

**THE PLAYS OF PAUL MERCIER: GLOBALISATION THE  
CELTIC TIGER AND BEYOND**

**By**

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## **DECLARATION**

I hereby certify that this material, which I now submit for assessment on the programme of study leading to the MA in Humanities, is entirely my own work and has not been taken from the work of others save and to the extent that such work has been cited and acknowledged within the text of my work.

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# **THE PLAYS OF PAUL MERCIER: GLOBALISATION THE CELTIC TIGER AND BEYOND**

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**Jean Clarke,**

This thesis presents an exploration of Paul Mercier's plays, written and first performed between the period 1980 and 2006: *Drowning* (1984), *Wasters* (1985), *Spacers* (1986), *Buddleia* (1995), *Kitchensink* (1997), *Native City* (1998) and *Homeland* (2006). Its principal focus is on how Mercier's plays dramatised elements of globalisation and the Celtic Tiger. Firstly, I situate a theoretical and cultural lens before examining how his plays characterise and perform an urban-world into which we are drawn, to witness and reflect on situations that are both those of others and of ourselves. Material for this thesis includes: unpublished manuscripts of the plays, theatrical reviews, the general body of work on culture, drama and theatre, and finally philosophy and sociology texts.

The principal argument of my thesis is that Paul Mercier's plays, through their characterisation and performance, dramatised the complexity of our nation-state in a world of globalisation and the ephemeral era of the Celtic Tiger. His plays bring us to the periphery of social contexts; they remain focussed on the humanity of the everyday, while, at the same time, embracing imagination, creativity, inspiration, humour, the aesthetic, Greek Tragedy, Celtic mythology and kitchen-sink drama.

While Mercier's dramatisation of the everyday might appear to be insular, in that the setting is local and Irish, neither his characters nor their stories are pre-occupied with issues of historical and national identity, at least not within a post-colonial context. Rather, his pre-occupation is with contemporary issues of a different kind of colonisation, that of globalisation and the era of the Celtic Tiger.

My study advances the canon of work on Paul Mercier; it critiques nuances of globalisation and the Celtic Tiger through the lens of drama and performance.

# CHAPTER ONE

## SETTING THE SCENE

### **Introduction:**

The purpose of this thesis is to examine ways in which Paul Mercier's work is shaped by globalised identities and the impact of Celtic Tiger Ireland. The term Celtic Tiger was coined in 1994 to describe a period of rapid authentic economic growth, driven by foreign direct investment. According to Buchanan, the idiom of the Celtic Tiger is essentially 'the password of a newness that attempts to separate old from new, local from global, and past from present;' it is about a new sense of being Irish (2009:300). Historically, coming as it did in the final decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the period of the Celtic Tiger was also part of a late modernity and post-modernity globalised value system here in Ireland. Indeed, Ireland became the 'poster child of free-market globalisation' but not for long (O'Toole, 2010:10). Instead, due to our own property bubble and the international financial crash in 2008, we experienced the sinking of the Celtic Tiger and a move toward a package of austerity, formulated by European and global institutions, the European Union (EU) and the International Monetary Fund (Ibid, 10).

Prior to the collapse of the Celtic Tiger, Declan Kiberd lamented the absence of 'major celebration or corrosive criticism' of the profound social change that was part of the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in Ireland (2005, 276). He wrote:

The pace of change may be just too fast for most, for it is never easy to take a clear photograph of a moving object, especially when you are up close to it. Nothing, after all, is more difficult to realise than the present – we are always at its mercy more than we are its masters. [...], many writers find it hard to believe sufficiently in the shiny surfaces of Celtic Tiger Dublin to go to the considerable trouble of rendering them. (Ibid, 276)

Perhaps it was because Mercier was writing about a reality, devoid of materialism and wealth, and without the potential to host the arrival of a future Celtic Tiger, or that his plays performed a less ornate surface of what, for some, was a new found wealth and affluence, that his work was not considered in the canon of work explored by Kiberd. Maybe, the time of the writing of the plays (1984-2006), considered in this thesis, was itself too close-up to the period of the Celtic Tiger to be visible, particularly when Kiberd proclaimed, ‘a fatalism among the intelligentsia, who seem unable to believe in the recent affluence, preferring to see it as a blip on the radar screen rather than the natural order of things’ (2005, 276).

So what was the rhythm and vision of Irish life in the lead up to, and during the period of, the Celtic Tiger, and how might they be belatedly understood, from the perspective of an artist who began writing and directing plays in the 1980s? Through my critical engagement with Mercier’s work, I content that his plays are a performance of cultural resistance to globalisation, while, at the same time, they position the arrival (and demise) of the Celtic Tiger. Furthermore, I argue that his interest in urban and suburban working-class communities, and the milieu of their development and survival, illuminates our understanding of globalisation within an Irish and theatrical setting; and he does this by assimilating the local and national space of the everyday as a reflective mirror to explore the fragmented nature of individualism, anonymity, consumerism and urbanisation that underpins globalisation.

Sources and techniques employed in my engagement with his work included a textual analysis of nine plays written and performed between 1984 and 2006; commentary by journalists; theatre reviews; and relevant theoretical sources. The plays reviewed include: *Drowning* (1984), *Wasters* (1985), *Spacers* (1986); his Dublin Trilogy – *Buddleia* (1995), *Kitchen Sink* (1997) and *Native City*, (1998); and finally plays written in the first years of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century – *We Ourselves* (2000), *Diarmuid and Grainne* (2001), and *Homeland* (2006).

In my analysis, I encountered each play as a piece of written drama, while at the same time considering each text's performative potential and its complex use of space and place, beyond mere location and physical structures. The issues of urbanity and class, and their relative invisibility within the notion of a Celtic Tiger Ireland, were crucial to my readings of Mercier's work. Manuscripts of all plays were made available to me by Paul Mercier, as none of them are in print; hence, the inclusion of more primary material than is usual in a thesis.

### **Situating a theoretical lens: culture**

My task in writing this thesis was to engage in a critical analysis of Mercier's work; but, since no reading or engagement with drama is ever 'innocent, or objective, or purely descriptive' (Waugh, 2006, 2) assumptions underlining my standpoint are debated in this section of the thesis.

Just how we understand the formation of literary canons is in itself a valued process, by which I mean the notion of an 'in-between' in what is read, or experienced, as drama; that is, who is the reader, who is the audience, and, in the case of a thesis about literary work, who is the narrator? I came to this work with a background in ethnography and an interest in the theatre of life, which might explain why, in the first instance, I was drawn to Mercier's work. For me, albeit a circumstance enhanced as a consequence of my academic studies in theatre and drama, I see culture, art and literature as genres that are there for the "everyone"; they provide an entrée into a world of knowing that does not objectify social, economic and political processes, but, rather, performs the actualities of people's everyday lives and experiences. As genres of performance, they provide images of rhythm and vision, toward the creation of what John McGahern describes as:

A world in which we can live: if not for long or forever, still a world of the imagination over which we can reign, and by reign I mean to reflect purely on our situation through this created world of ours, this Medusa's mirror, allowing us to see and to celebrate even the totally intolerable (2009, 7).

In my reading of the of Mercier's work, I found myself, at one and the same time, in a world of imagination – both that of Mercier and my own – and also a world of past experiences as an ethnographer, which, combined, provided me with a complex lens of understanding that

allows me to give this unique critical evaluation of Mercier's work. However, there are limitations to the work: I did not engage with all of Mercier's plays; I was restricted by the timeframe and demands of the thesis; and finally, mine is a narrative voice of an "advanced beginner" in drama and dramaturgy. Thus, while this is my 'categorical statement,' to quote Harold Pinter: '[It] will never stay where it is and be finite. It will immediately be subject to modification by the other ...' (1976, 9).

According to Michael D. Higgins, 'we encounter culture as a process, a tool for redefinition,' where we can both recognise our finite existence as human beings and also the infinity of our imagination; culture allows for a transcendence of time and space, a wholeness of experience (2006, 158). Engagement with the work of Raymond Williams (1977) further illuminates the meaning of culture and its relevance to this study. He considers the notion of culture from a perspective of 'the arts,' that is, as a 'system of meanings and values,' a 'whole way of life,' and, in particular, the relationship of these understandings to 'society' and 'the economy' (Ibid, 13). Critically, Williams differentiates between static culture – an achieved civilisation, and dynamic culture – one underpinned by the development of the 'human spirit,' including the complexity and variability of the external shaping forces, and material social processes that shape it (Ibid, 15-19). While Williams's theoretical perspective is not a prescriptive grammar for engaging with the notion of culture, and by definition art and literature, it is an invitation to involve oneself differently, to move oneself to the periphery of social contexts, and to remain focussed on the humanity of the everyday, while, at the same time, embracing imagination, creativity, inspiration, the aesthetic and a positive sense of myth (1997, 15). Noteworthy, Higgins sees in William's work an 'inclusive invitation to reflection,' a summons 'to integrate biography and history in a patient way' toward the creation of an eye for revelatory and resonant images (2006, 182-183). Critically, Higgins makes a distinction between an art and literature 'of the people' (i.e. a 'parasitical' literature, descriptive, revelatory, based on nostalgia and, or bitter memory), and an art and literature 'for the people', (i.e. subversive, defiant and illuminating), while advocating an empowering cultural meaning for art, beyond the objectification of the human spirit (Ibid, 128). He is eager for a literature that is more than entertaining, for one that is able 'to jog the sensibilities into a critical self-appraisal' and that can 'trace out the contradictions of the state as structures impinge upon our people' (Ibid, 128).

My reading of Mercier suggests that his work is a celebration of the human spirit and the everyday, in the sense of how Williams and Higgins commended art might be. Both the characters and settings of his dramas bring the audience toward a space of reflection of the self, about the “other”, about the self and other, and about the historical period of globalisation and the Celtic Tiger Era in Ireland. It is my argument in this thesis that the art of Paul Mercier, including his talent for capturing the everyday through energy of language and the richness of comic playfulness, along with the performance of subtleties of individual vulnerability, is essentially subversive and illuminating, within the standpoint offered by Williams and Higgins.

### **Situating a theoretical lens: globalisation and culture**

Although the notion of globalisation is not new, Pieterse argues that within its current historical context – from 1980s onwards – globalisation is essentially Eurocentric in nature, and an embodiment of ‘presentism’ (2014, 236). A globalised standpoint foregrounds the importance of a world economy of trade, transactions, capital and investment, which encourages migration, the movement of people and the dissemination of knowledge. Its embodiment of ‘presentism’ reflects notions of modernity, postmodernity, and a capitalist world, in particular the fragmented nature of individualism, anonymity, consumerism and urbanisation. Globalization within a late capitalist world is articulated by Bergeron as:

The commodification of nearly everything that has an exchange value and a fetishism of the commodity-form that obfuscates social relations between people so that they appear to be relations among objects (2014, 1).

Specifically, the commodification of culture, including attempts to annex it as a means of economic growth and exchange, are key elements of Ireland’s economic development, notably in the government’s ‘Imagine Ireland’<sup>1</sup> initiative. Of this venture, Lonergan comments:

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<sup>1</sup> The Imagine Ireland initiative involved a twelve month series of readings, performances and conferences in the USA, the purpose of which was to attract multinational investment toward restoring Ireland’s international reputation (Lonergan, 2013, 45)

Imagine Ireland is an exercise in nation-branding: it is founded not on any sense of the artistic or aesthetic worth of any Irish artists' work, but instead on the need to market Ireland's uniquely creative status in a manner that will be of benefit to businesses (2013, 45).

Deliberations on the status and performance of culture in Ireland, and the notion of Irishness, have long been a source of debate, initially within the idiom of revivalism which foregrounded principles of 'cultural nationalism' and the 'Celtic Twilight'<sup>2</sup> movement, and later within a modernist perspective, which endorses a practice of cultural reflection, with a preference for 'discontinuity to continuity, diversity to unity, conflict to harmony, novelty to heritage' (Kearney, 1988, 12). However, a third standpoint is offered by Kearney, one that involves 'a *collage* of modern and traditional motifs' toward a postmodern mode of consciousness, in that 'it borrows freely from the idioms of both modernity and tradition' (Ibid, 14).

While Kearney's view of postmodernism suggests a freedom of expression, within the context of theatre, postmodernism is seen by others to have a marginalising effect, with a potential for incapacitation and weakness (Fortier, 2002). According to Fortier, the notion of a postmodern theatre is 'a process still under way and not an irresistible *fait accompli*' (Ibid, 180). Referring to Birringer (1991)<sup>3</sup>, he proposes an 'obsessive exploration of representation and its limits,' and an 'ability to contradict and rupture the indifference of contemporary culture' as a requirement toward the avoidance of postmodern impoverishment (Ibid, 180). This suggests the notion of 'discontinuity' and what Foucault saw as the constitution of a subjective knowledge or '*savoir*,' as part of an *epistme*, that is, a construction of knowledge that determines both empirical orders and social processes – a contextualised knowing (1994,

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<sup>2</sup> Proponents of the Celtic Twilight movement believed that Ireland's proper destiny lay beyond the spiritlessness of modernity; and instead, it needed to be positioned within the myths of the Celtic past (Kearney, 1988, 11).

<sup>3</sup> Birringer, Johannes H. *Theatre, Theory, Postmodernism*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991.

255-257). The performance of contextualised knowing prompts opinions about what is presented as theatre in terms of character, plot, denouement, dialogue, set and setting. For, if theatre is to contradict and rupture, it must in essence prompt moments of reflection, either during the performance or post the performance, where the audience engages the wonders of their imagination toward possibilities of understanding beyond theatre as a place for seeing and hearing. According to Bharucha, what is necessary is 'to be able to see the global and communal realities of our times *through* (original emphasis) the transient illumination of theatre' (2000, 17).

Just how a contextualised knowing might be enacted within the transience of drama and theatrical performance is articulated by Fortier as: drama that 'restores critical distance' and in its performance gives 'a subtle and complex understanding of its context' but without explicit commentary or the taking of political positions (2002, 181). The issue of context in Twentieth Century Ireland was essentially underpinned by 'a prevailing sense of discontinuity' including: a crisis of cultural consciousness, between the 'claims of tradition and modernity,' the absence of 'a coherent identity,' the 'breakdown of inherited ideologies and beliefs,' and 'the insecurities of fragmentation' (Kearney, 1988, 9). Critically, in the early years of Twenty-first Century Ireland, the crisis of cultural consciousness continues, this time positioned within a continuity and discontinuity of culture described by Higgins as: a 'residual category of explanation;' 'a hegemony and product of order, power, influence and authority in the social setting;' and a celebration of citizenship, tolerance, healing and 'the complex tapestry that is our identity' (2006, 158-160). According to Kearney (referring to Seamus Heaney), finding resolution to the problematic and dilemma of our cultural consciousness requires a 'search for symbols and images adequate to our predicament' (1998, 10), while Higgins argues for a tolerance and respect for 'every story' and a transcendence of time and space, where 'dream is as important as object' (2006, 158-160). In this thesis, I

explore how Paul Mercier uses and creates symbols, images and dramatic narratives to situate the problematic – globalisation and the culture of the Celtic Tiger – of late Twentieth Century and early Twenty-first Century urban Ireland.

According to Lonergan, the social changes wrought by globalisation including asylum seeking, tourism, multi-culturalism, inter-culturalism, universal human rights and foreign direct investment all have influenced the reception of many plays in Ireland, while not necessarily being considered explicitly by dramatists (2010:4). However, drama and its development can be understood within the notion of globalisation in terms of *if*, and *how*, it: critiques the notion of society and the nation itself; characterises the everyday lives of people as heroic; and dramatises and performs conflicts and struggles between values of mass consumption and aesthetic values. It is this latter notion of globalisation that is central to my analysis of Paul Mercier's work.

### **Introducing Paul Mercier**

Paul Mercier is a contemporary Dublin dramatist and a founding member and artistic director of the Passion Machine theatre company. He has written 18 plays, some in the Irish language. He wrote and directed his first play in 1984. Mercier dramatises the everyday, the problematic interplay and material social processes between politics and aesthetic values, as well as the complexity of physical, personal and social space and place. His work with Passion Machine drew a non-traditional theatre audience; prompting one newspaper *The Sunday Tribune* to describe him as 'an explorer of a world that has been all but written out of Irish literature and theatre' (Quoted in Lauren Onkey, *The Passion Machine Theatre Company's Everyday life*, 2000, 223-224). In an interview in 2011<sup>4</sup>, Mercier said of his job as a dramatist: '[it is] to make sure that people are entertained in one sitting between 8pm and

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<sup>4</sup> Article by Sara Keating in *The Irish Times*, posted March 21<sup>st</sup> 2011 - <http://dublintheatre.ie/wp/?p=1132>

10pm; and in the process, if I can get to say something about life, that's great,' a comment that implies an oblique evocation that his plays are a form of social commentary. Later, he spoke of the characters in his plays: people who are at a 'critical point in their lives,' and in 'circumstances of pressing economic circumstances,' which again implies acknowledgement and ownership, as author, of dramatic literature that performs the complexities of the social production of life.

I argue, within this thesis, that Mercier's plays bring together the poetics of a space and place of urban modernity-postmodernity and its politics, *as well as* the politics and poetics that include the everyday and cultural traditions within the machinations of power that encompass them. Furthermore, as an ethnographer reading his plays, I see them as performance ethnographies, with the characters and actors "being there" within the space and place of "other" and the potential this offers for a real literary process, described by Williams as, 'a matter of recognizing the issues as part of a whole social process which, as it is lived, is not only process but is an active history, made up of the realities of formation and of struggle' (1977, 210). The writing and the staging of the everyday by Mercier is deliberately within the narrative of the "insider" (to use an ethnographic term), as well as being celebratory of a culture marginalised (or at least defiant) within a globalised ideology of consumerism, individualism and commodification: and Mercier acknowledges this:

Theatre should be doing something for people, liberating them and helping them come to terms with aspects of their lives. [...] So many influences from abroad have crept into our culture. We are trying to create our own heroes at home and we have begun to do that on a popular, not an elitist, level. [...] We don't go in for high drama, high art, political drama, obscure drama, foreign work. Our main aim is to develop theatre that is about what we think is important in everyday life (Cunningham, 1990, 8).

While Mercier sought to distance his theatrical practice beyond politics, it is difficult to ignore the implicit micro-politics (if not, also, the macro-politics) within his plays, as well as (to quote Onkey, 2000, 225) his 'attempts to refine a theatrical practice that is not already

overdetermined by Irish nationalist theatre and its sometimes cumbersome notions of “Irishness” and “nation”. His shift from a dominant metanarrative of Irish theatre, toward a narrative of a fragmented, authentic everyday of multiple identities and localised struggle, suggests a revolutionary action under the umbrella of modernity–postmodernity. Notably, his dramas are deconstructive, self-evaluative and reflexive. His characters and their settings are not just about whom the story of the drama is told and located; rather, they perform selves and circumstances that challenge notions of identity, certainty and what it means to be in the world of late Twentieth and early Twenty-first Century Ireland. Above all, Mercier’s plays fit within the notion of postmodernism in that they engage critically with reality, for as Mudasir (2011, 9) notes:

It is this deconstructive impulse of postmodern drama that vindicates its value as a mode of critical engagement with the contemporary culture and politics and establishes it as a significant artistic category capable of both reflecting and commenting on the contemporary reality.

Chapter two begins a more in-depth analysis of Mercier’s work, commencing with three plays written and performed in the 1980s.

## CHAPTER TWO

### PLAYS FROM OURSELVES, ABOUT OURSELVES AND FOR OURSELVES: MEDIATED EXPERIENCE AND AUTHENTIC EXPERIENCE IN *DROWNING*, *WASTERS* AND *SPACERS*

#### Introduction

While I've chosen *Drowning* (1984) as the principal play to underpin this chapter, I will draw on two others, *Wasters* (1985) and *Spacers* (1986), to substantiate the main argument at this stage of the thesis, which is: the early works of Paul Mercier begin a critique of society, at the fringes of urban life, and of the nation. All three plays considered are about the everyday; they also work metaphorically as narratives of urban modern life and as a concrete close-up of the shared world and private world of urban youth and urban families. Mercier's plays are bitter-sweet comedies; they express contrasting emotions of pain and pleasure, happiness and melancholy, and realities of power and powerlessness. His plays characterise the lives of people who, with an awakening understanding of the circumstances of their lives and community – work, unemployment, drugs and mental health – begin to see a nation state, that is somehow not relevant to their lives, or doesn't seem, or wish, to understand them.

In the decade of the 1980s, Mercier began to situate fractures in society along with an understanding of the complex human spirit that is about a desire for individualism, but is also a yearning for a sense of belonging and a status of structure. In essence the characters of his plays can be seen as 'minipublics' (borrowing a term from Bohman, 2004); they are local and have agency; they live and have relevant perspectives on the complex social facts of *their* everyday (my emphasis). Bohman argues the case for involving 'minipublics' in civic processes toward new understandings about democracy in the transnational context of

globalisation (2004). A commitment to the idea of minipublics represents a shift away from notions of centralised power and expertise, toward a recognition of, and engagement with, localised and contextualised knowledge and understanding – know-how and know-that; it is about insider power rather than outsider power. Ideas about insider knowledge, ordinary people and minipublics are reflective of Mercier’s beliefs on developing theatre about what is important in everyday life; Higgins’s notion of the worth of ‘every story’ in culture and citizenship; and finally Williams’s ideas of active histories as part of real literary processes (see Chapter One).

### **Ordinary People**

*Drowning* was the first play performed by the *Passion Machine* theatre company. Described as a rock musical, it launched a new voice to a new theatre audience in Dublin, in 1984. The play is set in a Dublin working-class housing estate; its setting is the family. The play is about the struggle of Luke Burns, the son of the family, to find a different meaning in his life: as a rock star and lead singer Ozzy Stench, with the Tomahawks. However, his efforts become entangled in a fantasy world of dreams of escape and success as a singer; his life with a family that struggles in a world of social and economic deprivation and disadvantage; and his love and allegiance to his family. Luke’s dream-world is a tapestry of his own stories, those of his family and finally of his backing group. The stage performance brings both family and backing group together in an illuminative performance that positions Luke in a dual-position of grieving for his trapped relatives and fantasising a different world of fame and success. The travails of the Burns family, particularly those of the mother Ma Burns, bring the family beyond the protected, albeit chaotic, environment of their home to an institutional custodial space of a psychiatric hospital, from where she is kidnapped by her own family toward the freedom of ‘living in paradise’. But, this is all part of Luke’s dream-world, with the audience being drawn into a comic and satirical performance of the chaos of life lived at the margins of

society, including associated social and psychological issues of anonymity, agency, hope and hopelessness. The import of Luke's dream-world of family and rock band in proposing and substantiating the play's meaning is enhanced through the words of the songs included in the play, not because of their musicality, which Colgan describes as 'not exactly replete with melody' (1991, 8), but their function in providing commentary on where the dilemmas of life are lived, at home and in the everyday:

I'm racing fast / Fall with me / Take my hand and follow down to home / I'll take you back to heartland / Falling back to home again / Falling back to heartland. (73)

The opening scene of *Drowning* is set on a rock concert stage; Luke the principal character is dreaming:

This is it, I'm doin' it. I'm in the back of that limo, heading out of the city like a bolt. From the filth into the sunset. And the driver calls me sir. We'll get you there, he says. (4)

Straight away, the audience is brought into a soliloquy of illusions of a different life, of freedom, of affluence, suggesting a theatrical moment of inflection; that is both a critique of globalisation through an illustration of freedom and the embrace of hedonism, and a naïve dream of youth. The opening dream of Luke is arresting, all the more so because it is quickly brought to an end with the voices of his mother, Ma Burns: 'Luke, have you any idea what time it is?' and his Da: 'Did you hear your mother?'(4). But the band plays on; that is until the arrival on stage of Luke's Da, Ma and siblings, Joey and Sis, carrying a table and four chairs, where they form a family photo tableau around the table in the middle of speakers and rock-gig paraphernalia. This scene is both frenetic and funny and the set is austere, but deliberately so, for Mercier and Passion Machine had, of necessity, to 'convey ideas more effectively, [...] because we have no set or special effects, everything is play, and depends on the acting' (Mercier & Hunter, 1985).

From the outset Mercier engages his audience in a binary standpoint, the simultaneous inscription and subversion of a basic dramatic category, that of character: he situates a meaning for this family that is both a social reality of the everyday in a working-class family and a surrogate for a postmodern globalised state. Whether it is the band singing songs about a 'New Day', or the family play acting a chat-show, with Da as the host, Luke the guest celebrity and the rest of the family watching it on their television in the room, *Drowning* draws the audience into a frenzied world that is both real and surreal.

The world the Burns family inhabit reflects a 'minipublic' of a reality that is both ordinary and extraordinary, and all the time a reality constructed with painstaking detail. Their lives are performed within a dream-like authenticity to a captured audience, which allows for the performance of an insider's experience, but without an outsider's challenge. Instead, the audience leaves challenged to consider the legitimacy and relevance of what they experienced. Looking carefully, one can see a mode of action in Luke's dream that suggests texts of globalisation – consumerism, individualism, the existence of better material conditions, and hints of progress – while the voice of his mother, asking Luke if he has 'any idea of the time it is,' (4) and his father telling him to 'get outa that bed and get a job' (5) are more than a wakeup call to Luke, but rather a foregrounding of a dialectical on the notion of the family, society, the nation state and globalisation. While Luke is dreaming of the beyond, his mother and father are in the here-and-now. In a globalised world, things happen from out there – they involve 'large scale and macrosociological processes;' but, our self-originating reality, our here-and-now, or what Bohman terms 'unavoidable social complexity' must also be considered toward realising 'conditions of possibility' in a globalised world (2004, 123, 131). Furthermore, the performance of a 'chat show' in the early part of the play is a reminder to the audience that this drama is itself taking on a global product, albeit briefly, and with a sense of cynicism. But, while the out-sidedness of this global product is implicit, in the

hands of Mercier it is also a critical tool to prompt questions about the place of art in a market economy, as well as the familiarity of identity, rather than the anonymity of other:

Da: (As host on the air) [...] tonight we give you the outrageous Ozzy Stench. [...] So now, young man, what have you got to say for yourself?

Luke: (Waving to camera) Howya, Ma!

Ma: (Collapsing off her chair) Oh, sweet Jesus.

[...]

Da: (Host) Yes, and what advice would you offer to all those young rebels looking in tonight?

Luke: (To camera) What are you doin' watching this crap?

[And later, when the band makes a surprise appearance on the chat show and briefly play some music]

Da (Host): Right, time we took a commercial break.

Luke: No, ye don't. (Grabbing host in arm lock and speaking to camera) Go near them commercials and I'll pull his head off.

Da: (Host) No ads. No ads!

(13-14)

But, this level of illumination is only really reached when the drama is over, when one can respond reflexively to it, rather than as a consequence of its foregrounding one particular message or meaning. For *Drowning*, Mercier's first play, creates a new social space to allow individuals to express and explore multiple identities and circumstances, while, in the words of Lonergan, 'avoiding the normalization of one particular set of values' (2010, 131), a pattern that is noted in the other plays explored within this thesis.

### **Multiple identities and circumstances**

In his presentation of multiple identities and circumstances of urban life in the 1980s, Mercier's characters in *Drowning*, *Spacers* and *Wasters* narrate idioms of the everyday, closely associated with performative elements of musicianship and theatre-within-theatre.

The performance of this late Twentieth Century, urban and working-class everyday is both immediate and reflective. There is no attempt to romanticise it, while the use of the vernacular of working-class Dublin, as well as the settings of their homes and communities, all point toward a casting and performance of ‘energies from below’ and ‘the shout from the street’ (borrowing two terms from Luke Gibbons, used in his reference to James Joyce and *Ulysses* (2015)). While borrowing these terms, I am also suggesting that Mercier’s work is Joycean in its approach, in that both men employ streams of consciousness, parody and jokes, as well as situating their work in the everyday of urban Dublin. Just as, ‘Joyce embraced the ‘filthy modern tide’ and resolved to create in its wake altogether different possibilities of experience’ (Kearney, 1988, 31), so too does Mercier. On the occasion of its second staging in Dublin, Gerry Colgan, writing in *The Irish Times*, said of *Drowning*: ‘The author lures us deep into comic terrain and then springs his satires, social and psychological, on us’ (1991, 8). However, although Mercier viewed himself as a reluctant advocate of political consciousness, believing that ‘people should like the play and laugh at it, and enjoy it and maybe they’ll go away and reconsider some things’ (Mercier and Hunter, 1985, 12), the very notion of writing and performing for an audience from a pedagogy of reflective thinking is in itself a political action. In essence, Mercier’s work invites the audience into the inter-contextual relations of an urban, working-class everyday; it challenges the very notion of existing inter-texts, by bringing into being, through drama, “in here” from “out there”, where it all goes on.

Paul Mercier’s plays dramatise a sense of Ireland far from the branded identity of the ‘Imagine Ireland’ (see Lonergan, 2013), or a revivalist Ireland of exalted rural civilisation (see Kearney, 1988). Rather, it is as Luke sees it, ‘a sprawling’ reservation for lower life forms,’ from which to escape ‘[to] take that great leap, unleash yourself on the world, change your name and shoot a revolution’(11). And what of the human spirit and maturity within this

disadvantaged society, this other Ireland? Mercier's characterisation of Luke's Ma as 'the other ma' who took Luke on walks and filled his pockets with 'seashells and shipwreck' (17-18), to the Ma who 'really did look mental' as she took 'everything to the [psychiatric] hospital' (34), gives a stark reality to individual and family crisis, and a world breaking down, a fractured world; all of which are illuminated by the chorus of the band:

What a feeling / This burning feeling inside / Takes me like a storm / I can never be the same / What a feeling / My world is breaking down / I'm only walking now / To see my people / Drowning / Drowning / All that I love / Drowning / All that I love / Drowning (33-34).

It is as if the chorus is chanting issues and experiences of worldliness that challenge what is worth being considered in the first place. In other words, what use are dreams if one's reality is in crisis? What of the everyday, or what Bharucha terms "the interval" that takes place *during* politics, not *in* politics' (original emphasis); that is 'a continuum of ceaseless activity that is going on all around us, pulsating through the immediacies of conflicting times?' (2000, 151-152). In *Drowning*, Ma Burns' mental illness, the experience of her hospitalisation, the family's weekly visits to her and Luke's attempts to abduct her, all give dramatic effect to a sense of ceaseless activity and conflicting times:

Every Sunday was a big day out, when the where-the-fuck-are-we tribe headed south to see the loonies. Bit of a giggle if ye didn't know one. Gas thing was on visiting day you couldn't tell who was a space cadet and who wasn't. Even the doctors looked mental. And everywhere the smell of cabbage and custard. The sound of cups and trolleys. The spotless floors. The neat beds. The silent misery and all the whisperin'. (SHOUTS) Everybody whisperin'! (37-38)

The Burns family epitomise a body in crisis, beyond that of the individual or the family. It is as if the everywhere that smells of cabbage and custard are an allegory for what can happen in circumstances of sameness and the loss of individuality and uniqueness. While *Drowning* is not an explicit commentary on, or the taking of, political positions in relation to the nuances of globalisation, the circumstances of Luke's dream and the happenings of the Burns family offer symbols and images adequate to the predicament of both submission and

divergence to conditions of hegemony within a globalised world of individualism, consumerism and commodification. In *Drowning*, Mercier's branding of Ireland is urban, disadvantaged, and chaotic; it is other; but, it is out there.

### **Desire for individualism, belonging and a sense of structure**

While individualism and a need for belonging are both processes experienced by the members of the Burns family, it is in Mercier's other work from the 1980s – *Wasters* (1985) and *Spacers* (1986) – that these fundamental social processes are dramatised, not inside a family, but within the community and the everyday of urban youth. *Wasters* is a story about six disenchanted and disaffected young Dubliners who spend a night drinking together on waste ground on the edge of a local council housing estate. Bonzo, is home from London, where he works on a building-site. Both his leaving and his return home for the weekend were unexpected. He wants to party with his old friends – Joycer, Ducky, Liz, Martina and Angela – and, as he and his male friends set up on the wasteland, later to be joined by the girls, feelings and emotions come to the fore. There are scores to settle, wounds to heal and games to play. The parody and comic elements of the play give a sense that there is little meaning and purpose to the lives of these young people; but, for all their game playing and settling of scores, including attempts to score with each other, theirs' is a bleak world. Bonzo, who got away to work in Islington, is home to reassure himself that he still belongs and matters to this group, while their drinking party on the waste-ground, where they reminisce about similar activities when they were younger, emphasises their hopeless situation. The characters are going nowhere, except for Joycer, whom, we learn later, is going to prison. But, not everybody knows about Joycer's crime. Moreover, he is not about to say anything about his guilt or innocence, because to snitch on others might be too dangerous.

The dialogue is at times repetitive and meaningless; but, that said, within their singing, use of wordplay and expressions of nonsense, the characters show feelings and a desire for individualism, belonging and structure:

Bonzo: It's just good seein' ye again.

Martina: Is tha' all? Did ye miss us?

Joycer: (Singing an intro) 'Da da da da ...daaa!'

Bonzo: No.

Joycer: We'll take that again there folks.

Liz: Far from it, says you.

Joycer: (To Bonzo) Go on, tell them what ye said.

Bonzo: Sorry?

Joycer: He swears nothin' has changed. No different, he says. Imagine tha' what'?  
(To Ducky) Didn't he?

(35-36).

Their desire for a sense of belonging and to support each other is also tinged with a cruelty of point scoring and ridicule, whether it is about past or present relationships and exploits, or what they are wearing; for example, there is much ridicule of Joycer's flowery shirt, which is referred to as a curtain. However, it is when knowledge of Joycer's pending court case and likely prison sentence is made known to Bonzo, though the rest of the friends already know, that this drama promotes a multi-level criticism and reflection on power and powerlessness. Liz (Joycer's fiancée) explains to Bonzo how Joycer was caught robbing and a security man ended up in hospital with a split skull, though she didn't think he did it.

Bonzo: Will that sap ever learn?

Liz: I know but I feel sorry for him.

Bonzo: And will you ever learn?

Liz: His number is up whether he done it or not. Who gives a shite once they nabbed him ... at last? He won't be squelin' to no-one neither. Cos if he does his face won't be in any shape for my bleedin' weddin'. He can go to prison on his own and cop on. A year won't make any difference.

Bonzo: What ye talkin' like that for? He hasn't been tried yet.

Liz: Oh' he's goin'. He's goin' alrigh'.

(56)

It is as if they are all caught in a cycle of despair, with no sense of agency, or hope. However, in anticipation of Joycer's conviction and imprisonment, the friends act out a master plan for his escape, and what follows is a parody of adventure where the escape becomes a battle of wits to outdo the 'screws' and 'cops' and, once out, for all of them to 'go straight'. Thus, they plan taking a bus home and shun the idea of stealing a car; but the bus is full, has a minimum fare and as they try to get around their dilemma, they miss the bus and 'There's a squad car comin' (83). Their playacting is over; Joycer has escaped and they are back to their party on the waste-ground and to an exploration and interrogation of their friendship and rivalries. Again, there is playacting as they perform a make-belief escape from their world, only to finish up exhausted and cold. It is the end of their night on the waste-ground. Ducky asks: 'When does the sun come up?' Joycer replies: 'Does it matter, Ducky?'(131) They're going home; the play ends.

*Wasters* brings the audience to the macro-context of: problematic multiple identities – the lives of six friends; individualism – their individual stories and what is known to the self and to others; a sense of belonging – Bonzo's wish to reassure himself that as a returned migrant he still belongs within the group; and finally structure – their physical and social environment. By bringing the audience into this physical and social waste-ground of others, Mercier challenges us to be more open and flexible in how we understand space, place and belonging. The audience is prompted to look carefully into the very organisation of society, to consider everyday lives of disadvantage, little opportunity and distant ruling social groups

– characterised as ‘screws’ and ‘cops’ – and to move beyond an abstract and naïve understanding of cause and effect. In this way, Mercier demonstrates how theatre can be a location and space of inclusivity, of as many perspectives as possible, and as a conduit of connection with ‘minipublics’ whose experiences challenge the selectiveness and limitations of a branded identity within Ireland, most notably within the ‘Imagine Ireland’ initiative (See Chapter One).

Theatre-within-theatre is the dominant dramaturgical style used by Mercier in the play *Spacers* (1986). A group of young workers from a local council estate rehearse and perform a play written by Chas, the security guard at their local supermarket. The play – *Mikado*, but nothing like the original – has been entered for a Variety Show competition, which has a monetary prize for the winner. The cast includes: Thomas, a skinhead who collects shopping trolleys and is unemployed; Belinda, also unemployed but with ambitions to be a model; Hughie, who drives a forklift at the supermarket, as well as being a general annoyance to the others; Stella, a glamorous hairdresser, with aspirations of being famous – she falls for Ritchie, an ageing rock and roller who is on the dole, and Antoinette who has no glamour, works on the shop floor and is upfront in telling it as it is.

Right from the outset, we are prompted by Mercier as to how we might make sense and construct order out of what we are to experience. The stage is a rundown parochial hall where the cast are about to start their rehearsals; and while what they are rehearsing is described as ‘a story of love and passion, of evil that eats men hearts and make (sic) them inflict pain on other men and their birds’ (74), the play mirrors everyday dramas of the members of the cast and of a community in trouble. The play is about key elements of individualism, belonging and structure – desire, fear and a fractured world. That it is the actors’ reality played out in a performance of “the other” is prompted early on too, when Belinda reminds the rest of them:

‘It’s only meant to be pretend’ (7). But the pretend world of Chas’s play is one of drugs, bank robberies, vigilantes, personal assault and altercations with the law, all a part of the fabric of urban inner-city life in Dublin in the 1980’s.

Tensions are ever present between the actors: they jostle for positions of stardom and power; try to achieve personal visibility within the group; challenge authority; argue about the potential prize money should they win; and finally they seek out romance with each other. And all the time, the reality of their lives and their performance become entangled in the story of the drama, principally that of Chas who wishes to find romance with Stella and who wants to go ‘somewhere’, ‘[to] drive up those mountains leavin’ all this squalor behind. Over the summit till you forget there ever was a city’ (49).

Their muddled lives get in the way of their performance, not just in rehearsal but on the day of the competition. They find it hard to locate the hall where they are to perform and, when they do so, their acting is poor. They make it up as they go along, before finally being disqualified. While this comedy of errors has the audience laughing, for it is after all Mercier’s intention that his plays should, in the first instance, be entertaining and not didactic or political, it presents a polemical message crafted in a good story, of a community isolated in a climate of violence, and where ‘nobody cares anymore,’ because ‘that’s how things get done around here’ (95, 96). And just as the playwright likes ‘throwing the audience into a scene all of a sudden’ (*The Irish Times*, 1993, 12), his endings ensure that the same audience leave, mediating the closing lines. For in the final scene of *Spacers*, as Chas and Antoinette reflect on what happened – he has not been successful in his quest for Stella and the performance did not go as he intended – Mercier once more uses the moment to prompt the audience that his work retains a critical edge toward reality:

Antoinette: It was only supposed to be a ten minute variety not a full blow epic. [...] There's always next year.

[...]

Chas: I've had enough. No-one's interested. No-one cares about that sorry mess of a world out there. All anyone thinks is about themselves.

(118-119)

Again, in the final utterances of the play, Mercier reminds us that his plays are not 'funny ha-ha theatre' but rather 'a laughing celebration of what reality is' and, as such, are there for the audience 'to come along and identify with [...] and] to transcend the situation. It is an exorcism' (Cunningham, 1990, 8). *Spacers* is a chaotic drama of realism and surrealism; it challenges us to engage long after the final curtain, that we might ponder on the fictionalised characters of Chas's play and on the ambitions and vulnerabilities of the actors who play the parts.

*Drowning, Wasters* and *Spacers* dramatise the everyday of urban working-class Dublin; they produce what Battersby describes as: 'high art with street cred,' where 'what appears to be simple, straight forward and comic burlesque is in fact loaded with tortuous personal dilemmas' (1993, 12). Mercier's work is political; it gives voice to ordinary people, people who through their personal and community dilemmas can be seen as other, or indeed, not seen at all. But principally, his work calls on the audience to listen. The street credibility of his characters implies an authenticity of understanding supportive of my earlier argument on 'minipublics' (see Introduction, this Chapter) as well as demonstrating how drama and performance, in the hands of Mercier, can be a creative medium toward the inclusion of multiple-perspectives in the solution of common problems. His plays are both subversive and sceptical; they allow him to perform an art for the people – an art that challenges audiences into a reflective mode, long after the final curtain. In Chapter Three I explore Mercier's engagement with the urban landscape and its people, through his Dublin Trilogy.

## CHAPTER THREE

### SUMMONING AND PERFORMING DUBLIN LIFE IN THE DECADE OF THE ARRIVAL OF THE CELTIC TIGER: *BUDDLEIA*, *KITCHENSINK* AND *NATIVE CITY*.

#### Introduction

The focus of this chapter is Mercier's Dublin Trilogy— *Buddleia* (1995), *Kitchensink* (1997) and *Native City* (1998), which were written, and first performed, in the middle of the final decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. They tell a story of an urban landscape which is fictional, but symbolic, of north inner-city Dublin, an area in decay, with few prospects and very little, if any, voice, and at a time of the arrival of the Celtic Tiger. O'Toole, positions this trilogy of plays as 'saturated in a sense of modern dislocation and discontinuity' (1995, 14); while Mercier speaks of writing about an area, 'a world unto itself,' not necessarily because of those who live there but as a consequence of being neglected, of being trampled upon and restructured 'with no thought as to the social implications' of 'unemployment and drugs.' Mercier writes of a people out there but 'not in control of the bigger picture' (Moroney, 1998, A8A). His writing during this decade, while continuing within the genre of the subversive literature he began in the 1980's, foregrounds localism – by this I mean rendering visible the everyday of people, while at the same time showing how localism can be a state of disempowerment within hegemonies of planning and urban development – as well as the political context of the period, particularly in terms of development, planning and multiculturalism. Indeed, through his characters and their performances, he plays a role of 'vigilant opposition' despite Kiberd's contention that Irish writers 'have yet to work out

where they stand [...] on a whole range of issues from political corruption through [to] the Celtic Tiger (2005, 286).

The principal play to be considered in this chapter is *Buddleia*, while the drama and performance of *Kitchensink* and *Native City* will further illuminate the key focus of this chapter, which is: Mercier's Dublin Trilogy characterises scepticism and resistance to the idiom of the Celtic Tiger as a constructive circumstance of newness and advancement, the separation of the old from the new, local from global, and past from present.

### ***Buddleia*: approaching undefined truths of corruption and vulnerability**

In *Buddleia*, Mercier provides a dramatic commentary on a contemporary reality of corruption, and vulnerability in Ireland, while at the same time drawing the audience into a reflexive space of political and ethical sensibilities. It does this through the medium of its message and through its title, language, setting and range of characters. Given the title is the first message of the play, *Buddleia* challenges the audience with a mixed message of reality and fantasy. A buddleia is a butterfly-attracting, purple flowering, shrubby tree which proliferates on all cement waste ground; it will also find itself a space to grow in fractured and derelict buildings. In its habitat in inner-city Dublin, it is a weed, a sign of decay and degeneration. However, in Irish mythology the butterfly, *feileachan* or *dealán-dé*, symbolises the brightness of god, while also having the ability to readily pass through the veil between this world and the magical realm<sup>5</sup>. The butterfly is also symbolic of change. Thus, in choosing this title, Mercier invites the audience into a conversation about possibilities, about decay of the soul of a city and critically about the nature of realism.

*Buddleia* was first performed in October 1995; it marked Passion Machine's Dublin Theatre Festival debut. It is a complex play, not least because it has 48 characters, all of whom give

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<sup>5</sup> <http://aliisaacstoryteller.com/2014/07/24/dealan-de-the-butterfly-in-irish-mythology/>

voice to the machinations of an everyday, where opportunistic and material factors dominate, with just occasional sensitivity toward moral and ethical values. Principally, it is a drama about postmodern Dublin, where the characters bring the audience on an episodic journey through the physical and spiritual heart of a troubled and mercenary urban society. It is set in a small, urban decaying house, where an older man – a war hero – is set upon by two youths and a boy, with the intention of stealing from him to support their drug habit. But the boy is there reluctantly; he doesn't 'want to do this anymore' (4). Moreover, he wants the others to leave the old man alone; but they just turn on the boy and the man who are both 'left doubled up and crying on the floor' (5, 8). This is real life opportunism set against vulnerability.

Youth 1: (Dragging OLD MAN around the room) Right money, c'mon. C'mon money; where is it?

Boy: Can I go now?

[...]

Youth 1: (Pushing OLD MAN away) Ah, Jaysus, he's after pissin' himself.

[...]

Old Man: Money's in the drawer.

[...]

Youth 2 (Finding a locked jewellery box) What's this?

[...]

Old Man (Seeing box) No, not that, please. I'll give you cash

[...]

Youth 1: (To Youth 2) Can ye not just take the bleedin' thing?

Old Man (Motioning to get box) God's sake, that's all I have.

[... (The old man gets knocked to the ground.)]

Boy: Can't you leave him alone?

(3-5)

There is more abuse and taunting of the old man and the boy; both are left doubled up and crying on the floor, before the scene is interrupted with the music of *Rain Drops Keep Falling from the Sky*, by Frank Sinatra, and the sound of falling rain. The boy stands up in pain, and looking around at the room he says ‘Sorry, Mister.’ By the end of the first scene, the audience is drawn into a confusion of realism; the very nature of our being and what we understand as decent and civilised existence are challenged. Right from the beginning we are spectators to a scene that is both brutal – the youths seeking to rob an elderly and vulnerable man – and humane – the young boy, caught up in a hegemonic moment of violence, realises and connects with the humanity of the old man’s vulnerability and his ‘pissin’ himself’ and says he’s sorry. In his connection with the vulnerability of the man, the boy brings humanity to a situation of oppression. For a moment, and in that brief apology, he finds his own agency. The circumstance of the vulnerability of one draws the emotion of compassion from the other, albeit that the boy is vulnerable too. Through the validity of his words and images, in this opening scene, Mercier captures the audience in a web of fear and compassion. We are already part of a moral dilemma.

The fear of the old man and the young boy, as well as their concern for each other, suggest, from the outset, that this is a play about moral values. Later, the old man is found dead, believed to be following a heart attack. While no further mention is made of the break-in, the occasion of the removal of his remains from the home remind us of the intimacy of a life once lived – the crying neighbour, the priest, the migrant son, the daughter who will inherit the house, a mislaid war medal, and of the anonymity of life – guards, undertakers, estate agent. The large number of characters, and with so many of them introduced in the early scenes, is, in the words of Styan, an indication to the audience of how ‘complex an event’ this play is and ‘how subtle the weaving that makes up the happening’ (1975, 5). For, with the arrival of the estate agent the drama moves beyond the personal to include the public.

The small terraced house changes occupants and uses. The focus becomes an angry and sometimes comic account of shady dealings, property, development, zoning and politics. Kernaghan, the estate agent – who earlier dismisses the daughter of the old man and her ideas for developing the house by telling her, he ‘can arrange a buyer,’ a ‘fair price,’ and ‘within days, and with no fuss’ – is in conversation with Moran, a developer who is ‘the one building a garage around here’ (44). The conversation turns to planning, zoning and compulsory purchase:

Moran: But I want all these houses cleared before the local elections circus gets under way.

Kernaghan: Of course.

Moran: The last thing we need is some lily white crusader looking for a cause.

Kernaghan: Speaking of which. Dessie Fitzpatrick looks set to get the party’s nomination.

Moran: Well, that’s good news. Who’s [sic] daughter is he shaftin’?

Kernaghan: You’ve your spokesman if he makes it.

(46-47).

Meanwhile, in the next scene, a young couple and their daughter seek some degree of normality at Christmas time – Helen the mother is reading the Christmas story to their child – in a circumstance where the father, Thomas, prepares a heroin fix over a candle, injects himself, before later producing gifts for their child and extended family:

Thomas: Look, there ye go. (*A doll*) One Mary Lou. And batteries. That makes three women in this family who can talk. Wanna hear what I went through to get this?’

Helen: No. And keep your voice down.

Thomas: And there, look, a tea set for four, her stocking and a crash helmet. One bottle of Jemmy and smokes for the old lad, perfume and towels for me ma. And listen, I’d no time left, so I went and bought twenty scratch cards for your ma.

(50)

The divergent use of space within these two scenes, as well as the diversity and tone of conversations from the public to the intimate, are indicative of Mercier’s ability to use drama

to stimulate, what Styan (1975, 3) refers to as, ‘a gestalt of impressions,’ a complexity of moral and ethical values that are individual, social and political. While the conversation between Moran and Kernaghan implies newness and advancement, the circumstances of Thomas and Helen foreground a realism of urban decay and poverty, despite a desire to clear the houses. Furthermore, Mercier’s use of a changing space from decayed residential to a site of opportunistic development symbolises a narrative of capitalism alongside a humanity of vulnerability and poverty. Critically, Mercier is prompting the imaginative activity of the audience; he is goading their compassion to see unseemly disadvantage in a world of speculative abundance. While both circumstances are performed within a storyline of shady dealings, the audience are persuaded to discriminate between the rightfulness of both (or not).

It is not possible to engage dispassionately with this performance; rather, the audience is drawn into a compassionate engagement with what is going on, to look for responsibility and culpability. Such a style of engagement is in essence a moral style of engagement; it requires, what Nausbaum describes as ‘a belief that there are serious bad things that can happen to people through no fault of their own, or beyond their fault’ and ‘valuable things are not always under a person’s own control, but can in some ways be damaged by fortune’ (2003, 314). Thus, in drawing upon our compassion, Mercier induces the audience into a critique about the nature of our being, and our society at a particular historical moment, where the symbolic circumstance of the Celtic Tiger – building and planning – is juxtaposed alongside the everyday of deprivation: and all happening within shady deals. The very essence of who we are and what it means to live in solidarity with other emerges as the message and meaning of this drama; that is, in circumstances of poor social cohesion for some and parallel privilege for others the very essence of the nature of our obligations are challenged.

The intermittent appearance of the boy throughout the play – whom we learn is the grown up lad of a mythical baby named Jordan found in a basket on the canal, a location for women

and ‘personal services twenty-four hours a day’ – signals both the ethical and personal in a much fractured public world. The boy is present at the end of the play too, on the site of the now rezoned land, where a petrol station is being built, alongside a new highway. But like the older man, in the opening scene, the boy’s demise is imminent. He gets hit by an excavator and, although he initially seems alright, he collapses and dies, but not before retrieving the lost war medal, which he holds in his hand. The recovery of the war medal is symbolic; considered alongside the boy’s earlier concern for the old man it dramatises another moment of humanity, of connection, a moment of imagined transition, a circumstance of hope, a counter-narrative in a world of shady deals.

The play ends with the boy being taken away by the ambulance men, Gus and Les, who earlier are the undertakers who take away the body of the old man, and, during the play, are the workmen who remove the furniture from the house and tell us the story about the man who finds the baby in the canal. The workmen are a key link in taking the audience through the often muddled plot, of what O’Toole referred to as, ‘the shaggy dog story of the plot’ (1995, 14). But then, their presence as workmen, in a drama about corruption, decay and disadvantage, suggests a type of chorus, or the presence of the average citizen, who are witnesses of a polity over which they are quite powerless, though they are not without suspicion and understanding of what is going on.

On the occasion of its performance in the Dublin Theatre Festival in 1995, Cogan noted that ‘the succession of short scenes’– there are 15 scenes with no interval – along with the ‘brevity of the episodes,’ or what he termed ‘a picaresque journey [...] taken at a gallop’, requires engagement with ‘the cumulative effect’ rather than seeking understanding through developed characters (1995, 12). The absence of matured characters is perhaps not surprising given, on the one hand, the superficiality and ephemeral nature of the Celtic Tiger, and, on the other hand, the relative invisibility of people who live life at the margins. In life,

characters like Kernaghan and Moran are often devoid of passion, preferring instead to engage in rational self-interest; while those, like Thomas and Helen, are often unnoticed in commodified worlds, and with little opportunity for personal development. However, both the shallowness of the characters and the brevity of the scenes in this play are evocative of systems and circumstances of oppression. For as Freire noted, in circumstances of oppression there are those who refer only to themselves and their self-interest, and those ‘not always even recognized’ but conceded to survival (1972, 34).

Notably, a letter to *The Irish Times*, during the first theatre performances of *Buddleia*, suggests that Mercier’s gallop was indeed a theatre experience, capable of analysis, recreation and adjudication. It had an impact that the letter writer believed needed to be noted in the highest office of governance:

My praise goes to *Buddleia*, a play on exploitation, abuse, lies, pain and purgation, pertinent to an audience today. [...] though full of humour, [it] left me and many others disturbed and uneasy. I wonder if any of our Teachtaí Dála [Members of Parliament] saw it? (O’Connor, 1995, 13)

Síle O’Connor’s letter is a confirmation of the power of Mercier’s play in foregrounding and challenging the ideology of the Celtic Tiger and globalisation, as an occasion of newness and advancement for all. Her letter is an example of the concern that can be stirred by circumstances of oppression and exploitation performed in drama that is both about people and for people: drama that is there to stimulate the compassion of the audience toward an enhanced understanding of the world we live in.

### **Scepticism and resistance articulated through title, language, setting and characters**

*Buddleia* was to be just a beginning of Mercier’s use of theatre, and, in particular, its space and character, toward articulating a painful, though often very humorous story of change in Ireland. In *Kithensink*, the second play of his trilogy, Mercier provides a single window, a

half-built house in a fictional Dublin suburb, in the period of 1956 – 1996, for the audience to witness and experience the anger and ugliness imposed by forces of ignorance and greed. Through the story of Helen, a child of suburbia, her husband Dermot and later their children, the play performs a trajectory of experiences from love's young dreams and ambition to circumstances of failed ambition, personal alienation, a destructive sense of self and death. The performance is both Greek Tragedy and kitchen-sink drama, with the tragedy unfolding as Helen and Dermot's dreams unravel and their relationship becomes fractured to a point where they become oppressed by each other and by the circumstances of their living and their lives. Dermot's plans to make it in the business world have not succeeded and their relationship is fraught with acrimony. A conversation in Scene Four, between Helen and Dermot, speaks profoundly of the complexity of their relationship and circumstances; it draws the audience into an emotional and tragic moment that demands both personal reflection and engagement with the notion of systemic oppression and a depersonalised self:

Helen: You just won't admit it, will ye?

Dermot: I'm sorry, what's the charge this time/

Helen: (*Pulling the newspaper from his face*) Don't patronise me, you prick.

Dermot: Fuck off.

Helen: What's the point here, Helen?

Helen: Can you bring yourself to exercise just a little humility now and again. Just admit you didn't see it coming, Dermot. Admit you've been had.

Dermot: You're out of line now.

Helen: I tell you what I'm out off (sic). Cash. Hard currency. Market confidence. A sense of worth and ...

Dermot: Sorry, is this domestic or foreign policy we're reviewing...?

Helen: I'm a confused woman, Dermot, I have no idea. I am also suffering from acute paranoia, which doesn't help. That's what you get for being bone idle and giving in to temptations of residential life. No idea what the breadwinner does for a living, not to mention amusement. God only knows the men, and women, he has to contend with...

Dermot: Don't start that again.

Helen: Sorry, out of order. Retract and repent. Stick to the point, you twisted bitch. So he's leaving then, is he?

Dermot: He's not leaving.

Helen: Oh. Great.

Dermot: He's being fired.

(51-52).

As Colgan noted, *Kitchensink* is a 'penetrating view of a city and its people' (1996, 12). It stages a critical condemnation of modernity and, in particular, urbanisation and the sprawling developments associated with Celtic-Tiger Ireland. Helen and Dermot's fractured relationship can be seen as a metaphor of counter-realism to the good life promised by globalisation and the Celtic Tiger.

The third play of Mercier's Dublin Trilogy is *Native City*. The opening scene, a taxi rank, set in a disused church, ushers the audience into a contemporary scene of patriotism, chauvinism, and racism, all performed through the antics of a group of Dublin football fans who seek preferential treatment over Bosnian refugees in the allocation of the next available taxi. Mercier uses the space of the setting as a place of history over time, where a chronologically reversed history is performed in small cameos: the arrival of the Vikings, the Huguenots and Queen Victoria and the actualities of the history of Dublin itself, including *inter alia* the 1913 Lockout, the Easter Rising, the Civil War, the bombing of the North Strand during the Second World War, the mass emigration of the mid-twentieth century, the housing action of the late 1960s, when the state itself was the focus of criticism both for its poor housing policy and its destruction of the city in favour of corporate replacement buildings, and the Dublin bombings in 1974. Once more the action is frenetic, with Nowlan describing *Native City* as 'immensely ambitious' and 'inhabited by a highly athletic and generally hyperactive cast of

dozen' (1998, 14). While the title *Native City* could refer to any city, Mercier seems determined that his play be more than about location within a global context, but rather about a sense of place, where things happen, where people arrive from outside and become integrated, and where they can also be abused. But, it is also a place which tells its own tale and produces its own history, where individuals are an essential presence and their activities are always relational; for example in Scene Twelve – Lock Out 1913 – when an injured striker, in the milieu of the charge between strikers and the police, speaks:

You know none of this would ever happen if your paymasters work up to the facts of life. The aristocracy of industry in this city, like all aristocracies, have abused their power .. (sic) You do not seem to realise that your assumption that you are answerable to yourselves alone for the action in the industries you control is one that becomes less and less tolerable in a world so crowded with necessitous life (Mercier, 1998, 61).

Although this scene has no overt connection with contemporary globalisation, nonetheless, the striker gives global positioning to the use and misuse of power in the pursuit of profit-making. Critically, his circumstances are local; they are the poverty of the everyday; and his native city is about a human connection with a reality of a place crowded with necessitous life. Similar to the characters of the boy, Helen and Thomas in *Buddleia* the localism of the injured striker in *Native City* is a contested space to that articulated by those with power, whether it is the control of industry or the manipulation of planning.

Paul Mercier's Dublin Trilogy opens up many discourses including: space and the use of space in drama; human spirit and human development; struggle and social processes, including the periphery of social contexts; language and time. Principally the plays considered in this chapter situate the local in a period of the arrival of the Celtic Tiger, and while *Native City* opens with an issue closely associated with this period – immigration, this play is essentially about experiences of localism within a globalised world, or at least a geographical world beyond the native city. While notions of localism can be associated with

divergent and idealised rhetoric of control, agency, efficiency, democracy, fairness, partnership and participation, local knowledge, resources and a sense of ownership, but with no real conception of multi-sectoral collaboration (Williams, Goodwin & Cloke, 2014), Mercier's dramatisation of localism allows the audience to experience what was in essence – at least during the Celtic Tiger Era – a fractured sense of localism. The rhetoric of his localism is not idealistic; rather it foregrounds the cracks and fissures of inequality, greed and materialism; and, in so doing, it create spaces in which to re-evaluate and imagine a more inclusive sense of ourselves and our community within a reality of globalisation.

The notion of contemporary localism, within Irish culture, is considered by Kiberd as 'localist postmodernism' which he describes as 'a wholly new kind of art which doesn't look to any distant centres of authority for its sanctions' (2005, 301). Kiberd is somewhat sceptical of this 'cult of the local' believing it to be 'a panic reaction to the forces of globalisation' coming as it does at the end of a century when 'nationalism seemed to offer some kind of resistance to the forces of global capital' (Ibid, 300). However, localism, as created and performed in Mercier's Dublin Trilogy, is not a contracted introspection but rather an ontology of humanity beyond the limits of nationalism, toward a sense of being, of the self and of the community, that exists in the everyday and beyond a nation-state. His localism dramatises hegemonic culture based on structures of power, influences and authority, while his characters tell their stories, share their dreams and perceptions, and either demonstrate or utter their power and powerlessness.

Mercier's localism and his dramatization of versions of ourselves, along with our ability to be influenced by others, represent a cultural and artistic space crucial to what Higgins terms, 'the complex tapestry that is our identity,' a space that is about tolerance and respect for the self and the other (2006, 160). By this I mean that his narration of localism provides a contested

set of meanings to frame the development of new, ethical and political spaces of our identity, as indeed was observed by Síle O'Connor in her letter to *The Irish Times* in 1995 (see above).

Finally, while Mercier does not overtly refer to globalisation and the Celtic Tiger in his Dublin Trilogy, his counter narrative to the idioms of growth, expansion, individualism and power, as well as his dramatisation of a fractured localism, are authoritative factors in understanding the social change of the time. They raise questions about a foreign culture—globalisation – and the Celtic Tiger, at least in the sense that these phenomena were a distant ethos to the everyday lives of the people who lived in the communities about which he wrote, while at the same time globalised values were adopted by others to exploit local circumstances for the few at the expense of the many. All of these themes are dramatised through myth in his play *Homeland* (2006), which I debate in Chapter Four.

## CHAPTER FOUR THE ABSURDITY OF MYTH MAKING: *HOMELAND* AND A PERFORMANCE OF THE NOT-SO-SHINY SURFACES OF THE CELTIC TIGER

### Introduction

In this final chapter, just one play – *Homeland*, written by Paul Mercier in 2006 – is considered. While two other of his plays – *We Ourselves* (2000) and *Diarmuid and Grainne* (2001) dramatise constituents of globalisation and the Celtic Tiger, it is not possible, within the confines of this thesis, to critically engage with them. Specifically, I explore how myth and mythology underpin Mercier’s dramatisation of a contemporary period in Ireland – the Celtic Tiger Era – and how he uses a mythological framework to re-think its reality and authenticity.

### Myth and mythology

Myth is about communication; it is about storytelling and the stories told can be about anything; for as Barthes noted: ‘everything can be a myth’ but critically mythical stories have a ‘social *usage*’ [original emphasis] in that they prompt us to reason their meaning, while not necessarily agreeing their substance (1972, 110). Barthes foregrounds an understanding of mythical stories as examples of the ‘falsely obvious’ or, ‘the ideological abuse’ hidden within ‘decorative display[s] of *what-goes-without-saying*’ [original emphasis] (Ibid, 11). In other words, myth can be used to deceive as well as to inform; it is ‘not defined by the object of its message, but by the way in which it utters this message’ (Ibid, 109). The use of the term ‘utters’ is noteworthy, since to utter can be more than to emit a sound; it can also convey a negative connotation of falsification (*Longman Dictionary of the English Language*, 1984, 1661). Foucault considers two functions of myth: to give a sense of an ‘ideal world similar to ours, yet altogether different,’ of ‘a world without mystery, without concealment, [and] hence without hypothesis, without mystery or intrigue;’ and myth to convey a sense of something

replete with what it means to say,’ where the clarity of its meaning is in the ‘vivacity of its expression’ (2000, 47). Thus, myths and mythologies offer a broad framework for understanding, from simple, unquestioning and decontextualized storytelling to complex dynamic storytelling, where the very meaning of what is being uttered is obscure rather than obvious, at least initially, until one is drawn into, and can realise, the myth ‘as a story at once true and unreal’ (Barthes, 1972, 128).

Myths are symbolically significant, not because they tell a ‘truth’ or an ‘un-truth’, but because they draw us into a cultural way of knowing – of meaning – that is somehow there already. Myths are there for our consumption, for us to engage with both their points of attention and their composition as a whole. Myths require a ‘different consciousness’ to unlock their meaning: an imagination away from the literal, to one that ‘widen[s] out to include many ideas and images all at once’ (Wilshire, 1989, 98). Crucially, the power of myth and mythology to enlighten and inform requires an appreciation of their binary function – to reflect a culture’s deep-rooted beliefs about the nature of the world, and to deceive, or mislead, by masquerading a falsehood as truth in order to hide, or at least diminish, its real status as an ideologically motivated narrative (Babbage, 2000, Barthes, 1973, Foucault, 2000). In summary, myth is a system of communication; it is a message.

### **The myth of Tír na n-Óg: past and present**

In drawing on myth and mythology for his play *Homeland*, Mercier uses the myth of Oisín and Tír na n-Óg to comment explicitly and critically on the contemporary social context of a postmodern Tír na n-Óg, that of the Celtic Tiger Era, where the Country of the Young of Irish mythology becomes a modern-day, ephemeral and false land of paradise and plenty, the Country of the Celtic Tiger. In the story of Tír na n-Óg, Oisín is led by Niamh, a beautiful woman of the Tribes of Danu to the Country of the Young, where he lives for 300 years.

However, during this time, and despite all the pleasures of the fairyland of youth, Oisín is still not satisfied and so decides to return on horseback to the land from which he came. He is advised by Niamh not to dismount the horse, for to do so will age him immediately. He ignores her, gets down from his horse, ages 300 years and comes back to resentment and exhaustion.

In *Homeland*, Mercier explicitly dramatises the Country of the Celtic Tiger as mythical, a falsehood of reality which, according to O'Toole, came dangerously close to being considered and accepted as a decorative, timely and merited actuality (2010). Myth and mythology are used to explain a very recent historical period and ideology which, at the time of the first performance of the play in 2006, was not easily understood, or is it now. While, *Homeland* does not explicitly mention the Celtic Tiger, it dramatises and performs the false ideology of the period – greed, corruption, excessive building, anonymity and vulnerability. Notably, Buchanan states:

One helpful model for interpreting the ideology of the Celtic Tiger is to read the phrase as the site of a battle over cultural self-identification, of competing attempts to harmonize Ireland's new economic image with the traditions of Irish history and Gaelic myth (2009, 302).

And this is what Mercier does in *Homeland*. He mythologises the Celtic Tiger through the character of Gerry Newman, a latter day Oisín, returning from his Tír na n-Óg, which he describes as a 'beautiful villa near the coast. [Where] I was in paradise, conquering my demons, when I should've been on earth chasing my dreams' (1). Gerry is a communication expert and developer's bagman, who takes his country personally, as well as feeling responsible for how others experience it. But, right now, he is flying in on a short-term business trip and experiencing a bumpy landing, which he describes as 'the force-field around our mystical island,' only to be advised by another passenger, '[to] grip your seat and you feel your seat is connected to something that isn't connected to anything' (2). Gerry seems to

find meaning in the words of the passenger as he asks if he ‘can quote’ him. But is his understanding shaped by the lens of the communication expert or by those of the developer’s bagman, or both? The audience are about to shadow Gerry as he plunges into a journey of self-discovery in the New Ireland of greed and materialism he helped to create.

### **A summation of *Homeland***

Gerry the protagonist has landed and is home on a mission, to pick up a bag of cash, and ‘advise the man who is going to lead this great nation of ours’ (7). He is cautioned by his wife not to leave the airport; advice reflective of Niamh’s forewarning to Oisín of dangers ahead should he dismount from his horse. However, Gerry fails to heed the warning of his wife. He is to meet a ‘doorman’ with the cash; but instead he meets a Mr Boulder, builder and brother-in-law, of a politician, Councillor Merriman – soon-to-be ‘King’. Mr Boulder is carrying the cash, but he also needs some ‘tutoring’ – ‘I want to know can you get me off’ – in relation to a forthcoming court case for tax evasion. Gerry obliges, by ‘help[ing] people change the plot by changing themselves,’ by getting them ‘to plug into your [their] own myth’ (11, 14). Mr Boulder is impressed and well tutored; he prevails upon Gerry to leave the airport to go to a party, assuring him that the country is in need of Gerry’s ‘genius for one more day’ (17).

At the party, to celebrate swinging a major building contract, Gerry meets Niamh, a prostitute and drug addict. She relieves him of his cash, credit cards and plane ticket before leaving him with a hangover and an unpaid bill for a hotel room and refreshments. Gerry is now on the move, running from debts as he runs from the hotel, and from other services – food, phone calls and taxi – he needs, but for which he cannot pay. His once famous name and notoriety – Gerry Newman the man who made planning and building Deerpark and Hazelwood housing estates possible – is of little value to him now as he drifts around with nothing. When rambling around Gerry breaks into the house he exchanged for his paradise abroad, to be met by the Italian family who were duped into the house exchange, only to realise that Gerry

looks ‘nothing like the man in the photos. Like the house you look nothing like you show us...’ (30). Gerry’s communication expertise is not just about getting others to plug into their own myth; he is the epitome of myth making himself. Eventually, Gerry is rescued by a ‘Kind Man’, someone from his past, who is now reformed and a member of The Church of God’s Gospel.

The Church needs Gerry and his communication skills to spread their mission. He obliges; and his new journey takes him to the original show-house on Hazelwood, where Gerry made possible ‘the greatest roll-out of starter homes in the history of the nation’ (46). Here he learns the mission of the church: to save the people of the housing estate ‘from this urban hell they call home’ and to help Gerry out of ‘the myth you’ve [he’s] been living and [to] put you [him] in touch with your [his] true narrative’ (47), a narrative beyond corruption. In his new mission, Gerry again meets up with Niamh, through ‘divine synchronicity’ (57) as he makes his missionary rounds in the housing estate his corrupt deals made possible. Niamh is in fear of her life from her pimp/boyfriend; she is also terminally ill with HIV/AIDS and wishes to meet with a child she gave up for adoption. After a moving scene where Niamh is helped by Gerry to find her daughter, but without revealing her identity, and Gerry realising, but not telling, that the adoptive parents are Mr M. J. Grogan and his wife – he who built Hazelwood Estate and was part of the shady and corruptive planning/building enterprise – Gerry lives with Niamh in the urban hell of home until she dies of AIDS, and he finally returns to his paradise on the continent.

Principally, this is a play about myth and mythologies, albeit a free adaptation of the epic tale of Oisín, Niamh and Tír na n-Óg, where the very symbols of the Celtic Tiger Era – excessive building, poor planning and corruption, alongside continuing deprivation and an endemic urban drug problem – are dramatised to provide, what Hennessey describes as, ‘ironic commentary on the city’s recent economic transformation’ (2008, 247-248). The play had its

first performance in the Abbey Theatre in January 2006, a boom year within the Celtic Tiger Era. But, it was to be the calm before the storm of the waning of the Tiger in 2007 and its collapse in 2008; and a time, according to O'Toole, when 'just as a century ago, Ireland is a country in search of a national myth'<sup>6</sup> (2006, 2).

### **Situating a contemporary national myth**

Ireland's need for a national myth in 2006, as in times past, when theatre turned to ancient Irish epics, was necessary 'not quite for inspiration, then at least for a sense of location' (O'Toole, 2006, 2); for, as O'Toole noted elsewhere, the boom of the Celtic Tiger was a time of cultural cronyism, self-indulgence and outright corruption, which 'fostered, alongside the real economy in which people created goods and sold them, a false economy of facades and fictions' (2010, 19). Identity was also – and remains today – a problem within the theatre itself, where two modes of national theatre compete with each other for dominance. There is 'a commodified abstraction' – a theatre with global appeal and market; one that enacts and promotes state policy but does not challenge it – and a national theatre grounded in the notion of citizenship, where citizen experiences and concerns are dramatised and performed to prompt local audiences to reflect on the circumstances of society and state (Lonergan, 2010, 78). Notably, just two years prior to the staging of *Homeland*, the centenary celebrations of the Abbey Theatre (2004) had to be curtailed, including the cancellation of two plays – one by Mercier<sup>7</sup> - because of financial problems (Lonergan, 2010, 80). So, while Ireland was in

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<sup>6</sup>In the first decades of the Twentieth Century, Ireland set up its National Theatre (Abbey Theatre (1904)) and achieved its independence (1922). The Abbey Theatre was a critical arm of the newly independent state in helping to establish a sense of identity and to provide a space and place for an exploration of the new nation's sense of itself. William Butler Yeats and Lady Augusta Gregory, both founding members of the Abbey Theatre, foregrounded the importance of myth and mythology within the Irish Literary Revival, in which the Abbey Theatre played a focal role.

<sup>7</sup>The production of Paul Mercier's *Smokescreen*, planned for the final quarter of the Abbey Theatre's Centenary year was cancelled, along with the revival of Lennox Robinson's *Drama at Inish*. In interview with Belinda McKeon, Mercier spoke of how *Smokescreen* was intended to 'indicate where the theatre should and could go as a work' at this juncture; he also spoke of how, despite its demise, its 'energy and dynamic' made its way into *Homeland* (McKeon, 2006, 14). According to Lonergan, the immediate priority of the theatre at the time was 'financial survival, rather than national self-representation;' while the theatre's decision to produce Dion Boucicault's 1894 play *The Shaughraun*, as its major summer offering, drew intense criticism from the media,

the boom years of the Celtic Tiger Era, an ideology of global capitalism and a reality of insufficient state funding transformed our National Theatre into ‘a “creative industry” where they needed to ‘compete with other forms of entertainment;’ seek out private and corporate sponsorship’ and produce work capable of exploiting ‘opportunities available for profit on a globalized theatre circuit’ (Ibid, 96-97). It was within these economic, cultural and social circumstances that O’Toole saw it necessary for the creation of a modern myth: to give some sense of location in troubled times, while suggesting that the very notion of a sense of place in Ireland was under threat. Indeed, Mercier’s title for a play about the very essences of the extremes of globalisation and the Celtic Tiger – the fragmented nature of individualism, anonymity, consumerism, urbanisation, as well as the greed and corruption spawned by these characteristics – suggests a recognition of a crisis of *belonging to* and not just *residence in* [my emphasis] a place and time in the first decade of Twenty-first Century Ireland. The relevance of the play’s title was remarked on by Hennessey: ‘Mercier’s ironically-entitled *Homeland* stands as a warning of the dangers of reducing a sense of place to one of mere location’ (2008, 250). She elaborates:

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not least because of controversy about its representation of Irish life (a criticism dominant too at the time of the founding of the National Theatre (2010, 81-82). While foregrounding a financial explanation to rationalise the cancellation of Mercier’s drama, his history of writing plays about the fringes of urban life, and critical of society and the nation may also have been a factor. As I argued earlier, his plays do not fit into the framework of nation-branding, idealised by the ‘Imagine Ireland’ initiative to attract foreign direct investment (see Chapter One), and thus it is conceivable the de-selection of *Smokescreen* was made all the more easy because of that. While he may draw on ancient myth to frame the story of his plays, as he does in *Homeland* and others, Mercier’s work does not perform a Yeatsian ‘ancient idealism’ but rather it engages a sense of myth toward a radical analysis of the social base of experience, and of its mode of production. It was my intention to access and read *Smokescreen*, but like all of Mercier’s work it is not in print. My request to the author for a manuscript of the play received this reply:

I was really surprised about your request for *Smokescreen*. Where did you get wind of this project? Firstly it never got staged because the Abbey hit a financial crisis at the time. But the actual name of the project was *Republica*. *Smokescreen* was just that, a smokescreen title. [...] But it was never done so it is in effect a ‘never was’. (Personal email correspondence 12<sup>th</sup> & 13<sup>th</sup> January, 2015)

The content of Mercier’s correspondence suggests a tone of ‘revelatory explication,’ a concept explored by Higgins, where a descriptive and part explanatory literature, prompts the need for a more considered engagement toward explanation (2006, 128). While, my correspondence with Mercier does not fit within the genre of literature, the term ‘revelatory explication’ is illuminating in terms of the decision making that occurred within the National Theatre’s celebrations and, in particular, how the work of one playwright, whose genre of work is essentially a critique of globalisation and the Celtic Tiger, was itself the target of a theatrical celebration that found itself caught up in an elusive market and the quagmire of globalisation. That said, it is not within the scope of this research study to pursue this interest.

Location is essentially a mathematical term; it implies coordinates, latitude and longitude, the position a particular point in space, decontextualized except in its measured distance from other points. Place, on the other hand, implies *dinnsheanchas*, context, surroundings, history, the sort of human connection to geography implicit in the designation of home as “my place” (Ibid, 250).

Looked at within the notion of *dinnsheanchas*, *Homeland* dramatises a critical era of change in Ireland, as well as proposing a potent drama to stimulate theatrical reflexivity, or what Lonergan terms:

A mode of reception, whereby an audience’s enjoyment of a theatrical production is determined by the audience’s capacity to relate the action to their own preoccupations and interests, as those preoccupations and interests are determined locally (2010, 87).

Mercier’s *Homeland* crafts a modern myth, which is evidenced both through the point of its message, and by the way in which it is uttered – the language used can be both enigmatic and lucid as to its negative or positive meanings. There is ambiguity about the play, at least initially, due in part to a desire to hear and rationalise the language rather than to accede to, and appropriate, the myth, or myths. For this is a play that both sketches a myth to tell its story – Gerry, the protagonist as a modern day Oisín – and has as its theme what is essentially a mythical, if not ephemeral episode of economic growth in Ireland – The Celtic Tiger, a circumstance of boom to bust, or what O’Toole describes as ‘a false economy of facades and fictions,’ where ‘self-confidence [turned] into arrogance, optimism into swagger, aspiration into self-delusion’ (2010, 19-20).

According to Hennessey, while the play does not foreground the ‘epic tale,’ its setting in a contemporary Celtic Tiger Dublin provides a ‘free adaptation in which the underlying story serves to structure the action and to provide ironic commentary on the city’s recent economic transformation’ (2008, 247-248). In other words, the pleasure, dissatisfaction, resentment, exhaustion, anger and revenge of Tir na n-Óg, become contemporary human qualities of the Celtic Tiger Era performed and dramatised in *Homeland*. Furthermore, the sense of place of youthfulness in Tir na n-Óg is explicated as a sense of belonging (or not) in *Homeland*, an

aspect explained by Hennessey, who advances understanding of the consequence of both O'Toole's appeal for a 'sense of place' and Mercier's dramatisation of *Homeland* – itself a deconstruction of place and location (Ibid, 249). She describes *Homeland* as 'another watershed moment' in Irish theatre, where the very substance of our national identity is under scrutiny, beyond a 'global positioning system', toward the inclusion of an analysis of our functioning and non-functioning state of economic, social and cultural reality (Ibid, 249). Critically, *Homeland*, while dramatising essences of the commodification of our society, also challenges the status quo of globalised notions of progress and development and globalised brands of Ireland (see Chapter One and the example of the 'Imagine Ireland Initiative'). The next section further evaluates how Mercier's *Homeland* positions and dramatises the experiences and concerns of the Celtic Tiger Era in Ireland.

### ***Homeland*: ambiguity, myth and meaning**

In his review of *Homeland*, O'Toole noted: 'The absurdity of myth-making is itself at the heart of Mercier's story,' within a circumstance where the heroic becomes mock-heroic and the epic becomes ironic (2006, 2). He elaborates:

The difficulty for this whole enterprise is its fundamental ambiguity. On the one hand, the desire to draw on myth suggests that we need it. On the other, we are all now too self-aware not to sense that the difference between mythology and bullshit can be narrow. [...] Mercier is eating his mythic cake while declaring out of the side of his mouth that it is probably junk food. He is simultaneously telling and questioning a story. The approach is as honest as it is ambitious, but it is hardly surprising that one side of the play tends to undercut the other. (Ibid, 2002, 2)

*Homeland* is a drama about the excesses of the Celtic Tiger; thus, it is not surprising that the notion of ambiguity is dominant, given that the essence of the Celtic Tiger Era, within a globalised world, is epitomised by an opacity and shift of understanding about values and meaning within our society, at an individual, community and national level (Lonergan, 2010, 10). Notably, an early scene between Gerry and Mr Boulder, the builder, is both vague and

revelatory about the behaviour of builders and planners – a dysfunctional and corrupt, but very lucrative behaviour that epitomises the worst elements of the Celtic Tiger Era. The dialogue between the two men illustrates how getting rich and accruing the trappings of wealth are also about the need to be both cunning and devious in order to make both happen. But this is no confession, or an admission of doing something wrong, illegal or unethical. Rather, the intonation implies it is the only way to get things done and, what's more, any negative personal consequences of such behaviour – like falling foul of the tax inspector – requires a regime of self-survival. There is no room for the other; life is definitely about the self. The conversation between the two men is a mythical speech; it is replete with pervasive sarcasm; it is never without a dualistic meaning. While it describes an actuality of the Celtic Tiger Era, it also describes a fairy-tale existence that is shady, dishonest and ultimately ephemeral:

Gerry: Your life is the product of your own making and you have no-one to blame but yourself.

Builder: I will never give those names [of other builders to the revenue].

Gerry: You carry-on like that and you'll be tried and sentenced before you get into that court.

[...]

Builder: I've done nothing wrong, thank you.

Gerry: Apart from defrauding the country.

Builder: Don't cod yourselves folks, if it were done the official way, we'd still be leaving it like cattle.

[...]

Gerry: Have you received planning permission in the last few years?

Builder: I put an extension on a fucking kitchen.

Gerry: Your brother-in-law convinced his fellow councillors to ignore local opposition and grant you planning permission.

Builder: There was never any local opposition.

Gerry: There is now.

Builder: What?

Gerry: And you bought her [sister, wife of brother-in-law] that new jeep.

Builder I did not buy her a jeep.

Gerry: I heard you fitted out her kitchen and put a new sunbed in her bathroom.

Builder: Who said that?

Gerry: Only for your brother-in-law you'd be out of business.

Builder: That's a lie

Gerry: Then plug into your own myth! If you don't tell the story, then they will tell it for you. If you're not living your story, they will rearrange your life for you. Now what does that mean?

Builder: I don't know anymore.

Gerry: Close your eyes

Builder: I am sailing to a tropical island.

Gerry: No you're flying, James. Through a tropical story. You grip your seat. You feel your seat is connected to something but it isn't connected to anything. You fasten your seat belt but you're only strapped to thin air. The industry has forsaken you. You are in a tailspin. You are falling.

(12-14)

The language and inflection used in this scene communicates a message – that of innocence, entitlement and naivety, or what could be described as a cynical description of “a poor me”, a vulnerable Mr Boulder, while at the same time the underlying meaning is one of corruption, which unmask and reveals the innocent poor-me-talk for what it is. However, once one engages dynamically with the form and the meaning of the conversation it is necessary to shift beyond the either or message and to see, instead, a fertile narrative that is at once true and unreal. In other words, one is drawn into a myth – the particular story of *Homeland*, a metaphor – which begins to explain the story of the Celtic Tiger Era in Ireland, a story that

was both real and unreal. Mercier's decision to give import to ambiguity by using a signifier of corruption, through language and utterings, that are at times jargon and nonsense speech, or to use O'Toole's term – 'bullshit' (2006:2) – gives meaning and form to the ephemeral nature of the "success story" of the Celtic Tiger in Ireland. In other words, the dramatisation of corruption within *Homeland* is more than the objective of what is written; rather, it has structural significance in an historical and political period in early Twenty-first century Ireland. Principally, it positions a fractured society of affluence, greed, vulnerability and poverty.

Further illumination of Mercier's use of a modern myth, while drawing from the historical myth of Tír na n-Óg and the notion of a qualified immortality, can be gleaned from the work of Barthes and his thesis that 'materials of myth presuppose a signifying consciousness' which allows one to think through and beyond their actual substance (1973, 110). Thus, as an audience, we can engage with the myth, we can be pulled along and entertained by it. But; ultimately, myth is there to 'communicate' and to give 'a message' (Ibid, 109). Furthermore, some level of ambiguity is core to achieving the significance of the message, for as Barthes noted, myth without ambiguity promotes 'literal understanding,' whereas insight and knowledge derived from focusing on 'an inextricable whole made of meaning and form,' or what he terms 'an ambiguous signification,' fosters a dynamic focus and 'it consumes the myth according to the very ends built into its structure: the reader lives the myth as a story at once true and unreal' (Ibid, 128). Thus, it is little wonder that O'Toole uses the binary of a mythical cake and junk food, for one is the essence of illusion and the other comes with a severe health warning, suggesting that the very core of the New Ireland that Mercier dramatises in *Homeland* is somewhere-in-between.

The notion of giving dramatic performance to a process of somewhere-in-between is noteworthy, not least for the difficulties it presents, but principally because working the hyphens in terms of understanding and know-how is essentially about reinventing how we look at who we are (Fine, 1998), both as self and other. And to do so, is to question the very essence of globalisation and the notion of otherness – where the self, individual, community and nation is now part of a bigger whole of otherness, of nowhere in particular – within a globalised idiom of a master narrative of privilege and social order, open to corruption and exploitation. Crucially, there are moments in the play when the audience is acutely drawn into a critique of this nature, for example when Gerry, now a member of The Church of God, is in conversation with Kenneth, one of the ‘monks’, in what was the original show house of Hazelwood:

Kenneth: Your vanity is so vast you think you built this devil’s playground:

Gerry: Well, obviously not with my hands.

Kenneth: MJ Grogan built that. [...] You built nothing.

Gerry: All due respect, anybody can build, few can make it happen. [...] Those people are better off because of me.

Kenneth: Have you met them? Do you actually know anyone out there? [...] You were corrupted, Gerry.

Gerry: What I do is turn dreams into living reality.

Kenneth: You do worse than that. You make people believe it’s right

(48).

But, what is the audience to believe; how are we to evaluate the experiences and concerns dramatised by Mercier in this scene and in *Homeland*? It is necessary to engage in a process of immersion, to listen to the dialogue of the play, to enjoy its humour and absurdity; but crucially, to understand the significance of what is going on. It is also crucial to appropriate the myth of this latter day story of Oisín [Gerry] and Tir-na-nÓg and the consequences of

dismounting the horse that rides unimpeded from a land of youth, or leaves the airport – both metaphorical places of positive, harmonious and eternal goodness, righteousness and delusions of self. For, in the words of Barthes: ‘it is *I* [original emphasis] whom it [the myth] has come to seek. It is turned towards me, I am subjected to its intentional force, it summons me to receive its expansive ambiguity’ (1972, 124). Thus, in this scene, where Kenneth situates many challenges for Gerry – his sense of righteousness and make-belief, as well as daring him to meet those whom he sees as better off because of him; to see himself in that reality of the other; and to get off his horse and to live in the real world –, Mercier summons the audience to transition with Gerry as he leaves the airport and as he visits the housing estate: for to do so is to make the connection between the historically-deified plot of the original Tir na n-Óg and Mercier’s dramatisation and performance of a contemporary Irish and world happening – the Celtic Tiger and globalisation. Through this transition we realise there is no land of youth; there is no legendary land of plenty for all. Instead, we see the fragmented nature of individualism, anonymity, consumerism and urbanisation that enhance some and destroy others.

Paul Mercier describes *Homeland* as ‘a journey’ [on the stage], one that poses questions about our very identity: a journey where the audience is taken out of ‘a sense of certainty about our bearings’ and ‘our terms of reference’ to a situation that challenges us to ask: ‘And who are you [am I]?’ (McKeon, 2006, 14). My evaluation and analysis of this play supports Mercier’s depiction of his play as a journey. There is no room for passivity or indifference by the audience. *Homeland* is a drama of revelatory explication and subversive performance that seeks to trace out contradictions, structures and values emanating from the essence of globalisation, while at the same time eschewing, what Lonergan (2010, 78) terms, a globalised brand of ‘commodification abstraction’ associated with international appeal, and indifference to the status quo of state policy. *Homeland* performs a comprehensive

contextualisation of time, space and place, where the audience is invited, if not compelled into a discourse of citizenship – both private and public (self and other) – and of our shared experiences and concerns.

*Homeland* is a drama of entertainment, but critically it is a critique of Ireland during this historical moment. It provides us with a comforting space and place to endorse its true meaning – our sense of self as a nation. Critically, it is a signifier of the meaning of the Celtic Tiger and it works as a modern day myth. For as Lembert notes in his writings about Barthes's *Mythologies* and other works:

Signs work always in the excess created by those who desire to bring the meanings to them that are already there. Signs are meaningful only because they participate in the ubiquitous irony of meaning – that signs do not mean unless they are other, which opens the comforting space into which the other can add that which is already there (2006, 187).

There is no doubt that *Homeland* is excessive – junk food and mythical cake (referring to O'Toole earlier, this Chapter). However, the message of the play is about excessiveness – the Celtic Tiger Era – and Mercier's dramatisation of the associated contemporary social issues through the ancient mythological lens of Tír na n-Óg demonstrates, in the words of Higgins, that 'we do not have to eschew tradition to mould [and understand] modernity' (2006, 198). While at the performance, we are engaged by the other – the characters and the story that make up the drama; however, once the performance is over and we the audience disperse there is the self and a time for reflection. We can move beyond the meandering thread, or journey, of the myth and see the larger patterns that begin to fall into place – patterns of a globalised world and the mythology of the Celtic Tiger – and their potential to deceive and to normalise corrupt patterns of behaviour.

To conclude, *Homeland* along with all the plays researched in this thesis characterise and perform a world into which we are drawn and which mirrors that described by McGahern: 'a

world, of the imagination over which we can reign', where we can 'reflect purely on our situation through this created world' (McGahern, 2009, 7). Mercier's created world foregrounds an understanding of the complexity of our nation-state in a world of globalisation and the ephemeral era of the Celtic Tiger. All of his plays bring us to the periphery of social contexts; they remain focussed on the humanity of the everyday, while, at the same time, embracing imagination, creativity, inspiration, humour, the aesthetic, Greek Tragedy, Celtic mythology and kitchen-sink drama.

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