Introduction: A ‘Sense of the Body’

Ireland has literally eroded, in the sphere of representations that constitute social identity, a comfortable sense of the body. (Herr 1990: 6)

In his 1987 introduction to *The Selected Plays of Brian Friel*, Seamus Deane wrote, ‘Brilliance in the theatre has, for Irish dramatists, been linguistic. Formally, the Irish theatrical tradition has not been highly experimental. It depends almost exclusively on talk, on language left to itself to run through the whole spectrum of a series of personalities often adapted by the same individual’ (Deane in Friel 1987: 12). In *Performing the Body in Irish Theatre* I investigate the body in performance and its interpretative possibilities beyond a literary history of Irish theatre. Ireland is credited with a strong literary theatre tradition; literary theatre is documented through literary criticism, and so a critical tendency to focus on language is considered here. My investigation of Ireland’s relationship with the word – in terms of the body in performance and a predominance of language on stage – has led me to address our representations of the body in Irish theatre, the body as a site of meaning and the construction of Irish theatre history as a literary history. Here I consider whether an arguably postcolonial experience of language shaped emergent performance tradition.

*Performing the Body in Irish Theatre* seeks to infiltrate the literary theatre discourse to find how representations of the body in performance have been sidelined. A consideration of the body in performance in Irish theatre necessitates an overview of the construction of Irish theatre discourse and a questioning of the canon. The plays I have chosen to consider here were ‘written’ by a playwright in each case; therefore, in considering the body in performance in Irish theatre it could be said
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that I have not chosen to move outside the literary. I counter this by suggesting that each of the plays in question has been suppressed in some way by the dominant discourse of dramatic, textual analysis. I chose each work in consideration of its respective place in theatre history and of its emphasis on the body as a site of meaning. By questioning perceptions of the body in performance within the Irish cultural frame of reference, I investigate the shaping of that dominant discourse and how that has affected critical and audience responses to the core plays and influenced more recent theatre practices.

In *Performing the Body in Irish Theatre* I explore five plays and their production histories that stage(d) the body in a particular way. In Chapter 7, I then consider stagings of the body in contemporary theatre practice. I believe that these productions, the earliest dating from 1983, sketch a time frame significant in that it marks a period when international performance developments were beginning to influence the work of Irish practitioners as they emerged from a period of artistic conservatism.¹ In critical studies of the Irish theatre canon – such as *A History of Irish Theatre* by Christopher Morash (2002), and collections such as *Druids, Dudes and Beauty Queens* edited by Dermot Bolger (2001) – Irish theatre discourse has begun to recognise the incorporation of alternative vocabularies in the creation of meaning on stage. Such vocabularies were not new in Irish theatre but had been marginalised in practice and in the documentation of Irish theatre. However, in the 1980s a series of theatrical events, both within the mainstream and outside, began to change this. Some are included in this study and are directly relevant to the reinterpretation of the body, of movement and of image, which continued to develop throughout the end of the twentieth and into the twenty-first century, in tandem with major shifts in the cultural, political and economic landscapes of Irish society.

To explore the significance of the body in performance I needed to consider the dramatic text in relation to its performance. The language of the playwright is only one element in a process that includes an almost dizzying number of variables: performance conditions, audience response and interpretations of the material by actors, directors, designers and each audience member. An opposition of language and the body is unworkable, however, as language on stage is given voice; it passes through the body and is dependent on the structure, texture and mechanics of the body to be created. It is of the body. Also the actor, fellow actors and audience members receive language through the body. Voice specialist Kristin Linklater has emphasised the physical sensation of language, and a need to be open to the sensual experience of the