

Adapting Flann O'Brien's 'The Brother'

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I was first introduced to the rather stiffly titled notion of *Anglo-Irish Literature* when I signed up to a course of the same name reading for my degree in English in the early 1980s. It was a popular course mainly due to its custodianship under the then rising academic star and Irish literature expert, Bob Welch, whose recent death has caused much sadness to all who knew and studied with and under him. Bob was soft of tone but very much twinkle of eye and brought a muscular appreciation to his literary teaching which became positively visceral when he dragged his tutorials, as he always did, on to his favourite ground – anything to do with W. B. Yeats. My brother, who had also studied under Bob, laughed with delight when I informed him that I was on the way to one of his Shakespeare lectures exclaiming,

— Can that man turn anything to his favourite subject!

Bob had unashamedly entitled it, *Hamlet and Yeats*. The lecture consisted of a short introduction to the play but mainly of Bob reading out passages



Based on the surreal, comic imagination of Irish writer Flann O'Brien, 'The Brother' presents three men talking and drinking in a Dublin bar on April Fool's Day 1952. The fact that one of them – the eponymous Brother – is absent is no bar to him giving out on everything from French art to the dangers of eggs.

Press Copy, Edinburgh Festival 2012

from his own book, *Irish Poetry from Moore to Yeats*. Though the link was spurious, nobody cared; he was passionate, knowledgeable, entertaining, and enraptured in his own subject, exactly what undergraduates wanted, then as now, and as I would later learn, exactly the qualities that theatre audiences also crave. Bob literally talked his way around a subject until he got on to the ground where he wanted to be, a place where he felt safe, authoritative, and at home to hold forth, an Irish trait if ever there was one. So when my colleagues Gerry Smyth, Reader in English and David Llewellyn, Head of Drama at Liverpool John Moores University, approached me with an adapted script based on Myles na gCopaleen's *Cruiskeen Lawn* columns from *The Irish Times*, it was not entirely unfamiliar terrain. The short play they handed me, *The Brother*, was initially created by Gerry Smyth with suggestions from David Llewellyn. Gerry had written it from na gCopaleen's vignette episodes consisting of dialogues between two men waiting at a bus-stop, one of whom is obviously well-educated and a little nervous, while the other is a forthcoming, working-class man speaking an enriched Dublin slang. But was it dramatic, theatrical, or performable?

The edited patchwork of satirical slices of Dublin life, liberally sprinkled with prosaic domestic detail which spirals into flights of fancy, reminded me very much of my early introduction to Irish literature. Like Bob Welch with his beloved Yeats, in this two-handed studio drama, the verbose and oddly un-named hero 'Man 2' is fixated. He bombards his helpless victim 'Man 1,' a hapless chap he happens upon, with story after anecdote after observation on the life, tales, times, and opinions of his never seen but constantly alluded to brother. A figure whose mention, usually found by his own verbal circumnavigation, can seemingly be related to and shed light on any subject, idea or event. You name it, the brother has apparently seen it, done it, been there, or at the very least has a stream of opinions on it – according to Man 2 at least. And why does Man 2 constantly riff on these obsessional brotherly digressions? We never get to know and do not really care. Because our man does it with such garrulous gusto and glorious abandon or in the Irish vernacular – He gives it shtick! Theatre loves enthusiasts, and if they are completely enthusiastic about a subject we know little of, much less care about, so much the better. Place a character like this with a straight man who simply wants a quiet life and we already have a classic comedic and dramatic dynamic to begin a process of elucidating O'Brien's rich, linguistic playfulness and up-front, literary cheek. As Bob Welch used to flagrantly say throughout all his lectures, seminars, and tutorials and always at the end,

— And you can buy my book on Yeats at the university bookshop, very reasonably priced.

But words on a page do not necessarily make a play. The writer, written textual theorist, and teacher Sol Stein argues persuasively that the reading experience of finely crafted literary work can often be lost in the translation of dramatic adaptation.¹ The demands of run-on dialogue, incident, and action do not allow for the necessary savouring of linguistic appreciation. Indeed, more direct and simple narratives can be more successfully expressed in dramatic forms. The short stories of Philip K Dick, for example, have produced celebrated blockbuster movies like *Blade Runner* whereas the works of literary giant Joseph Conrad have yielded relatively modest film and television dramas. The strength and complexity of virtuosic prose can defy the structural integrity of an adapted dramatic form, and even when dealing with the seemingly straightforward demands of finding a small-scale stage home for Myles na gCopaleen's ruminations, this is a fundamental consideration.

A director is therefore always looking for that theatrical conceit or dramatic argot that will bring its subject alive. A crucial element that will lift a scripted story off and away from the writtenness of the page and into the living breathing world of the liveness of the stage. Most dramatic adaptations of celebrated literary work fail not through some inherent problem with the chosen text but with the adaptors' unwillingness to fully and correctly rework the material, instead they desperately hold on too tightly to some notion of 'originality' – a basis for creating new work that my colleague, drama lecturer Dr James Frieze describes as, 'a highly over-rated concept.' This is often done with good intention in the name of preserving some idea of integrity or faithfulness to the text. Ironically, it is this type of principle that is the first casualty of the adapting process, as it is this very type of thinking that turns adaptation into a collision of forms rather than a collusion of a rich stimulus that yieldingly feeds dramatic potential. Dramatic adaptation is artistic transformation creatively moving from one world to another. It is only in this free and fluid way that the essence of the original work can be preserved and expressed with any kind of authenticity. It is the key decisions on how this transformation should take place that shapes the parameters of the adapting process and how the project is truly forged for better or worse. Rather than a blow by blow account of an adapting rehearsal process therefore, this article is more of a discussion and record of the thinking behind it, the action taken, and the resulting consequences.

Neither Gerry Smyth nor David Llewellyn would call themselves full-time professional actors, though between them they have both considerable musical, acting, and performance experience. This is a good start to work with. Professional actors are often a self-conscious and self-absorbed lot and need the care, attention, and developmental skills of a patient parent dealing with temperamental teenagers. Having two grown men who were simply interested in the material and who wanted

to get it on stage in an entertaining, refreshing, and informative way may seem like obvious conditions for a process like this – but it so often isn't. This gave us all a kind of freedom to explore the fluidity with the material with few rules or hang-ups other than the potential of the script and the practicalities of a small-scale production and our potential audience dictating our performance. The first decision in any theatrical production is often taken for granted, especially if it is prescribed in a script and chosen to be unchallenged and accepted. It comes before character, scenes, and most ideas of textual interpretation – it is the world of the production and how it can be theatrically achieved. The first decision of where our two characters should meet has been decided on by some judicious thought and attendant scripting. That it is in the fug of some Dublin barroom snug now seems obvious because it works so well for the piece, for its associations with O'Brien and his drinking circles and for us who know this world only too well. The theatrical conceit and dramatic argot of the pub with its mixture of the impersonal and over-friendliness has set us on the road, now all we have to do is make all these words breath. And it being Flann, there are a lot of words here.

The striking element about this text is the density of the dialogue that pours out of one character all over the relative linguistic punctuation of his hapless stage-fellow, who for the most part sits absorbing the running commentary with varying degrees of beleaguered engagement. Written originally for a newspaper column as a humorous satire on daily Dublin life, its self-conscious wordiness does not immediately lend itself to theatrical action and dynamism. The strong Dublin vernacular is at times challenging to follow, both for its use of colourful local slang and idiom and for its unashamed stretching of plausibility as the incidents get more extreme and the tales get taller. This is not English but Irish or Hiberno-English, and behind the playful banter and mischievous games of logic – riffing on a seemingly endless stream of consciousness catalysed by the life thoughts and opinions of the verbose pub bore's 'Brother' – lies a serious questioning of meaning, intelligibility, and assertion of identity. We are in and around the modernist Irish terrain of Joyce and Beckett (though to canonise O'Brien to their literary effulgence is a matter for academic investigation and debate) but we are also in a post-Free State Ireland with a political conscience informed by centuries of resistance to its old English exploiters and the recent struggles of 1922. 'Just because English is still the vastly dominant language doesn't mean we have to talk like them and thereby think like them' is a belief both wittily and muscularly played out and celebrated in all of O'Brien's work, with its exuberant richness of Irish vocabulary, phrases, and jokery. Like all the best gags, at heart all the stories and set-ups have some sort of plausible premise. This then becomes twisted, magnified, teased, and inflated as the banter runs away on glorious flights of fancy, all delivered with a sincere self-delusion/belief and ramified with the resounding

endorsement of the surely non-existent brother. A classic strategy of comic development, with situations, characters, and events spiralling out of hand which has been seen and has delighted from Moliere to Milligan, the *Commedia* to Sit-Com.

Our two characters are set in the affable and ritually sociable work of the Irish Bar snug in which impromptu conversation – the banter and the craic – are endemic. This is a world in which the Public House is exactly that, where stories, jokes, and observations on ‘the talk of the day’ are to be shared with all present. The fact that one of our characters is simply trying to enjoy a quiet read of his paper after lunch is understandable and is the source of the tension and humour in the face of the verbal onslaught of the pub drunk and raconteur. But understandable, too, is the tacit understanding that both should take part and indeed have a public duty to share in the barroom banter that is nothing short of a national cultural pursuit – even if one of the participants just wants a moment’s peace, he is contractually and morally obliged to take part. Anything less would be tantamount to being somehow un-Irish. The prim, the proper and the standoffish is of course the stereotypical behaviour of the English, is it not?

But literally this is all talk and the vast majority of it from the mouth of just one character, and however colourful and entertaining the craic, the risk of bombarding an audience (in this production many for whom English is not their first language) and losing their engagement is great. From Shakespeare to Radio 4’s *Just A Minute* to *Father Ted*, native English speakers often revel in their expressive possibilities – but even the linguistic riches of the Hiberno-English of Flann O’Brien can become wearing, indeed precisely because the commentary is so thick with *dirty great lashings* of Irish verbal cream.

The clues to finding a theatricalisation which deals with these issues is contained, as ever, within the challenges presented to us. First, even a cursory study of raconteurism – whether from the Music Hall MC, gavel in hand, or from the Pub/After Dinner speaker, drink in hand – reveals that these characters project not just a verbal dexterity, but a force of gesticulatory, ‘big’ character. Colourful characters like these do not simply tell a story, they loudly declaim, act, and embellish them, adding voices and physical imitations of their characters, mimes of key actions and dynamic cadences. Secondly, our target European audience has its own wonderful tradition of physical performance through its mime and clowning tradition which adds technique and precision to the gusto of our bravura raconteur. From the *Commedia* we have elements of the pompous professional status of Il Dottore buzzed around by the base energy and appetite of Arlecchino. Phillipe Gaulier’s buffoon clown, with his naivety and idiocy deployed to bring down and explore mainstream social niceties, was a good model to start creating our pub tall storyteller who at once captures our quiet, refined

profession and undercuts any notions of status he grimly hangs on to metaphorically through his newspaper. And finally, it is to Jacques Le Coq's mime training we turn to find a coherent language of gesture. Here we have tried to find a physical style – reserved and nuanced for our straight professional, bold but controlled for our raconteur – which seeks, rather than to over-physicalise and embellish the storytelling, to capture his gusto with a carefully choreographed precision. The aim is to stay in the world of the pub but as the verbal language heightens and flourishes its subjects, so too a physical language, augmented by costume and some facial make-up, lifts the performance beyond the social realistic without overstating into that of the pantomimic. Like the boozier's pronounced hooter as he regales the barroom company with his comic tales, Le Coq called the clown's red nose the smallest mask of all. It is this fusion of influences we brought to make the rich and quirky text of *The Brother*, theatrical.

Our early run-throughs are promising. There are looks, moments, the physical comedy of the duo, and of course the language. But it is not quite right. Ironically, it takes our European hosts at the O'Brien conference in Vienna 2011 to point out what we had already suspected. Our efforts to physicalise and personify the text had led us into the over-explanatory territory of the ever so slightly mannered performance. One of the great strengths we have is the naturalness of the performers. Gerry Smyth, a native Dubliner, has smooth features and a rounded face while David Llewellyn's more Anglicised Dublin professional has the big angular features of a large man – two classic comedia masks. The terrier-like smaller man is constantly badgering the fey, more removed bigger man and the natural rapport the performers have as friends is apparent throughout. So what is the problem? Again, I think of Bob Welch when he would become exasperated with some of us for having the audacity to take notes during his lecture,

– I can hear yiz scribbling, will youse ever stop it! Put your pens down and open up your heads and listen! Stop trying to understand and just understand.

In our efforts to explain the texture and language and idiom of O'Brien we had disturbed its natural conversational dynamic and forgotten a key to any understanding of Irish prose – the linguistic rhythm knows its own lyrical mind. So we tried playing it at the full conversational speed of our barroom banter and gave up on worrying how much an audience would comprehend on the level of linguistic sense alone, trusting they could glean as much from the sound of the language. Two things happened, one more expected than the other. First, the text came alive musically, paused and flowed with the organic vibrancy of the to and fro of a pint of porter passing from hand to mouth to lips. This also loosened up the rehearsed-ness of the

physical language which needed to be both choreographically precise for the demands of the clowning to hit the right beats, yet to have the effortless stream of uninflected performance. Secondly, this interplay of rhythms and freer flow unlocked something we had talked about in rehearsal and touched upon, but had not quite found, a strong emotional undercurrent running through the piece. The movement and language became a game between two quite isolated souls in their own ways, both perhaps seeking both the satisfaction of solace and the warmth of companionship. Man 2's constant harrying of Man 1, both tactile and verbally swamping, and their final coming together to reach some sort of accord before going their separate ways, became in its final moments genuinely moving. It revealed a tone running throughout the piece, even a touch existentially bleak – Mr Beckett would be proud. The irony of isolation and laughter of loneliness of course is very much the province of Joyce and Beckett and the whole Irish literary gang – but also we found it here with Flann, perhaps with an undercurrent of homosexual remoteness in times when Dublin may have been a fair city but certainly not openly gay. Having said that, my favourite moment from the show does not reside in the glittering vernacular linguistics, the darker secluded undertones or the, at times, brilliantly played clowning comedy – for me it's the look of recognition between the two men before they part – it's just a moment of friendship – but it feels right.

*I would that we were, my beloved, white
birds on the foam of the sea!*

— William Butler Yeats.



Notes & references

¹ Sol Stein, *Solutions For Writers* (London: Souvenir, 1998).

*In memory of Prof Bob Welch,
who steered so many of us away from
the rocky road
and on to the right path.*