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Through the Past and Into the Future: Irish Theater in 2014

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Through the Past and Into the Future: Irish Theater in 2014

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In 2014, Irish playwrights and theater-makers demanded that audiences reconsider and reimagine how we narrate our history and how we share our stories. This theme was established early in the year, when the inaugural Theatre of Memory symposium was held at the Abbey Theatre in January. The three-day event invited practitioners to come together with some of the country's prominent cultural commentators and academics to discuss and re-imagine how Irish theater responds to the past. It was an invigorating and hopeful way to begin 2014, but it was soon overshadowed by reports published in the *Irish Times*. As the event was still running, the newspaper revealed that an independent panel of assessors, appointed by the Arts Council and the Abbey Theatre itself, had concluded that the Abbey was not meeting its aim of producing world-class theater. Cultural commentator Fintan O'Toole (who was himself a speaker at the symposium) wrote in the paper that "Although some of the Abbey's work drew high praise, some aspects of some productions were judged by individual assessors not even to reach 'an acceptable standard for professional theatre presentation.'"¹ The *Irish Times* report—and the timing of its publication—resulted in a controversy that persisted for several weeks.

Even before that, political wrangling had been threatening the country's cultural output. The first days of January saw the much-anticipated Limerick City of Culture project "immediately turned into a fiasco" when a scandal broke over a government appointment to the chief executive position that was conducted without an open search.² Karl Wallace, the artistic director, citing clashes with management and the perception that he was being sidelined in programming decisions, resigned just two days into the year-long project and two members of the artistic leadership—already advanced in the programming process—followed his example. **[End Page 143]**

Yet, despite such conflicts at the higher level of decision-making, Irish theater artists kept producing high-quality work that showed international influence but was recognizably of the Irish tradition in its imagination and concerns. Numerous companies showed themselves to

be drawing on recorded history, using received and archival materials, but bringing contemporary tools and techniques to bear. There was the sense of a nation processing trauma and entering recovery in much of the work. Irish theater artists showed how resilient they are in their craft, with work that often drew on the past but which was also graced with a sense of hope.

Notably, much of this work was created outside the national theater institutions. Indeed, much of it also happened outside of Dublin, and sometimes, outside of any physical building at all. Practitioners showed real innovation in finding experimental modes to tell richly imaginative stories that were often fantastical yet seething with emotion. The country's theater-makers, perhaps gearing up for the commemorations anticipated for the centenary of the Easter Rising in 2016, were equally adept at reaching backward into history and forward into an imagined future. Festivals in Galway and Limerick attracted huge crowds to see work as diverse as *Ballyturk*, the new play by established playwright Enda Walsh, and a seven-and-a-half-metre-high marionette of a Granny that paraded through the streets of Limerick.

There was a strong trend of new writing in 2014, causing some to herald the re-emergence of the Irish playwright and the traditional play; others claim he never left the shores. "He" is the appropriate word, regrettably, as the most successful Irish playwrights do continue to be male, with Michael West and Mark O'Rowe showcasing dramatic writing in the country's national theater and Enda Walsh using the platform of the country's largest arts festival in Galway. But outside of these contexts, there is a lively cohort of exciting female practitioners: directing, devising, and finding ways to explore Irish history and its social concerns.

At the Peacock Theatre in March, *Conservatory* was an accomplished work, with undertones of Beckett and Mamet, but written in a voice unique to playwright Michael West. West's unnamed couple of the Protestant ascendancy, "He...

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1. Fintan O'Toole, "Abbey Confidential: Outside Experts Unimpressed by Our National Theatre," *Irish Times*, 18 January 2014.

2. Peter Crowley, "Limerick's City of Culture: The Critical Take," *Irish Times*, 13 December 2014.



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