“The Theatre of Disturbance”: Interview with Olwen Fouéré
« Le théâtre de la perturbation » : entretien avec Olwen Fouéré

Lionel Pilkington
Olwen Fouéré is one of Ireland’s most important contemporary theatre and performance artists. Working internationally in English and in French, her extensive practice navigates theatre, film, the visual arts, music, dance theatre and literature including collaborations with playwrights such as Steven Berkoff, Marina Carr, and Laurent Gaudé as well as visual artists like James Coleman and Jesse Jones. She was co-artistic director (with composer Roger Doyle) of music and theatre company Operating Theatre (1980-2008) and in 2009 she founded TheEmergencyRoom dedicated to her own experimental work. Performing in all of Ireland’s major theatres, as well as in various theatres and festivals globally including Paris, Avignon, New York, Sydney, and London, Fouéré is especially well known for her writing and performance of riverrun (2013-2016), and for her work as performer and artistic collaborator in Jesse Jones’s Tremble, Tremble which represented Ireland at the Venice Biennale in 2017. Notable film appearances include This Must Be the Place by Paolo Sorrentino, The Survivalist by Stephen Fingleton, Mandy by Panos Cosmatos and The Northman by Robert Eggers.

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Lionel Pilkington: I wanted to begin by asking you about the 1980s – that decade in which Ireland’s model of political economy changed dramatically from a previously existing social policy ambition, however weak, to providing social care to what has become today’s current orthodoxy: supporting private capital.

Olwen Fouéré: That’s changing again maybe! I’ve never been interested in an Irish election until the election that took place over this weekend.¹ I kept texting updates to my brother who couldn’t get any information where he was, and he kept coming back saying “It’s a revolution”, “It’s a revolution”. Well, it’s what everybody wants. Or it’s what I want, what I’ve wanted for years, but now it feels like everybody wants it.

LP: Yes, and so many people are saying that they would be quite happy to pay more taxes if they got a better health service and other public services.

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¹ Our interview in Paris (10 February 2020 at the Centre culturel irlandais) took place two days after the Irish general election on Saturday, 8 February 2020. In that election Sinn Féin was the political party that received the largest number of first preference votes winning thirty-seven seats – the first time in almost a hundred years that neither Fine Gael or Fianna Fáil won the most votes.
OF: Yes. For so long I have felt that this valuing of its economy above everything else would be the death of Ireland. To hell with the economy if you have the proper and right kind of life for people. If Ireland could at last fulfill its potential as a visionary and independent country, that would be wonderful.

LP: For me there was a similar strong sense of this kind of possibility latent in the 1980s in Ireland, and particularly in the less mainstream forms of theatre where there prevailed an expanded conception of theatrical acting and of thinking about performance. I’m thinking for example of the moving statue performances of Thom McGinty. I was wondering if you could tell me about your recollections of McGinty in those years?

OF: I knew Thom McGinty well. I still have the mask he gave me when he was alive and the “Salomé” ring which he left me in his will. It’s a beautiful mask (black and white and red) that you put on your head and the front is like a headdress and on the back is his face. I wore it for the piece I performed at the benefit concert for him in the Olympia that Susi Kennedy and I organised after Thom was diagnosed with AIDS, and he was already becoming quite ill. The title of the concert was *The Diceman Cometh*...

I worked with Thom McGinty in Dublin and on tour for about a year and a half around 1979-1981. The company was called the Grapevine Theatre Company, I think, and we did two shows – *Withering Hypes* (which was the adult version) and *Bubblegum* (the kids’ version, which was *Withering Hypes* with the dirty bits taken out). We toured all around Ireland. We camped; we slept in these remote little town halls and schoolrooms. We had an extraordinary time. So I worked with him all during that time and then he set up the company in Spiddal (Co. Galway). A lot of other work was coming in for me and Thom was always saying [Scottish accent] “You’ve got to get your ‘performing being’ out there”. He was kind of telling me: “No, don’t bury yourself down in Spiddal, spread your wings”. But I was very tempted to join them in Spiddal.

LP: He did some great things. There’s one act – the “Bloody Visual” – that I’m trying to find out more about. I know that it was performed in response to the massacres at Chabra and Shatilla (September 1983), but I am wondering if it was devised initially in response to the homophobic murder of Derek Flynn that took place the previous September and/or its dreadful aftermath where the five convicted of the killing were given suspended sentences (March 1983)? Thom’s costume was a

2. Thom McGinty (known as the Diceman) was a street performer, actor, theatre director and political activist who worked in Dublin from 1976 until his death in 1995. Prior to 1976, McGinty worked as an actor with the Marxist-oriented Strathclyde Theatre Group and with Scottish 7:84; he also trained in Edinburgh with the Gay performance artist Lindsay Kemp. In Ireland McGinty performed at the Dandelion Market before its demolition, was involved with the Grapevine Arts Centre, and then he moved to Galway where he founded his own theatre company (Dandelion Theatre Company) with Dick Donoghue.
white mask and cloak that had blood seeping out of his wounds; he looked like a bloodied ghost figure. It was very striking.

OF: He used that for Bloody Sunday commemorations. There was a special commemoration of that in the 1980s that he used it for.

LP: I also wanted to ask you about Operating Theatre and James Coleman and how that began.

OF: Well, Operating Theatre and James Coleman are two separate entities. Roger Doyle and myself set up Operating Theatre in 1980 and it was set up as a kind of a band, a music and theatre group. One of our earliest productions was a piece called The Diamond Body (1984). Not long before that we had invited James Coleman to make a new work with us. That was Ignotum per Ignotius (1982-1983). We had funds from the Dutch Ministry of Culture through Roger’s connections in Holland so we premiered and toured Holland with it first and then presented it in the Douglas Hyde Gallery in Dublin the following year. That was the one thing that we did with James as Operating Theatre. Roger Doyle and I had worked with James separately in 1980 on So Different… And Yet and that was the first piece I did with James. It was a fascinating experience for me and also quite a formative experience. And during our rehearsals, James realised that he needed a composer / musician and I suggested Roger Doyle and that’s how that happened. Then a year or two later, as Operating Theatre, we asked him to work with us. That piece was Ignotum per Ignotius. And then I collaborated with James on several other of his works after that, I think I worked on about eight James Coleman pieces in total. There was a wonderful retrospective of his work in 2009 where everything was remastered and there was a beautiful, huge, projection of So Different… And Yet in the courtyard of the Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin (IMMA). It was one of my proudest moments, seeing that piece in all its glory.

LP: When you started working with Coleman, you did a lot of tableaux work, didn’t you?

OF: In So Different… And Yet the choreography, which took place entirely on an invisible chaise longue, was structured around different poses, like fashion poses or photographs in motion. He was very clear about the physical language that he was after. He had a very clear idea about the costume as well. He had written an extremely long and complex text. It was all there, but he didn’t yet know what form the performance should take. The performance aspect evolved over a two-month rehearsal process until we were ready to shoot it. It was rehearsed like a play and filmed in one take, about an hour long. I had to have all of the text and the choreography inside me, like for a solo show. Roger also had text to speak and he composed and played all the music. So we did the first take but we all felt we could do a better one. As it happened, our cinematographer hadn’t brought another hour-long video tape with him but he had brought three twenty-minute tapes as back up. And we were out in the wilds – in the middle of nowhere – so we had to go ahead and do the second take with the three twenty-minute tapes. Hence there
are two invisible edits in the piece. We had to work out how to cut, freeze and pick up with the exact same shot and carry on.

LP: Can you tell me something about the genesis of *The Diamond Body*, and whether it is published?

OF: Well, it’s out there in the form of a short story called “The Little Merman” in *Adventures in a Bathyscope* by Aidan Carl Mathews.\(^3\) We had asked Aidan to work with us on a new performance piece. So Aidan and I discussed the subject matter and he suggested something about the women of Troy or other female heroic figures but I said that I was very interested in the subject of androgyny and in the fusion of ideas about gender – a sort of genderlessness full of sexuality. And as it turned out he had been writing a short story about a man who was mourning the murder of his hermaphrodite lover and was undergoing a sex change to become a hermaphrodite. So Aidan was in the process of writing this story, which hadn’t yet been published, and we worked on it with Aidan to create a performance piece. I think what he eventually published was the result of what we had done; it was the same monologue. The play itself was never published as a play. *The Diamond Body* was our title; it comes from a term used in alchemy, meaning the fire created when opposing energies come together in fusion creating a new element.

LP: Mathews mentions the case of Ann Lovett in an interview in relation to the play.\(^4\) He talks about *The Diamond Body* as about scapegoating….

OF: Yes, it was – the story was all about scapegoating. That’s basically what the story deals with, the old, ancient story of the scapegoat.

LP: It was so resonant at the time. Terrible things had happened in the early to mid-1980s – the death in childbirth of the 15-year-old Ann Lovett, the homophobic beating to death of Declan Flynn, the homophobic stabbing to death of Charles Self and then the response of the Gardaí in lifting 1,500 gay men in the wake of their investigation of Self’s murder. It was a very cruel response by the state that was in itself part of a cycle of scapegoating. So it strikes me that one of the things that Operating Theatre was trying to do in relation to this was generate some level of self-consciousness about the cultural behaviours/habits that subtend such a response.

OF: Not consciously, or perhaps very consciously on both our parts but for different reasons. I think we were interested in exploring and revealing aspects of art that didn’t seem to be within the vernacular of art in Ireland at that time.

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So for me it was about form. I wanted to explore a particular kind of theatrical form that I was not seeing or experiencing anywhere else. Sometimes people set up theatre companies to do shows that they cannot do anywhere else. But in this case it was about trying to give space to a particular kind of perspective, of the power of form as a portal to an alternative reality, and of how content is embedded in form.

One of the things that always drove me mad, and still drives me mad, is when people regurgitate the phrase “art is a reflection of society” or theatre is “a reflection of society”. I say, no it is not. Theatre or Art is one of the few tools we have for envisioning. It’s the envisioning of something; that’s what art is, and that’s what theatre is all about or should be, in my view. Art is an act of resistance against a prescribed reality.

LP: Absolutely! In relation to this I was thinking that many of the shows that were done by you and by Operating Theatre entailed engineering encounters with otherness; that is, working towards an insistence that understanding the Other (which means not scapegoating, not objectifying the other) entails an encounter with the opaque and therefore confronting the limits of one’s own knowledge.

OF: Yes… and accepting that we are all Other. We are all Other. Recently, when I was asked what belonging and home meant for me, I said the more I engage with art and the process of envisioning, the more I realise that our essential state is completely nomadic. We belong to the universe. And I quoted my friend, the artist Dragana Jurišić, who lives in Ireland. When she was interviewed about what it was like to go back to Yugoslavia (which doesn’t exist anymore) she said it was actually quite freeing in the end: that is, it was freeing to “belong” to a country that no longer existed. And she had this great quote that I love. She said (in her thick Balkan accent): “People are not trees; do they really need roots?”.

LP: Your own parents came to Ireland in the late 1940s.

OF: The West of Ireland has always been a magnet to such people. And I met amazing people out there all through my childhood. I knew Richard Murphy very well and it was through Richard that I would have met people like Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes amongst others. Ludwig Wittgenstein spent time out West as did Heinrich Böll. And Antonin Artaud ended up in Inis Mór (Aran Islands).

5. Dragana Jurišić is a Croatian-born photographer and academic living and working in Dublin.
6. The eminent Austrian-born philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951) stayed in a cottage in Rosroe at the mouth of Killary Harbour (in Connemara) as a guest of Maurice O’Connor Drury. Wittgenstein’s first visit took place in 1934; a second longer stay took place from November 1947 to June 1949.
8. The French dramatist and theorist Antonin Artaud (1896-1948) visited Ireland in August 1937 staying for two weeks (at the house of Seán Ó Milleáin) in the Eoganacht area of Inis Mór.
LP: Yes, there are times when not feeling at home at home can be energising. [...] You worked with the Breton sculptor Yann Goulet in the early 1970s, and I was wondering how that experience influenced your work in the theatre. Did that stay with you? Did you think of movement like a sculptor would?

OF: Of course, it all stays with me. Yes, I think I came to theatre through sculpture and through the visual arts. I used to explain my need to stretch forms in terms of having come through the visual arts and ending up in performance, but I think that there are possibly other explanations as well. Perhaps in my DNA there is a more European sensibility in thinking about form. Yes, sculpture is always with me and I never really think of what I do as acting. It’s more an embodiment of some sort. I drive some other actors or directors mad because they talk about character but I never think in terms of character. I don’t really know what character means.

For a lot of actors and directors theatre is mostly about story and character. And these are both things that I am not particularly interested in. I’m interested in the experiential, in embodiment and in disturbance.

LP: How did you find training in Stanislavsky’s method when you worked with the Focus Theatre (in mid to late 1970s) given the tendency for Stanislavsky’s training methods to lead towards character-based performance.

OF: What the Stanislavsky thing did for me was ultimately about my interest in the body (I had also begun training in tai chi at the time), all those things came together and made me stand on the stage with – and I know no other way of saying this – with absolute truth; in the sense that it was about presence. It made me understand what it was to be purely there and nowhere else. There’s no artifice. I learnt something about standing there in the here and now in absolute being.

Thom McGinty would often talk about the “performing being” – and a mixture of all those processes brought me to a realisation that this is the place that I need to work from. The Stanislavsky influence helped to bring me there even though there was stuff around the Stanislavsky approach that I needed to get rid of. But the tiny bit of training that I did do made me understand that you have to “be” in order to experience and communicate. You can’t just pretend to be and pretend to communicate. In terms of “building a character” and other aspects of the Stanislavsky method, it’s not that I never felt they were useful. Probably I do use them but I use them very much for my own ends. But I still think character and narrative are overly dominant ideas in the theatre world. I remember doing

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9. Yann Goulet (1914-1999) was a Breton activist and a prominent Irish sculptor. Goulet trained at the École nationale des Beaux-Arts in Paris and later became a leading member of the association Seiz Breur to popularise Breton Arts. Goulet’s involvement in Breton nationalism during World War II led to his being sentenced to death in Rennes following the liberation of France in June 1944. Goulet and his family fled to Ireland and he became an Irish citizen in 1952. He went on to become an acclaimed Irish sculptor exhibiting and teaching at the Royal Hibernian Academy.
a master class while I was on tour in the USA with Terminus. All three of us who were in the play would give a masterclass together in different places and the three of us are very different actors. I remember working with a student on a scene and at one point I said: “Forget about character, just forget about character”, and it unlocked something in her straight away. I said “Just imagine that you are in a situation. Imagine that you’re several fathoms under water in a capsule and trying to communicate to the people on the surface who are waiting for you….”. Then I was talking to their teacher some time later and he said for weeks they have been going around saying “She said forget about character!” It was like sacrilege!

LP: I find that your shows often leave one with a sense of not being able to fully encompass everything that one beholds. In contrast, I suppose that mainstream theatre is essentially directed towards an effect of transparency: an impression of understanding and of confirmation.

OF: Well there’s great value in the mainstream theatre as well. But the way that I work – and it’s not a choice that I’ve made – is much more about the experiential. I’m really interested in someone else’s work when I fully experience it at the same time as not knowing what the hell it is. If I was to write a book about theatre I would call it The Theatre of Disturbance. Because I can believe the work if I am watching it without having a clue of what is going on and still wake up the next morning not knowing what I saw but can’t stop thinking about it. What I call being “moved” is when the tectonic plates shift inside of you, not when you get all emotional and weepy which is what many people associate with being moved. I am much more interested in the former movement. Yes it can produce all sorts of emotions, but that is not the object, you know.

LP: Sometimes I think that Thom McGinty’s moving statue performances were about something similar to that – about compelling the spectator to have an encounter with this passive, mysterious and unresponsive other. It was a sense of an encounter with something different, opaque, half recognisable but not fully recognisable. What’s your view on that?

OF: Well, you know, he offered himself as an object of meditation. And another thing I am really interested in (and every actor will probably tell you this but we achieve it very rarely) is this sense of being a messenger, being a vessel through which it comes. I am not sure what “it” is but I know when it is happening, and an audience knows when it is happening, and there is also that wonderful stage in rehearsals where you’ve put everything in place (the text and everything) and there is a kind of surrender and you’re letting “it” lead you. You no longer have to make decisions; it is just going to lead you. It’s rare that it happens, but it’s what we all strive for and I think even very conventional actors know it when it is happening.

10. Mark O’Rowe’s Terminus was a play done by the Abbey Theatre (directed by Mark O’Rowe) in 2011 and which featured Olwen Fouéré, Declan Conlon and Catherine Walker.
And so in some ways, yes, I think that Thom was always tapping into that thing of just being the messenger, the vessel.

**LP:** Could we speak a little about your work with Laurent Gaudé\(^\text{11}\) on *Sodome, ma douce* (2010) and *Danse, Morob* (2017).

**OF:** I translated both of those plays. And so far I’ve worked with him three times; last year with *Nous, l’Europe, banquet des peuples* which premiered at the Avignon Festival in July 2019. It is on tour at the moment but I’m not doing the tour because I have too many things going on. *Nous, l’Europe*… is probably my least favourite text of his but he’s an amazing writer. I love working with him. The way we met was that I was here in Paris in 2008/2009 having just completed a run of another show *Paula Spencer, la femme qui se cognait dans les portes*\(^\text{12}\) and I was sitting around one day and read in *Le Monde* about a new play that had been just published – because here in France of course plays are published even if they haven’t yet been performed – and I saw the title – *Sodome, my douce* – and I thought God, that’s a fantastic title, and then I read the blurb about it, and it said it was about a woman who had been buried in salt for thousands of years and it starts to rain and she comes to life and she tells a story of how the city of Sodome was destroyed. And I thought I must get hold of this play. And I found a copy somewhere, and I sat down in Place de la Sorbonne and read it in one sitting. And the next morning I was on to the Société des droits d’auteurs to get the rights. And a year later it had its world premiere in English in my translation, produced by Rough Magic in association with my company TheEmergencyRoom directed by Lynne Parker. And it sold out almost immediately.

**LP:** That’s another play about how social forces can sort of tear someone apart.

**OF:** Yes, yes.

**LP:** And in a way the more recent *Danse, Morob* conveys a similar preoccupation.

**OF:** Yes similar. I mean Laurent’s work is very interested in that thematic; and he also has this magic realism which I love. With *Sodome*, there is a section of it which I read the other night and which I have here. I love it. Basically she’s told the audience everything about the destruction of her people and their culture and of how Sodome was destroyed through plague warfare. An Ambassador comes to negotiate and he’s a beautiful man, and he’s embraced by them all but he is carrying a plague and they all die of the plague, including him. Killed by contagion – contagion is a subject that I am very interested in.

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12. *Paula Spencer, la femme qui se cognait dans les portes* was first performed at the Théâtre de la Tempête (La Cartoucherie) in Paris on 16 September 2008. Written and performed by Olwen Fouéré, the piece deals with a woman’s struggle with alcoholism and domestic abuse and is an adaptation of Roddy Doyle’s novels *The Woman Who Walked into Doors* (1996) and *Paula Spencer* (2006).
[Olwen reads a section from her translation of *Sodome, ma douce*:

I was nothing more than a salty residue of life, but I endured. [...] Once more I have felt the pleasure of moving my limbs. The air has filled my lungs again. [...] I will leave the unknown scent of Sodome in my wake. First it will intrigue you; then it will disturb you; that is good. [...] Contagion, do you remember? That is the weapon I will use.

The whole contagion of ideas and the contagion of culture. That’s what we’re talking about.

LP: I was fascinated also by *Danse, Morob*.

OF: He wanted us to work together again and wrote that play for me to produce if I wished. There are some biographical elements, he even recounts my father’s funeral in it. And I used a voice recording of my father in the pre-show.

LP: I was interested in this because of this awareness of the after life of things. And, in particular in relation to *Danse, Morob*, the after life of the no-wash protest which of course was very different to the hunger strike protest. The hunger strike was all about sealing up the body whereas the no-wash protest was about unleashing the body and its orifices and the consequences of that. I think that it left an alternative model about how one could think about doing embodiment: a model that would be available to everybody and not just the proverbial four people in south Dublin. There was an extraordinary sense that you could rally and do something with a counter public which, I am trying to argue, is similar to what took place with the moving statues.

OF: It was sort of using the body as a weapon.

LP: How engaged were you with those kind of issues?

OF: Of course I was aware but I was also guilty of a huge amount of ignorance. Since then I have become good friends with one of the hunger strikers who was also in the no-wash protest [Laurence McKeown, also a playwright] and Laurence has this phrase that he uses: “southern ignorance”. So I was very much caught up in the southern ignorance about the north which I still feel ferociously ashamed about – even though I worked with Field Day [Theatre Company] in 1981 and could see and feel a lot of what was going on in situ. But there was something about not knowing about how I could become engaged other than take part in the protests where I did become involved – like “The Parade of Innocence” which Pat Murphy organised along with others to free the Guildford Four and Birmingham Six.¹³ So I was highly aware and involved yet I wasn’t really aware enough of the type of discrimination that was going on, and I am still not. It was very insidious and often very subtle. Laurence often tells a story about his neighbour who was a Protestant and had exactly the same house as his father and got planning permission whereas when Laurence’s father wanted to do exactly the same conversion he was refused on multiple grounds.

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¹³. “The Parade of Innocence” was a mass demonstration and street theatre event that took place in Dublin on 9 December 1989.
Danse, Morob did terrible business. And I still don’t know why. I really wanted to do it as part of the 2016 commemorations because there had been so little reference to the 1980/1981 hunger strikes during that year. So I did it at the end of 2016 (December 2016 / January 2017). We never got to the bottom of what had gone wrong. My producer did meet someone who said, “Ach, you know, the dirty protest – after Christmas, no”.

I was mixed about Laurent [Gaudé] choosing to write on that subject. I mean it was very connected to me and to Ireland but first of all I had worries about a non-Irish person writing about the no-wash protest and about me being “southern”. I am very wary of appropriating something in order to make a piece of work.

LP: And it was partly about your father as well; and how we can all be a little bit destroyed by social processes.

OF: Well I wouldn’t say that he was destroyed. But there was a mark that stayed on him like a stain all his life because he was a Breton activist and continued to prioritise the Breton struggle during World War II and this was seen by the French as traitorous. So that was in the 1940s. But there was no such bad treatment in the 1970s when he was in La Prison de la Santé; he had his own cell. He even met [Jacques] Mesrine – you know Mesrine, the bank robber. You must watch those movies: one is called Mesrine (1984) and the other is called Mesrine: Killer Instinct (2008). In one of the films there is a scene of him escaping La Santé. When I saw it first I thought my God, is this the place? It looked like a medieval prison.

You know when we did Paula Spencer, la femme qui se cognait dans les portes we opened it at La Cartoucherie (in Paris) and there were a lot of police on the opening night, because the project was partly funded by the Ministry of Culture. But there were two different cops for every night of the show; they even turned up for the night that the show wasn’t on. And at the end of the two weeks, the theatre administrator said, “Tu sais les flics – c’est les flics à toi!”. Because of the name! A little bit of harassment. I thought it was hilarious. So whenever we went anywhere else I would say “Où sont mes flics?”.

LP: Could I ask you how you became involved in “The Parade of Innocence” and what you did in it?

OF: It was an enormous event and just about every art practitioner I knew took part. I was asked, I can’t remember by whom. But everyone knew about it and everyone wanted to become involved in some capacity. Ten of us were in a cage – representing the Birmingham Six and the Guildford Four – moving all the way down to O’Connell Street and onwards to Dame Street as far as the steps of the Central Bank building (which at that time had no railings around it). I played Carole Richardson of the Guildford Four, and was the only woman in the cage.  

14 The “Guildford Four” was the name given to four people – Paul Hill, Gerard Conlon, Paddy Armstrong and Carole Richardson – who were wrongly convicted of having detonated bombs
Incidentally, the cage was borrowed from a circus. When it was collected by one of the justice campaigners, the ringmaster showed him the cage — still occupied — and told him he would have to evict the lion himself. Seemingly he did!

[...]

I could talk to you more about statues. I had a recurring dream for years — from when I was a child at school I think. I would have this recurring dream and I feel that it is all connected to what I do because I think about it still but I don’t get the dream anymore. In the dream, I am in the boarding school that I went to in Dublin — I was there between the age of 10 and 16 — so I would be in that school, and there is a fire. And we’re told that in order to escape from the fire we have to go down this corridor and we have to do it in formation: a very specific formation. And some people are falling away and that screws everything up, and then eventually we go out into this open area and there is an area on the right hand side (kind of like a courtyard) where there are all these figures frozen like statues, in these different shapes like dancers and the glow from the fire is shining on their muscles and their bodies, you know, and they are completely still but they are alive. And I remember feeling that I have to go there. I want to go there. And everybody was saying no, no, no, you’ve got to go here. And there is a man on a bench rowing, rowing and he says, “Come up here, come up here”. And I start rowing with him, and that’s the end of the dream. And my big regret is that I went rowing with the man and that I didn’t go with the statues. To me that was the world of art, and the other was the other world — the so-called real world — and I went with the man on the back of the bench. Maybe the man on the bench was more to do with falling in love or something.

LP: This story reminds me that I also wanted to ask you about acting a woman in the 1980s. This is something that you speak about a lot in this period and the “necessity” of androgyny.

OF: I was very interested in androgyny because I never felt that I fitted into the normal idea of gender, of “womanhood” and of “femininity”. I didn’t feel that I fitted into it; and that was as much from women as from men actually. It wasn’t necessarily gender-based; more like a cultural thing. I felt that the place I existed was in between those: in between those genders.

LP: Could I ask you to elaborate on a comment that you made to an interviewer [Charles Hunter] in The Irish Times in 1984 when you said, “I wanted to avoid women’s politicising as a theme”. I’m interested in your use of the term “politicising” and its suggestion of your wanting to use androgyny to get away from an identity-based politics. Does this make sense to you?

at two public houses in Guildford in Surrey in 1974. They were imprisoned in October 1975 and released in October 1989. Carole Richardson, an English woman, was 17 at the time of her arrest.

OF: Yes, I suppose so. I know I wanted to raise questions about gender as a social construct and the polarisations that were occurring in gender politics. I wanted to explore and explode those narrow definitions of male and female. We are only now beginning to acknowledge that there are numerous intergenders and everything the idea of intergender entails in terms of our culture – but the world is still hanging on to the pink and blue, female and male.

LP: And would you say that the theatre at the time exaggerated such gendered traits?
OF: At the time I definitely did feel that (though again, this is all much clearer in retrospect); I now know a lot of what I felt was because of the pressure to interpret female roles in a certain way… particular as an *ingénue* as I was then.

LP: Well that’s a role that is deliberately played up in your performance in Coleman’s *So Different... And Yet* – you have a green costume with a red ribbon around one leg. You’re like a strange Cathleen Ni Houlihan.

OF: She’s definitely Cathleen. She’s definitely Ireland in many ways. I play Ireland a lot I think. I played Cathleen Ni Houlihan – in the late 1980s directed by James Flannery. When I perform *riverrun* I always think about her – when I’m going down the Liffey in the final pages of *Finnegans Wake* – it’s like Cathleen Ni Houlihan coming back after a hundred years and saying: “Well I’m off – it could have been great, but I’m off now”.

If I had known about performance art when my interest in the visual arts began, I would have become a performance artist. So when I became an actor, my first encounter with performance art was in the foyer of the Project Arts Centre and encountering Nigel Rolfe: that was 1976-1977. Nigel used to do some of his performances in the gallery space in the Project – which was the foyer, and Nigel would have been rolling around on the floor for literally two days. And then you’d get other people: an amazing Belfast-based performance artist called Alastair MacLennan who usually kept still for long periods. We took it in our stride. But in what other theatre in Ireland could you have found that sort of thing going on in the foyer?

I often think of how the 1980s in Ireland was such an exciting time theatrically, and how conservative the theatre became after that in so many ways, with the exception of many of the young companies in Ireland now who are fantastic. There are quite a few of them who are doing beautiful work – not just shows that can’t be done in the main houses, but doing their own particular work. I am very heartened by that. But at the time, in the 1980s, Ireland was a much smaller country. So there was the mainstream and there was the alternative stream. But the alternative stream was a lot more radical in the 1980s than it was even ten years ago: the Sheridans, Operating Theatre, Nigel Rolfe, a lot of the bands like Virgin Prunes. Until about ten years ago the Irish theatre was so conservative. It comes and goes in waves. I’ve also observed how art always seems to flourish during a time of economic depression. Proof if proof were needed that measuring a country’s success by the value of its economy is a bogus principle.
**LP:** Finally could I ask you about your plans for the future?

**OF:** One of the ideas that I have as a possibility for the future is to do a production of a play by Thomas Bernhard called *The President* which is basically about a dictatorship couple: the dictator and his wife. There’s a revolution and even his son has joined the revolution, and it’s terribly funny. And there’s a moment when the President’s wife talks to the empty basket of her dead dog (the dog died when it heard the gunshot from an attempted assassination on the President but that killed one of his cronies, a Colonel) and, at the same time, the husband is in the bathroom roaring laughing with his masseur. But you know, the trouble is I have a problem when people say why do you want to do it; and I say, I don’t know – because it’s about a dictatorship couple. And there’s another scene where the President is somewhere like Portugal with his mistress, who is an actress, and the President says I’ll have to speak with the national theatre and get them to give you a proper role. And it is all so corrupt. In the final scene, he is in his coffin, and she’s dressed in black.

**LP:** It’s resonating with you.

**OF:** Yes. There’s something about it. It is like they’re still hanging on, and everything else has gone to shit – but there’s something dark and funny about it at the same time. So that’s one project that interests me. The other one is an idea about an interview – an interview format, like a TV interview. The interviewer has to be quite intelligent and I want it to go into philosophical ideas as well. And the words of the person being interviewed – I want these to be something that’s hard to get a hold of politically. It could be really fascist and at the same time it could be not: very right wing or not at all. It was inspired by watching an interview from 1959 by Mike Wallace with the philosopher/writer Ayn Rand,\(^{16}\) and there was something about that interview I found very compelling. Ayn Rand’s persona – her look, her accent, the cigarettes, her background escaping Stalinist Russia – is fascinating. Of course I don’t agree with her politics which have been adopted by many figures in the far right in the United States. Mike Wallace was saying things like “What do you mean you’re against altruism?”, which make you realise that America was far more left leaning at that time.

**LP:** That’s fascinating. And you are quite right about the different world views at that time: for example, ideas of social welfare in the United States – the “New Deal” as it was called – were broadly accepted up until the mid-1970s. But, as I’ve been reading recently [in Hillary Miller, *Drop Dead: Performance in Crisis, 1970s New York*, 2016], these principles were broken following a constructed “debt crisis” in the space of a few years in New York; and New York at that time was the city that best exemplified an urban centre organised along social welfare principles. Between 1975 and 1977 that all changed thanks to a manufactured recession; in Ireland a similar change takes place in the early 1980s with the result that by 1986 the new normal is the privatisation politics of neoliberalism.

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\(^{16}\) See online: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7ukJlBZ8_4k.
OF: Yes, the “me, myself, and I” philosophy. I’m delighted that you are writing about the 1980s in Ireland. I’ve always thought that there was so much that was amazing that was happening in that period. My friend Jesse Jones, who worked with me on *Tremble, Tremble* (really worth seeing) is similarly interested in that kind of crossover between politics and art.

The third project that I am thinking about is with Marina Carr. Marina and I have worked together loads of times but always within institutions – like theatres and so on, and her work always goes through masses of literary department notes. We get on very well and we work very well together. And I said to her one day, why don’t we just do something together; let’s just commit to it that we make something together and that you write whatever you want and I will tell you what I am interested in – but you don’t have to write about that – and so we spent a week here (at the Centre culturel irlandais) this time last year. And we read Keats aloud to one another for the whole week, and then read up about his life and death. And the Tuberculosis thing interested me because of my interest in contagion; a lot of my family – my mother’s family – died of tuberculosis. But the first thing that I suggested to her was something on the Sphinx. But she’s also doing so much Greek-inspired stuff at the moment, and the piece that she’s writing for the Abbey now is loosely based around *Oedipus Rex*. It was like too much Greek. There again, maybe these projects will all merge together: the interview thing may become Sphinx – and the Sphinx could be the interviewer or interviewee. The Sphinx could be male or female, and of course she’s animal as well. That’s what I like.

LP: Thank you so much Olwen. This has been an immense pleasure.

The interview took place on 10 February 2020 at the Centre culturel irlandais.