

Ireland On Stage: An Exploration of Theatre in Ireland Outcome Report

Over the course of my semester abroad in Dublin, Ireland, I attended ten theatre performances. Though my original intent, as stated in my Original Proposal, was to view eleven performances, this ultimately proved to be unfeasible in consideration of the duration of my program. These ten performances were a mixture of both Irish and foreign-born works, the purpose being to observe the Irish influence on and interpretation of both domestic and foreign works. The minigrant provided to me by the Miller Arts Scholars program was used to cover the costs of attending the performances (transportation and tickets). My observations were compiled into reflections, in which I discuss Irish elements and their representations in the performances, storytelling methods, and stylistic components. I have compiled my overarching observations into a comprehensive outcome reflection, included below.

Throughout the course of my semester abroad, I hoped to engage with international works with the aim of becoming a more well-rounded and open-minded student and practitioner of theatre. I strongly believe that the engagement afforded to me through this minigrant provided me with an opportunity to globalize my definition and understanding of theatre and performance art as a whole. Extensive exposure to a new historically and performance-rich culture has fostered for me an open mind, a broadened perspective, a global network, and a new sense of creativity. I truly feel inspired and better prepared than ever for a future in the performing arts and beyond

Budget Report

Show	Cost (Euro)
<i>The Father</i>	28.50
<i>Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?</i>	39
<i>The Heiress</i>	26.5
<i>Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme</i>	20
<i>Donegal</i>	18
<i>The Remains of Maisie Duggan</i>	20
<i>Stand-Up Comedy at The Laughter Lounge</i>	31
<i>How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying</i>	22
<i>The Commitments</i>	58.45
<i>The Seagull</i>	40
Bus Transportation	2.70 each way → 54
Total	357.45

357.45 Euro converted to USD is a total of **\$382.34** (as of January, 2017).

Reflection on Irish works

Pride in Irish culture and history was a predominant theme throughout the pieces I saw. Though Irish history is extensive and riddled with complexities, Irish nationalism is a fairly new sentiment wrought only in recent decades in accordance with the Celtic Tiger, progressive social and political movements, and a newfound acceptance of the Irish language and music tradition. Artistic mediums throughout Ireland have been a primary carrier and promoter of these nationalist sentiments. Frank McGuinness' Irish piece *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme*, for example, is a strong concoction of Irish nationalism, psychology, and sexuality. As with many of the Irish pieces I viewed, the timely revival of McGuinness' piece was not a coincidence. Performed exactly 100 years from the Battle of the Somme, the production falls in accordance with a year of celebration for the Republic of Ireland, also the centenary of the 1916 Easter Rising. Not only was this an important historical year in Ireland, it was also enormously controversial - a major point on which Irish tourism and research has been focused this year. The character of Pyper in particular is extremely reflective of revolutionary twentieth century Ireland, embodying ambiguous identity, enigmatic in his sexuality, background, and beliefs.

However, most characters found in these pieces were far from ambiguous. Indeed, the vast majority of the Irish pieces I saw, regardless of genre, were explicit commentaries on Irish society, built around strong characters and strong messages. The most recurring subject matter? The role of the family. While many productions, including the musical *The Commitments*, presented the family unit as a substantial source of support, the family was most predominantly a source of great contention. Both *Donegal* and *The Remains of Maisie Duggan* were variations on the drawing room play genre, focusing largely on dramatic action and tension within the family unit. Drama comes from the point most central to one's life – in Irish culture, both today and throughout history, that is the family unit. Tension over economic uncertainty and broken family ties were the central drivers of conflict in *Donegal*. Disparate social values and tensions deeply rooted in family history, too, fueled the powerful and vocal divisions in *Remains*. Headstrong characters repeatedly guided by self-interest in both plays found their tensions culminating with all-inclusive confrontations. Rarely did they find a happy ending. This theme was certainly a commentary on misplaced values and was central to a number of the Irish pieces I saw.

Despite the aforementioned pride in Irish culture that has arisen in recent decades, it is critical to the comprehension of Irish theatre to recognize that Irish culture is definitively hybrid. The Irish, as well as their more contemporary art, fundamentally embrace the paradox of valuing history and culture while incorporating progressive notions as the message of the piece and incentives for the characters. The most direct of this commentary came from the standup comedy shows I saw. Employing a dark humor, comics addressed current and relevant domestic and international events from a 'stereotypical' Irish perspective: comics would assume dimwitted, innocent, charming, and brusque characters to reflect all aspects of the stereotypical Irish persona and reimagine situations with Irish characters involved. At the same time, comics made a distinct effort to comment on Ireland's place on the international stage and prominent events occurring abroad. Through their humor and approach, the comedians continuously made clear statements on current events at home and abroad. This mixture of material appealed immensely to an audience of both Irish and international nationality.

I assert, then, that performance art in Ireland is used to facilitate the promotion and maintenance of Irish tradition and culture while looking towards a modern and globalized future. It is not only the Irish mentality, therefore, that reflects this cultural hybridity, but Irish art as well, resulting in unique and distinctly Irish conventions.

Reflection on Foreign works

Irish interpretation of foreign works goes far beyond the simple use of an Irish accent. The performances of foreign pieces that I viewed were very reminiscent of Irish works, primarily in subject matter and the use of the work as a platform for social commentary. Gaiety Theatre's modernized production of Anton Chekhov's classic drama *The Seagull*, for example, perfectly epitomizes the incorporation of Irish elements into a foreign-born piece of work for the purpose of igniting cultural impact. The tragedy was transformed and translated to be set in modern-day Ireland as was evident not only in script, but also in set, costume, dialect, and characters. The piece was adapted to feature a lesbian love affair, reflecting the recent and prominent push for gay rights in Ireland – gay marriage was legalized in Ireland in November, 2015, and has become a source of Irish pride despite Catholic tendencies. Furthermore, the play echoes the continued fight for women's rights in Ireland with Nina's detrimental dependence on Trigorin, and the problematic wealth-obsessed remnants of the Celtic Tiger that manifest in the character of Eileen.

Much like the Irish works I saw, these foreign works were notably centered around familial interaction and tension, many in the fashion of the drawing room play structure common to late-19th and early 20th century theatre. *The Heiress*, for example, primarily tells of a frayed relationship between a father and daughter. Their feud impacts not only his daughter's prospects while he lives, but also following his death. As in many Irish works that center around the family unit, the piece displayed the extensive role of the family to one's life and interaction with their environment.

Florian Zeller's *The Father* was a contemporary take on this structure, exploring the effects of a deteriorating mind and confronts the audience with the universal reality of aging. Though a French piece, the emotionally charged piece was made universally appealing by its culturally-transcendent subject matter and the use of the family. *The Father* beautifully puts family life onstage, episodically displaying the family as both a familiar and foreign entity as Andre's illness progresses. This episodic structure to the piece reflects Andre's perspective of his world and his closest relatives; scenes don't flow but fracture, distend, and repeat. Interestingly, despite the difficult subject matter, the piece maintained an attitude unique to the Irish that I uncovered throughout my time abroad. It presented a grim but humorous outlook on the future, manipulating difficulty with dark humor and conviction.

These plot elements allow for the plays to engage with subjects that are both new-wave and very familiar to Irish theatre and society. This includes the use of black humor to bring attention to the seriousness of the breakdown of the family unit and depression, and the cultural dysfunction of ignoring unfurling troubles. Consequently, many of these plays serve as lenses through which we see not only glimpses of Ireland, but a complete and unapologetic analysis of the country.