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Chapter 25

AGONISTIC SPACES

Dissensus and Ethical Conflicts
in Recent Irish Theatre

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25

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Clare Wallace

PHILIP: This is not civilised. What's happening here is not proper.

PAUL: This is what civil society is now. Discourse. Debate. Honesty. Feedback (*beat*), truth (*pause*). Liz was speaking her truth –

PHILIP: – This is not a debate –

PAUL: – She's entitled to do that. She's a woman, entitled to her own opinion –

PHILIP: – Paul, stop it –

PAUL: – We're talking about women, aren't we? We're talking about sluts? Whores?

(Tierney-Keogh 2019, 58)

In the twenty-first century issues of social morality, sexuality and reproductive rights have been lightning rods of debate, activism and radical change in Irish politics and culture. Ireland's jolt into neoliberal modernity in the 1990s, with its rollercoaster of boom, austerity and partial recovery, coincides with its transformation from a conservative, Catholic society where divorce was illegal until 1996 to poster child for marriage equality in 2015. Yet if cosmopolitanism, diversity and emancipation might be keywords in this account of civil and civic experience, the cruel legacies of patriarchal, pro-natalist policies since national independence have continued to disturb the prevailing narrative of newfound progressive liberalism. As the angry exchange above from Lisa Tierney-Keogh's *This Beautiful Village* neatly indicates, the very terms in the conversation about civil society and civic responsibility are far from stable. The dissonance between the recent past and the contemporary moment produces a dynamic and uncomfortable space of agonistic debate both political and cultural, and ultimately raises questions of values, accountability and action.

In his insightful survey *Theatre & Ethics* (2009), Nicholas Ridout sees theatre as occupying a special place in the negotiation of such questions. He notes:

there is something particular about theatrical spectatorship that offers ways of thinking about ethics – and, specifically, thinking socially and politically about ethics – that no other cultural practice seems to offer. Theatre inserts its ethical questions into the life of its spectators in a situation in which those spectators are unusually conscious of their own status as spectators, and thus as people who may exercise ethical judgement.

(Ridout 2009, 14)

This observation underwrites my approach to the work that theatrical performances instigate as aesthetic spaces of ethical and political reflection. More concretely, the chapter will discuss three recent performances – *This Beautiful Village* by Lisa Tierney-Keogh (2019, 2020), *Home: Part One* collectively created at the Abbey Theatre (2021) and *The Saviour* by Deirdre Kinahan (2021, 2023) – as a means of illuminating this work, its difficulties and its significance. While patently very different, each orbits issues of trauma, intolerance and ethical impasse, tracing multiple axes of inequality that intersect across matters of sexuality and gender. A shared feature of all three is the way they are at once embedded in and speak to the socio-political environment of contemporary Ireland, while at the same time their reach was extended by their availability in online formats during the pandemic period. In a twenty-first-century moment marked by the emancipatory promises of the exposure of past wrongs, state investigations and redress, referenda and openness to social transformation, these performances, I argue, suggest the complex contours of Irish civic discourse, and of theatre as a space of critically meaningful agonism.

Agonism, Dissensus and Critical Politics

Agonism, in recent theoretical discourse, is most readily associated with political theorist Chantal Mouffe’s understanding of politics as a space conditioned by the ‘ever-present possibility of antagonism’ (Mouffe 2013, 1), that can never be stabilised in an enduring state of consensus. While her argument for an ‘agonistic pluralism’ as an alternative to the ‘deliberative democracy’ model of the political (Mouffe 1999) has been critiqued, the implications of such pluralism for artistic practice, and the roles these practices play in shaping the public imaginary, merit attention particularly for theatrical performance as a communal, public activity. Taking up this challenge in the opening chapter of *Performing Antagonism: Theatre, Performance & Radical Democracy*, Tony Fisher bypasses well-worn debates about theatre’s in/efficacy, to foreground “‘the *agōn*” – or “struggle” – at the very centre of the experience of the political’ (Fisher 2017a, 4). In doing so, he not only echoes Mouffe, but also recalls Claire Bishop’s bid for an art of ‘relational antagonism’ as ‘a critical force that appropriates and reassigns value, distancing our thoughts from the predominant and preexisting consensus’ (Bishop 2004, 78).

The *agōn* – conflict, struggle or contest – in Classical theatre ‘took the form of the “debate scene”’ (Fisher 2017a, 11), in which opposing principles are articulated by actors or by actors and a chorus. In a modern sense, the evolution of such scenes might be traced in the verbal jousting of Bernard Shaw’s drama of ideas, or in Bertolt Brecht’s crafting of an epic theatre – two titans of modern drama committed, in vastly different ways, to rhetorical effects with political sightlines. Both have been the subject of criticism regarding their didactic intentions, or pretensions, depending on one’s perspective. The distinction between these approaches and the post-Brechtian theatre for Fisher, Hans-Thies Lehmann and others, lies in a ‘historical shift or displacement of practices *away* from a politics [...] based on a naïve belief that theatre’s pedagogical power rested on its rhetorical effects, and toward forms of theatre and performance that engaged in what might be designated *a critical politics of the visible*’ [*italics original*] (Fisher 2017a, 17). Such a critical politics is not literally confined to seeing *per se*, but rather affects the representational field as a whole, recalling what philosopher Jacques Rancière identifies as art’s role in the ‘the distribution of the sensible’ (Rancière 2004, 7). Notably, for Rancière, disagreement and emancipation are pivotal to his thinking on the politics of aesthetics; his theory of dissensus is rooted in ongoing and multiple disturbances to what can be perceived, felt or heard, that operate to recalibrate the sensible order. Moreover, both the work and the audience matter: ‘[e]mancipation’, he contends, ‘begins when we challenge the opposition between viewing and acting [...] when we understand that viewing is also an action that confirms and transforms this distribution of positions’ (Rancière 2009, 13). What I want to spotlight here

is that while the focus of Mouffe's and Rancière's work diverges, they respectively recognise the force of exclusion inherent in maintaining communities of consensus. Dissensus is thus performative, it makes the marginal, the conflicted, the contradictory appear within taken-for-granted situations.

A 'drearily familiar concatenation'

The narrative of Ireland's Celtic Tiger transformation from the mid-1990s to 2008 is regularly plotted along the assumption that economic neoliberalism was the wellspring of progress. Social and cultural liberalisation flowed along downstream from fiscal policy, leaving the values and attitudes of the past behind. The decriminalisation of same-sex sexual activity in 1993, the legalisation of divorce in 1996, the recognition of same-sex marriage in 2015 and the repeal of the 8th Amendment prohibiting abortion in 2018 have undoubtedly been important milestones. They have come at a high cost for those whose lives were shaped by the tight confines of conservative values, a cost disproportionately paid by women. As Gerardine Meaney acerbically notes in *Gender, Ireland and Cultural Change*, in the immediate aftermath of the financial crash,

the rapidity of change obscured the depth of continuity. The drearily familiar concatenation of motherhood, nation, referenda and paranoia erupted periodically at crisis points around issues of sexuality, sovereignty and, eventually, race. The narrative of rapid national progress was dependent on the suppression of evidence of the persistence of structures of conformity, domination and exclusion at the heart of Irish society and culture.

(Meaney 2010, xv)

Meaney is one of a number of scholars who, in the words of Eamonn Maher and Eugene O'Brien, questioned 'the comfortable consensus that developed between government, the media and business interests' (Maher and O'Brien 2015, 5) on the nature of Irish (self)-reinvention. As I hope to underscore, the recursive issues of gender, sexuality and race remain of direct relevance to the performances under discussion here.

Both *Home: Part One* and *The Saviour* are openly situated within a socio-political environment permeated with the legacies of inequality, injustice and abuse, while the presence of these legacies in *This Beautiful Village* though implicit is foundational. Since the 1990s, alongside Ireland's story of economic progress, revelations of the psychic and physical violence meted out to vulnerable women and children by Church-run and State-sanctioned institutions have haemorrhaged into the civic sphere. In addition to numerous fictional and non-fictional works of literature, theatre and film, a rich body of critical scholarship on memory and trauma in Irish culture exists, including seminal work by Emilie Pine – *The Politics of Irish Memory* (2011) and *The Memory Marketplace* (2020) – and by Miriam Haughton – *Staging Trauma* (2018). They are among the many who have provided excoriating accounts of the ways in which the Irish State has repeatedly failed to respond adequately to the thousands of victims of institutional abuse in Ireland. Whether we look to the Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse (Ryan Report 2009), the Report of the Interdepartmental Committee to establish the facts of State involvement with the Magdalen Laundries (McAleese Report 2013) or the Mother and Baby Homes Commission of Investigation Report (2021), such patterns, official apologies notwithstanding, have scarcely diminished, and seem no less problematic today than when Pine wrote her first book on the topic in 2011. By the second decade of the twenty-first century, the story is well-known, but the extent to which the ethical demands of the past have been addressed at State level is an ongoing issue, only intermittently in focus. *Home: Part One*, *The Saviour* and

This Beautiful Village in their respective ways embody the agonisms of these contexts and pasts, raising enduring questions of how to act in the present.

‘Dissensual speech’ – *Home: Part One*

‘[D]issensual speech’, writes Tony Fisher,

is the speech of those who speak without being certified to do so; whose speech thus lacks all authorisation; whose words depend neither on the competence, rank, nor distinction of the speaker. It is unlicensed speech, meaning its utterances derive from a place other than that of sanctioned discourse.

(Fisher 2017b, 200)

As such, it enacts a challenge to authority from a position of marginality or powerlessness. *Home: Part One* is a performance intervention exemplifying dissensus in a scene of civic antagonism and ethical conflict. It acts not only in the immediate context of the debate about appropriate responses to Ireland’s history of gender discrimination and abuse, but also in relation to the equality debates of the twenty-first century and specifically #Waking the Feminists. Strategically premiering on YouTube on 17 March 2021, it replaced the usual celebratory St Patrick’s day pageants with a painful articulation of injustice that, thanks to pandemic conditions, was broadcast globally.

Conceptualised by directors Graham McLaren and Neil Murray, led and curated by Noelle Brown, *Home: Part One* was collaboratively created at the Abbey Theatre in 2021. The work was a direct response to the publication of the long-awaited final report of the Mother and Baby Homes Commission of Investigation in January of the same year. The Commission, formed in 2015, had a mandate to examine the functioning of so-called Mother and Baby institutions and County Homes from 1922 to 1998 to ascertain how women and children were treated in these institutions and the practices of adoption they facilitated. The final report chose to disregard numerous survivors’ testimonies given to its Confidential Committee as this material was deemed ‘contaminated evidence’ (Brown 2021, 19). The commission concluded that although child mortality rates in the institutions were significantly higher than in the general population, there was little evidence of forced adoption, systemic racism or ongoing physical or sexual abuse; neither did it find that women were incarcerated by force of law in any of these institutions. Moreover, the recorded interviews (some 550) were not transcribed and were subsequently destroyed due to data protection concerns (Gallen 2022, 106ff). Following public and political outcry, the commission recovered backup audio recordings in late February 2021. Considerable criticism has been levelled at the commission’s handling of the investigation, its methodology and its communication with those who participated in its research. Three legal cases were brought challenging the report’s conclusions and an alternative report with widespread support from academics was drafted.

For a duration of three hours, *Home: Part One* gave the stage to survivors’ testimonies – 50 of them, read by 46 women – some public figures, actors, writers and survivors – interspersed with music by Mary Coughlan and five filmed portraits of survivors. The pace was slow, and sombre; the material painful, the stage bare and dark. The absence of the melodramatic formula so prominent in Peter Mullan’s 2002 film, *The Magdalene Sisters*, uncovered the unsutured wounds in the past of lost children and lost parents. In contrast to the apparently objective and affectless discourse of the Commission’s report, *Home: Part One* was relentlessly methodical in disclosing the suffering inflicted by these institutions and those who enabled them. Its aesthetic mode was documentary – this is not a play, but rather an activist performance of agony. The

words of those excluded, disenfranchised, brutalised and silenced carry weight and accumulate as a disruptive affective force, voiced through the collective of readers who do not act, but rather deliver these testimonies.

The performance was emotionally and temporally demanding, entering audiences' homes at a time of very different confinement, challenging us to attend to experiences that are, by now, far from secret. The distribution of testimonies to a diverse cohort of readers gestures strongly toward their shared status, as intrinsic to so many Irish families' histories. It is not the first of such interventions at the Abbey Theatre. In 2010, the theatre produced a series of plays and events under the title 'The Darkest Corner'. Each of the 2010 plays also responded to the recently published government findings on child abuse in institutions, with Mary Raftery's documentary text, *No Escape*, using material verbatim from the Ryan Report (2009). As with these earlier works, *Home: Part One* engages with a history of cruelty and suffering, that has become increasingly recognised as part of Ireland's history and yet remains a site of present struggle, demonstrably unresolved.

What is the outcome of this? Listening to the testimonies and memories read in *Home: Part One* arguably opens what Mouffe calls 'agonistic public space' where critical artistic practice 'mak[es] visible what the dominant consensus tends to obscure and obliterate' (Mouffe 2013, 93). As Pine reminds us, ethical witnessing is complex, it requires the 'immaterial labour of listening' and an acknowledgement that 'listening is not neutral' (Pine 2020, 162). The dominant attitude in Irish politics seems to have shifted from denial to acknowledgement and apology. Yet, distributing responsibility among citizens in general, while at some level true, also has permitted the institutions of State and Church that collaboratively created the systemic incarceration of women and children to evade the burden of responsibility and redress. In this evolving context, works like *Home: Part One* are of value as expressions of dissensual, unlicensed speech that insist on something beyond listening – an engagement with injustice and a commitment to action. In 2024 the Abbey Theatre's follow up project for schools, *Home: Education*, marks an effort to continue in the spirit of civic intervention in the face of inadequate state attention and meagre evidence of redress for survivors.

Liberation – *The Saviour*

Deirdre Kinahan's *The Saviour* also draws us towards agonistic spaces inextricably entangled with the regulation of sexuality, women's bodies and the challenges of an ambivalently, unevenly emancipated present. Directed by Louise Lowe for Landmark Productions, it opened at the Cork Midsummer Festival as a livestream from the Everyman Theatre in June 2021, featuring actors Marie Mullen and Brian Gleeson. In 2023, the play received its stage premiere at the Irish Repertory Theatre in New York, closely followed by a run at the Dublin Theatre Festival at the Pavilion Theatre. For the stage production Brian Gleeson was replaced by Jamie O'Neill.

The Saviour is a work that gradually exposes the cracks in the progressive surface of the new Ireland. The dramatic lead, Máire, and her son, Mel find themselves in conflict with each other even while they might be presumed to be allies within this altered, modern world. In interview, Kinahan is explicit in placing the play in relation to the transformations of the 2000s; she describes the work as emerging from 'the great joy of the marriage referendum and the yes campaign', the idea of the character of Máire, 'a beautiful, brilliant, broken woman who is caught between two worlds', and her son Mel, and 'the effect of that trauma on him' (Kinahan 2021b). Indeed, what Kinahan achieves in this piece is to rotate what initially appears to be a comedy, towards a much more confronting encounter in which questions of belief and ethics are posed.

Formally, the play is a dramatically conventional realist duologue or two-hander. More compelling than its form are the ways the work invites audiences into the intimate interleaved

spaces of desire, parent-child relationships and religious faith. The duologue, as observed by Dan Rebellato, has been remarkably frequent in both British and Irish theatre since the mid-1990s. One of its prime merits, he suggests, ‘is that it enables us to focus very directly on [...] the nature of our ethical obligations to one another and what that tells us about the nature of judgement and ourselves’ (Rebellato 2014, 81) – central concerns, I would contend, for *The Saviour* as well. It is important to note though that the play begins not with dialogue, but with an extended monologue. Centre stage is Máire, dressed in a satin nightdress, enjoying a cigarette in bed on her 67th birthday. She gleefully shares her thoughts with Jesus (and the audience), about the previous evening’s sexual encounter with Martin, a man she met at church who now tends her garden and with whom she shares a devoted Christian faith. There is a refreshingly liberated humour in the play’s pivoting of the overdetermined qualities of this image away from previous associations. Kinahan’s scenario is a palimpsest, knowingly fusing several allusions, the most prominent being the Molly Bloom monologue at the close of James Joyce’s *Ulysses* which concludes with the affirmation ‘yes I said yes I will Yes’ (Joyce 1992, 933), later strategically echoed by the Irish abortion rights organisation ‘Together For Yes’ in their campaign to repeal the Eighth Amendment to the Constitution. The second reference is to Tom Murphy’s *Bailegangaire*. In the original 1985 production Marie Mullen performed the role of Mary, the long-suffering daughter of the house; in 2014 she took the central role of Mommo, the senile, bedbound matriarch of the play. The stage image in Garry Hynes’ revival of this iconic play at the Town Hall Theatre in Galway is closely mimicked by Louise Lowe’s handling of the opening scene in *The Saviour*.

While Máire blows smoke rings and basks in the novel glow of good sex, Martin, who never appears on stage, is allegedly preparing breakfast. Máire positively lays claim to her pleasure:

I am enjoying the fag.

She takes a drag.

And the sex!

Which was a surprise I can tell you.

[...] Sex was always a means to an end.

Foisted on me when I didn’t want it or offered for a bit of peace.

But this was different!

(Kinahan 2021a, 7)

This opening predictably elicits some amusement, the foundation of which is all too easy to elide. The bedroom scene and Máire’s bodily presence are mediated through predetermined semiotics – the satin nightdress, the postcoital cigarette, the intertextual residues of earlier Irish narratives – and yet the root of the humour lies curled in the taboo of the aging yet sexual female body, here on stage speaking her desire out loud. On closer inspection, Máire’s initial ‘shamelessness’ is an act of defiance that momentarily renders perceptible the lingering presence of ‘sexageism’ (Bousan 2016, 1ff), but only momentarily.

If Máire’s speech seems to signal a freshly emancipated attitude to sex that might be taken as a synecdoche for Irish experience more generally, then such sentiments are offset by more ambivalent perspectives that are also perhaps to be perceived as representative. An internalised sense of shame soon surfaces as she acknowledges the perceived absurdity of her situation: ‘Get a grip on yourself, Máire Sullivan! I can hear you say that, Jesus. And you’re right. Do you know you’re right... I’m acting ridiculous. At my age!’ (Kinahan 2021a, 7). The joyous, impulsive intimacy with Martin is marked as a welcome change from the spiritual intimacies shared with Jesus, the abusive attentions of an uncle who ‘used to bother [her] when [she] was a child’

(Kinahan 2021a, 8) or even her dutiful relations with her late husband of 42 years. Memories soon wither the celebratory tone. Máire's chat with Jesus discloses that she is also a survivor of an institutional school in Stanhope Street Dublin where she was abandoned by her father following her mother's death, and where she spent a grim and brutalised childhood working in a laundry attached to the school.

The internalised agonistic dimension to Máire's monologue insinuates what is to come in the dramatic structure. With the arrival of her son Mel the play's dynamic shifts from monologue to dialogue, from painful and pleasurable reminiscence to present disjunctions and frustrated arguments. Tensions are evident as soon as Mel appears. His birthday gift for his mother is a large doll, in reference to one the institutional school deprived her of. It is a pre-eminently kitsch gesture, well-intended yet incredibly naïve, patronising and an impossibly inadequate means of patching up what Máire lost as a child.

Antagonism erupts as Mel challenges Máire's judgement with respect to Martin. He and his husband have discovered that Martin is a convicted paedophile whom they believe is deceiving Máire in order to gain access to her grandchildren. Máire is furious at this invasion of her privacy and lashes out viciously at Mel, deluging him with contempt for his homosexuality and asserting her preference for a supposedly repentant Catholic paedophile whom she can 'save'. The clash with Mel shows a different Máire, one who resented caring for her husband and disregarded his atheistic dying wishes, who has wrestled with depression throughout her adult life, who has transmitted the cruelties of her own childhood to her children despite their evident concern for her and who has perhaps, unintentionally, exposed her grandchildren to a sexual predator.

The debate scene of *The Saviour*, while rather contrived, pits family members and world views against each other in suggestive ways. At an obvious level there is a contest between generational identities and experiences, between religious and secular, traditional and contemporary. More interestingly, within its structure two differently marginalised positions clash producing a state of dissensus. Both positions – those of Máire and of Mel – contain within them degrees of self-contradiction. Máire is a nexus of oppositions, of dynamic life force and of vulnerability, of faith and hypocrisy, of wilful disdain and of love. Mel similarly combines sensitivity with condescension and care with an inability to respect his mother's faith or her agency. Both present contrasting conceptions of the world that have embedded within them rival notions of emancipation. And both emerge from an ambivalently shared and yet unshared social history, the force of which is simultaneously suggested and denied. For Máire, Jesus is her constant companion and 'no one is beyond forgiveness' (Kinahan 2021a, 36). Martin represents a promise of companionship and pleasure. For Mel, Jesus is an expletive, a façade behind which Máire retreats and he can admit no rehabilitation of Martin or of the church institutions he regards as wholly abusive.

One might wonder who is the saviour referenced in the play's title? Is it Jesus – the most conventional possibility? Is it Martin who rescues Máire from loneliness and lovelessness? Is it Máire who spiritually saves her dying husband against his wishes and who might redeem Martin? Or is it Mel, the enlightened gay man who defends his love for his husband and seeks to protect the extended family? Whose perspective should take priority and where does responsibility lie? The character of the *agon* in the play is both ethical and political, challenging the viewer, as Rebellato maintains, to examine their own judgements and senses of obligation. Kinahan's play offers no simple resolutions, but rather underscores the tangled and ongoing nature of the traumas of the past, of self-determination and self-preservation and, above all, the ideological antagonisms that lie just beneath the surface of the present. It suggests that sites of liberation can also be sites of misrecognition, and that alongside progressive change lies the disturbing legacy of a past that cannot simply be disregarded.

Community Interests – *This Beautiful Village*

Set in the present in suburban Dublin, the action of Lisa Tierney-Keogh's acerbic social satire, *This Beautiful Village*, takes place in a well-lit, ostensibly familiar space: 'a living-room with modern, tasteful decor. The house is a classic South County Dublin estate build from the 1980s: perfectly functional and nothing special' (Tierney-Keogh 2019, 1). The play had its first outing on the Abbey stage in 2019; a reworked Zoom call format version titled *This Beautiful (Virtual) Village* was streamed in 2020 during the pandemic lockdown. Despite its limitations, the Zoom format distilled the debates of the stage play, highlighting the compartmentalisation of the characters' views and experiences, adding a new layer of ironic signification to the use of Malvina Reynolds iconic 1962 song 'Little Boxes' as the performance begins. Indeed, the portioning of the setting for a Zoom call format multiplies the effect rather than altering its meaning. Here is a drama that takes a head on approach to questions of civic co-operation and ethical action, where progress and community are the chief bones of contention.

Tierney-Keogh presents a menagerie of contemporary urban characters that, as in *The Saviour*, invite consideration as positions within the Irish socio-political ecosystem. Ranging in age from sixties to thirties, they share a comfortable middleclass co-existence. Maggie, the eldest is a compulsive redecorator for want of any more meaningful activity; she's partial to her wine and oblivious to the racist tilt of her attitudes. Philip is in his fifties, working class and self-made, well-meaning, keen to defend his property and status quo decency, with little time for intellectual nuance. Paul is a disgruntled screenwriter, whose career is stagnating and who when under pressure reveals a nasty sexist streak. Liz is a married lesbian and vocal feminist, overly earnest in her quest to correct the patriarchy. Dara has a passion for organic, homemade food, is painfully politically correct, overcompensating for a less than perfect marriage. The youngest is Grace, an overworked black doctor, hungry, tired and impatient.

As members of their local residents' association, they meet to discuss what to do about a piece of sexist graffiti sprayed on the wall of their estate. The appropriate response to the statement "Jessica is a filthy fucking slut" (Tierney-Keogh 2019, 31) produces an increasingly antagonistic exchange of perspectives among the members of the group, as schisms in their communal values are revealed. 'A political community', Rancière notes,

is not the realization of a common essence or the essence of the common. It is the sharing of what is *not* given as being in-common: between the visible and the invisible, the near and the far, the present and the absent. This sharing assumes the construction of ties that bind the given to what is *not* given, the common to the private, what belongs to what does *not* belong.

(Rancière 1999, 137, *italics mine*)

While a local residents' association may not seem to be a political community, it nevertheless takes on a political character as a representative organisation attempting to arrive at an acceptable consensus with regard to shared space and private property. As the quotation at the start of this chapter signals, efforts to police 'proper' behaviour and property beleaguer the efforts of the collective as they debate what response is most appropriate.

It soon becomes apparent that the very nature of the issue at stake is understood in radically different ways that threaten to spiral out of control. Liz, who has called the meeting, sees the graffiti as emblematic of a wider gendered problem. Idealistically, she wants to tackle the root cause:

We need to look at this wall and think about why. And I want to know who did this. [...] So I can talk to them about what they wrote. Find out what they mean. Hear what they have to say about women. This kind of thing, it's deeply misogynistic.

(Tierney-Keogh 2019, 15)

Interrupting Liz's emotive feminist response are the pragmatic views of Philip and Maggie. Both blame local kids, whom Maggie undiplomatically labels 'knackers'; both are primarily concerned with 'property values and the neighbourhood' (Tierney-Keogh 2019, 13). They are happy to eschew bigger questions, and paint over the problem literally and metaphorically in order to preserve their present comforts. Paul, meanwhile, is keen to use the event as a debating point about presumed sexism; as the play progresses, he escalates his provocations to argue against what he sees as a restrictive liberal consensus. He tosses down the gauntlet to Liz asking: 'is it possible for you to consider that what's happened is a response of frustration to the erosion of masculinity by modern feminism?' (Tierney-Keogh 2019, 23). Dara seems more interested in cooking than in political injustice, but tries to navigate, unsuccessfully, towards a tolerant middle ground. Though Grace is alert to the sexism of the graffiti, she is less appalled than Liz. Her daily experiences at a public hospital expose her to direct abuse and more pressing crises. As a black woman she sees it on a continuum with other forms of oppressive expression and, in particular, racism. She is wearied by the others' unacknowledged privilege, their hypersensitivities and insensitivities, and is more sceptical of their rote notions of community. The group bandy around ideas about how better to protect their estate with the installation of security cameras, revealing an uncomfortable level of unexamined racial profiling even amongst the most progressively inclined. The crude mechanisms of racialised belonging and marginalisation are vividly illustrated when Maggie's friend sends a photo of a youth spraying the wall. Because the figure seems to be black or maybe Asian, Maggie immediately turns to Grace to ask if 'Maybe you know him from your community'. When reminded that Africans and Asians are not even from the same continent, Maggie blunders on 'How am I supposed to know the difference? This is ridiculous. This is what they want. To divide us. To break up our community' (Tierney-Keogh 2019, 50) – making visible the processes of differentiation that also determine social groups.

In this 'perfectly functional' and ordinary space, Tierney-Keogh uncovers a seething mass of disagreements, misunderstanding and vulnerabilities nestled between the Marks and Spencer snacks, the craft beer and organic food. She has a talent for satirical comedy at the expense of her characters, remorselessly skewering their explicit and implicit prejudices. Philip is horribly embarrassed when he accidentally breaks a vagina-shaped ornament belonging to Liz, prompting a whole series of jokes in the opening section of the play. Maggie and Philip rely on truisms about the discipline and decency of the old days, causing the younger characters to flinch in objection. Dara's smug obsession with his homecooked lasagne and the generalised comic business of swatting a persistent fly jostle with casual racism, sexism and fierce disputes about free speech and consent. It becomes hard not to notice how economic precarity and marriage breakdown hover in the wings for the characters, threatening their positions in this community of apparently shared social privilege and normality.

Tempers soar as the group realises that Paul has appropriated the association's funds, Liz feels her concerns are underappreciated, Philip spills wine on Grace, and Paul, in the process of sponging it off, inappropriately touches her breasts. Even the normally placid Dara erupts at the lack of appreciation for his emancipated sentiments, revealing yet another tellingly gendered fault line in their collective:

What the hell is it you all want? (pause). I'm doing my level fucking best, day in, day out, to support you, to raise women up. I go on all of the marches, I voted Yes to

Repeal, I show up for my kids and it's never e-fucking-nuff. [...] What about me? What about my needs? Where do I figure in all this? Women are constantly angry and I'm shit out of ideas what to do about it anymore. So I tried to stand up for you. And I made a lasagne. A fucking delicious lasagne. With organic mince. And fresh pasta. So fuck me. Fuck, me.

(Tierney-Keogh 2019, 35)

Antagonistic speech finally spills over into physical violence between the younger men, and the liberal progressivism of the group degenerates into vulgar hostility that unmasks the proprietary and exclusionary logic of the community crosshatched with multiple intersectional inequities and resentments. In the end, they decide to paint over the graffiti and to demote Paul as treasurer. This moment of majority decision-making illustrates keenly the problem of consensus as a process of reduction, of assigning people and things to their proper places, of 'closing spaces of dissensus by plugging intervals and patching up any possible gaps between appearance and reality' (Ranci re 2013, 71). Neither Paul nor Liz are accommodated by the practical resolutions taken.

This Beautiful Village is evidently a drama of agonistic politics in Mouffe's sense, bursting at the seams with issues – racism, sexism, class – quite literally debated on stage. Tierney-Keogh presents us with a political microcosm, representative of agonistic spaces within the larger civic Irish domain. The presence of an irritant in the smooth civil workings of community, is embodied in the intermittent buzz of an errant fly, that is finally violently dispatched by Grace. It is a gesture paired with a lecture delivered by Grace to Paul which crests in a remarkable declaration:

You, and the power you were born with, are over. Your time, is up. So you can sit down, close your mouth, open your eyes and ears, and start listening to the loud noise coming over the hill. It's not a rebellion, it's not a movement, it's not a revolution, it's some god-dam, overdue, mother-fucking evolution

(Tierney-Keogh 2019, 61)

While this provides Tierney-Keogh with a satisfyingly punchy feminist finish, as a rhetorical gesture it is deficient in nuance. More interesting are the ways this rather formally predictable work, gestures towards the challenging ethics of co-habitation (Butler 2012) and the paradoxes that inhere in all notions of communities, however liberal they appear to be. Strikingly, despite their vicious disagreements, the characters remain together in their shared agonistic space and tend to each other's injuries. They do not achieve a neat consensus, neither do they succeed in being 'tolerant and shar[ing] kindness with one another [so they can] leave here tonight with a renewed respect for each other' as Dara puts it (Tierney-Keogh 2019, 39). But they remain in proximity and in their civic, though not always civil, common space. *This Beautiful Village* has considerable flaws as a drama especially in its polemical transparency and in the flattened dimensions of its characterisation. However, its attempt to open a conversation about power, social accountability and intersectionality on stage might be productively understood as 'relational antagonism', a form of work 'predicated not on social harmony, but on exposing that which is repressed in sustaining the semblance of this harmony' (Bishop 2004, 79), that invites a rethinking of these relations.

Agonistic Spaces

For Chantal Mouffe, 'agonistic pluralism' seeks not 'to eliminate passions nor to relegate them to the private sphere in order to render rational consensus possible, but to mobilise those pas-

sions towards the promoting of democratic designs' (Mouffe 1999, 755–756). Theatre and performance, to return to Rancière, as “ways of doing and making” that intervene in the general distribution of ways of doing and making as well as in the relationships they maintain to modes of being and forms of visibility’ (Rancière 2004, 13), constitute vital spaces in which the discursive and performative character of dissensus and difference can be embodied and articulated. Linked by their attention to agency, sexuality and gender, *Home: Part One*, *The Saviour* and *This Beautiful (Virtual) Village* exemplify the diversity of approaches to critical agonism in contemporary Irish theatre. Collectively they point to the continuing, pressing challenges of relationality, inequality, and responsibility in the socio-political environment of contemporary Ireland and the role of performance in creating spaces of recognition, contestation and debate.

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