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No More Fourth Wall: Performing Reality, Witnessing History, and the Rise of ANU Productions

History and theatre are both performed, negotiated, and altered by time and interpretation. In the past 50 years, history and theatre have grown more connected through the rise of site-specific work in historic sites and other sites of memory. Site-specific theatre uses many of the theoretical underpinnings of "environmental theatre" but requires stagings in "found spaces… locations, both used and disused"—that is, spaces not originally intended for theatre productions.[1] It requires an intimate connection between performance and site.

Site is deeply material; we can touch and move through a physical environment, but places also have layers of intangible meaning that mediate our relationships with them.[12] The "site" in site-specificity is often a *lieux de mémoire*, inscribed with memory not only because of its past but because of the layers of meaning added to it by theatrical production.[2] Site-specific theatre responds to history and memory but it also creates, transforms, and re-inscribes memory. Theatre is a creative, interpretive project, much like history, but it is also a representational and emotional medium that relies on personal experience and deep intimacy, like memory.

Contemporary site-specific theatre emerged directly from the environmental theatre tradition established by the Performance Group and East Coast Artists in New York in the 1960s and 1970s, though its origins go back (according to some scholars) to ancient Greece.[3] More recently, this form of theatre and its varied offshoots has been applied in performances that traverse themes in public history and cultural heritage such as *Ngale kweNdlu* ("The Other Side of the House"), a devised, site-specific performance grappling with a complex heritage of colonialism and apartheid in a former mining magnate house in Johannesburg, South Af-

1 Arnold Aronson, *The History and Theory of Environmental Scenography* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1977), 183; Mike Pearson and Michael Shanks, *Theatre/Archaeology* (London: Routledge, 2001), 23.

2 Pierre Nora, "Between History and Memory: Les Lieux de Mémoire," *Representations* 26 (1989): 8, 18.

3 Arnold Aronson, *The History and Theory of Environmental Scenography* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1977), 183.

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rica,[4] and the "reconstruction" of local memories through "historic environment theatre" in the old city of Zuoying, Kaohsiung, Taiwan.[5] Site-specific theatre was a feature of the 2014 First World War centenary commemorations in Britain whereby, according to Benzie, the producers aimed to recreate "the aesthetics and atmosphere of combat, rather than relying on symbols as the mode for commemoration."[6]

Site-specific theatre is an effective medium for the exploration of history because of the intimate relationships it fosters between performers and audiences; the connections it engenders between people and places; and the ways in which it uses memory to add new layers of meaning to historic sites. Site-specificity involves negotiating public memory, history, and contested heritage while maintaining an ethical relationship with marginalized communities and found spaces. In this chapter, the "disused" space is the historic site or "found space."

This chapter addresses the rise to prominence of the Dublin-based site-specific theatre company ANU Productions between 2011 and 2017. Why the demand for site-specific and experimental theatre during these years and beyond? The success of ANU is the result of a commitment to experimental work, a relationship with history as a performance tool, and shrewd associations with arts funding interests. However, an economic and cultural shift has also been critical. Grene and Lonergan identify the global economic crisis of 2008 as a key turning point for Irish theatre whereby "increased globalization of Irish society has led to a new awareness within the Irish theatre of international dramatists and practices—which have in turn helped to shape and reshape Irish awareness of its place in the world."[7] This was coupled with an increased interest from Irish government funding bodies during the "Decade of Centenaries"[8] which heralded an expansion of site-specific theatre and broader public awareness of the genre in Ireland. A crucial moment was

4 Alex Halligey and Tamara Guhrs, "Space for Haunting: Site-Specific Theatre as Method for Engaging with the Complexity of Heritage Sites," *South African Theatre Journal* 36, no. 1 (2023): 1–15.
5 Ching-Pin Tseng, "Historical Environmental Theater as a Catalyst for Recalling Citizens' Collective Memories: The Performance Revealing the Old City as an Example," *The International Journal of Architectonic, Spatial, and Environmental Design* 17, no. 1 (2022): 115–31.
6 Rebecca Benzie. "Commemorating the War," in *The Cambridge Companion to British Theatre of the First World War*, ed. Helen E. M. Brooks and Michael Hammond. Cambridge Companions to Theatre and Performance (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), 248.
7 Nicholas Grene and Patrick Lonergan, "Introduction," in *Irish Drama: Local and Global Perspectives*, ed. Nicholas Grene and Patrick Lonergan (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2012), 1.
8 The Decade of Centenaries was a program established by the Irish government to commemorate the hundred-year-anniversaries of major events in early-twentieth-century Irish history, especially as they relate to the struggle for Irish independence. See "Decade of Centenaries 2012–2023," *Decade of Centenaries*, accessed July 20, 2022, https://www.decadeofcentenaries.com/about/.

the 2016 centennial commemoration of the 1916 Easter Rising. The association between arts and revolution was a key part of the narrative surrounding the centennial.[9] In 2015, a budget of €30.8 million was allocated for the centenary program, which drew contributions from the Arts Council, Culture Ireland, the National Museum of Ireland, and others.[10]

How, in this context, has ANU engaged with audiences by invoking collective memory? How has their oeuvre impacted Irish heritage work and what does this mean for public history? This chapter is based on interviews conducted from April to July 2017 with company members, spectators, and creative collaborators of ANU Productions: ANU actors Laura Murry and Lloyd Cooney, lecturer in philosophy at University College Dublin and researcher and activist for Justice for Magdalenes (JFM)[11] Katherine O'Donnell, costume and set designer Niamh Lunny, lecturer in Folklore and Celtic Civilization and director of the National Folklore Collection at University College Dublin Kelly Fitzgerald, and the former Head of Special Projects at the National Archives of Ireland and historical advisor to ANU Catriona Crowe.

ANU Productions, 2009 – 2017

ANU Productions, founded by theatre maker Louise Lowe and visual artist Owen Boss, is responsible for the most significant site-specific theatre being produced in the Republic of Ireland today. ANU's first work, *Basin* (2009), premiered at the Dublin Fringe Festival, and subsequent works were funded through the Arts Council, Culture Ireland and other initiatives. The second installment in the four-part "Monto Cycle" (a 2010 – 2014 production series exploring the so-called Monto area of North Dublin) was 2011's *Laundry*, performed in a former Magdalene laundry on Sean McDermott Street.[12] The play was based on historical research on the

9 Ronan McGreevy, "Easter Rising Commemorative Programme Revealed," *Irish Times*, March 31, 2015, accessed May 20, 2017, http://www.irishtimes.com/culture/heritage/easter-rising- commemorative-programme-revealed-1.2160368.

10 Tim O'Brien, "Heritage and Culture Sectors to get €300 m by 2021," *The Irish Times*, September 29, 2015, accessed May 20, 2017, http://www.irishtimes.com/culture/heritage-and-culture-sectors-to-get- 300 m-by-2021 – 1.2371903.

11 JFM sought a state apology and compensation scheme for Magdalene Laundry survivors, received in 2013, and now operates as a research organization raising awareness and supporting survivors. See "About JFMR," *JFM Research*, accessed July 20, 2022, http://jfmresearch.com/aboutjfmr/.

12 ANU Productions, "Laundry," video, accessed December 6, 2016, https://vimeo.com/34489217. Magdalene laundries were carceral institutions run by the Roman Catholic Church with sponsorship from the Irish state that, for over 200 years, imprisoned unwed mothers and other women

laundries in the 1950s and 1960s but was firmly rooted in the principles of social justice that defined the Monto Cycle; although the production was clearly concerned with history ANU saw it as a polemic on contemporary social issues—namely, the continuing silence around this part of Ireland's traumatic past.

Laundry's success led to a 2013 commission from the Irish Congress of Trade Unions to create *Living the Lockout*, a re-enactment-style "experience" to take place in a tenement building at No. 14 Henrietta Street.[13] This received significant structural and financial support from Dublin City Council and the soon-to-be-opened Tenement Museum (now called 14 Henrietta Street). *Living the Lockout* was enormously popular and although Lowe had never set out to do history-based work, *Lockout* set the stage for a major commission in 2015. *Pals – The Irish at Gallipoli*, exploring the lives of members of the D Company of the seventh Royal Dublin Fusiliers in World War I and staged in the National Museum of Ireland – Collins Barracks, received rave reviews.[14] This success led to a larger commission to create a triptych of works for the 2016 Easter Rising centennial program: *Sunder*, about the 1916 retreat through Moore Street; *On Corporation Street*, performed in Manchester and dealing with the 1996 IRA bombing of the city; and *These Rooms*, about the 1966 commemorations of 1916 and the North King Street Massacre, performed in a purpose-built space.[15]

ANU Productions uses devising—the practice of developing a production as a collective rather than through the hierarchies of playwright-director-actor—as its primary way of working.[16] O'Gorman and McIvor see devised theatre as the newest wave in the world of Irish art,[17] building on the physical theatre movement of

(at least 10,000) deemed "unfit" for life outside of confinement. The laundries ran for-profit businesses (mainly laundry and needlework) using the unpaid labor of inmates. For more information see "About the Magdalene Laundries," *JFM Research*, accessed July 20, 2022, http://jfmresearch.com/home/preserving-magdalene-history/about-the-magdalene-laundries/.

13 Irish Congress of Trade Unions, "ANU Productions – Dublin Tenement Experience – Living the Lockout," video, accessed December 6, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZWAYCfZwdw.

14 "Pals," ANU Productions, August 3, 2015, accessed December 6, 2016, https://anuproductions.wordpress.com/2015/08/03/pals/; Peter Crawley, "Theatre Review: Pals – The Irish at Gallipoli," *Irish Times*, February 16, 2015, accessed May 20, 2017.

15 "Sunder," ANU Productions, March 22, 2016, accessed December 6, 2016, http://anuproductions.ie/sunder/; "On Corporation Street," ANU Productions, March 21, 2016, accessed December 6, 2016, http://anuproductions.ie/on-corporation-street/; "These Rooms," ANU Productions, March 20, 2016, accessed December 6, 2016, http://anuproductions.ie/these-rooms/.

16 For more on devised theatre see Deirdre Heddon and Jane Milling, *Devising Performance: A Critical History* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

17 Siobhán O'Gorman and Charlotte McIvor, "Devising Ireland: Genealogies and Contestations," in *Devised Performance in Irish Theatre: Histories and Contemporary Practice*, ed. Siobhán O'Gorman

the 1990s (informed by French mime and clowning traditions and Japanese Noh, among other influences) and the leftist theatre of the 1970s (including Brazilian practitioner Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed and the use of guerrilla theatre as protest by groups like Vietnam Veterans Against the War and ACT UP). In 2017, ANU was one of only a few companies in Ireland creating site-specific, immersive, and environmental work and one of the few with a relatively sustainable revenue stream.

ANU represents, in many ways, the future of historian-artist collaboration in Ireland, inching ever closer to the mainstream. How will this connection to establishment commemoration practice affect the validity of their future work? In what follows, I explore the company's approach to art and memory, and the dangers and challenges of engaging in history through theatre.

"It's Only a Game." Ethical Remembrance, Audience Engagement, and the Aesthetics of Memory

Government funding and artistic license determine not only what is presented but also who gets to present it, and in what spatial and temporal context. With "ethical remembrance" we seek to critically examine the past with all its faults and successes while using it as a guide for a better future.[18] Pine notes that "the opening up of the Irish past falls short of full ethical remembrance because too often it has been politically and aesthetically shaped, or is still subject to the perils of amnesia."[19] For a history-based site-specific theatre production to work, its creators need to take aesthetic liberties, but in Pine's framework, those liberties are at odds with ethics. ANU's version of history may not be "accurate" in the academic sense but performances are made to feel so real that audiences no longer question the facts.

The ANU development process begins with extensive research by the whole company, and includes improvization sessions, devising movement pieces, and interacting with physical spaces. Actress Laura Murray described the process of creating *Laundry:* "We would have looked at a lot of the testimonies... from the

and Charlotte McIvor (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2015), 1; see also Sandy Fitzgerald, ed., *An Outburst of Frankness: Community Arts in Ireland – A Reader* (Dublin: Tasc at New Island, 2004).

18 Emilie Pine, *The Politics of Irish Memory: Performing Remembrance in Contemporary Irish Culture* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 16–17.

19 Ibid., 153.

women who were there, and we would have each took something from one of those person's stories and... tried to show that or re-live it."[20] *Laundry* relied on interviews that outside researchers had completed with Magdalene survivors. Costume designer Niamh Lunny expressed deep concern for the need to make both actors and audience members feel that the women were really working. When pressed for her sources on the clothing that the women would have worn in the laundries, Lunny confessed that this involved listening to their interviews, hoping to hear them describe their clothing. Mostly, she used Google Images. The authenticity she sought was not a historically accurate garment but rather one that had the superficial appearance of authenticity.[21]

For professional historians who later worked with ANU, the process has been rewarding. Kelly Fitzgerald commented that "The integrity to the research has the same rigor as any kind of academic experience, but then it's that whole... bringing back the human voice into them..."[22] ANU seems to empower historians, giving them opportunities to share their work with diverse audiences and to explore avenues frowned upon within the academy. Initial contact with ANU was a welcome addition to Catriona Crowe's work in public history and digitization. She "could see the potential of site-specific theatre, particularly, to bring the lessons of history to people in a digestible and exciting and moving way."[23] For Fitzgerald, the issue of access was also important, but her main focus as a folklorist has been emphasizing untold stories: she recognized ANU's work as: "coming from the vernacular, coming from the grassroots... It's not from books or from state records that we draw our material, but it's from the narrative, it's from the voice."[24]

ANU's historical focus emerged from its early work on social justice issues and betrays a deep emotional attachment to the source material. This is appropriate, especially in the case of *Laundry*, but can sometimes mean that the work feels overly didactic or even aspirational. Katherine O'Donnell was concerned that in *Laundry* so many of the narratives that actors had chosen to embody were of women who escaped incarceration. She noted that a minuscule number of women even attempted to leave, yet stories of escape made up approximately one sixth of the narratives in the performance.[25] Crowe came to the defense of ANU's historical process: "To find a theatre company that was willing to use the

20 Laura Murray, interview with Nora Katz, June 12, 2017, transcript.

21 Niamh Lunny, interview with Nora Katz, June 1, 2017, transcript; neither Catriona Crowe nor Kelly Fitzgerald were involved in the development of *Laundry*.

22 Kelly Fitzgerald, interview with Nora Katz, July 6, 2017, transcript.

23 Catriona Crowe, interview with Nora Katz, July 8, 2017, transcript.

24 Kelly Fitzgerald.

25 Katherine O'Donnell, interview with Nora Katz, May 4, 2017, transcript.

documents that I cared about in a respectful and accurate way – and accuracy is really important. They don't make things up. They'll often embellish slightly, but only for the sake of smoothness, of how things will go.[26]

While ANU may embellish or speculate, a deep respect for the source material and for the people whose stories are put on display underlies every aspect of the process. In recent years ANU has invited historians to be central players in the collaborative process, creating an environment in which every member of the company does archival research and gains an appreciation for the primary source material.

"There is no Fourth Wall"

Murray summarized the distinctive experience of performing in an ANU production: "There is no fourth wall."[27] Performers directly address, engage with, and even touch audience members in spaces that often only house one performer and one spectator. Singleton views this structural choice as causing spectators to be "implicated through intimacy," involved bodily in the performance at a deep level and therefore responsible for its outcomes and explorations. For him, intimacy is a "dramaturgical strategy" that forces audience members to conceptualize what is happening around (and often to) them in the context of their own memories.[28] The play becomes a part of the spectator's life.

The structure of an ANU show immediately facilitates a close relationship; small audiences in non-frontal stagings mean that spectators are participating in the play rather than watching events unfold. Actor Lloyd Cooney described this: "[The] beauty of that is… the intimacy that you have as an audience member. You feel like you're having a one-on-one experience with these people."[29] Spectators also make decisions about how they will present themselves. Fitzgerald loved that "as an audience member… you can have such an influence on a performance…"[30] Cooney concurred: "The whole beauty of it is anything can happen…" Murray described how, on being instructed to "genuflect" at the altar in the chapel of the former Magdalene laundry where *Laundry* was staged, an audience member made an obscene gesture up to the holy cross. Murray, along with other interviewees, embraced the uncertainty of the experience: "When you offer for people to get

26 Catriona Crowe.
27 Laura Murray.
28 Brian Singleton, *ANU Productions: The Monto Cycle* (London: Palgrave Pilot, 2016), 2, 5.
29 Lloyd Cooney.
30 Kelly Fitzgerald.

involved … even if it's in the smallest of ways, you're leaving yourself open to every possible scenario. So you have to be prepared [for] that…"[31]

ANU actors are trained to respond to and interact with spectators. In *Angel Meadow*, their 2014 production in Manchester, performers relied on code words to communicate issues that arose with audience members. If a spectator got too upset by (or involved in) a scene, actors would reassure them by saying, "It's only a game."[32] If someone refused to help her escape from the laundry, Murray would still find a way to get them to the next scene. It would be almost impossible for an audience member to meaningfully change the outcome of a performance, but ANU manufactures a feeling of uncertainty that adds perceived weight to a spectator's every decision. None of it is real.

Of course, audience members enter productions with agendas and experiences of their own. Cooney performed *Living the Lockout* with an audience that included President Michael D. Higgins. The show moved through the rooms of the tenement building and ended in a cramped hallway with Cooney's character in a heated debate with his brother about whether to sign a pledge not to unionize. During every performance, Cooney asked an audience member to read the pledge aloud, and then asked them if they would sign it: "So we had Michael D. Higgins… in this tiny…derelict hallway, …And we're having this argument and I ask him to read [the pledge] and he defiantly reads it out, and I just go, "Would you sign that?" And he just looks me bare in the eye and goes, "Never!"[33] President Higgins imagined himself and his modern political agenda in a fictionalized context. ANU uses historical documents (and sites) as a means of accessing this imagined past rather than as a means of investigating it beyond previous understandings. It is a new performed narrative based on contemporary relationships with the past.

"Kind of Haunted."

All six interviewees talked about the experience of doing theatre in a historic site in terms of engagement with the physical space. Unlike a traditional proscenium stage, historic buildings have their own personalities that shape ANU's work. ANU performances layer history, memory, and personal experience onto the physical fabric of a location. This reliance on the site as storyteller, as an object that can

31 Laura Murray.
32 Ibid.
33 Lloyd Cooney.

communicate its personality simply through physical presence, is itself devised. The "sense" or "vibration" that audience members and actors feel when entering a site is overwhelmingly caused by ANU's construction of a performed environment in which these seemingly ordinary buildings gain resurrected lives.

This is not to say that ANU's connection to historic physical spaces is negative; it is a hallmark of the company's work and is what sets them apart. Typically, company members of an ANU show will try to get into a space as soon as possible so that it can inform the devising process. For *Living the Lockout*, the actors and crew spent the entire rehearsal process in the tenement building. By the end of the show, Murray noted, it felt like she actually lived there. For *Laundry*, however, scheduling and access issues meant that the company could not visit the building until technical rehearsals. For Murray, that last-minute site visit was what finally brought her performance to life: "Until you're in the building, until you're there, it doesn't quite yet feel real…"[34]

Interviewees also expressed the idea of the building having an energy of its own. Murray told a story of a break between performances of *Laundry* when she and a group of cast and crew members were sitting in a corner room. The crew had handheld radios to communicate throughout the show and suddenly they heard the noise of babies crying through the receiver.[35] Murray is hardly a believer in ghosts and spirits, but spending all day in a former laundry caused these hallucinations for the entire cast. Lunny, too, felt that the building was "kind of haunted."[36] Pine states that "[G]hosts are a sign of… the 'excesses' of memory, a manifestation of the excessive grip of the past on the imagination of culture in the present."[37] Whether figurative or perceived as real, there is a sense of the past coming back to haunt people in the present, because the traumas of history remain unresolved. How much are these "ghosts" really present in spectators' and actors' minds, and how much are they manufactured by ANU to lend gravity to performance spaces?

For O'Donnell and Lunny as audience members, entering the Magdalene laundry on Sean McDermott Street caused visceral reactions. Upon being let in the front gate of the laundry, O'Donnell "was immediately on edge… I could feel… this aggression rising in me, and it was my reaction to the… colonial architecture

34 Laura Murray.

35 Ibid.

36 Niamh Lunny.

37 Pine, *The Politics of Irish Memory*, 16; Joanne Tompkins, too, refers to what she calls the "host/ghost connection": the host is the site itself, and the ghost is what a performance brings to the site. See Tompkins, "The 'Place' and Practice of Site-Specific Theatre and Performance," in *Performing Site-Specific Theatre*, ed. Anna Birch and Joanne Tompkins (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 8.

of the religious institution." Having grown up in the Catholic Church, O'Donnell felt that she was "hard-wired to respond with reverence and obedience and docility to Catholic hierarchy, particularly nuns… They own me. It's kind of in my system. And I could feel myself trying to resist that… And I could feel all of this kind of rush of… being a child, a product of this… formation… coming up."[38] Lunny reported the most evocative physical response of the interviewees: "The smell in that building was just, it's not that it was disgusting, but it was so evocative, it was… one of those things. And, actually, it's funny that I'm saying that now, because I've since lost my sense of smell, and I can still smell what that smelled like, and the carbolic soap…"[39]

Audience members took the smell home with them in the form of a bar of soap, a physical connection between the traumatic, forced labor of the Magdalene survivors and the simple act of doing laundry in one's home.[40] Oddey posits that "the empty space of the building, like the theatrical performer, has an identity, history, memory, and soul."[41] The "site" in site-specificity is not only the place where the work is performed but also the bodies that are involved in that performance, either as actors or spectators.[42] Holding soap in one's hand after seeing *Laundry* expanded the site of the production to not only the spectator's home but also their body.

"It was Only in Hindsight That I can say When the Show was Over."

What happens when a performance takes place in what we perceive to be "the real world"? Immersive theatre relies on the blurring of reality and the play, of art and life. ANU's work encourages audience members and actors to forget what is real and what is staged. For Lunny, an immersive ANU show left her wondering if the people she saw on the street before and after the performance were actors or ordinary people: "It was only in hindsight that I can say when the show was over."[43] For her, "Instead of a design or a vision, it was about making things as

38 Katherine O'Donnell.
39 Niamh Lunny.
40 Owen Boss, "Practitioner Workshop," presented at Trinity College Dublin, April 3, 2017.
41 Alison Oddey, *Re-Framing the Theatrical: Interdisciplinary Landscapes for Performance* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 96.
42 Mike Pearson and Michael Shanks, *Theatre/Archaeology* (London: Routledge, 2001), 135.
43 Ibid.

real as possible." She recalled spending hours in her back garden breaking down wellies for *Laundry* to make sure they looked authentically worn. Her favorite detail was the effect she developed to make actors' hands look work-worn by dyeing them red with poster paint: "It had an impact… I think sometimes for an audience those things are subliminal. You don't come out going, "My God, did you see those red hands?" But you have a sense that was a really tired, wrecked… person, or someone who had been working hard."[44]

The blurring of reality and the play can sometimes result in situations in which audience members do not know how to react to what they see unfolding before them. *Living the Lockout* began with audience members viewing a short video that explained the historical context of the 1913 Lockout, after which Cooney entered singing "The Red Hand Badge." His hands and chest were covered in stage blood, as his character had just been in a fight. At one performance, the audience was made up of older women who were so concerned for his safety that they would not let the performance continue: "[They] just would not let me get through the piece. I was just trying so hard. But they totally believed me…"[45]

Normally, the structure of the proscenium is a barrier between audience and actor; prop guns, stage blood, and pratfalls are only representations of real violence and injury. In the intimate setting of an ANU production there is no suspension of disbelief; there is no disbelief. The fact that these moments feel real is the greatest fiction of all—this is aestheticized history devised in order to create a sense of authenticity based on understandings of how the past should feel. But all attempts at re-creation are mere representations. The more ANU strives to create an authentic experience, the more it becomes theatre.

This focus on hyper-reality exposes a more deep-seated theatricality and aesthetic sensibility. Pine calls into question the ethics of aestheticizing the past, and the need for accuracy and sensitivity in representing traumatic history through artistic media. Kelly Fitzgerald, who trained as a performance artist before becoming a folklorist, also questioned this distinction between real life and performance. Her insight—that the aesthetic of reality itself is a performed process for ANU—makes the ethical quandary far less dire.

But regardless of such high-minded artistic philosophies, audience members still see these performances as representations of the past. This is in many ways troubling but also an unsolvable problem. As long as ANU maintains a sensitivity to historical trauma and strives for accuracy, these performances are an important medium for the theatre-going public to learn from and about the past.

44 Ibid.

45 Lloyd Cooney.

The Ethics of Performing the Past

For actors Lloyd Cooney and Laura Murray, the sense of responsibility in portraying real people is ever-present:

> We try to portray their lives in the most realistic way we can from their perspective and from the world that they live in... We try to find out about them, research, chat to them, "What do you do? Where do you live?" Workshop with them, bring them into the show, let them know that this is for them as well as just an audience coming to see it.[46]

ANU's devising process contributes to the ethics of the final product; if everyone in the rehearsal room is equally invested in the research process, the performance will involve a deep level of respect for the source material. As an outsider, Katherine O'Donnell saw it as highly collaborative:

> Art is created within constraints, but the... constraints of this new process they've... put on themselves is around trying to work collaboratively... They were all able to really fully embody and incorporate the knowledge they had gained and transmitted. And that seems to me to be a very ethical way of approaching... traumatically enforced silences, or silences, also, around traumatic experiences.[47]

The crucial aspect of ANU's ethical process is the distinction it creates between participation and entertainment. Putting traumatic history on stage to be watched is different from throwing audience members into the thick of it, experiencing and critically engaging with it. Niamh Lunny's mother:

> was a social worker..., and I would tell her about ANU's work and she would say... there was no way she would ever... see an ANU show, and it's not out of disrespect to ANU, it's because she's like, "No, I lived that. That was my job for 25 years. I don't want to see it as entertainment." But I... don't think anybody comes to an ANU show expecting to be entertained. I think that's the difference...[48]

O'Donnell also feared an exploitative portrayal of the Magdalene laundries, but was pleasantly surprised:

> We didn't consume, in the way I was fearing, [a]... sentimental or sensational or shocking thing. We weren't made into consumers who just... passively drew that in. We were bodily

46 Ibid.
47 Katherine O'Donnell.
48 Niamh Lunny.

> involved, we were involved with every capacity we had. And that changed us into… people who had both an authority but also… an obligation to speak about the experience we'd had.[49]

Her description resonates with Pine's concept of ethical witnessing, the performance of the traumatic past for the purpose of education and understanding. For these audience members, the ethics of the production manifested in the memories and emotions that spectators carried with them out of the play.

Ultimately, this type of ethical witnessing begs the questions: what do audiences, performers, and creators get out of ANU's work? Are they spurred to action or left with more questions? Murray hoped that audiences would leave with a greater openness to diverse perspectives and gain "a real insight… into how a person actually lived and, hopefully, for them to see life from their point of view."[50] For Lunny, ANU shares stories "that needed to be told and that needed to be remembered, and that had kind of been buried by us as a society."[51] Her experience of *Laundry* also cemented her firmly-held beliefs and contributed to her deep anger at the atrocities perpetrated by the Irish state: "I thought about the women, mostly. Those poor women. And actually, what I thought about was the men. Where were the fucking men? Where were they? They all got off scot-free. No man ended up working for free in an institution for the rest of his life. Just… oh, my blood starts to boil."[52]

For O'Donnell, the experience gave her hope in the Justice for Magdalenes (JFM) campaign and made her understand that she was not alone in the struggle for justice. She noted that, after seeing *Laundry*, it would be impossible for audience members not to talk about the experience.[53] This is why theatre works so well to explore the traumatic past—it is ephemeral, experiential, and determined by the personal experiences of audience members, performers, and creators. It is alive.

In developing the concept of "postmemory" Hirsch argues that aesthetics can offer a bridge between the traumatic past and the present.[54] Art, therefore, can be a mediation point between an imagined and remembered past and a hopeful future. ANU gives the public, many of whom have never personally experienced the atrocities of the laundries, the hardship of tenement life, or the horrors of

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49 Katherine O'Donnell.
50 Laura Murray.
51 Niamh Lunny.
52 Ibid.
53 Katherine O'Donnell
54 Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2012).

war, the tools to speak about the traumatic past. When spectators enter that immersive historical world, they, too, witness trauma: "I wanted it to go on and on and on and on. Every person needed to have that immersive experience of being made a witness."[55]

ANU Productions and Public History

ANU's work contributes to public history as much as it contributes to the development of site-specific theatre in Ireland. A turning point was *Living the Lockout:* the performance and its aftermath were crucial in the development of what is now 14 Henrietta Street (which at the time was called the Tenement Museum Dublin). Catriona Crowe was adamant that "[ANU's] input really changed the way that that house was perceived and understood."[56] A follow-up production, *Hentown*, opened at the Tenement Museum in August 2017, in advance of the official museum opening in September 2018. It explored the troubled history of Dublin housing, with a focus on June 1963, when two tenement buildings collapsed.[57]

ANU followed *Living the Lockout* with *Pals – The Irish at Gallipoli*, commissioned and proposed by Lar Joye of the National Museum of Ireland – Collins Barracks and Catriona Crowe of the National Archives. Like *Lockout*, it was far less experimental than ANU's typical work and it was billed more as an "experience" than a "performance." *Pals* also served to raise foot traffic in Collins Barracks, and drew a diverse crowd: "They had that lovely combination of hitting a chord with the general population who don't necessarily go to the theatre..."[58]

These productions helped these institutions to gain attention, as well as contributing to changes in the ways in which they conceived of their audiences and the diversity of ways in which it is possible to interpret history.

There are ethical implications to a theatre company, rather than a professional historian, doing the most groundbreaking work on intangible heritage at these important sites. This leads to questions about why, historically, Irish heritage professionals have not been doing more to engage audiences through performance. If ANU's involvement leads to increased public interest in heritage, and innovative interpretive plans for these institutions, the collaborations may well be justified.

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55 Katherine O'Donnell.

56 Catriona Crowe.

57 "Hentown by ANU Productions," Dublin Tenement Museum, accessed July 20, 2022, http://anuproductions.ie/work/hentown/.

58 Catriona Crowe.

ANU's first production—*Basin* (2009)—was an exploration of working-class life on the north side of Dublin and took place in director Louise Lowe's childhood home. How did this same company get a commission from the National Museum of Ireland to do a history-based production about Irish rugby players marching off to war in 1915 (*Pals*)? ANU's early work embraced social and political commentaries and rarely dealt with history, but unprecedented financial support from national funding organizations has allowed ANU to break boundaries and gain notoriety in the context of twenty-first-century commemorative programming. *Pals* had a budget of almost €200,000, according to Crowe, a significant improvement on the shoestring budgets of previous ANU works. This major financial boon has likely contributed to the company's recent focus on history-based productions and set the standard for future funding. ANU's 2017 Dublin Theatre Festival offering *The Sin Eaters* earned them a €139,948 project award from the Arts Council.[59] Crowe commented that "the Arts Council has now recognized what a wonderful company [ANU is] and anything they apply to them for they usually now get": "there are people [in the Arts Council], shall we say, who smile on what ANU is doing and understand that they... eminently deserve to be an RFO [regularly-funded organization]. If they got that it would change their lives, because it would just mean security, safety."[60]

What does it mean for an avant-garde theatre company to have such a close connection to the arts establishment? Can the company continue to create theatrical indictments of the Irish government if they are so indebted to the Arts Council? This cozy relationship may complicate the further development of ANU's most political work.

ANU company members are loath to admit that funding plays such a large role in the content of their productions, insisting that the company follows their own artistic vision. The reality is far more interesting: in describing the beginning of the process for creating *Pals* at Collins Barracks, Crowe noted that Lowe apparently expressed trepidation at:

> doing something on posh boys, because her entire milieu up to that had been working class Dublin... And she was, like all great artists..., full of self-doubt. So we convinced her... and after it was over she said, "I'm so glad I did that, because it broadened my perspective, it gave me another view of what was happening in Dublin and Ireland at the time."[61]

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59 These estimates are based on Arts Council data from 2009 to 2017. Not all grant allocations are publicized and ANU also receives project-based funding from other sources, including partner institutions. See "Who We Funded," *Arts Council*, accessed July 26, 2017, http://www.artscouncil.ie/funding-decisions/.

60 Catriona Crowe.

61 Ibid.

The commission led to ANU being featured in the 2016 centennial commemorations. *Sunder* and *These Rooms* (2016) were more experimental and social justice-themed than *Pals*, but both were central in the centenary program. ANU's 2016 partnership with Dublin Bus, titled *Beyond Barricades*, invited visitors to board specially-decorated Dublin buses for tours of the city with actors: "Through the eyewitness testimonies of those involved, we invite you to traverse the significant events of the week, immersing yourself in an adrenaline-fueled experience."[62] ANU also played a central role in RTÉ's Reflecting the Rising event in the Dublin city center on March 28, 2016.[63] When asked whether she thought ANU would continue with more history-based productions or more experimental works, Kelly Fitzgerald commented that she assumed they would be "Continuing both, in order of sustainability."[64]

The genesis of these productions did not come from within the company, and ANU's featured presence made the government's commemorative program appear more radical. At what point does the work serve to further an artistic and philosophical vision or external institutional needs? While ANU's history-based productions engaged the centenaries as sites of dissonant heritage, they also, arguably, legitimized the commemorations as a ritual (if repackaged) national identity project, a critique also levelled at historians during the commemorative period.[65] But if it is not sustainable to only do projects that completely align with the company's core philosophy, leveraging state commissions may keep theatre companies like ANU financially solvent while leaving them the freedom to pursue other, more experimental, projects. It is difficult to quantify the extent to which the renewed commitment to arts funding precipitated by the commemorations has actually resulted in any net financial gains for the sector writ large. What is certain is that grant funding awards continued to be shaped by the Decade of Centenaries, with disparate project applications molded to its themes.

62 "Journey back to 1916 with Dublin Bus," *Dublin Bus*, March 23, 2016, accessed August 3, 2017, https://www.dublinbus.ie/News-Centre/Media-Releases-Archive1/Journey-back-to-1916-with-Dublin-Bus/.

63 "RTÉ Reflecting the Rising," *RTÉ*, accessed August 3, 2017, http://www.rte.ie/centuryireland/index.php/articles/rte-reflecting-the-rising.34KellyFitzgerald.

64 Kelly Fitzgerald.

65 Dominic Bryan, "Ritual, Identity and Nation: When the Historian Becomes the High Priest of Commemoration," in *Remembering 1916: The Easter Rising, the Somme and the Politics of Memory in Ireland*, ed. F. McGarry and R. S. Grayson (Cambridge University Press, 2016), 38–41.

Conclusion

ANU Productions exists at a very specific moment in the world of Irish and international experimental theatre. Arts funding in the last decade and a half—a period that has included both the economic collapse and the revitalizing force of the centenary commemorations—has proven lucrative for experimental, and specifically history-based, theatre, driven by both necessity and opportunity. ANU has capitalized on this ever-increasing demand for history-based theatre during the Decade of Centenaries and international commemorations of the first world war period, and has done so with immense state and institutional support.[66]

ANU's performances also work largely because of the purposeful blurring of reality and art, asking difficult questions and embracing audience discomfort. As ANU moves from the fringe to the mainstream, will ANU maintain its artistic and ethical integrity? Time will tell. ANU audiences will continue to witness, participate in, and learn from the traumatic past: "They've been at it a long time, but it still feels fresh and new… All sorts could still happen."[67]

66 Recent productions like *Staging the Treaty* (2022) about the 1922 Anglo-Irish Treaty debates; *Hammam* (2023–24), a collaboration with the Abbey Theatre, based around the ruins of O'Connell Street after the opening battle of the Irish Civil War in 1922; and *The Dead* (2024–25), a collaboration with the Museum of Literature based on James Joyce's 1914 short story, prove that history-based theatre of or adjacent to the revolutionary period continues to hold currency.

67 Kelly Fitzgerald.