
With the Statue of Daniel O’Connell a dream,
Done in chromium-plating – yes, that’s the scheme.⁶¹

While the Pike would later be celebrated by Ireland’s political establishment for subverting stale nationalist ideals, at this early stage the *Follies* can be seen also to participate in a public critique of nascent ‘place marketing’ endeavours which were being carried out scenographically through the decoration of Dublin city for An Tóstal.

A sketch called the Mannequin Parade also appeared in the *Follies* that year. This was a mock fashion show that poked fun at efforts to revamp the Irish fashion industry, which were taking place at the time with international competitiveness in mind. Here, the *Follies* can be seen both to reflect and to interrogate Ireland’s push to develop its international exports. The sketch was to become an evolving part of future *Follies*. Although it parodied the Irish fashion industry, it became a regular feature of the *Fashion and Fun* shows in Ireland of the 1950s, where it was presented to audiences of over 1000 on large runways.⁶² And while it mocked the processes of Ireland’s internationalization, it also toured internationally as part of the *Dublin Pike Follies* which appeared at the Arts Theatre, Cambridge and the Lyric Theatre, Hammersmith in November 1957. A script for the sketch, with special additions and alterations for British audiences, is held in the Pike archive at Trinity College Dublin. The Mannequin Parade was narrated in ‘honeyed tones’ by Stevens, as fictional compere Neasa Ní Hemlchain.⁶³ The performers would model their outfits and

silently mime various scenarios using their accessories and props in accordance with Ní Helmchain’s presentation.

The Mannequin Parade derived its satire from the export-driven nation-branding that had become part of the Irish fashion industry. The *Dublin Pike Follies* version opens as follows:

Ladies and Gentlemen, the Irish Fashion designers, Miss Sybil Connolly and Miss Irene Gilbert, have built up in Dublin a not inconsiderable export trade in haute couture – using and adapting Irish materials, such as tweed, to the haut couture of cities such as New York, Paris and Sydney. A really determined effort to boost Irish fashion exports to London, however, has not been thoroughly undertaken and it is with a view to capturing the fashion markets of London that we are presenting.

Specifically mentioning Connolly, who spearheaded efforts to revitalize the Irish fashion industry during the 1950s, the sketch also riffs on the drive to reintroduce traditional crafts such as tweed and embroidery as part of the Irish export trade.⁶⁴ The final male model is presented as a sort of plastic paddy figure. The outfit is entitled ‘Gaelic Glory’ and Ní Helmchain tells us that it is marketed towards the ‘London-Irish nostalgic exiles’. The model carries a hurly, wears a ‘bright blue suit, brown shoes, flashy American tie and a tweed cap’, while Ní Helmchain tells us that ‘the Irish patriot will note with satisfaction that not a single foreign influence has been at work in this model’. In addition to hinting at recent efforts to tempt the Irish diaspora through such initiatives as An Tóstal, the humour lies in the apparently inevitable transformation of the national by internationalism. Other offerings on the tour included Winsor Worthy, and the commuter conventional – an outfit positioned as perfect for men using London’s public transport, complete with an umbrella which Ní Helmchain tells us is ideal for use in forcing one’s way down an escalator. Here, as elsewhere in the *Follies*, the Pike plays with national stereotypes (in this case, both Irish and British) to produce comic effect. Yet, while The Mannequin Parade lampooned efforts to expand fashion and export industries, ironically it could also be seen in mutual co-optation with both. As well as showcasing the interactions of Ireland’s theatrical and cultural scenographies, this exposes the intricate relationship that the Pike had with contemporary tensions concerning socio-economic change.

Conclusion

Ireland of the 1950s underwent what can be seen as a significant scenographic shift, in which visual culture was harnessed to improve Ireland’s performance on the international stage. Examining the Pike theatre from the combined perspectives of established and emerging definitions of scenography reveals how Ireland’s increasingly image-conscious culture impacted on the visual and performative character of Irish theatre. The Pike, by subverting traditional Irish nationalist ideals especially in its production of a work such as *The Rose Tattoo*, is usually remembered as part of efforts to achieve internationalized modernity following the Emergency, initially generated by Ireland’s political establishment but apprehensively received by the public. Yet, the framework of scenography reveals much more about the complexity of the Pike’s history in relation to contemporary visual and performative cultures. In its stage imagery, lighting and sound, the Pike can be seen to have contributed to the drive towards design innovation that characterized 1950s’ Ireland. Simultaneously, however, the Pike can be seen as striving to negotiate the tensions of the period, especially through the scenography of the *Follies*. Throughout the life of the Pike, the *Follies* would continue to offer metatheatrical engagements with Irish visual culture and theatrical performance, for example by satirizing productions taking place on Ireland’s larger commercial stages and by riffing on the Irish fashion industry even as a *Follies* sketch became part of its promotion. As such, the Pike can be seen to occupy a significant, self-conscious and complicated position in relation to Ireland’s scenographic histories.



Fig. 2: Carolyn Swift in the ‘Lotus Flower Dance,’ choreographed by June Fryer and performed as part of *Further Follies* (1955). The *Follies* expressed awe for all things foreign, sometimes unwittingly caricaturing diverse cultures. Swift’s costume was based on Kathakali male attire complete with a papier-mâché headdress made by Desmond McNamara, while the dance consisted of mixture of Bharata Natyam steps. Photograph by Andrew Flynn, courtesy of Manuscripts and Archives, Trinity College Library, Dublin.

NOTES

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- ¹ Shannon Jackson, ‘Performing Show and Tell: Disciplines of Visual Culture and Performance Studies’, *Journal of Visual Culture*, 4 (2005), p. 164.
- ² Ibid.
- ³ Sodja Lotker and Richard Gough, ‘On Scenography: Editorial’, *Performance Research*, 18.3 (2013), (pp. 4-5).
- ⁴ Lotker and Gough, p. 6.
- ⁵ Jon McKenzie, *Perform or Else: From Discipline to Performance* (New York: Routledge, 2001), p. 6.
- ⁶ See Henry M. Sayer, ‘Review of *Perform or Else: From Discipline to Performance*’, *Modernism/modernity*, 10.1 (2003), 200-02. Sayer asserts ‘the disintegration of the page as a tool of communication at book’s end suggests that McKenzie understands all too well that his argument has ultimately crashed and burned. But he gives us much to think about along the way’ (p. 201).
- ⁷ Diarmaid Ferriter, *The Transformation of Ireland, 1900-2000* (London: Profile, 2004), p. 468. According to Ferriter, during the 1950s, Ireland had ‘been forced to begin to see itself in the context of its relationship with its European neighbours, particularly regarding Marshall Aid funding from the United States and the beginnings of European post-war reconstruction. [...] The Marshall Aid period was significant in that it focused much attention on the difficulties of directing the economy away from protection towards more openness’ (p. 467).
- ⁸ Jen Harvie, *Fair Play: Art, Performance and Neoliberalism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 62-107. Here I am paraphrasing Harvie’s terminology in Chapter 2, which is titled ‘The Artrepreneur: Artists and Entrepreneurialism.’ While Harvie’s book focuses on arts practice and funding in Britain – and particularly London – from the 1990s on, I see her useful term ‘artrepreneur’ as having wider historical and geographical relevance.
- ⁹ Thomas Bodkin, *Report on the Arts in Ireland* (Dublin: The Stationary Office, 1949), p. 36.
- ¹⁰ P.J. Little qtd. in Arts Council of Ireland and Design Research Unit of Ireland, *International Design Exhibition 1954* (Dublin: Hobson Morris, 1954), p. 3.
- ¹¹ John Turpin, ‘The Irish Design Reform Movement of the 1960s’, *Design Issues*, 3:1 (1986), p. 11.
- ¹² For more on the initiatives outlined in this paragraph, as well as the background and processes of Irish design reform, see Turpin’s ‘The Irish Design Reform Movement of the 1960s’.
- ¹³ Turpin, pp. 5, 9.
- ¹⁴ *In Flags or Flitters*, RTE, 1991, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=glhITizC53o> [accessed 3 January 2014].
- ¹⁵ Joan FitzPatrick Dean, *Riot and Great Anger: Stage Censorship in Twentieth-Century Ireland* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004), p. 154.
- ¹⁶ Patrick Lonergan, *Theatre and Globalization: Irish Drama in the Celtic Tiger Era* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009). In this seminal study, Lonergan examines how the Celtic Tiger period of rapid social change, unprecedented economic growth and heightened internationalization impacted on the Irish theatre industry, with a particular focus on the ways in which Irish productions were presented and marketed abroad.
- ¹⁷ Tomás Mac Anna, ‘Earnest Blyth and the Abbey’, in E.H. Mikhail, ed., *The Abbey Theatre: Interviews and Recollections* (Totowa, New Jersey: Barnes and Noble, 1988), pp. 167-72.
- ¹⁸ Lionel Pilkington, ‘Theatre, Sexuality and State: Tennessee Williams’s *The Rose Tattoo* at the Dublin Theatre Festival, 1957’ in Nicholas Grene and Patrick Lonergan, eds., *Interactions: Dublin Theatre Festival 1957-2007* (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2008), p. 24.
- ¹⁹ Mary Trotter, *Modern Irish Theatre* (Cambridge: Polity, 2008), p. 119
- ²⁰ See also Christopher Morash, *A History of Irish Theatre, 1601-2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 212. Here, Morash outlines critical responses indicating that theatre presented by the Abbey during this period was often perceived as dull compared with alternative theatre productions. From this perspective he contends, for example, that the ‘excitement generated by [...] amateur productions was in sharp contrast to the boredom of which Abbey audiences so often complained’.
- ²¹ Pilkington, ‘*The Rose Tattoo* at the Dublin Theatre Festival’, p. 24.
- ²² Alan Simpson, *Beckett, Behan and a Theatre in Dublin* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962), p. 1.
- ²³ Beckett was living in France and writing in French when the Pike requested the rights for the English language premiere of *Waiting for Godot*. While the English language premiere ended up taking place at the Arts Theatre Club, London in August 1955, the play enjoyed an extended run at the Pike, which

subsequently toured Ireland, beginning in October that year. Behan’s *The Quare Fellow* was initially rejected by the Abbey before being produced by the Pike in 1954.

²⁴ Pilkington, ‘*The Rose Tattoo* at the Dublin Theatre Festival’, p. 27.

²⁵ Phyllis Ryan, *The Company I Kept* (Dublin: Townhouse, 1996), p. 140.

²⁶ Pilkington, ‘*The Rose Tattoo* at the Dublin Theatre Festival’, p. 24.

²⁷ Carolyn Swift, *Stage by Stage* (Dublin: Poolbeg, 1985), p. 98.

²⁸ Swift, p. 99.

²⁹ Swift, p. 105.

³⁰ Swift, p. 105-06.

³¹ Swift, p. 106.

³² Morash, in *A History of Irish Theatre*, has also refigured the limitations of the Pike theatre space as inciting creative possibilities, especially in lighting. He argues that Simpson’s creative endeavours in this area emerged from the opportunities provided by both smallness and layout. Since ‘no seat in the theatre was more than four rows back,’ the audience never had a problem seeing the actors; this ‘allowed Simpson to use almost exclusively directional toplights and sidelights, with very little spill, and only minimal front lighting was necessary to make the actors’ faces visible’ (p. 202).

³³ Simpson, p. 6.

³⁴ Simpson, p. 7.

³⁵ Simpson, p. 6.

³⁶ Simpson, pp.6-7.

³⁷ Various images of these productions are held in the Pike Theatre Papers (General), Manuscripts and Archives Research Library, Trinity College, Dublin.

³⁸ Joslin McKinney and Philip Butterworth, *The Cambridge Introduction to Scenography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 13.

³⁹ Swift, p. 143.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Simpson, p. 8.

⁴² Christopher Baugh, *Theatre Performance and Technology: The Development of Scenography in the Twentieth Century* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

⁴³ Swift, p. 104.

⁴⁴ Simpson, p. 100.

⁴⁵ Swift, p. 144.

⁴⁶ Swift, p. 102.

⁴⁷ Simpson, p. 3.

⁴⁸ McKinney and Butterworth, p. 5.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Lionel Pilkington, *Theatre and the State in Twentieth-Century Ireland: Cultivating the People* (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 152.

⁵¹ Pilkington, ‘*The Rose Tattoo* at the Dublin Theatre Festival’, pp. 24-6.

⁵² Pilkington, ‘*The Rose Tattoo* at the Dublin Theatre Festival’, p. 26.

⁵³ Swift, p. 247.

⁵⁴ Trish McTighe, ‘Landscapes and Literary Tourism: The Pike’s *Godot* and the Commodification of Place in Ireland’, paper delivered at ‘The Irish and the City’, Irish Society for Theatre Research conference at Birkbeck, University of London, 1 November 2013.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Swift, p. 190.

⁵⁷ For more on the Gate’s role in reclaiming Beckett for Ireland, and for marketing the brand of an Irish Beckett internationally, see Trish McTighe, ‘“Getting Known”: Beckett, Ireland and the Creative Industries’, in Fintan Walsh, ed., *That Was Us’: Contemporary Irish Theatre and Performance* (London: Oberon 2013), pp. 160-62.

⁵⁸ Swift, pp. 227-9.

⁵⁹ Swift, p. 154.

⁶⁰ Keith Hopper, *Flann O’Brien: A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Post-modernist* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1995), pp. 270-5. Brian O’Nolan (Flann O’Brien) as Myles nagCopaleen is credited with first dubbing the bowel of light ‘the tomb of the unknown gurrrier’.

⁶¹ Swift, p. 121.

⁶² Swift, p. 135.

⁶³ Swift, p. 120. In the manuscript, held in the Pike Theatre Papers (General), Trinity College, Dublin, ‘Hemline’ is written in brackets, presumably as the pronunciation for Nessa’s surname ‘Hemlchain’

while on tour in the UK. All subsequent references to ‘The Mannequin Parade’ are from *Dublin Pike Follies* (November 1957), Pike Theatre Papers (General), Manuscripts and Archives Research Library, Trinity College, Dublin (MS 10813/6).

⁶⁴ Turpin, pp. 7-8.

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