1
The Absent Body? Performing Tradition

Even though we know how hideously bodies lie, we want to retain some faith in the authenticity of the body’s gestures. (Phelan 1997: 31)

1.1 Cultural specificity – Is there an Irish body?

In 1990, in ‘The Erotics of Irishness’ Cheryl Herr speculated on what she describes as Ireland’s ‘over-identity crisis’ and questions the perceptions of the body in Irish society:

One feature that almost no one mentions is the relationship between the Irish mind and any kind of Irish Body. The identity-obsession marks a social repression of the body on a grand scale. As I see it, the loss occurs on both individual and collective levels. (Herr 1990: 6)

That such a loss occurs on both individual and collective levels affects the individual actor or theatre practitioner and Irish audiences. The repression of the body has been evidenced in the creation of meaning at all levels of the theatrical process in Ireland. The work of playwrights whose work (even unknowingly) subscribes to this repression of the body is more visible in the Irish theatre canon. Until recently practitioners who work to foreground the body in performance have had limited or sporadic success in this area of Irish theatre practice. Actors are constrained by a process that privileges language and has, for the most part, seen the actor as facilitating rather than materially creating meaning.
Although Herr is primarily concerned with visual art and archaeology, she refers specifically to the material presence of the body and how it has been represented:

Ireland has literally eroded, in the sphere of representations that constitute social identity, a comfortable sense of the body; in tradition as well as in colonial and postcolonial Ireland, the body has frequently been associated representationally with danger and has been scrutinized with an intensity that *stills* (photographically). (Herr 1990: 6)

Here the problematic notion of the ‘Irish Body’ is introduced. Is there an Irish body? Herr is subscribing to the very ‘identity-obsession’ she identifies by speculating on the Irish body here, but it is perhaps necessary to take on this issue within its own parameters. Herr is also adopting a Cartesian standpoint in her opposition of the Irish mind and Irish body (an opposition that could also be termed ‘essentialist’). While I recognise that she is addressing the Irish context, cultural specificity is in danger of becoming essentialised in Herr’s argument, a pitfall I am working to avoid with the ‘Performing the Body in Irish Theatre’ of my title rather than ‘Performing the Irish Body’. Yet the issue of representation is central to a study of Irish theatre and Irish theatre practice. Herr’s anxiety about the ‘stilling’ of the body can be applied to theatrical representation, the relationship between the body and the word, and how a playwright incorporates the performative into the play. And while it is important to qualify the ‘Irish body’ the questions raised in ‘The Erotics of Irishness’ are pertinent to an analysis of Irish theatre in the twentieth and early twenty-first century. What have been the ambitions of Irish theatre practitioners and the demands of Irish audiences? Does a repression of the body on individual and collective levels give rise to a specific theatre tradition – are we defined by a repression of ourselves?

Cultural specificity and the staging of a culturally specific condition raise the issue of authenticity as that which can be taken to define Irish theatre as distinct from its others. Colin Graham questions ‘the persistence of authenticity’ in Irish culture and links a striving for authenticity to the conditions of postcolonialism: ‘[a]uthenticity and claims to authenticity underlie the conceptual and cultural denial of dominance’ (Graham & Kirkland 1999: 8). Graham quotes Golomb’s definition of authenticity as ‘the loyalty of one’s self to its own past, heritage and ethos’ (Graham & Kirkland 1999: 11). Authenticity, in Graham’s terms,