

‘Whose art is it anyway?’ Devising in Participatory Arts and Professional Theatre Practice: A Critical and Historical Analysis of Upstate Theatre Project

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Introduction

A survey of contemporary Irish theatre practice indicates that an ever-growing number of theatre companies are using devised performance as they seek to develop new approaches to theatre-making and explore new theatrical forms. Within this mix is the work of Brokentalkers, ANU Productions and Una McKeivitt. Not only do these companies and artists place devising at the centre of their performance practice but they share the stage with untrained performers. This chapter begins from the premise that while these approaches are becoming more widespread and visible, they are not new. Their origins, in fact, are deeply rooted in the field of community-engaged theatre. As Charlotte McIvor argues elsewhere in this collection, for example, the concept of devising as a politicised practice merging professional and non-professional artists has been in operation in community arts practice in Ireland since at least the 1970s.

Upstate Theatre Project has been one of the long-standing innovators in the area of community-engaged theatre from the 1990s onwards. This chapter proposes that the new thinking among some professional theatre-makers mirrors the model of collaborative, participatory practice developed by Upstate over seventeen years, and represents a logical progression of that socially-engaged tradition. It is also suggested that an appreciation and acknowledgement of the aesthetic value of community art informs the current devising movement within the professional sector. It is notable for example that many recently acclaimed independent devising artists including Brokentalkers’ Gary Keegan and Feidlim Cannon, and ANU Productions’ Louise Lowe, have found a natural home in Upstate.

Upstate is an Arts Council-funded ‘community-engaged performing arts organisation’ which has operated in the border region between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland since 1997

(Upstate Theatre Project, 'About'). Specialising in devised performance, Upstate enjoys an international reputation in the fields of professional and community-engaged theatre and has made a significant contribution to both participatory arts and professional theatre practice in Ireland. Founded by Declan Gorman and Declan Mallon, the company has successfully and consistently interwoven participatory engaged practice with professional theatre practice in the creation of local, regional and national theatre productions. Upstate's recent collaborations with some of the newly emerging artists referred to above has raised the company's profile further as those artists have achieved national and international recognition in their own right. It is not surprising that Upstate should gravitate towards these young artists who challenge form and style and whose shared ethos demonstrates a resolute belief in the aesthetic value of collaborative community art, nor is it surprising that such artists should be drawn to work with the Drogheda-based company. Upstate's unique geographical and cultural position in the Irish theatrical landscape make the company's model a useful lens through which we can view the place of community-engaged theatre and devised practice in Ireland. The company is uniquely positioned for a number of reasons. It is one of the longest established community-based theatre organisations and the only theatre company to consistently provide community arts in a regional and cross-border context in the Republic of Ireland. Furthermore, while Upstate's practice has always encompassed both professional and community theatre, their funding status has changed from that of a professional touring company to an arts participation organisation in 2010. This makes them a compelling case study of how the funding landscape has changed in Ireland since the 1990s and the place of collaborative, community or devised practice relative to these shifts.

This study is informed by my own longstanding association with Upstate. My relationship with the company began as a local citizen and audience member based in Drogheda and developed from there to my current position as a voluntary board member of the company. From my position on the board, I have watched Upstate develop its practice over the past seven years. Prior to joining the board, I was engaged on an occasional basis as assistant director and stage manager with the professional touring wing of the company before going on to work as a facilitator and director on some of the company's cross-border projects. This trajectory has given me insight into the company's work and their role in the local community, along with their position in the wider regional context and

their contribution to political and social affairs in the border area in the early years of the Northern Ireland peace process. My involvement with Upstate has raised my own awareness of the possibilities and challenges of theatre making, the frustrations and satisfactions of the devising process and the scope and constraints within which a theatre company must operate.

The research for this chapter was conducted through a series of interviews with Declan Mallon, Director of Upstate; Declan Gorman, former Artistic Director of Upstate; and members of Upstate's artistic team of recent collaborators, including Stephen Murray, Louise Lowe (ANU Productions), Feidlim Cannon (Brokentalkers), and Paul Hayes (Catastrophe). A number of the community projects' participants also contributed to the research through a focus group. I offer an analysis of Upstate's work at various stages of the company's history, as well as examining the relevance of its model in relation to the developing collaborative, participatory practices currently in vogue in contemporary Irish theatre. The techniques and practices utilised by Upstate's artists are presented here as a backdrop to the contemporary growth of devised performance in Irish theatre. It is not possible, within the confines of this chapter, to provide an exhaustive account of the considerable body of work produced by Upstate over the past seventeen years. Instead this essay will provide a brief overview of a selection of productions from the company's oeuvre in an effort to give the reader a flavour of the variety and breadth of work Upstate has produced.

The discussion begins with an analysis of *The Border Chronicles* trilogy, a series of original devised plays comprising *Hades* (1998), *Epic* (2001) and *At Peace* (2007), that sought to document life in the region known as the border area of Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland during a period of immense political, social, cultural and economic change. This selection is taken from work produced by Upstate Live, the company's professional touring wing. The discussion will also examine four productions produced by Upstate Local, the company's community-engaged wing: *Tunnel of Love* (1999), *Come Forward to Meet You* (2011), *Ship Street Revisited* (2012) and *The Far Side* (2013). These productions have been chosen as their chronological order spans the arc of the company's lifetime and thereby offers a glimpse of how the work has developed over time. *Tunnel of Love* (1999) was the first devised piece created by the company; the other three plays form a trilogy

that emerged from Upstate's Shared Heritage Programme which commenced in 2011. This programme, inspired by the archive collected by Drogheda Local Voices, (a project documenting recordings of the town's social history) set out to explore Drogheda's oral histories through contemporary storytelling. The trilogy is also of interest because it provides a snapshot of the work created when Upstate teamed up with some of the newly emerging artists referred to above. This new phase of work developed after the company's restructuring in 2011. The seven plays discussed here therefore illustrate the diverse array of styles and approaches adopted by the company; they highlight the principles and ethos that inform Upstate's work and they offer the reader a broad spectrum of the methodologies and techniques associated with devised practice.

The early years of Upstate Theatre Project

Established as an independent regional theatre company in Drogheda, Co. Louth, Upstate's aim was to bridge the gap between what founders Declan Gorman and Declan Mallon saw as a false divide between professional theatre and community-engaged theatre. From its inception, the company sought to reflect a broad understanding of the place of 'theatre' and 'drama methodologies' in a wider social context. In Gorman's words, 'Upstate Theatre Project was founded initially to explore the interface between art and progressive social values' ('Aesthetics'). The organisation's vision reflected a cultural democratic viewpoint which 'conceives of the arts as a form of political as well as of aesthetic power' (Benson, 1992, 31). A distinguishing feature of Upstate's practice is its emphasis on art for all – its determination to create art and arts practices inclusive of all citizens. The philosophy of cultural democracy is summarised by Benson as follows: '[...T]he case for cultural democracy is moral and political, and grounded in the dominant ideas of modernity. It resists the conception of art and of artists as detached from ordinary life, and argues instead for transcending the divide which has grown up between art and society' (32).

In keeping with the principles of cultural democracy, the company's policy articulates Upstate's aim to improve arts access and provision for all members of the community and, specifically, to expand its audience base to non-theatre goers and to encourage local citizens to

participate in the creation of communal art. Upstate's four-strand policy declared the company's socially engaged agenda under the four distinct headings of Local, Learning, Lab, and Live. The company's first publication, *Up and Running: A Review of the First Two Years* (1999) defined each of these areas as follows: Upstate Local, encapsulated 'the company's community drama animation programmes, whereby Upstate works in partnership with local groups to develop drama activity and to devise original dramas of interest to them' (3); Upstate Learning was the branch that would provide 'a range of training and education programmes' (3); Upstate Lab aimed to offer an 'innovative workshop programme, dedicated to researching new approaches to staging and playwriting. Regular action research work is carried out in collaboration with professional actors, designers, choreographers etc., and with local groups and trainees' (3); and finally, Upstate Live, was the term used to refer to the professional touring wing of the company.

The four strand policy reveals an aspiration to merge community-engaged theatre with professional practice through collaborative, participatory processes. The provision of experimental workshops and related training and educational supports is an indication of the company's vision and recognition of the strategies required to realise its mission. While the company initially pursued all four areas, Lab and Learning appeared to become less prominent, and Local and Live became the principle strands of the company's practice. This division of practice was most unusual; it distinguished Upstate from other theatre companies operating at the time. It was also a somewhat odd decision given that, on the one hand, the company sought to 'bridge the gap' between professional theatre and community-engaged theatre, and on the other, it drew a distinction between 'pure' professional practice (Live) and collaborative community/professional practice (Local). Both wings were dedicated to working with the community in the creation of original devised theatre. Gorman explains that the Live/Local divide was a first step towards integration against the backdrop of 'widespread indifference that abounded in arts funding, media and industry circles generally to community-engaged practice in the 90s. It was driven by an ethos of affording equal esteem to diverse ways of making art' (Personal interview). The division of practice, therefore, seems to have been largely a political decision.

While Gorman and Mallon make a clear distinction between the devising processes adopted by Upstate Live and those adopted by Upstate Local, they refuse to distinguish the work in any way that would elevate one over the other. Gorman avows: ‘I reject any hierarchical placing of value on work by differing population groups where the work is genuinely creative and motivated by the desire to make change through art – whatever that might mean’ (Personal interview). He emphasises that there are many models of devising and Mallon concurs stating, ‘there’s no one model that we would champion; the method and technical approach will continuously shift in order to suit participants and the aesthetic ambitions of the project’ (Personal interview). In the case of Upstate Local, the plays were devised, written and performed by participating members of the local community who were provided with professional facilitation and essential training, whereas the plays produced by Upstate Live, while inspired and informed by the community, were written or adapted from classic texts, directed by Gorman and performed by professional casts, with the occasional inclusion of non-professional or training actors, who then toured the shows locally, nationally and internationally.

The plays of Upstate Live were devised through a process of inquiry and engagement with the community which Gorman describes as akin to action research (Personal interview). Through a range of methods including workshops, focus groups and interviews, members of the community shared their views and ideas which were then explored in dramatic form through drama workshops and public readings before being scripted by Gorman who is explicitly identified as the author. The devising methods used were similar in many respects, but differed in terms of the role of the writer and the associated issues of how ownership of work was designated. According to Gorman, this distinction is important and needs to be made clear at the outset of a project. An analysis of a selection of devised work produced by Upstate Live and Upstate Local now follows.

Upstate Live 1997 - 2010

Although Upstate specialise in devised performance, the organisation also has produced and performed a variety of other work including adaptations of well-known works and plays by local and national playwrights. The first Upstate Live production was Gorman’s adaptation of Gerhart

Hauptmann's *The Weavers* (1997), a 19th-century epic of a local craftsmen's revolution in 1844 Silesia. Gorman's adaptation drew parallels between the traditions of the North East of Ireland and the remote Polish-German region in which the original play was set. Other plays adapted and produced by Upstate Live include Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (1999), Paul Smith's *The Countrywoman* (2000) (adapted by Elizabeth Kuti) and Patrick Kavanagh's memoir, *The Green Fool* (2004). In addition to these adaptations, Gorman directed John McArdle's *Two Houses* (2005), a play for children. In a later phase Upstate Live produced Colm Maher's *The Enemy Within* (2008), Aidan Harney's *Submarine Man* (2009), and Conall Quinn's *The Ones Who Kill Shooting Stars* (2010) developed under Upstate's Writers' Commissioning Scheme which was established and managed by Paul Hayes during his tenure as creative producer with the company.

In terms of work that derived from a devising methodology, Upstate Live produced a series of plays that would eventually become known as *The Border Chronicles*. Written by Gorman, the plays were based on information gathered through interviews, focus groups and public meetings with local communities across the border region over a ten year period. Emerging themes were explored in workshops with professional and community actors who probed and experimented with ideas through improvisation and physical movement exercises. This methodology was adopted with a view to creating original artistic work that reflected the specific cultural context of the geographical and political milieu of the border region. As a socially engaged arts organisation, Upstate sought to capture and express, in aesthetic form, the community's response to the social and political happenings that prevailed in the area during that period. In this regard, the plays are an example of how action research can potentially translate into devised theatre.

Spanning the period 1997 to 2007, the plays offer an account of life in the border region during a time of major political upheaval that covers the signing of the Belfast Agreement, the uneasy peace which followed it, the beginnings of the 'Celtic Tiger' economic boom and the new phenomenon of significant inward migration. The events that unfolded during that decade are depicted against a backdrop of myths and legends from the ancient civilisations of Greece, Ireland, West Africa and the Baltic region. As the narratives weave back and forth from the surreal world of ancient

folklore to the present day Irish political landscape the parallels between these worlds become apparent.

Taking as its starting point the ancient Greek myths of the underworld, *Hades* (1998), the first play of the trilogy, is set in the fictitious border town of Ballinascaul (Town of Shadows) in the months following the Good Friday Agreement, the peace treaty which enabled the end of the Northern Ireland conflict. Inspired by the ancient Greek myths of the underworld, the play is a collection of stories of individuals seeking to overcome the obstacles life has thrown in their path. The characters include a taxi driver and his 15-year-old daughter who sneaks out of their home at night; an ex-champion boxer desperately trying to escape the grip of moneylenders; a boy whose true identity were it to become known would cause great scandal in local political circles and an assortment of local public figures struggling to retain their identity in the midst of the shifting sands of an unfolding peace process. A weave of storytelling, myth, dream and dance *Hades*, won a BBC/Stewart Parker Award in 1999 and drew comment on Upstate's collaborative community approach: '[I]f, as Thomas Kilroy recently stated, a lively, collaborative community theatre is emerging to challenge the traditional pre-eminence of the literary in Irish drama, Upstate Live may well lead the charge' (Byrne 54).

Epic (2001), the second instalment of the trilogy, is set primarily on the Cooley Peninsula in County Louth in the wake of the foot and mouth disease that beset the area in 2001, at a time when border paramilitarism and the threat of a breakdown in the peace process remained prevalent. The play merges the ancient Celtic myth of the Táin Bó Cuailgne with modern reality to portray life in this small farming community following the outbreak of the virus. The four-person ensemble, doubling up in twenty seven roles, present a weave of interconnected stories that trace the devastation and disquiet that swept through rural Ireland as a result of this agricultural crisis. The play begins with two boys witnessing an act of criminality in a remote, sacred mountain setting. A modern curse is unleashed and a virus affecting livestock spreads through the land. A cull of farm animals disturbs the ancient ghosts on the plains of Meath and a mysterious virus begins to spread into the homes and hearts of people causing computer crashes, factory closures and a trail of deceit and destruction across the country. The play, a combination of storytelling, surreal myth and dream captures the social and economic disaster

that faced inhabitants of this area of the border, while paramilitaries continue to try to hold their grip on the community.

Echoing the themes of *Hades* and *Epic*, the final part of the trilogy, *At Peace* (2007), adopts a physical performance style that mixes myth and modernity to explore life in a peacetime border community. A multi-ethnic cast of Irish, African, and Eastern European actors and an onstage use of their respective native languages highlighted the increased cultural diversity experienced by the border area as a result of the rapid population shift occurring in Ireland during the early years of the twenty-first century. The play begins with the fictional discovery of human remains found during the building of a cross-border motorway. Work on the by-pass is held up when a Nigerian ground worker discovers the ancient remains in the path of the bulldozers. The disturbing of the bones appears to trigger a series of strange events in the area and ancient myths of Eastern Europe, West Africa and Celtic Ireland surface as the interconnected stories of a group of Nigerian, Latvian and Irish road workers present on the day of the find unfold.

Together the three plays of *The Border Chronicles* offer a panoramic snapshot of a community in a state of flux, where issues of identity, values and traditions were thrown into disarray during an era of unprecedented political, social, cultural and economic change. Time and place combine to communicate a distinctive cultural context that not only infiltrates the work but isolates Upstate's geographical and cultural position in Irish theatre-making.

During this period, Upstate was funded in equal measure by the Arts Council, the statutory body charged with funding the arts in Ireland, and the Programme for Peace and Reconciliation, a European Union programme aimed at stabilising society in the post-conflict era in Northern Ireland and in the counties that form the Border Region of the Republic of Ireland. Arts Council funding was allocated towards core company costs and the Upstate Live programme, while EU funding supported the development of projects under Upstate Local.

In 2010, the company underwent radical structural changes occasioned by funding cuts and a negotiated arrangement with the Arts Council to cease professional production and regional touring

and pursue a purely participatory agenda. Upstate Live ceased to operate and Gorman departed the company to pursue other solo, teaching and public art interests. The company, now under Mallon's direction, continued to be funded by the Arts Council of Ireland but solely under the auspices of the Arts Participation Department. The Arts Council had declined explicitly to support Upstate Local activities previous to this. The upheaval coincided with the arrival of a number of emerging theatre-makers on the Dublin scene who proclaimed their collaborative credentials from an early stage. Some of these practitioners, namely, Louise Lowe of ANU Productions and Feidlim Cannon and Gary Keegan of Brokentalkers, were to become essential in the continuance of the development of practice and form in Upstate as the company changed from an Artistic Director-led to a curatorial model. Interestingly, Upstate's shift from theatre to participatory arts funding occurred at the same time as these artists, whose practice hinged similarly on collaborative devised theatre with community actors, were funded under the Arts Council's theatre budget. The reason for this anomaly is unclear but it illustrates how the funding landscape has changed in Ireland in recent years, impacting on the structure of arts organisations and – by extension – the form of works they produce. Upstate's recent phase of work, the company's development under participatory arts funding and its relationship with this new wave of artists forms part of the discussion that follows below. The discussion begins by examining the history of Upstate Local.

Upstate Local 1998 - 2010

In Upstate's formative years, Gorman and Mallon worked together as co-facilitators. Their first large-scale undertaking was a creative partnership with a local branch of the national organisation Macra na Feirme (meaning Stalwarts of the Land in Gaelic). This organisation provides opportunities for 17 – 35 year olds in rural communities to interact through participation in a range of social and cultural activities including performing arts. Upstate's partnership with the local Termonfeckin branch culminated in the productions *Tunnel of Love* (1999) and *Zoo Station* (2001). These plays, along with an earlier work devised by Gorman and the Monaghan Macra Arts Club, are documented in the company's publication *Way out in the Country: An Anthology of Community Plays* (2001). In this collection, Mallon recounts how Upstate Local sought partnerships with groups interested in devising

and scripting original material. He writes, '[u]ltimately we wanted the challenge of writing about a contemporary community, delving into its psyche, challenging its imagination and hearing its stories by having people from the community write the play themselves' ('Way Out in the Country' 203). A discussion of Gorman and Mallon's artistic partnership and the process of working with the local community in their first devised production, *Tunnel of Love*, illustrate how the company's origins in devising began.

***Tunnel of Love* - Gorman and Mallon**

Set in a fictitious rural village, *Tunnel of Love* (1999) depicts life in a small Irish rural community at the turn of the twenty-first century. The play traces the lives of two fictional families over a two-year period, leading up to and including the day of a troublesome wedding. It is a character-driven, episodic drama that follows a narrative through line concerning families divided by social and economic difference, punctuated by such features as flashback, direct address and stylised movement tableaux. Part of the story involves a local man who emigrates to London to avoid the gossip that will inevitably follow the break-up of his seven year engagement. In London he falls for a woman a few years his junior who also hails from his home village. They return to marry at home but on their wedding day it is revealed that he has had a dalliance in the meantime with his ex. This familiar plot of deceit and betrayal allowed not only for comic episodes, but a serious investigation of emigration, the male psyche, addiction (in a sub-plot concerning an alcoholic family member) and class division in a small community. Some of the later more physical and ritualistic work of Upstate is prefigured in the visual tableaux in *Tunnel of Love*, in particular a highly stylised beginning and ending in which the traditional wedding game where the couple runs through a 'tunnel' of outstretched guests' arms becomes a portal into dream, memory and altered realities.

Tunnel of Love saw Gorman and Mallon combining their methods, Gorman drawing on a model that he had begun to develop in his earlier work in Monaghan and Mallon bringing his knowledge of youth drama (already a hotbed for devising in Ireland at the time) to the project. They acknowledge that borrowing techniques and methods from other practitioners and theorists helped

shape their practice and cite Augusto Boal, Chrissie Poulter and Clive Barker as particular favourites. In line with the principles of cultural democracy underpinning the company's ethos, the duo was acutely aware of the need to develop an inclusive approach that would accommodate the varied needs of diverse communities. Fostering positive relationships and creating an environment of mutual respect that encouraged an exchange of ideas and allowed for meaningful dialogue and critical reflection was a priority. As Gorman and Mallon progressed onto the more complex *Zoo Station*, they saw drama games and exercises as key to achieving such an atmosphere. Consequently, every workshop began with physical and verbal drama exercises – warm-ups, trust and spatial exercises – before moving to more intricate work such as tableaux and improvisations. The company's incorporation of physical theatre promoted an emphasis on physicality and movement, and so workshops and resultant productions typically contained a strong element of choreographed movement. Tableaux depicting abstract physical situations were frequently used as a stimulus for brainstorming ideas which were then developed further into scenarios for improvisations.

Gorman and Mallon describe their work in this phase as character-driven narratives. They cite character as the most important element of the process, deeming it much more important than story. Gorman explains how participants would form a series of tableaux and characters and 'before they knew it, they had created a story and then they had created five stories and then we would say, right, let's take those five stories and see can we find a frame to marry them' (Personal interview). They quickly discovered that a narrative drama form was the key to finding a frame and best suited their purpose and methods. It was an effective vehicle for harnessing the unconnected stories that frequently emerge from collaborative writing processes. Mallon maintains that because the work was character driven there was no difficulty in developing a script; characters would bring stories with them: 'with clearly defined characterisation and scene objectives, collective writing was not a problem' ('Way Out in the Country' 204). Nevertheless, the collaborative methods used generally led to a hotchpotch of storylines and characters. So, a form consisting of multiple narratives intertwining and unfolding simultaneously was needed.

Gorman observes that dramas with several narratives benefit from the use of devices such as ‘unifiers’ and ‘clustering’ (Personal interview). He explains, ‘it is helpful to have at least one unifying device – something that all the characters experience even if independently from other characters. And clustering (the gathering together of characters into logical clusters) is a critical step in developing cohesive narratives’ (Personal interview). He also recommends that when it comes to penning a story collectively, it is wise to agree a location and a timeline. Gorman and Mallon used these techniques to guide the writing process. In addition to physical drama exercises, their workshops included a succession of creative writing exercises all of which were inspired by what had transpired on the workshop floor and many of which were in the realm of dream or involved memory exercises or working with objects. Participants, having agreed a location and timeline, frequently sat and wrote in seven minute bursts. This balance of freedom and structure – a coherent framework that allows multiple narratives to develop – gave participants opportunities for individual and shared creative expression. The method of interweaving improvisation with writing is an effective means of stimulating ideas and eliciting material from the participants. It also ensures that the stories are expressed in the participants’ own voices, which has the added advantage of capturing the cadence of the local dialect.

Gorman and Mallon recognised that the techniques they had developed were highly adaptable and they set about honing these methods further to work with intercultural and intergenerational groups. Following their fruitful partnership with Macra, Gorman and Mallon expanded Upstate Local across the region to include the wider border area and parts of Northern Ireland. During the period between 2002 and 2007, Upstate Local developed its community-engaged programmes through the auspices of The Crossover Project. Funded by Border Action through Peace and Reconciliation II, the programme comprised of four adult groups and one youth group in the border counties of Louth and Monaghan in the Republic and in counties Tyrone and Fermanagh in Northern Ireland. This cross-border and cross-community project sought to devise original material reflecting life in rural communities of the border counties through the voices of members of both sides of the divide. The devising process that the company had by now developed provided an opportunity for Catholics and

Protestants north and south of the border to come together in the creation of communal art. Although conflict resolution was an obvious objective, Gorman and Mallon were adamant that setting out to ‘tackle’ issues head on was a tactic that should be avoided. Instead they opted to concentrate their efforts on the creation of art. Gorman asserts, ‘[w]e always described our quest first and foremost as an artistic one, immediately affirming that no-one has a monopoly on dreaming, on creativity’ (‘Aesthetics’). Gorman and Mallon maintained that any issues present would inevitably surface through the process. With artistic pursuit firmly the focus, they began their work in the realm of dream. Gorman explains their rationale as follows:

In the early years of Upstate we began with dreams . . . that became particularly important when we moved to The Crossover Project you know, we felt that there were such sensitivities there around Catholics and Protestants and north and south and all that stuff and there was enormous pressure on us to deal with issues and we said, ‘No we won’t do that, the issues will come trailing in behind us eventually anyway.’ Why start with the labels, why start with the presumptions that we are victims or the presumptions that we are enemies? You know? Let’s begin in the kind of shared and wonderful world of dreaming because every human being dreams in some way; they dream actively and they dream passively in their sleep. So we would create these kinds of big mad tableaux and I would also introduce very early in the process a creative writing exercise that was based around writing a dream. (Personal interview)

This strategy was an effective leveller; it invited participants to communicate and interact imaginatively and intuitively, and alleviated tensions and prejudices that may have been present. It provided participants with an escape from reality and a safe distance from the conflicts that troubled their everyday lives. The use of tableaux facilitates an easy transition to the type of abstract movement pieces that characterise Upstate’s theatre. In those early years, in which peace-building and – later – interculturalism were part of the context, Upstate deliberately avoided sharing personal histories with audiences, although some carefully managed work along such lines did occasionally proceed in more advanced enclosed workshops. This foregrounding of dream-based fictions over lived experience was based on a belief that reconciliation and empowerment should come initially from the collective act of devising and creative writing. Participants were encouraged to ‘leave their baggage at the door,’ to park their labels, resist categorisation and instead to imagine new worlds and fictional scenarios, often parallel to the real, familiar border counties milieu but nonetheless newly reimagined in a shared

process. After five years, with an average of four local productions per year, The Crossover Project came to an end and Upstate shifted its focus from the rural communities of the border region to the world of interculturalism and urban youth in its next phase of work.

The Louth International Theatre Project was launched in 2007 in response to the rapid demographic change that had occurred in the region as a result of the large influx of immigrants into Ireland during the boom years of the Celtic Tiger economy. This intercultural initiative aimed to provide an artistic forum where the growing international population could voice their experience of life as an immigrant in Irish society. The first production to emerge from the venture was *The Journey from Babel* (2009), an off-site performance on the theme of journeys and migration. The play, directed by Gorman and Mallon, was devised by fifteen local people of eight nationalities. Performed in a disused dockside warehouse, this work is a significant transitional moment in the company's development, signalling the move from largely black-box, narrative dramas to Upstate's current preference for interactive and site-specific work. The transition was influenced partly by Hayes' interest in site-specific work and his appointment as creative producer of the company and partly by the growing trend in site-specific performances happening elsewhere. *The Journey from Babel* utilised techniques common in contemporary site-specific performance including physical engagement with the audience, separating the spectators into separate groups and promenading from room to room. Other companies specialising in site-specific performance at the time were Northern Ireland based theatre company Kabosh and Dublin based theatre company Semper Fi whose production *Ladies and Gents* (2002), first performed in the public toilets on Dublin's St. Stephen's Green as part of the Dublin Fringe Festival, won a Fringe First Award in Edinburgh 2004. While *The Journey from Babel* did not entirely reflect the specificity of the site where it was performed, the production combined documentary historical testimony, video, audio, ritual gestural work and song with narrative fiction and comic relief. The narratives highlighted similarities between the lives of immigrants living in present day Ireland with historical accounts of migrants globally through the ages, from the biblical Babel myth of the performance's title to the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire of 1911 in New York in which 146 migrant workers perished.

The Mango Tree (2011), the second production to emerge from the Louth International Theatre project, combined traditional storytelling with visual artistry to reveal the hidden voices of a diverse community. The stories, told through a series of monologues, explore the isolation and disconnection felt by the inhabitants of an Irish town. In the Director's Note on the show's programme, Stephen Murray writes: 'It seemed important that what we were doing was also a social activity and the process of meeting up, devising and working on the play was resolving the very issues that we were working on.'

During the same period as the Louth International Theatre Project, Upstate was also concentrating its efforts on creating a number of community-engaged theatre projects with the young people of the area. For example, *No Change Given* (2009), directed by Stephen Murray and Declan Mallon, was devised over a four month period by a group of twenty-five teenagers from various parts of Drogheda. The project began with the idea of producing a show on a bus. This starting point prompted consideration of situations that might arise on a bus, and characters emerged through plotting the route the bus would take. The characters were developed and a storyline was established through a series of improvisations examining what might happen both on and off the bus as certain characters entered and exited the action. Scripted by playwright Colm Maher, the play was described in its programme as 'a story of life, love and youth in a walled town. Post boom drama through the eyes of the generation who will have to foot the bill. Not so much life in the fast lane as life in the bus lane.' Significantly, this project was informed by an early urban work, *The Bus Project* (2007), undertaken in Ballymun, by Louise Lowe collaborating with Murray as part of in the 2007 Dublin Fringe Festival.

Kinda Random (2011), directed by long-time Upstate collaborator Tara Jenkins, is a further example of the company's work with the youth of the area. Adopting a documentary style narrative, the play offers an account of life in a present day Irish town from the perspective of its adolescent community. During workshops the thirteen participants aged between 13 and 17 explored and experimented with voice, improvisation, choreography and physical theatre techniques and recorded their responses to questions concerning the lives of young people. Jenkins collaborated with Fintan

Brady, a writer and political activist in Belfast, who edited the recordings to create a script based on the participants' responses.

Much of the intercultural and youth work was experimental. Mallon explains that this is because this type of performance needs 'continually to shift and change to ensure a cultural connection with those participants who may have no interest in dramatic presentation as it is conventionally perceived' (Personal interview). These three projects belong to a middle and transitional phase of the Upstate story and coincide with an internal restructuring that took place when Paul Hayes joined the company in a creative producer role in 2006. From his earlier work with Catastrophe Theatre Company, Hayes brought with him an enthusiasm for site-specific work and his own first directing project for Upstate was the historical drama *The Enemy Within* (2008) performed across two heritage sites in the town of Drogheda - Laurence's Gate and Millmount's Martello Tower - both significant sites in historical sieges of the town. Across the company's Live and Local strands, the move towards the later site-specific and documentary work was beginning to take hold.

Upstate under participatory arts funding

As outlined earlier, Upstate underwent structural changes in 2010 following the Art Council's decision to change the company's funding status from a professional producing touring company to a participatory arts organisation. This period in the company's development is marked by the company's recent affiliation with newly emerging artists such as Louise Lowe (ANU Productions), Feidlim Cannon (Brokentalkers), and Paul Hayes (Catastrophe). An analysis of three of the works produced by Upstate in conjunction with these artists now follows.

***Come Forward to Meet You* – Artist Louise Lowe (ANU Productions)**

In September 2011 Upstate, as part of the Shared Heritage Programme, invited artist Louise Lowe (currently co-artistic director of ANU Productions) to work with a group of local adults to devise a piece of theatre based on the oral history archive collected by Drogheda Local Voices. The culmination of that venture was *Come Forward to Meet You* (2011), a site-specific production

performed in Oldbridge House, an eighteenth-century manor located on the site of the 1690 Battle of the Boyne, a battle of considerable political and historical significance nationally and internationally. The British throne, French dominance in Europe and Religious power in Ireland were at stake in this decisive battle between the Catholic King James and the Protestant King William of Orange whose landmark victory shaped the course of Irish, British and European history in the centuries that followed. The annual twelfth of July commemoration of the infamous battle remains a contentious issue in Irish North-South relations. The eighteenth-century manor and estate now publicly owned and managed by the Office of Public Works (OPW) houses the Battle of the Boyne Visitor's Centre. Large installations detailing European politics at the time of the battle and exhibitions illustrating events from the King's perspective are on display in the Visitor's Centre on the ground floor of the house. The setting of *Come Forward to Meet You* in this important heritage site, heightened the theatricality of this production. The play reveals a world normally hidden from view. Confined to the basement, the action invites the public to enter the private sphere of the house.

Billed in the programme as 'a unique collision of oral history and highly physical performance,' the play is based on the oral memoir of local woman Angela Mitchell, who lived and worked on the Oldbridge estate as a servant in the 1920s. As is often the case in devised theatre, the site inspired the story and informed the performance. Lowe remarks that in her practice devising begins with 'a space, a place or a theme;' she is confident that in this case the architecture of the space fuelled the making of the piece. Lowe recalls how the group were drawn to Angela Mitchell's story. The reason for this was not clear but she speculated that the predominance of women in the group may have steered an overall affinity with Angela's story.

The action takes place in five rooms in the original kitchen area located in the basement of the big house. Audience members, having been assigned a number, are greeted by a butler who escorts them through the courtyard into the house. The performance begins in the corridor with a movement piece involving the full cast after which the actors disperse to various rooms followed by audience members marshalled according to the number they were allocated. In each room, the actors await the audience who move from room to room to watch fragments of Angela Mitchell's life unfold. The

action in each room is repeated every time a new audience group enters the space. The memories portrayed include the death and burial of a new-born twin, a seductive dance between a young couple entangled in a forbidden courtship, and the highly-physical and disturbed antics of the butler scaling the walls in the kitchen before he eats the supper prepared by a kitchen maid. The wake of the lady of Oldbridge House is depicted in a darkened room where a servant fervently prays as she repeatedly circles the coffin of her mistress. Across the hall, a servant in the laundry room is washing sheets and asking audience members, 'Do you believe in ghosts?' as she hands them bars of carbolic soap and buckets of water so they can help her complete the task. In another room an archived recording of Angela Mitchell's voice is heard describing the events illustrated by the various scenes.

The division of the audience into appointed rooms creates an intimate atmosphere and intensifies the experience for both the actors and the audience. The use of highly-physical movement pieces in confined spaces creates a palpable sense of entrapment. Dance infiltrates Lowe's work. In her view actors discover a character's inner thoughts and emotions through movement. The choreography of this production is testament to this belief as the narrative emerges through the movement and rhythm of the performance and infuses the characters' lives with symbolic rituals. Lowe emphasises the importance of giving each actor a 'task' to complete. For example, one actor might be given sheets to wash, while another actor might have to eat a meal or scrub a table. Lowe focuses the actors' attention on physical tasks as a means of creating the action; she maintains that this tactic is also an effective strategy for reducing performance anxiety amongst both trained and untrained performers. Lowe refers to Ann Bogart's view that the right people are in the room at the right time. Lowe explains 'I think I take that notion on strongest no matter where I am, that this is the right place, this is the right time, these are the right people and so we make the right piece for these people in this place at the right time.'

There was a pleasing symmetry between the characters being portrayed and the actors portraying them. In this subversive account of life in the big house, it is the servants, the butler, the kitchen maid, and the laundry worker who are centre stage. The characters represent the traditionally invisible citizens in society. The non-professional community cast have a central role to play in

bringing the stories of the otherwise forgotten characters to life. Voices that otherwise would not be heard, both in terms of content and performance, are given a platform.

***Ship Street Revisited* - Artist Paul Hayes (Catastrophe)**

Ship Street Revisited (2012), the second instalment of the Shared Heritage Programme, also focuses on the lives and memories of ordinary people. The former residents and workers of the, now largely derelict, street of the play's title are the subjects of this play. Set in 1940s' Drogheda, the plot weaves around the lives of the tightknit, working class community who resided in Ship Street, an industrial area surrounding the town's port. A cast of fifty community actors brought to life the abandoned street, as well as the forgotten stories of the men and women who worked in the boot and shoe factories, the breweries and the mills. A combination of street performance and traditional drama and storytelling, the performance took audience members on a journey through the street and into the derelict homes of its residents. As with *Come Forward to Meet You*, audiences were divided into small groups and guided to each location by a 'local resident' who chatted with audience members about the trials and tribulations of life on the street. Inside the various houses, audiences were met with a conventional fourth wall performance depicting the lives of those who lived there. Familiar themes of young love, family, emigration, poverty and unemployment emerged from the stories that unfolded inside the walls of each dwelling.

Ship Street Revisited was written by Aidan Harney and directed by Paul Hayes. Harney, a local playwright, had been researching the local oral history archive made available to Upstate as part of the Shared Heritage Programme, and he and Hayes had worked together previously on *Submarine Man* (2009). A number of factors distinguish *Ship Street Revisited* from the other two projects that form the trilogy. The fact that it was written by a playwright, for instance, immediately sets it apart. Harney's script, however, emerged from a devising process and the participants, like those of the other two projects, contributed to the development of the characters and storyline. The main reason for adopting this approach was down to Hayes' methods of devising which differ significantly from those of Lowe and Brokentalkers. ANU and Brokentalkers usually begin devising from scratch and continue

in this mode right up to the final rehearsal, whereas Hayes, most likely because of his dramaturgical background, opts to work with a writer and likes to have an early draft of a script beforehand. This preference for dramaturgy, in fact, represents a continuation of the literary strengths traditionally associated with Upstate, exemplified in earlier works such as *Tunnel of Love* (1999), *Zoo Station* (2001), *Time's Hands* (2007) and *Midland* (2008). This shows how Mallon's curatorial policy embraces new methodologies while maintaining space for the artistic strengths upon which the company was built. Hayes felt it was important to explain this style of practice to the participants of the project. He admits, 'I never said to the cast of *Ship Street* that they were writing their own play, I said they were informing the writing of the play, it's different.' Hayes' and Harney's work is a reminder that devised and more 'literary' theatrical forms are not necessarily diametrically opposed. Gorman makes the point that, although devising for the stage is very seldom about creating a literary piece of theatre, one of Upstate's achievements is marrying devising with literary traditions. He states: 'Some of the work that has been created through processes that could appropriately be described as devising actually have quite a strong literary element in them because we always brought creative writing into the room' (Personal interview).

Although this was Hayes' first time to devise and direct a show with community actors, he had devised a number of shows with his own professional theatre company Catastrophe. Those shows were usually inspired by a site-specific location and written by a writer who created a script based on the characters and themes that emerged during the devising process. Hayes followed the same model for *Ship Street Revisited*, and immediately set about securing a site that would provide him and the writer with a framework. Once the venue had been agreed, participants drawing on local history archives were asked to find a person who grew up in Drogheda in the 1940s, on which each would base her/his character. Following this, the performers began writing scenes involving these characters.

With a total of eighty-five participants, *Ship Street Revisited* was Upstate's most ambitious project to date. Aside from the large number of participants, the show was received well locally. It sold out for twenty nights, drawing predominantly non-traditional audiences (anecdotal accounts from the show's participants suggest that upwards of 80% of the audience were non-theatre-goers) and

attracting an unprecedented number of social networking comments. Much of the reason for this response from the community was due to local interest in the site-specific location and in the oral history archive on which the play was based. Ship Street is strongly associated with the town's industrial past and holds a special place in the town's history. Many locals have fond memories of the street and the residents who inhabited it.

Ship Street Revisited and *Come Forward to Meet You* reflect a significant shift to site-specific work by the company and a decision to search for locations that both reflect and affect the narrative. The settings of Oldbridge House and Ship Street were instrumental in developing plot and characters during the collaborative process between artists and participants. Moreover, both venues resonated enormously with the told stories and the local community audiences.

***The Far Side* – Artist Feidlim Cannon (Brokentalkers)**

The Far Side (2013), the third project in the Shared Heritage Programme, reflects the other recent shift in Upstate's direction from a dramatic narrative form towards a documentary style of presentation. This production mixes traditional live performance with multimedia to document the lives of seven locals living in present day Drogheda. Once again the ordinary events of everyday life were placed centre stage; as part of the process of creating this work, performers shared their memories and dreams of growing up and growing old in their local town. Unlike the first two parts of the trilogy, *The Far Side* does not draw on the local oral archives for its inspiration. Rather it relies on the personal lives and experiences of the performers to create a contemporary, living history. The events and experiences that helped shape their identity, from mealtimes around the family table to dancing in a bingo hall, are remembered and celebrated through a blend of humorous and poignant moments of personal recollections and reflection. The participants' stories were presented through a combination of recorded performance, visuals and music in a celebration of the history of their own lives. The action weaved between past and present as the performers' reminiscences came to life on a big screen providing a documentary account of the social history of Drogheda and, on a wider scale, a contemporary perspective of life in a large Irish town in twenty-first century Ireland.

The Far Side came to fruition under the guidance of artist Feidlim Cannon (Brokentalkers) who conducted a series of writing workshops with participants over a two year period. For Cannon, much of the nuts and bolts of devising revolve around keeping a record of what happens throughout the process. Flipcharts and markers are always to hand; images, photos, drawings, snippets of text and spider diagrams indicating kernels of ideas are charted and revisited as the work unfolds. Once again, this mirrors and reinvents methods used over two decades by Upstate artists. In his afterword to *Way out in the Country* (2001), Mallon describes how ‘the mapping of characters and clusters of characters, told orally, is charted on a grid’ (‘Way Out in the Country’ 205). In 2007, Upstate commissioned artist Vivienne Byrne to create a visual installation using hundreds of hoarded pages of literary scribbles, drawings, notes and similar grids and charts collected over ten years of Upstate’s community devising processes all across the border region.

Cannon, a self-confessed advocate of the collaborative process, sees devising as a way of challenging traditional ideologies of text-based theatre. Like Lowe, he is concerned with exploring the ideas that emerge from the people in the room. He cautions that clear communication between the artist and the group is crucial, ‘even if you don’t know what your show is going to be, tell them that.’ Whether this degree of honesty inspires confidence or alarm may well depend on the personalities that make up the group; nevertheless, it is a significant endorsement of the artist’s belief and confidence in the process and it serves to highlight the importance of participant voices in shaping the outcome of projects. Such a stance promotes openness to diverse ideas during the theatre-making process and increases a sense of group ownership of the final production.

During the course of *The Far Side* project, Cannon encouraged participants to speak openly and candidly about their experiences and memories of growing up in the town. He asked participants to bring him to places of personal significance in their local area. He and the group travelled around the town on a bus and explored places nominated by participants. Cannon recalls, ‘all of a sudden then the workshop became about them and I was the one that was actually participating in it.’ This reversal of roles shifts the hierarchy, empowering participants to take the lead. It places the artist in the role of observer and gives the group control over content, freedom to create, and opportunity to reflect.

Published literature on devised and community-engaged theatre practices by such writers as Boal and Johnston suggests that it is an infinitely more powerful experience for participants if the content comes from them, rather than from an outside source. Boal insists, ‘The themes to be treated were always suggested by the group or by the spec-actors; I myself never imposed, or even proposed, anything by way of subject matter – if the intention is to create a theatre which liberates, then it is vital to let those concerned put forward their own themes’ (19). Similarly, Johnston argues that, community drama workshops ‘are more effective by criteria of self-empowerment if they place the participating group in the role of content-makers’ (17). In the case of *The Far Side*, Cannon’s site-specific exercise appears to have provided participants with rich stimuli for writing. Participants commented that visiting the locations brought forgotten memories to the surface, and listening to other people’s memories stirred further memories: ‘things will come back to you [...] they’re talking about stuff you had forgotten about and then that will bring up another story’ (Upstate Theatre Project Participants). Cannon cites this as an important workshop tool as it not only generated material at the time but, like Lowe’s ‘complete the task’ strategy, it is also a useful rehearsal device, helping to alleviate participants’ performance anxiety. Cannon’s bus exercise also made clear that the stories, memories and reminiscences that the group shared with each other during the devising process should be the focus of the show. Cannon remarks that, in his experience of devising, what happens through preliminary exercises and in the rehearsal room often becomes central to the final production.

Murray notes that a similar process took place amongst the group who devised Upstate’s production of *Mango Tree* (2011). He recalls how this intercultural group found it difficult to link the separate stories that members of the group had written, and how that struggle ultimately became the theme of the show. He explains: ‘It was about all these different people in a city wanting to connect with each other, but not knowing how to. That became the theme because that’s what the workshop felt like sometimes.’ Community-engaged performance opens the possibility for everyone involved in creating a performance to have her/his voice heard by the wider community. The challenge of bringing together the disparate voices of a diverse community in many ways seems to inform the work. Sharing personal stories, exchanging ideas, and connecting with others in an act of communal

art-making to be shared with the wider community reflects Grayling's idea of the arts as that 'typically brilliant part [...] of the conversation a community has with itself' (38).

The wider local and global political significance of the work

The plays *Come Forward to Meet You*, *Ship Street Revisited*, and *The Far Side* offer vibrant and thought-provoking portrayals of contemporary Irish society. In this way, they follow the precedent set by *The Border Chronicles* and much of the early work of Upstate Local. Created and inspired by the community, all these productions are grassroots celebrations of the lives of 'ordinary' people, a commemorating of the stories and memories of people whose lives largely go unnoticed. Although firmly rooted in the local, the plays have a wider social and cultural relevance. By highlighting the collective concerns of individuals and communities, the plays reflect the diverse political and cultural beliefs and values that shape a community; they speak beyond the local to matters of national and global relevance. In doing so, they epitomise Michel de Montaigne's philosophy that 'the most deeply individualised is at the same time the most universal' (de Montaigne, qtd. in Cohen-Cruz 129). The plays reveal the social and cultural attitudes and the political and economic circumstances of frequently marginalised groups of society. The plays represent the lives and stories of working class and unemployed people, emigrants and immigrants, lone parents, adolescents, older people and other vulnerable and sometimes marginalised groups. These often disenfranchised voices and overlooked narratives of a community have characterised much of Upstate's work. Hayes remarks, 'Every town in Ireland has forgotten streets and forgotten stories . . . one of the things that we managed to do was tell people's stories that would have been forgotten otherwise . . . you can do that in this environment.' Murray agrees, affirming that it is the presentation of lesser-heard voices that distinguishes Upstate's work. He observes that the voices portrayed in an Upstate show usually are not heard in more dominant, literary and commercial theatre forms: 'They [the participant-performers] are giving a voice to something that you're not necessarily going to hear elsewhere. You're certainly not going to hear it in any of the big mainstream theatres and that's a shame . . . there's things [sic] that they're saying that should be heard.'

Upstate's pluralistic attitude and inclusive practice has resulted in an open-door policy that offers all citizens equal access and equal opportunity to engage with art as a participant in the theatre-making process. Participants are recruited using multiple methods, from ads in local papers to social media callouts to direct referrals from official agencies that work with minority groups and vulnerable peoples in the community. This policy has a direct knock-on effect on Upstate's audience profile as invariably a diverse range of participants attracts a variety of audience members, many of whom are non-theatre-goers, who turn out to support family, friends, neighbours and colleagues. In all Upstate's work, the company has maintained an inclusive, pluralist policy and demonstrated a consistent record of persuading people from all backgrounds and ages to come together to create art. By embedding its practice within local communities, Upstate is positioned to respond to the specific needs and agendas of specific communities, and to provide opportunities to widen participation and include culturally marginalised audiences. As a result, the company frequently works with people who have no experience of theatre or the arts. This adds significant depth to the work according to Murray, who asserts that working with community actors brings a fresh perspective that can revitalise the art form. He observes that experienced actors tend to have a heightened awareness of form and structure that can occasionally inhibit ideas whereas, he explains, participants with no experience of performance 'won't have thought about stuff as much so they'll do something completely different . . . completely new. When you are working with groups that don't necessarily have as much of a voice, you don't know what they are going to say.' This raises an interesting dichotomy for artists working in the shared environment of community and professional theatre. Indeed, the raw energy of an unschooled performer speaking or physically acting out something deeply truthful can be immensely powerful; it is one of the strengths of community casting, but the unique craft of the trained actors – and especially actors trained in improvisation – can yield equally evocative material. Murray's observation also highlights a need for responsible direction, a leadership and vision that is sensitive to the needs and abilities of participants, in particular, where vulnerable people such as those with intellectual disabilities or traumatic histories may be concerned.

In Upstate's most recent collection of work, the organisation has continued to position social engagement at the centre of its practice. Despite some divergence in terms of the methodologies and approaches adopted by its recently expanded team of artistic collaborators, the company's socio-political ethos remains steadfast. Whatever the tools and methodologies used in the creation of the work, the artists share a common aesthetic outlook; they collaborate with a community whose experiences and knowledge inform the subject, and together, they work to create a collective vision that reflects the world from their perspective. Each of the projects demonstrates a consistent attentiveness to process. While the pursuit of a quality aesthetic performance is the impetus behind each project, the end production is, nevertheless, of secondary importance to the process. David Grant alludes to this characteristic of community-engaged theatre in *Playing the Wild Card*: 'In community drama, the process is at least as, if not more important than the end product. This is because the involvement of the participants is the end being served by the project. The resulting production is a shared celebration of the work done together' (8). Upstate artists' and participants' comments as shared in the Focus group conducted by the author echo Grant's view. Lowe states that 'the productions by Upstate are a celebration of all the work that everyone's done, they're not what we are working towards . . . the end result is a celebration of the process.' Murray remarks, 'It's important that they [the participant-performers] have a show at the end of it but more important is the process and I think if you want to talk about Upstate then that's what counts . . . with Upstate everything comes from the group.' In the programme note for *Kinda Random*, Jenkins notes that '[...] the performance of *Kinda Random* is the tip of the iceberg. What has happened between us, in our workshop programme, is the other 80% of the iceberg.' Finally, from the participants' perspective, 'the performance is just the icing on the cake but all those workshops . . . all those meetings . . . the laughter and the fun . . . that journey is very special.'

Although the above quotes reveal consensus on the importance of process, there is also a strong emphasis on pursuing the creation of high-quality art. This intersection between high-quality practice and community-based ethos is crucial to Upstate's work. As Gorman asserts:

We have worked with communities time and again for whom the adventure of entering a theatre workshop, of dreaming up an image or narrative from nowhere, of progressing this to a stage performance, is a novelty. There has usually been no tradition of this. We are there because through whatever brokerage process these people have asserted their right to make art and to make sense of the world around them through art and we have been invited in to be part of that journey. Once in, we have never shied from insisting on our shared responsibility – we as trained artists, them as participant artists – to make art of the highest possible standards, whatever that might mean in these given circumstances. ('Aesthetics')

The pluralist, collaborative and participatory approach adopted by Upstate and its artists is underpinned by a resolute belief in the aesthetic value of community art. It is this fundamental principle that positions Upstate at the forefront of community-engaged theatre practice in Ireland, and it is this footing that has attracted likeminded artists such as Stephen Murray, Louise Lowe, Feidlim Cannon, Gary Keegan and Paul Hayes to the company. As Cannon observes: 'There's a real quality to the [Upstate's] work, it's not patronising; it's a piece of art that can be held up against any other piece of art. They're making high quality art that's steeped in their community.' Murray and Hayes agree. Hayes remarks that the work can take any artistic form 'but at the core of it, it should be about communities coming together ... that would be part of the remit because that goes back to the process'. Murray goes on to point out that community-engaged theatre is needed now more than ever: 'the current climate is probably good for theatre; good for the arts, in that people need to express themselves. People are annoyed, people want a voice, people want to have their say; they want to hear things, to see things.'

The plays discussed here engage with pressing issues in modern and contemporary Ireland concerning such intersecting identity categorisations as race, religion, class, social status and citizenship. The displacement, isolation and alienation experienced by certain communities, and individuals within those communities, suggest a need for greater cohesion and solidarity among citizens in society. Collaboratively made, community-engaged theatre creates opportunities for participants to engage in artistic expression and develop social networks within their local communities. It encourages artists and citizens to take action, to make theatre that inspires social change and to create art that engages and awakens the aesthetic imagination of the community. In so doing, it offers opportunities to awaken a critical consciousness in wider society. Perhaps we can account for the current popularity of devised practice in contemporary theatre, both in Ireland and

internationally, on the basis of wider desires to promote an ethos of sharing and communicating across perceived cultural, social and political boundaries in response to increased awareness of poverty, disadvantage, inequality and the socially-divisive impacts of neoliberal capitalism following the most recent global recession.

Conclusion

The current surge in experimentation within contemporary Irish theatre practice suggests a desire for alternative forms that are poised to communicate alternative messages. This development has perhaps been prompted by recognition of the need to develop styles of theatre that serve to better authenticate the live experience for both performers and audience. Why has contemporary Irish theatre practice moved progressively more towards embracing the ethos of community arts-orientated practice? Why are prominent artists now more than ever seeking out more inclusive, communal ways of making theatre? The answers to these questions may well lie in the fundamental changes that have swept Irish society from approximately the middle of the twentieth century to the present day. The demise of the power of the Catholic church, the tired politics of a state beleaguered with a legacy of corruption and greed, the so called 'Celtic Tiger', mass immigration, the economic downturn, and the continuous cycle of mass emigration have all contributed to increased disenfranchisement and disillusionment within Irish society. Where is the place of art in such a society and how can art address such seismic failures? Perhaps placing the creation of art in the hands of citizens, artistically embracing the tenets of cultural democracy and narrowing the gap between art and society might offer ways to ensure that art is given meaningful space to illuminate and interrogate pressing contemporary issues. Devising, by its very nature, is collaborative; it enables artists to be inclusive and it encourages citizens to voice their views. These are important steps towards the creation of a truly participative society.

The growth of devised performance and community collaboration is shaping a new relationship between the artist-citizen and the citizen-artist as well as the public's appreciation of a refined art experience. Community-engaged theatre uses the power of performance to build a bridge between art and society, providing possibilities for participants to create meaning in a personal and

communal context. It offers a framework for re-defining the parameters of art and extending the civic aesthetic space. There are in contemporary theatre practice opportunities to create aesthetic frameworks that encompass and acknowledge the values and aesthetics of community art. This, in turn, calls for a broadening of academic research on Irish theatre to include a critical discourse on this largely ignored sector. Perhaps the recent surge of devising will encourage more theatre-makers to explore new ways of creating art and new ways of broadening and deepening engagement with a wider audience cohort. In terms of future investment and funding for the arts, there is a strong rationale for allocating resources to support the continued development of inclusive collaborative practices that create art that invites equal engagement from all citizens of society. Upstate offers a sustainable model wherein such art has not only been created but documented and refined in long-term practices which acknowledge that, while projects and personalities come and go, the communities that engage with art, benefit from art and provide the wellspring of artistic inspiration remain rooted in place.

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