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**PRECARIOUS BODIES AND PHYSICAL THEATER:
A REVIEW OF DANCEPLAYERS' *THE DREAMING OF THE BONES*
BY W. B. YEATS**

The Dreaming of the Bones, by W. B. Yeats, performed by DancePlayers Company, O'Donoghue Theatre, Galway, Ireland, November 7–10, 2019.

Reviewed by Zsuzsanna Balázs

Dance and physical theater companies have been on the rise in Ireland over the last few years, including BrokenTalkers, the Blue Raincoat Theatre Company, Pan Pan Theatre, CoisCéim Dance Theatre, the Liz Roche Company, and most recently, DancePlayers Company. DancePlayers was founded in 2018 by Galway-based director and researcher Melinda Szűts with the aim of reimagining Yeats's dance plays through physical theater and demonstrating the ability of Yeats's plays to reach contemporary audiences. Initially, this rising popularity of physical theater was more visible at the fringes, but lately it has moved towards the center, as Helen Meany has explained in her article "Physical theatre comes to town." After their acclaimed debut with *The Only Jealousy of Emer* at the Galway Theatre Festival in 2018, DancePlayers returned with an equally powerful performance of Yeats's 1919 Noh-theater inspired dance play *The Dreaming of the Bones* in November 2019.

Both plays include ghosts and supernatural elements, and thus feature precarious, liminal bodies whose visibility depends on the decisions and choices of other characters—bodies that try to but cannot act as agents of their own fate. In Irish theater and society, the Irish Body has always been a political arena through which questions of the nation and sexuality have been contested and interrogated. As Claudia Kinahan put it in her article "Irish Bodies: The Rise of Dance Theatre," the Irish body has often occupied a liminal and vulnerable position, and it has always been a site of conflict in the national imagination, which became more visible at events such as the recent fight for abortion rights or the decriminalization of homosexuality in 1993. Yeats's plays frequently deal with the complex relationship between the nationalist master-narrative and sexual desire, although the bourgeois nationalist audiences of Yeats's time, viewed this as an insulting and dangerous combination. His plays thus often confront the audience with difficult questions, such as "is sexual desire a figuration of politics, or politics a displacement of sexual desire?" As Nicholas Grene has observed with regard to the riots after the opening of John Millington Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World*: "As the repressed physicality of the sexual was allowed to appear from under the normal decencies of its covering, so sex was proximate to violence [...]. Such

contamination of confused categories was a deeply disturbing affront to the middle-class nationalist community whose self-image depended on just such moral classification.”

Yeats was also aware that *The Dreaming of the Bones* might cause some turmoil; hence its premiere was delayed until 1931. On June 6, 1918, he wrote to Ezra Pound that he saw it as a “doubtful” play and that “recent events in Ireland have made it actual & I could say in a note that but for these events I should not have published it until after the war. I think it is the best play I have written for some years” (CL *InteLex* 3447). It is also less frequently emphasized that Yeats engaged critically with contemporary debates about both normative and non-normative forms of desire. He often expressed his sympathy for those who differed from the norm in any way (including Edward Martyn, Oscar Wilde, Charles Ricketts, Lawrence of Arabia, and Roger Casement among many others), and who could not fulfil their desires because of some obstacle created by society or the state. In a letter to Lady Dorothy Wellesley on December 2, 1936, Yeats criticizes those political and social institutions which shame people because of their difference. Here Yeats clearly states that saving a nation cannot serve as an excuse for such public shaming:

But suppose the evidence had been true, suppose Casement had been a homosexual & left a diary recording it all, what would you think of a Government who used that diary to prevent a movement for the reprieve of a prisoner condemned to death? Charles Ricketts & Lawrence of Arabia were reputed homo-sexual [*sic*] suppose they had been condemned on a capital charge some where [*sic*], what would you think of a profession [*sic*] who insured their execution by telling the middle classes that they were homosexual. [...] I can only repeat words spoken to me by the old head of the Fenians years ago. “There are things a man must not do even to save a nation” (CL *InteLex* 6737).

The *Dreaming of the Bones* dramatizes the clash between the nationalist master-narrative and sexual desire in the context of Ireland’s colonial past. As Kinahan explains, dance and physical theater can offer “theatre makers a universal language through which to reinterpret difficult stories about our past and the contested political status of our bodies.” In the past, Irish politics and the Catholic Church made several efforts “to enforce their ideology by de-sexualizing and repressing the Irish Body.” In the play, the ghosts of Diarmuid/the Stranger (played by Jérémie Cry-Cooke) and Dervorgilla/the Young Girl (Kashi Cepeda) ask forgiveness for the sin they committed against the Irish nation—that is, falling in love with each other resulting in the Norman invasion and pushing the Irish nation into slavery. More broadly speaking, the play is about the precariousness and liminality of two Irish people who cannot fulfil their love for one another and who ask for visibility, recognition,

and forgiveness from another Irishman, the Young Man (John Rice): “If some one of their race forgave at last / Lip would be pressed on lip” (*VPI* 773). The Young Man is fleeing from the police after the Easter Rising, and here he seems to represent the nationalist master-narrative of duty and sacrificial politics: adhering to a conservative code of value both in term of theater and politics, he wants to exclude sexual desire from the national cause. Thus, the play interrogates whether the Young Man is justified in shaming and excluding two Irish people from the frameworks of recognition as a way of taking revenge for the country’s colonial past.

Using physical theater helps to challenge and resist such conservative nationalist paradigms of sexuality and puts the marginalized in center position. It also highlights those areas that homogenizing political discourses want to hide from the public eye, namely the merging of the national and the sexual. The Young Man in this play refuses to merge the two realms and condemns those who have done so, but Yeats seems to offer a more critical take on his character. The play raises more sympathy for the lovers but it also helps understand the Young Man’s standpoint, which became even more evident through the choreography in *DancePlayers’* production. As the performance made clear, the play does not want audiences to take sides necessarily, but allows both the Young Man and the ghosts to tell their stories through interwoven and visually clashing narratives.

In this review I explore how the precarity of Diarmuid and Dervorgilla was framed by the production’s dramaturgical devices (movement, music, costume, and masks) and how these devices helped associate their vulnerable position with the fragility of birds, thus raising more sympathy for the lovers. I reflect also on two more questions central to the play and the production: What is it exactly that the Young Man is rejecting, and what is the play interrogating with this representation of the legend?

Before the show began, the First Musician (Conor Gormley) was already center stage as the audience arrived and took their seats. His body was in the center but in a precarious pose: its crouched, exposed position suggesting a state of physical precarity, such as subjugation and vulnerability, as if he was praying or begging. This image already conveyed important messages about power and the vulnerability of the body, putting the arriving audience in a somewhat superior position.

Along with Gormley’s first movements the music began, composed specifically for this production by Hungarian composer Ákos Lustyik and performed by Gergely Kuklis (violin), Nicola Geddes (cello), and Gilles Dupouy (harp). The slow, codified movements and white body paint of the three musicians also evoked *Butoh* performance techniques—a Japanese physical theater which merges Western and Eastern theatrical conventions in a similar manner to the influence of *Noh* theater on Yeats’s plays. The Second and Third Musicians



Figure 1. The First Musician (Conor Gormley) before the beginning of the performance. Photo credit: Emilia Lloret

(Aimee Banks and Una Valaine) joined him in this opening sequence, and their bent, crouching poses and terrified facial expressions put them in a dramaturgically inferior position, foreshadowing the fate of the ghosts of Diarmuid and Dervorgilla. The first lines of the opening song already indicate the importance of excess, desire, and emotions in this play: “Why does my heart beat so?” (*VPI* 762); “They overflow the hills, / So passionate is a shade, / Like wine that fills to the top / A grey-green cup of jade” (*VPI* 763).

Jérémie Cry-Cooke created a spectacular choreography of precarity through an interesting representation of agency and its precariousness with recurring shifts between inferior and superior positions, leader and follower roles. In the first half of the play, the ghosts possessed agency and their movements, diction, and poses suggested confidence and mastery. When the Young Man walked in with a lantern, he was afraid and confused. He is fleeing from Dublin to the West, and does not feel comfortable in county Clare: he feels lost in the darkness, so he is in a doubly vulnerable position. The ghosts, however, appeared on the balcony, above both the Young Man and the audience, standing upright, proud, and dignified, speaking in confident, sometimes even arrogant, mocking voices. Their costumes also gave the impression of a once wealthy and proud aristocratic couple who have lost their status through seven centuries of suffering and penance. Unlike the Young

Man, they are not afraid, and wonder about the confusion they see on the Young Man's face: "But what have you to fear?" (*VPI* 764). This makes the Young Man ill-at-ease—which the production represented as fury—as the Young Man is not yet able to act as agent and has to rely on others' help, even though Ireland is his home. He exclaimed with despise and disappointment: "[...] but you are in the right, / I should not be afraid in County Clare; / And should be, or should not be, have no choice, I have to put myself into your hands" (*VPI* 764).

The ghosts then descended and began moving around the Young Man to (intensifying) drumbeats, which appeared like an initiation ritual. This sequence ended suddenly with the Stranger's proposal, "I will put you safe" (*VPI* 765), which marked his initial position of mastery. Soon after this emphatic moment, the Stranger cried out in ecstasy and burst into laughter, crawling around the Young Man not with an air of humbleness or subjugation, but superiority, mockery, excess, and even eroticism, which visibly increased the Young Man's unease and fury. The play text does not give specific directions for movement or laughter at this point in the play, so this production choice clearly emphasized the ghosts' initial agency and deceitful attitude as opposed to the lost, angry, and confused Young Man, terrified of the sounds, the darkness, and his lack of control over events.



Figure 2. Photo credit: Emilia Lloret

The three characters then began marching in formation led by Diarmuid (with the Young Man in between the two ghosts), all emulating Diarmuid's movements. In the performance space, arranged to evoke Yeats's concept of the gyre, the audience was seated very close to the performers – particularly those playing the ghosts. As the trio marched, the gyre pattern represented the pathway up the hill. Lustyik wrote a beautiful “Marching song” for this long scene—a name chosen deliberately over “Travel song” by the composer and director, in order to evoke connotations of warfare. The marching was strangely juxtaposed with the beauty of the melody.

This marching scene showed changes of agency as well: first, Diarmuid was in a position of mastery, but then the Young Man took his place with movements that evoked the master characters of the *commedia dell'arte*, another significant influence on Yeats. The Young Man's place was then taken by Dervorgilla, and before they reached the summit, Diarmuid took back the lead position. Thanks to the use of physical theater, the performers enacting the two ghosts often moved very close to audience members, looking into their eyes; in this way physical theater allowed these liminal characters to affect audiences more intensely and emotionally.

However, after the marching scene but before reaching the summit where the ghosts beg for the Young Man's forgiveness, they began losing confidence and mastery. Their movements became increasingly fragmented and broken,



Figure 3. Photo credit: Emilia Lloret

their facial expressions more desperate, and their diction more sentimental—shaky and close to crying. This helped draw attention to the corporeal and psychic effects of social exclusion and precarity. Unlike the beginning, whenever the ghosts moved their motions were narrated by the Young Man, indicating that they had no agency over their actions and fate. No matter how hard they tried, their visibility and story were dependent on the Young Man's words.

Diarmuid and Dervorgilla also exchange leader and follower roles during the play. This production made it more visible; in the first half of the show, Dervorgilla was silent and only Diarmuid spoke, while Dervorgilla had to imitate his movements and maintain her presence even when she was not doing or saying anything. This arrangement was not only difficult for the performer but also made her body more vulnerable and doubly precarious: as a woman and as a person stigmatized for betraying the nation. In the second half of the play, Dervorgilla took over the agent role from Diarmuid, and continued telling their story to the Young Man with passion and vigor. Yeats deliberately made the lines of Diarmuid and Dervorgilla interchangeable and thought that Dervorgilla might as well be played by a man. As Yeats explains in his notes to *The Dreaming of the Bones*: “Devorgilla’s few lines can be given, if need be, to Dermot, and Dervorgilla’s part taken by a dancer who has the training of a dancer alone; nor need that masked dancer be a woman” (*VPI* 777). This interchangeability was reinforced by the ghosts’ movements in the production, as they exchanged leader and follower positions and their costumes, hairstyles, and masks looked very similar, thus signaling the equality and fluidity between the two characters. The lines assigned to the ghosts are not gendered and do not include any reference which would make the interchangeability of the roles impossible.

The second half of the play is also full of the Young Man’s expressions of loathing and rage at the English and the traitors of the Irish nation, and his bitterness and aggression stands in stark contrast with the tenderness and despair with which the ghosts gradually recount their story. Diarmuid and Dervorgilla try to create visibility for themselves, and thanks to the power of dance, gestures, and storytelling, they almost succeed in convincing the Stranger, who, however, refuses to be influenced emotionally: “O, never, never / Shall Diarmuid and Dervorgilla be forgiven. / You have told your story well, so well indeed / I could not help but fall into the mood / And for a while believe that it was true, / Or half believe; but better push on now.” (*VPI* 773)

It is important that Yeats wrote a play which gave this potential visibility only to the Stranger and the Young Girl through a combination of dance, movement, gesture, and masks—all of which contributed to the act of storytelling and made their story more powerful and convincing. In contrast, the Young Man wore no mask, moved very little in the space, did not dance, and stood almost motionless throughout the show, using only words to justify his story. The only

time he moved more in the space was when Diarmuid and Dervorgilla offered to help him and guide him—a gesture which, however, remained unrequited, as he was not willing to perform a similar act of inclusion for the ghosts.

This dissonance between the Young Man's and the ghosts' stage presence also helped to visualize the contrast between two playing styles: the naturalistic theatrical tradition represented by the Young Man and the new, more powerful, anti-naturalistic way of theater-making embodied by the two ghosts. This reading of Yeats interrogates the naturalistic style of drama which usually works with fixed notions of identity and classifications, while anti-naturalistic theater operates with more fluid notions of identity and refuses traditional categorizations. The Young Man gets anxious when he loses control once again and cannot understand what is going on, as he finds emotions and passion unnatural: "Why do you dance? / Why do you gaze, and with so passionate eyes, / One on the other; and then turn away, / Covering your eyes, and weave it in a dance? / Who are you? what are you? you are not natural" (*VPI* 774). The Young Man describes this dance scene as strange and sweet, but he deliberately refuses strangeness (the other) and sweetness (sentimentality and passion). For him, these ghosts' precarious bodies are sinful and shameful and thus not worthy of sympathy or grief. Yet in the final monologue, the Young Man's language becomes very poetic and moves closer to the ghosts' playing style, as if Yeats was making up for what had been denied from the Young Man's character before.

The second half of the play is also marked by the Young Man shouting "O, never, never / Shall Diarmuid and Dervorgilla be forgiven" (*VPI* 773) three times: two times before they reach the summit and once again at the very end, during the dance, when he already knows he is talking to Diarmuid and Dervorgilla. Three is a magic number in Yeats's works and *The Dreaming of the Bones* illustrates this beautifully: there are three singers, three main characters, three circles around the stage, and Dervorgilla says "being accursed" (*VPI* 770) three times. The Young Man's three exclamations of "O, never, never / Shall Diarmuid and Dervorgilla be forgiven" seem to work as answers and verbal reinforcements of Dervorgilla's three exclamations of "being accursed," which come right before the Young Man's rejections. In all three cases, the power and invisible violence of his words visibly crushed the lovers, and their bodies collapsed, their movements became much more fragmented, and they groan as if they had been murdered. The lovers' body language illustrated that they perceived the Young Man's words as an oppressive performative speech directed at them, which affected the way they behaved, identifying more and more with the subjugated, inferior position that the Young Man's words assigned to people like Diarmuid and Dervorgilla.

Cry-Cooke's visceral choreography fluctuated between a mix of confident, erotic, and fragile movements, at times bursting into ecstasy, suggesting the

lovers' wish to be liberated from their punishment, societal constraints, and judgments. The movements of the performers conveyed the strenuousness of their predicament and the punishment they had to perform in hope of liberation. The performers playing the ghosts moved mostly on the ground and, even when standing, seemed bent and broken, except for their first appearance. The Young Man never crouched or crawled during the production, and his body language did not convey as much physical discomfort as that of the ghosts, apart from his fear of being lost, and his confusion regarding the ghosts' identities. In other words, he never let himself be blown away fully by the power of desire and refused the needs of the body in order to stay true to his nationalistic ideals. The Young Man's expressions of refusal also put the ghosts in a physiologically vulnerable position right before the decisive dance scene which determined their fate: they had to dance knowing that they danced only to receive the final and most powerful refusal.

Another interesting aspect of the production was the reinforcement of *The Dreaming of the Bones's* bird motif through costumes, masks, and choreography. The text recurrently signals the connection between the lonely birds and the ghosts: "Somewhere among great rocks on the scarce grass / Birds cry, they cry their loneliness" (VPI 763). The Young Girl describes their story with a similar image: "They have not that luck, / But are more lonely" (VPI 769), "[t]hese are alone, / Being accursed" (VPI 770). Lustyik's music deliberately imitated bird songs, a theme that was supported by Cry-Cooke's choreography and Yvette Picque's costumes and masks. Both the chorus (the three musicians) and the ghosts conveyed fragile, fluid, bird-like movements with their arms and heads, while the costumes included half-masks whose noses were reminiscent of beaks and the performers' hair was styled to give an earthy, disheveled impression. During rehearsals, mask-work was incorporated into exercises for physicalizing character whereby actors chose a line that represented the essence of the character's mood and worked it into a piece of clay. Cry-Cooke's choice was the phrase "I will not answer for the dead" (VPI 765), and his mask-work was directly informed by the image of a bird of prey swirling above Diarmuid's head. He carved a big swirl to the left side and created a protruding nose for the mask which reflected his pride, but also his sense of guilt and his fear of being attacked from above. This choice dialogued nicely with the play text which recurrently hints at the ghosts' fear of remaining lonely like the birds, which whirl above their heads and cry out their shared loneliness. This mixture of pride, guilt, and fear in Diarmuid's character was also manifested in the shifts between master and subjugated positions his movements and body language conveyed onstage.

Costuming choices also highlighted Diarmuid and Dervorgilla's relationship with one another and with the land itself. The ghosts' clothes, just

like those of the three musicians, were a greyish brown earthy color, marked by white stains from the chalk powder poured all over the ground. This created the impression that the characters belonged to the landscape of the Burren, and that they were more at home there than the Young Man, yet their visibility was denied by their fellow Irishman. It was also remarkable that the ghosts' hands and bodies were close throughout the production but never touched. This element of the choreography highlights that the play speaks more broadly to those people who, for some reason, are not allowed to express their love, who cannot kiss or hold hands in public without being judged and condemned by society, and who are forced to feel ashamed of their story and desires: "but when he has bent his head / Close to her head, or hand would slip in hand, / The memory of their crime flows up between / And drives them apart" (VPI 772). They have to perform a "strange penance" (VPL 771), as "[t]hough eyes can meet, their lips can never meet" (VPI 771), and as the Young Girl laments "nor any pang / That is so bitter as that double glance, / Being accursed" (VPI 771). The reason this double glance is so bitter is that anytime their eyes meet, it reminds them of the impossibility of their love; the moment they establish intimacy through their glance, it is immediately broken by the very knowledge of its impossibility. The Young Man also denies the reality of their desire by claiming that "when lips meet / And have not living nerves, it is no meeting" (VPI 771). With this claim he also tries to justify why his forgiveness would be unnecessary and wrong, refusing to recognize their desires and feelings as valid and worthy of inclusion in the master-narrative.

DancePlayers' take on Yeats's play made more visible the play's interrogation of the validity of not only naturalistic theater but also political narrow-mindedness, which operates using a discourse of hatred and obsession with enemies of the nation, expecting people to put aside emotions and love when it comes to the national cause. While the Young Man speaks to the centuries of oppression the Irish endured under colonial rule, he too is in a vulnerable position, fleeing from police alone in the darkness. Yet, though oppressed himself, his reaction is to oppress. Although his attitude is anti-imperialist, his treatment of Diarmuid and Dervorgilla brings him closer to a totalizing and oppressive imperialist ethic that idealizes principles of duty and sacrifice. DancePlayers' *The Dreaming of the Bones* illustrated, through the power of physical theater techniques, that the play is more sympathetic to the two outcast lovers whose bodies can no longer touch and whose desires remain unfulfilled. Even though forgiveness is denied, this dramaturgical decision has a more emphatic emotional influence on the audience. It points at the cruelty and absurdity of the rigid, oppressive socio-political institutions that the Young Man represents, and which he justifies with references to Ireland's painful colonial past: "Our country, if that crime were uncommitted, / Had been

most beautiful" (VPI 774). The Young Man also stands for the mythology of sacrificial martyrdom and republican rhetoric which, as Susan Harris explained in *Gender and Modern Irish Drama*, works "as a normative force" designed to exclude and erase those who do not adhere to any totalizing vision of heroic nationalist resistance. As Harris further noted, Yeats established the foundation of this sacrificial tradition with early works such as *Cathleen ni Houlihan* or *The Countess Cathleen*, but later revolted against the idea; *The Dreaming of the Bones* serves as a spectacular example of this change.

By allowing both the Young Man and the lovers to tell their stories, *The Dreaming of the Bones* offers interweaving narratives, poses difficult questions about what and who can be included in the concept of Irishness, and most importantly, refuses to impose a single, totalizing narrative on the audience. In Adrian Frazier's words, the aim is "to cross the national narrative with counternarratives, not of nations, but of genders, sexualities, localities, and congeries of extranational interests." DancePlayers' mission to apply physical theater to Yeats's plays can indeed bring them closer to contemporary audiences, highlighting how ably Yeats's drama speaks to the present by addressing the still complex relationship between nationalism, sexual desire, alterity and the body.

NOTES

1. Helen Meany, "Physical theatre comes to town," *The Irish Times* (January 9, 1997).
2. Claudia Kinahan, "Irish Bodies: The Rise of Dance Theatre," *TN2 Magazine* (April 6, 2017).
3. Adrian Frazier, "Queering the Irish Renaissance: The Masculinities of Moore, Martyn, and Yeats," in *Gender and Sexualities in Modern Ireland*, eds. Anthony Bradley and Maryann Gialanella Valiulis (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997), 8–39: 10.
4. Nicholas Grene, *The Politics of Irish Drama: Plays in Context from Bouicault to Friel* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 86.
5. Kinahan, "Irish Bodies."
6. Kinahan, "Irish Bodies."
7. For a detailed discussion of precarity and physical theater see Marissia Fragkou, *Ecologies of Precarity in Twenty-First Century Theatre: Politics, Affect, Responsibility* (London and New York: Methuen Drama, 2019).
8. Frazier, "Queering the Irish Renaissance," 11.
9. Susan Cannon Harris, *Gender and Modern Irish Drama* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), 10.
10. Harris, *Gender and Modern Irish Drama*, 10.
11. Frazier, "Queering the Irish Renaissance," 10.
12. For more information about the show, contact DancePlayers Company directly at danceplayerscompany@gmail.com.