Ireland's Haunted Stages

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Shortly after noon on Monday, the 24th of April 1916, Padraic Pearse gave perhaps the most significant public performance in Irish political history, as he read the Proclamation of the Irish Republic from the steps of the General Post Office on Dublin's O'Connell Street, at the start of the rebellion against British colonial rule that became known as the Easter Rising. The Proclamation "guarantees religious and civil liberty, equal rights and equal opportunities to all its citizens, and declares its resolve to pursue the happiness and prosperity of the whole nation and of all its parts, cherishing all the children of the nation equally, and oblivious of the differences carefully fostered by an alien government, which have divided a minority from the majority in the past." On that day Pearse, a patriot and playwright amongst other things, found himself proclaimed Commander-in-Chief of the Army of the Republic and President of the Provisional Government. Barely a week after Pearse finished reading the Proclamation he was shot dead on the 3rd of May 1916 by a British firing squad, and the visionary Republic based on the principles of religious liberty, civic morality and social equality died with him. The Ireland that emerged as an independent Free State after the Anglo-Irish War of 1919-21 which would become a republic in 1949, was a society stymied by religious conservatism, political cronyism and social inequality—the last of these habitually blamed by right-wing nationalists on centuries of foreign oppression rather than decades of local injustice. These issues would continue to haunt the Irish state, and its stages, for the rest of the twentieth century, and lead inexorably to the nightmare of the current economic disaster.

In this essay I will look at the metaphor of the ghost particularly in relation to the issue of class disparity which has haunted Ireland and its stages for decades and is especially poignant in the current economic situation. Taking my cue from Marvin Carlson's seminal book *The Haunted Stage*, I extend his argument that for audiences "ghosting presents the identical thing they have encountered before, although now in a somewhat different context" (7), to the recurrence of class disparity and concomitant social injustice in Ireland as represented in Irish theatre across the twentieth century and on into the contemporary moment. The ghosts that haunt Ireland's stages re-materialize in the themes, characters and performance accretions of plays in successive decades since 1949. These ghosts are the shades of people whose lives were blighted by injustices perpetrated not by a foreign colonial power, but by domestic class structures that served the interests of a narrow elite at the expense of the broader public.

I've been hearing Marx quoted a lot recently, by various cultural commentators, public intellectuals and the like, usually when asked for their views on the current economic crisis, which is itself just the latest in a cycle of crises produced by modern capitalism. Each time I hear Marx's name taken in vain, I can't help but ask why

those talking heads who make their living as pundits on current affairs programmes didn't quote Marx over the last thirty years preceding the "Great Recession" as one of them called the recent unpleasantness. The answer I come up with is that they were, like so many self-styled intellectuals, too busy surfing the tide of neo-liberal capitalism to bother paying attention to the widening gulf between rich and poor. One of Marx's more famous quotes which has been doing the rounds recently is taken from his political pamphlet *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*: "Hegel remarks somewhere that all facts and personages of great importance in world history occur, as it were, twice. He forgot to add: the first time as tragedy, the second as farce" (300). Marx wrote his pamphlet in direct response to the 1851 *coup d'état* staged by Prince Louis Bonaparte, nephew of the Emperor Napoleon, in order to show how the class struggle in France made it possible for, "a grotesque mediocrity to play a hero's part" by aping the greatness of their historical forebears.

So, the tragedy of the Emperor Napoleon's bloody reign is followed by the farce of his nephew Louis, because "[h]istorical tradition gave rise to the belief of the French peasants in the miracle that a man named Napoleon would bring all the glory back to them. . . . The fixed idea of the Nephew was realized, because it coincided with the fixed idea of the most numerous class of the people" (Marx 318). Now if one were to apply this observation to the Irish context, one could perhaps explain the recurrence of the two centre-right parties, Fianna Fail and Fine Gael, alternating in government since the Irish Civil War of 1923, each of whom was aping the greatness of their historical forebears in the revolutionary period, by appearing to represent the "national" interest as their own, when they were more often than not advancing the interests of their own political class at the expense of the rest of the nation. As Marx suggests,

> Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please, they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given, and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living. And just when they seem engaged in revolutionizing themselves and things, in creating something that has never yet existed, precisely in such periods of revolutionary crisis they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service and borrow from them names, battle-cries, and costumes in order to present the new scene of world history in this time-honoured disguise and this borrowed language . . . (300)

The "conjuring up of the dead" that Marx describes here is not the sole preserve of the revolutionary generation, particularly when we call to mind historian Desmond Fitzpatrick's wry observation that if "revolutions are what happen to wheels, then Ireland underwent a revolution between 1916 and 1922 . . . social and political institutions were turned upside down, only to revert to full circle upon the establishment

of the Irish Free State" (232). The two centre-right parties which emerged from the subsequent Civil War of 1922-23, Fianna Fail and Fine Gael, were the political manifestation of different elements of the newly hegemonic Catholic, nationalist, middle-class. As with other former colonies of the British Empire, the native middle-class which nationalized itself by leading the struggle against the colonial power, in turn became the ruling elite. Subsequently, the spectre of class disparity would return to haunt the Irish state and its stages with each successive generation, as the national middle-class consolidated its influence over the resources of the state.

The provenance of this middle-class was described sardonically by playwright John Millington Synge in the early 1900s as "the groggy-patriot-publican-general shop-man who is married to the priest's half-sister and is second cousin once-removed of the dispensary doctor" (letter to his friend Stephen MacKenna, 1905; qtd. in Saddlemeyer 116-17). Rarely is this view of Irish life more clearly shown than in Synge's magnum opus, *The Playboy of the Western World* (1907), as Christy Mahon, the son of a "squatter" or landless labourer, vies with Shawn Keogh, a young farmer, for the affections of Pegeen Mike, the daughter of local publican-general shop-man Michael James. We see Christy go from the young rebel who has allegedly killed his father, to be christened the "champion playboy of the western world" by the women of the community, only to be revealed in the finale as what Shawn Keogh described him, "a dirty tramp . . . from the highways of the world" (221), when Christy's bloodied but unbroken father appears and reveals him to be a fraud. The play provoked a riot which has been well documented by historians and one might say over-documented at the expense of other plays. The opprobrium surrounding the production focussed on the perceived misrepresentation of the figure of the western "Peasant" and especially the reference to the "shift" or undergarments worn by the women in the play. In the heated political context of the time, such figures became totemic for nationalists during the period which lead up to the Easter Rising barely a decade later. As a consequence, the facts of economic hierarchies within the community depicted in the play were generally ignored by the nationalist intellectuals and ideologues who criticized the play, insofar as they were primarily interested in the issue of national sovereignty. In the build-up to the revolutionary period of 1916-23, nationalist activists persuaded their colleagues in the women's movement and the labour movement that the matters of gender equality and social justice would be postponed until after national sovereignty had been achieved. Whilst women gained the vote shortly after independence, the matter of bridging the gap between rich and poor in the new state would be left on hold.

These awkward facts have been generally ignored in the performance accretions that have built up to constitute the received performance tradition since the first production of the *Playboy* in 1907. In our own time, Roddy Doyle and Bisi Adigun's production of the *Playboy* in 2007 chose to represent Christy not as the landless son of a squatter, but as a wayward middle-class tearaway whose wealthy father chastises him at the end of the play. In this re-imagining, the west of Ireland is

transmuted to a violent west Dublin suburb populated by drug-snorting criminals and their foul-mouthed girlfriends. Christy Mahon becomes Christopher Malomo, a well-educated Nigerian refugee who has fled his native land after killing his father with a pestle, and attracts the sharp-tongued Pegeen with his morbid tale of his father's murder. Quite why she would be so taken with this story is unlikely, given her easy familiarity with the brutality of her community and the fact that her father Michael is a local gangster. In an RTE review of the production, Steve Cummins notes that while the "central crux" of the original remains, "those parts of Synge's work which don't fit this modern urban model have been rewritten, whilst any updated element has been mined for maximum comic effect. . . . Every line is played for laughs and brilliantly delivered by an exemplary cast, making for a re-working which is nothing short of an absolute triumph." Both the 2007 production and its reception are typical of the performance accretions and reception of Irish theatre over the century. The comedic elements of the *Playboy* have been accentuated with each performance over successive generations, to the extent that audiences become accustomed to expecting certain kinds of characterization. With the 2007 production, like so many versions of the *Playboy* over the years, the comic effects serve to further detract from the poverty, violence and criminality of west Dublin, and Christy's own penniless circumstances are completely elided in his transformation into Christopher, the spoiled prodigal son, whose father will take him back under his wing after a brief chastisement.

In fairness to Doyle and Adigun, the license to enhance the reassuringly comic elements of the play is there in the original playtext. In the finale, petit bourgeois normality is restored, Pegeen will marry Shawn, and the emerging middle-class will consolidate and expand, whilst the irksome landless labourers Christy and Old Mahon will allegedly go "romancing through a romping life-time." Until, of course, they run out of what little money they have and are forced to emigrate or die in penury, as thousands of their countrymen were doing at the time the play was first staged. It is all the more tragic then that only a few short years after the centennial production of the play in 2007, Irish men and women are facing the same dilemma. Although effectively pauperized as Christy is, thousands of Irish people cannot emigrate as their forebears did, because they are locked into mortgages that will take decades to recover the crushing levels of negative equity they are left with as the Irish property bubble burst. In a cruel twist of fate, during the last twenty years the Irish nation experienced a similar plot trajectory to Christy Mahon, as it went from one of the poorest countries in the western world to become a champion economy so admired by the rest, only to have their new economic status revealed as a groundless delusion.

The spectre of class disparity so evident but so frequently overlooked by historians and journalists alike in Synge's *Playboy,* re-materializes barely more than a decade later in the early Dublin plays of Sean O'Casey. As Declan Kiberd argues, the "loveable peasant has been thereby introjected into the native Irish psyche, to reappear as a twentieth-century slum-dweller. The rolling cadences of Synge and the forms of the traditional Abbey play are ill-suited to the rhythms of urban life: O'Casey

repeated but did not remodel them" (232). O'Casey was himself a card-carrying socialist, who was outraged by the lack of social change after the national revolution had been completed. In reference to one of the many Dublin slums he complained that "Grenville Street is here to-day, a little older, but as ugly and as horrible as ever" (131). Yet despite his socialist beliefs, proclaimed at length in his autobiographies, the indictment of class disparity before, during and after the national revolution is disavowed in his plays in favour of a dismissal of all ideologies as harmful illusions. In *Juno and the Paycock* (1924) for example, the working-class men are hardly the *stakhanovite* poster-boys for a putative Soviet na hEireann, with the skiving Captain Boyle proving the author of his family's demise, as he bankrupts them to local gombeen man Murphy after believing the false economic prophecies sold to them by the swindler Bentham, who it transpires has impregnated their daughter Mary and left them all high and dry. O'Casey's later play *The Plough and the Stars* (1926) incited a violent reaction on par with the reaction to Synge's *Playboy*. The response was led by the widows of the insurgents who died in the Easer Rising, driven by their indignance at O'Casey's dismissal of their husbands' bravery as mere delusion. The visceral response to the first production of *The Plough and the Stars* was all the more unfortunate given that such a play should have incited dismay at the conditions in which the slum dwellers were still living *after* independence had been achieved. As poet F.R. Higgins argued at the time: "If, as a sincere artist, Mr O'Casey interpreted the raw life he is supposed to know, then the sure strokes of a great dramatist would have painted such a picture of the Dublin underworld that instead of driving some to demolish the theatre, they would be driven out in horror to abolish the slum" (qtd. in Hogan and Burnham 325).

The real sadness in the three Dublin plays, specifically described as tragedies by O'Casey, is that the men are revealed as gullible simpletons who are too easily drawn to the glimmer of a false dawn, while the women are shown as two-dimensional martyrs who endure the consequences of their husband's lack of vision. The comic male pairs which inhabit these plays consistently provide the comic relief from the awful conditions in which the tenement dwellers try to eke out a living. The comic elements were enhanced by the actors who played the key roles, particularly Barry Fitzgerald and F.J. McCormick who were, as David Krause notes, "the two finest comic actors in Abbey [theatre] history" (138). The performance accretions which have built up gradually over the years following the portrayal by these actors of characters such as Captain Boyle and Joxer Daly, have become the traditional way in which O'Casey's characters have been received by audiences, and especially Irish audiences, over the years. So when in 1991 Gary Hynes directed *The Plough and the Stars* at the Abbey in a manner which deliberately emphasized the traumatic realities of slum life at the expense of the comic elements in the play one can understand the critical furore which greeted the production. The young girl Mollser's consumption is painfully evident in her rasping breathlessness; Jack Clitheroe's domestic violence towards his wife Nora; Fluther is no longer a drunken oaf but an alcoholic prone to thuggery and wild

outbursts; Rosie Redmond is no longer the charming, middle-aged prostitute, but a teenager who relies on prostitution to survive. In terms of reception, Brian Singleton notes that this production, "more than any other in the decade, caused the biggest division amongst critics and the largest flurry of comment on the Letters page of the *Irish Times*" (262). Singleton suggests that audience members prepared by the traditional performance accretions "were prevented from laughing by a representation which provided no comic relief from the seriousness of the politics and the violence surrounding it" (262). In a perverse echo of O'Casey's Dublin, if you were to take a short stroll after witnessing the Hynes' 1991 production, you would have encountered some of the "worst housing conditions and greatest heroin addiction rates in Western Europe, and a government still insisting that lack of public spending was the price of independence" (Singleton 261). The story underlying this official discourse is one of cronyism and corruption than ran to the highest levels of government, which became public knowledge through a succession of scandals and tribunals throughout the 1990s that were harbingers of the nightmare scenario of the post-Tiger crash in the late 2000s.

The slums depicted in O'Casey's plays were not abolished at the time of their first production, nor were they abolished twenty years later, much to the chagrin of Walter Macken whose plays *Mungo's Mansion* (1946) and *Vacant Possession* (1948) deal with lumpenproletarian life in the Galway slums in a succession of increasingly harrowing plays. In both plays the lead male characters, respectively Mungo King and Gunner Delaney, are former proletarian workers rendered incapable of work by crippling injuries. Their lives and the lives of their families are swallowed down a downward spiral of poverty, debt, depression and alcoholism, and they are preyed upon by gombeen men such as Skerret the landlord's agent and criminals with ludicrous names such as Wee-wee Brady and "Revenge" Horgan. In the earlier play, the hapless Mungo and his family are saved from perdition by his friend Mowleogs who places a winning bet for him on the sweepstake. There is no such redemption for Gunner however, as alcoholism leads to his demise and his family are left to roam the streets with his old rag-and-bone cart.

Barely a year after the unproduced *Vacant Possession* was published, the Irish Free State became a republic in 1949 and formally ended its centuries-long connection with Great Britain. Over three decades had passed since Padraic Pearse read the famous proclamation of his visionary Republic on the steps of the Dublin GPO. The society which developed during those years was characterized by what the writer Sean O'Faolain called an "unholy alliance between the church, the new businessmen, and the politicians" (qtd. in Lindsay 194). If there are two plays which define these realities in the new republic and set the tone for subsequent generations of Irish playwrights, they are Tom Murphy's *On the Outside* (written in 1959 and first produced as a radio play in 1962) and its sequel *On the Inside*, both of which were first produced on stage in Dublin respectively at the Project and the Abbey theatre in 1974. The plays are set against the years preceding and following the implementation of the

First Programme for Economic Expansion (1958-1963) by Taoiseach Sean Lemass and his Minister for Finance T.K. Whitaker. The First Programme constituted a step change from the economic protectionism of various post-independence governments which had so hindered prosperity. As Tom Garvin suggests, "it took what was seen as the economic disaster of the mid-1950s and the ageing of the Boys of the Old Brigade to force real change; there was a genuine problem of gerontocracy" (27). In the 1950s, "the facts of economic life and electoral pressure began gradually to nullify the special interests of older businesses, ecclesiastical, cultural and labour elites, the people who had, essentially, carved up the entire country into a set of fiefdoms after 1920 and 1932" (Garvin 27).

On the Outside is set outside of a country dancehall, where the two proletarians Joe and Frank wait earnestly in the hope that the middle-class teachers and businessmen going into the hall will help them gain admittance. Their hopes are obviously forlorn as the middle-class members of the community treat their less fortunate countrymen with studied casualness. The two men are only too aware of the rigid class distinctions that pervade their community, as Frank observes:

> The whole town is like a tank. . . . And we're at the bottom, splashing around all week in their Friday night vomit, clawing at the sides all around. And the bosses – and the big-shots – are up around the top, looking in, looking down. . . . Spitting. On top of us. And for fear we might climb out someway – Do you know what they're doing? – They smear grease around the walls. (180)

When Frank and Joe sing nationalistic songs to relieve their boredom, the reference to Patrick Sarsfield and the solidarity inherent in patriotic nationalism rings hollow in independent Ireland where British rule has been replaced by the hegemony of Catholic bourgeois nationalism. As the play draws to a close, the *nouveaux riche* Mickey Ford who has inherited money from his "uncle in America" leaves the dancehall with Anne, the girl Frank was supposed to meet up with after persuading her that he was a man of means. When Frank pleads with Anne to excuse his indigent circumstances, Ford dismisses him with the callous indifference of the risen bourgeoisie: "What about all the lies you told her? Pick on someone your own class now" (191). In many ways the character Mickey Ford anticipates the *nouveaux riche* that will emerge during the Celtic Tiger, as a generation of charming but ruthless local boys will become fabulously wealthy by spending money given to them by American and European banks on quixotic projects that will ultimately sink the Irish economy. In that future, the shades of Frank and Joe will re-materialize in housing estates across the country, as ordinary families become gradually enslaved to credit companies as they take out loans they can't afford to repay, in order to keep up with the exorbitant rise in the cost of living. Meanwhile, their Taoiseach Bertie Ahern will try to give himself a pay rise of over €38,000 on top of his already huge salary, an increase of more than the total salary for the average working citizen in Ireland at the time. And to those who dare

question the faulty logic of his Tiger economy, the Taoiseach will encourage them to go and kill themselves when he says: "Sitting on the sidelines, cribbing and moaning is a lost opportunity. I don't know how people who engage in that don't commit suicide."

The issues of class disparity and social injustice continue to haunt Ireland's stages through the rest of the century. Dermot Bolger's *The Lament for Arthur Cleary* (1989) offers a harrowing portrayal of Dublin in the 1980s, where gombeen men prey on the impoverished unemployed who inhabit Dublin slums that are morbid echoes of the tenement plays of O'Casey and Macken. *One Last White Horse* (1991) renders a Dublin cityscape blighted by drug abuse, despair and hopelessness during the reign of Taoiseach Charles Haughey, who as Fintan O'Toole argues in his polemic *After the Ball* (2003), syphoned off state funds for his own vanity projects while he told the Irish citizenry to "tighten their belts" (45-59). The Ireland which O'Toole portrays is one in which unemployed benefits cheats are sent to prison for the paltry sum the state is willing to pay them, whilst the business cronies of the political class salted away billions of tax payers money in off-shore accounts and not only avoided jail, but received the financial equivalent of a slap on the wrist from a judicial system that was unwilling to hold such high rollers to account. For O'Toole, these business tycoons who operate effectively above the common law were the new Irish aristocracy, insofar as they acted as if they were above paying tax revenues as the Celtic Tiger started roaring in the 1990s, whilst the vast majority of the Irish working public who did pay their taxes would be left to bail out the country after the tycoons and their friends in the building and banking industry effectively bankrupted the nation.

In this period the plays of Marina Carr came to prominence, particularly *By the Bog of Cats . . .* (1998). The female protagonist, Hester Swane is former lover of Carthage Kilbride and mother of their daughter Josie. Carthage is an upwardly mobile labourer's son who is due to marry Caroline, daughter of "big farmer" Xavier Cassidy. Xavier wants to consolidate his land with the land containing the Bog of Cats that Carthage has purchased at a bargain price from Hester. The expansion of the landed middle-class which Carthage and Cassidy represent is hampered by Hester's persistent claim on what she perceives as her ancestral territory. Hester is a figure of scorn for the upwardly mobile characters in the play, and is derided as a "tinker" and "piebald knacker" by Carthage's pretentious mother Mrs Kilbride who is hell-bent on her son's embourgeoisement, in spite of the fact that Hester's parents Big Josie and Jack Swane may have been poor with little land and property but were not strictly members of the travelling community. Indeed this scorn by the agrarian middle-class for their less fortunate citizens resonates on a generational level, insofar as Xavier holds contempt not only for Hester, but for her mother Big Josie whom he considers a drink-sodden whore, and for her daughter young Josie whom he regards as an obstacle to the successful union between Caroline and Carthage. What is striking here are the brutal conditions in which poorer members of the community, and particularly children, find themselves in. Hester recalls her childhood in the "Industrial School,"

an infamous system in which the poorest children in Irish society were subjected to a level of brutality that would make Caligula blush with shame. It is clear that her mother's childhood lacked formal education of any quality and young Josie is not only treated roughly by her mother but with visceral contempt by her grandmother Mrs Kilbride, who calls her a "little bastard" during a game of Snap and says: "Ya little coward ya, I'll break your spirit yet and then glue ya back the way I want ya. I bet ya can't even spell your name" (279).

In the context of the late 1990s, Carr's play could perhaps have been seen as anachronistic during a period when the Irish economy was booming and the *nouveaux riche*, cappuccino culture of brasseries and gastro-pubs were displacing the smoke-filled bars and their dirty denizens made famous by James Joyce and Brendan Behan. Yet during this time when the relative wealth of the Irish nation was among the highest in the world, the net wealth of most of its citizens was barely on par with the European average. Moreover, when the Irish treasury could guarantee multi-billion dollar loans through its new triple-A credit rating, the Irish school system was literally falling apart at the seams. An *Irish Times* survey in 2003 found that 62 out of 137 primary schools on the Department of Education's emergency repair list revealed slum conditions: outdoor toilets, faulty wiring, sewage problems, unsafe playgrounds, and severely over-crowded class rooms (qtd. in O'Toole 85-86). At the height of the boom in 2000 nearly a third of Irish children were experiencing deprivation. In a society which had, in the space of one generation, leapt from pre-modern to post-modern, the importance of quality education and the acquisition of technical skill had turned from a luxury to a necessity. However, when Ireland was experiencing fabulous levels of wealth and foreign investment, the educational achievement for the majority of its children was barely improving at all. In this context, the situation in which the poorer characters in *By the Bog of Cats* . . . find themselves is not some atavistic throw-back to the days of Synge and O'Casey. On the contrary, Carr shows that the social problems that haunted Ireland's stages in the first quarter of the century return to haunt the same stages in the last quarter of the century.

In his recent book *Dissident Dramaturgies* (2010), Eamonn Jordan suggests that many of the plays written and produced during the period of the Celtic Tiger

> did not necessarily bear much relation to that reality. Playwrights shied away from being topical, or they realized that the dynamics of the lived world did not best serve the stories they wished to tell or the scenarios and images they wished to generate through writing and performance, or the mechanisms of narrative were not appropriate to the circumstances of the society. (10)

Jordan contends that much of contemporary drama "put paid to the illusion that if you want to understand the dynamics of the Celtic Tiger period go to the theatre. The best exception to this has to be Declan Hughes's great play *Shiver* (2003)" (10). As usual, Jordan's analysis here is as incisive as it is informative, particularly regarding

Hughes's play which, whilst chronicling the hubris of those who rose and fell with the dot.com bubble at the end of the 1990s, provides a chilling prophecy of the cultural conditions which led to the collapse of the banking and building bubble at the end of the 2000s. This archetypal play charts the travails of the ambitious middle-class characters Richard and Jenny as they build their online publishing service, with ironically called the "51st state," and watch their personal fortune expand and collapse until they are left bankrupt. Jenny's forlorn description of her family's woes presages the fate of thousands of Irish people later in the decade: "We're on a defaulter's list now. Chances are, we'll never get a mortgage again. Even if they'd let us have one, I can't see how we'd afford it, we've that many debts. . . . To have had it once and seen it taken away is so much worse than never to have known it at all. If there was just some way we could get back home" (79-80). Jenny's longing for the pre-lapsarian recent past is echoed in Kevin's earlier reference to the past: "Back when we didn't have a standard of living, we somehow seemed to have more of a life" (29).

In Marina Carr's recent play *Marble* (2009) repressed fantasies and passions conflict with the social responsibilities of friendship and fidelity. The characters' quotidian lives and their struggles with primal desire and higher morality provide the thematic backdrop to the play's examination of the tragedy of the fragility of love. Whilst ostensibly dealing with the politics of interpersonal relationships, the play gains a certain political resonance when set in the broader context of Ireland's economic meltdown. In *Ship of Fools* (2010) Fintan O'Toole argues that the Celtic Tiger and its aftermath were the inevitable consequence of a fundamental lack of "civic morality [compounded by an] unreconstructed culture of cronyism, self-indulgence and, at its extremes, of outright corruption" (19). The challenge it seems is to build a new republic out of the ashes of the old, and to find a new civic morality to fill the amoral vacuum of unbridled corporate greed.

One could argue, as politicians have done, that immediately after independence the fledgling Irish government could not afford to abolish the slums depicted in O'Casey's plays; but twenty years later the spectre of urban poverty reappears in the plays of Walter Macken in the 1940s, in the plays of Tom Murphy in the 1960s, in Dermot Bolger's plays in the 1980s, and Marina Carr's plays in the 1990s. The real question then is not if successive Irish governments could afford social justice, but if they would be willing to pay for social justice when they could afford it. In the post-Tiger dispensation, we know that when the Irish government had the money the answer, simply, was that they were not willing to pay for better schools to give poorer children a way out of poverty, or affordable healthcare so that poorer families were not at the mercy of insurance companies charging exorbitant fees for pitiful services. Where Sean O'Faolain described the unholy alliance of Church, State and strong farmer, the contemporary equivalent would be the unholy trinity of bankers, property developers and politicians that drove the economy into the abyss that followed the collapse of the Celtic Tiger.

In *After the Ball* (2003) and the follow-up *Ship of Fools* (2010) Fintan O'Toole gives an excoriating analysis of the Celtic Tiger period and the economic devastation that followed in its wake. O'Toole makes it clear that the boom and bust were not an exception but the inevitable outcome of a republic that had never adhered to the ideals stated in Pearse's Proclamation, of a society that was riven by cronyism, greed and at times systemic corruption. All of these elements were dealt with in detail by playwrights before and after the Irish state achieved independence. When you consider Bernard Shaw's play *John Bull's Other Island* written in 1904, you would be forgiven for confusing Shaw with the mad scientist "Doc" Brown in Steven Spielberg's film *Back to the Future*, in terms of his uncannily precise description of an Irish future constructed by the property developers Doyle and Broadbent. As the eccentric Peter Keegan predicts:

> You are both, I am told, thoroughly efficient civil engineers; and I have no doubt the golf links will be a triumph of your art. Mr Broadbent will get into parliament most efficiently, which is more than St Patrick could do if he were alive now. You may even build the hotel efficiently if you can find enough efficient masons, carpenters, and plumbers, which I rather doubt. . . . When the hotel becomes insolvent your English business habits will secure the thorough efficiency of the liquidation. You will reorganize the scheme efficiently; you will liquidate its second bankruptcy efficiently . . . you will get rid of its original shareholders efficiently after efficiently ruining them; and you will finally profit very efficiently by getting that hotel for a few shillings in the pound. . . . Besides these efficient operations, you will foreclose your mortgages most efficiently . . . you will drive Haffigan to America most efficiently; you will find a use for Barney Doran's foul mouth and bullying temper by employing him to slave-drive your labourers very efficiently; and . . . when at last this poor desolate countryside becomes a busy mint in which we shall all slave to make money for you, with our Polytechnic to teach us how to do it efficiently, and our library to fuddle the few imaginations your distilleries will spare, and our repaired Round Tower with admissions sixpence, and refreshments and penny-in-the slot mutoscopes to make it interesting, then no doubt your English and American shareholders will spend all the money we can make for them very efficiently in shooting and hunting, in operations for cancer and appendicitis, in gluttony and gambling; and you will devote what they save to fresh land development schemes. For four wicked centuries the world has dreamed this foolish dream of efficiency; and the end is not yet. But the end will come. (450)

Had the members of the Irish political class paid even scant attention to what their playwrights were saying, perhaps the current debacle could have been avoided. The spectre of class disparity and social injustice returned to haunt Ireland's stages in every generation, and went unheeded. If you were to walk through the towns of

south County Dublin during the 2007 general election, you would have encountered Progressive Democrat election posters with the question "Left wing government?" and the answer underneath stating emphatically, "No thanks!" Perhaps if there had been some form of effective left-wing governance to counter-balance the unfettered building and banking industry with sensible regulation, then the Republic would not be mired in the social and economic morass it currently finds itself in. If you were to walk through the towns and cities of the Republic of Ireland today, you would find entire estates with hundreds of houses lying empty in what has colloquially become known as Namaland.[1] What were supposed to become thriving middle-class suburbs are now described by the media as "ghost towns." To say that Ireland is haunted by the ghosts of social injustice would not be a radical, unsubstantiated claim from an unreconstructed socialist; it would simply be a statement of the painfully obvious.

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1 After the acronym NAMA, the National Asset Management Agency, constructed by the Irish Government as a "bad bank" to deal with the massive debt revealed after the post-Tiger crash.

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