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Irish-Polish Cultural Interrelations in Practice: Interviews with Chris Binchy, Piotr Czerwiński, Dermot Bolger, and Anna Wolf

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Abstract:

The following interviews with practitioners of Polish-Irish intercultural relations give voice to two Ireland-based Poles and two Irishmen who, in different ways, have reacted to and represented the new Polish presence in Ireland. Chris Binchy and Piotr Czerwiński have focused on the experiences of Polish labour migrants in Dublin in their respective novels *Open-handed* (2008) and *Przebiegum życiae* (2009). Dermot Bolger explored, among other things, the historical parallels between Polish and Irish histories of migration in his play *The Townlands of Brazil* (2006). Anna Wolf is the artistic director and producer of the Dublin-based Polish Theatre Ireland (PTI).

Keywords: Dublin, migrant culture, migrant literature, migration from Poland, Polish-Irish intercultural relations

1. *"You Have to Think Outside of the Box": Interview with Chris Binchy and Piotr Czerwiński*

Chris Binchy (*1970) and Piotr Czerwiński (*1972) seem to have several things in common: they are writers, they live in Dublin, they can look back on an unusual employment history, and they have published four novels each. In addition, they have devoted one of their novels to the depiction of Polish and other East European labour migrants who struggle in the Irish capital during the Celtic-Tiger years.

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Binchy worked as an embassy researcher, painter, hotel manager, and even trained as a sushi chef. His first novel, *The Very Man*, appeared in 2003 and was shortlisted for the Hughes & Hughes / Sunday Independent Irish Novel of the Year Award. *People Like Us* was published in 2004 and was followed by *Open-handed* (2008). Focusing on five characters – two Irish and three from Eastern Europe – *Open-handed* explores "the Celtic Tiger's underbelly of alcohol, drugs, prostitution, corruption and money laundering" (Schrage-Früh 2011, 356). Binchy's latest novel is *Five Days Apart* (2010).

Czerwiński is a Polish journalist, columnist, and writer. Having worked for a number of Polish newspapers and magazines, he made his literary debut in 2005 with the novel *Pokalanie* (*Desecration*). His second novel, *Przebiegum życiae* (a neologism punning on the Latin word *Curriculum Vitae* which could be translated into English as *Conductum Lifae*), appeared in 2009 and was inspired by Czerwiński's own migration to Ireland in the mid-2000s. Relating the story of two mediocrely successful Polish labour migrants, the book has been noted for being written in 'Ponglish' – a colloquial pidgin language which mixes Polish with English and features invented words and expressions. Czerwiński's third novel, *Międzynaród* (2011; *Internation*), is a parody of a dystopia and again takes up the topic of emigration. It envisages a future where Poland is a global superpower and a promised land for English people, who move to Poland as labour migrants. Czerwiński's most recent novel is *Pigułka wolności* (2012; The Freedom Pill).

JR: What is the first question you would expect in an interview on Polish-Irish cultural interrelations?

PC: Let me ask you back: are there any "Polish-Irish cultural relations"? I honestly suspect that any person, on both sides of this barricade (and it is a barricade sometimes, indeed, in a very metaphorical sense), would be astonished to find that there are any. I would be, at any rate. Although I do know that such contacts have been made, but they are rudimental, in my humble opinion, considering the scale of Polish migration to this part of the world.

JR: So what about intellectual contributions to Irish culture made by Poles – can you discern any?

PC: There have been a few cases, yes. Polish actors playing alongside the Irish. Polish painters, Polish musicians. One Polish writer who came up with a novel written in 'Ponglish'…

CB: I'm aware of a few Polish journalists and the Polish theatre. I also know there are some Polish writers living here. Regarding your initial question, I would expect to be asked to comment on the impact of Polish migration in Ireland and on how, in general terms, Poles are perceived here.

JR: How then would you describe the Polish impact on contemporary Ireland and the stereotypical perception of a Polish migrant?

CB: I think the presence of mostly young Polish people and families is seen as a good thing, particularly in rural areas. There are probably a few more people at Mass. Polish migrants are probably the most familiar to Irish people, and they seem to have slotted in quickly and painlessly. I'm not sure if that's because the people involved are similar to Irish people, or if they're just good at adapting. As for the stereotypical perception, I'd say it's hardworking, reliable, cheaper than Irish alternatives, good-looking (primarily women), easy to get on with. I'm sure there are more negative attitudes out there, maybe in terms of taking work when young Irish people are emigrating or undercutting Irish workers or going on the dole. I haven't come across much of that, though.

PC: I think Poles have had an influence on Ireland in nearly all domains. They (we?) have shaped quite an important part of Ireland's history, and this won't get wiped out, it will stay with Ireland forever. What is more, they (we?) have built quite a large part of Ireland – in a very literal sense. But the stereotypical perception of Polish migrants is the same as the stereotypical perception of a Polish migrant anywhere. This is why they have Polish jokes in Chicago. One crucial rule applies to the entire history of any (e)migration from anywhere to anywhere – it is the salt of the earth that flows in the biggest waves. This is the saddest part. These people often have no idea that they are 'mobile ambassadors' of their countries and cultures, and that they are partly responsible for creating stereotypes. Sometimes they don't even know what a stereotype is. But this is changing now in Ireland. The salt has melted; it has gone to Norway or Belgium, or the Netherlands, so that we now constitute a much more cultured society here. The locals have finally understood that we really do have all those master's degrees and that we did not buy them online. And that we are not drunks and burglars, all of us. We can speak languages. We don't come from a place where polar bears roam the streets, and where there is no electricity. And so on. Sometimes I have the impression that certain people imagine Poland that way. They go to Warsaw then, usually on a stag night or so, they see the skyscrapers, come back, and never say a word more on the issue.

JR: According to the Irish National Census of 2011, Poles form the largest national minority in Ireland. If they disappeared from the country overnight, what would the Irish miss most?

PC: Polish beer – it's almost two per cent stronger than the Irish! I see the Irish buy our beer all the time, whereas I don't remember the last time I saw a Polish person buying Polish beer. But what do I know, I don't go to the off-licence very often. On a serious note though, I think that Ireland would

lose a lot. The Polish community is really contributing to the Irish economy and many other areas. But whether many people would actually *miss* that or not – that's another question.

CB: Stereotypically, the Irish would miss good service, reliable workers, reasonable rates in the trades. There would be jokes about the gene pool taking a hit, about future generations being a little uglier. Fewer people at Mass, I guess. Lots of personal relationships would be broken. People would be missed.

JR: Both of you have just mentioned economic contributions made by Polish migrants. The challenges of labour migration moreover form an important theme in Open-handed *and* Przebiegum życiae. *Would you say that economic issues are the determining factor in public debates on migration – from Poland and elsewhere?*

CB: Primarily, maybe. But if you look at Ireland over the last twenty years or so, a lot of the old stereotypical markers of Irish identity – Catholic, rural, nationalist, anti-British – have changed very quickly. The church has lost a huge amount of esteem and influence, and our relationship with Britain has improved substantially. Major inward migration began in the late 1990s, and the media started using the term 'new Irish' to describe those migrant communities well before, I think, the general population thought of them in those terms. In discussions about what it means to be Irish now – and there will be a lot of them leading up to the General Election in 2016 – migration will be a core aspect.

PC: For me, economic concerns are luckily not the determining issue. The Irish have their own history of migration, which is strong enough to make them stay away from mixing local economic problems with the subject of ethnic and national minorities. That's what I like about them. After all, blaming foreigners for a crisis would ring too many bells, wouldn't it? The Irish experience of migration is at the core of their attitude to foreigners, which especially nowadays, in times of economic recessions and seeking scapegoats, is extremely precious.

CB: I would agree that to some degree, the Irish can sympathise more with migrants due to their own history of mass emigration. That sympathy, though, is extended more to certain nationalities than to others. Poles, Latvians, and Lithuanians, Western Europeans and Anglophone white people have few issues, I'd say. Filipinos and Chinese seem to be well-regarded. Others get very little leeway – Nigerians (in Ireland most black people are assumed to be Nigerian) and Roma are regarded with deep suspicion. Non-Irish people claiming social welfare entitlements are often seen as taking advantage. "We worked when we went abroad", is a phrase that I've heard some Irish say in this context, which is not 100% accurate.

JR: Open-handed *features newcomers from Poland, but also migrants from other countries. What was your motivation, Chris, to write a novel in which migration to Ireland would play a crucial role?*

CB: In retrospect, I think the book came out of the atmosphere in Dublin in the mid-2000s, a feeling that everybody was entitled to be loaded (and that you were a moron if you weren't), and that in their pursuit of that goal, people became blinkered to the impact of their behaviour on the people around them and on themselves. As signs began to appear that things were going wrong, that behaviour became more frenzied, and joyless, and disconnected. I had worked in bars and restaurants and hotels, and had seen the beginning of that environment, and how people in the service industry were invisible to many of the customers they served. By the time I left that business, the vast majority of the people working in it were non-Irish.

I had worked in America at a time when there were thousands of young Irish people everywhere you went. You would hear the accent, and see people you knew or recognised or didn't want to see at all. Sometimes it was comforting, and sometimes it felt oppressive. When I was writing the book, I lived in an area where there were a lot of newly-arrived Polish people, and I thought it must feel vaguely the same for them. Living close to your compatriots had potential benefits, but if you were trying to escape something, to start something new for yourself, it had its downside, too.

JR: Piotr, you were part of this large group of Poles who came to Dublin in the mid-2000s. I would assume that writing Przebiegum życiae *was fuelled by your personal experience.*

PC: All it took was to see what was going on. You just had to see it to believe it, because it was pure madness. Even though I am, at least theoretically, 'one of them', I must admit that opening the labour market for the Polish was in some respects quite an incautious decision. Whoever made it, did not realize what kind of Pandora's Box they were opening! On a serious note though, if you had seen it, been there, the first thing that would have come to your mind would be the same thought that struck me: "Maaan, you just *must* write a book about this mess…". That's why I didn't have to do any research for my novel. Being here, with my eyes and ears open, was absolutely enough.

JR: How did you research for Open-handed*, Chris?*

CB: My wife had a Polish grandfather, and she has extended family over there. One of her cousins came to live in Ireland around the time I was writing this book. I talked to her about her reasons for leaving, why she came to Ireland, what she thought when she arrived, what she liked about it, what

she didn't. I went to Warsaw twice in 2006 and 2007 and met other family members. I went out with them, went to parties and bars and houses. I asked people how they felt about emigrating, what they thought of the people who had left, if they were considering leaving themselves, etc. I tried to find books that were reflective of the contemporary atmosphere in Poland, or how it felt to be Polish. People kept referring me to Witold Gombrowicz – perhaps because he was an emigrant himself – particularly to his *Ferdydurke* (1937/1938) and the diaries. I read them. I think I know what they meant. My book is different though. I read various blogs and websites written by Polish emigrants living here.

JR: It struck me that although in both Open-handed *and* Przebiegum życiae*, Polish characters are depicted as hardworking and motivated, ultimately, most of them do not succeed in forging a happy existence in Ireland. What are the implications of their 'failure'?*

CB: Nobody in the book is having a great time, Irish characters included. The Irish property manager Sylvester is starting from a position of comparative wealth and power and influence, and is still totally out of his depth at the end. His partner and chauffeur Dessie sees that he's being exploited by Sylvester, but can't seem to move on. Marcin, the newly-arrived Polish migrant, is too timid and obedient, and gets himself trapped in a crappy job where drinking is practically a necessity. His buddy Artur, by contrast, is not as academically bright as Marcin, but sharper, more perceptive, pushier, takes less shit. He sees his night porter job in a hotel as a cul-de-sac and immediately moves on. He works hard on building sites, his English improves, he gets on well with the gaffers, and starts moving up the ladder.

When I worked abroad, it was hard to predict who would sink and who would swim. It's a very specific skill – being able to do a job in a foreign country, while quickly seeing how the system works, how colleagues relate to each other, managing jokes and the social end of things. I wanted to reflect that. Seeing how well Artur manages things makes Marcin feel even more of a messer. How people get on in the book is more a matter of individual character than nationality.

PC: I wouldn't say that most of the characters in my novel do not succeed. But the fact is that the plot of the book is situated in Dublin in 2007. Back then, if you were a 40-year-old Polish MA degree holder with fifteen years of professional experience, you were simply crossed out as a human being. None of those 23-year-old 'managers' with pierced tongues and virtually no education comparable to yours would have even thought of hiring you. They needed servants, not experts. It has all changed now, but we had to go a long and thorny way to see these changes.

JR: Chris, your novel features migrants from several countries. Did you have scruples about or difficulties with assuming the voice of a different group and 'speaking for them'?

CB: The Polish characters in the book were characters first, Polish second. The same idea applied to the Romanians and the Czechs. While I tried to get some sort of insight into what motivated Polish people to emigrate to Ireland, how they felt about life here and life there, and what they thought they would do in the future, primarily I wrote the characters as individuals in specific circumstances with universal challenges, dilemmas, desires. I did try to incorporate some initial responses to Dublin that I'd heard from Polish people who'd come here, refer to some of the perceptions of the place that seemed to be common. But I did not in any way want to talk for the Polish population of Ireland.

In more practical terms, I tried to keep the language of the non-Irish characters neutral when they were thinking or talking to each other, to untether it from any particular type of English. One of the editors who worked on *Open-handed* – who was English herself – pointed out a couple of occasions where she thought the Polish characters began to sound Irish in their interior lives, using phrases or expressions that I didn't know were not in general use. I thought it was slightly funny that as the book went on, the Polish people began to pick up Irish accents, but I cut it back anyway.

JR: Piotr, let us shed some light on your personal history of migration to Ireland. Can you tell us something about your decision to leave Poland and come to Dublin in the mid-2000s?

PC: Maybe I should start by stating that I am not a migrant – I am an 'expat'. That is how the English describe themselves when they settle down abroad, to differentiate themselves from cheap labour folk from Eastern Europe, don't they? Well, in that case, I will not give them the satisfaction of being inferior to them. I am an expat, too!

Regarding my moving to Ireland, I guess that my history is slightly different from that of a vast majority of other Poles who came here. First of all, I didn't *have* to go, I *wanted* to. I am probably the only Pole who brought his own savings to Ireland. I had just given up a career in journalism; after twelve years in the mass media I was tired and burnt out. Back then, in 2005/2006, the crisis in the mass media job market was just beginning: short term contracts, self-employment, reductions, pay cuts – all that suddenly became popular in what was once an élite group, at least employment-wise. I escaped from that carousel shortly before it started running too fast. I had had no permanent job for about two years, although I had very well-paid casual ones, so I had no existential problems. I had moreover just taken up serious writing – the one with a capital "W". My debut novel, *Pokalanie* (2005), about the generation of Poles born in the 1970s, had just hit the bookstores and was quite a success. I had suddenly become a public person, albeit tem-

porarily and only on a local scale. I didn't enjoy that, incidentally. On the whole, I wanted fresh air, a new life. Anything new, as far away as possible from the world I had been living in for so many years. Far away from the rat race – and believe me, they call it a rat race for a reason.

English was the only foreign language I could speak relatively well without any sense of shame, so the choice was obvious when they opened the job market in Western Europe for Eastern Europeans. England was a no-go area at that time. The terrorist attacks on the London tube had just occurred. There was double taxation, and the locals' attitude to Poles left a lot to be desired (as it does to this day, to be honest). Ireland seemed different, so I came to Ireland. I put on my best suit, my best coat, and carried an umbrella with a wooden handle. You see, my story is a bit different. I even spent all my Polish savings here…

JR: What was your initial experience of living in Ireland?

PC: Upon arrival, I realised that I was automatically put into a particular category, just because of the colour of my passport. I told people I was Polish and they laughed. I told them I was a writer and they pissed their pants laughing. It was interesting. Happens to me to this day, every now and then. I don't have a Polish accent; some say I sound like "a South African who spent too much time in America". For many Irish, I was a 'Polack', one of those who came here to do everything the Irish didn't feel like doing. I could feel it every day, on every corner. I hadn't taken that into consideration, it was very humiliating. I have to admit that I didn't like that Ireland – it's hard to like someone when you have to kneel before them. But I like the Ireland that we have now. It's poorer, but it's finally Irish, the way I had always imagined it. People are normal again. Now they are the Irish I always wanted to meet and live among. It's good, despite the price Ireland had to pay to wake up from the prosperity craze. But again, for me, that wasn't Ireland back then – that was a bad dream, in a way.

JR: If you were Irish…

PC: … I would easily get a decent job. I would quickly get promoted. Seriously. No joke here. I don't refer to any particular situation. It's just a general rule and there is no sense denying that. Good for them, at least they respect themselves. I wish Poles had such an attitude in Poland.

JR: What knowledge of Ireland did you have before it opened up its labour market to new EU members in 2004?

PC: Theoretical, to put it straight. Plus, of course, everything that came in the media during the 1980s, about the Troubles etc. But that's a different story. I am a huge fan of Robert Emmet, he reminds me of our Polish 'errant knights'. It is funny sometimes, because I often get to speak to Irish people and

when I tell them about my interest in Robert Emmet's story, they just smile at me bluntly, because they have no clue who Emmet was. Sometimes I make jokes and tell them it was a missing member of U2, who made it in the property business and fled to the States when it collapsed. People love that story.

JR: Your mentioning of Robert Emmet in connection with the Polish struggle for independence in the nineteenth century raises the question of the role of national history for both countries.

PC: Our histories are similar. We both had oppressive neighbours whom we struggled with for centuries. We both had poverty, we had pride, a strong will, the skill to survive and persist…

JR: What about religion?

PC: … and we had religion.

CB: I would agree that superficially there are certain overlaps in the two countries' histories, having long, troubled relationships with invading neighbours. But Ireland's history has been dominated by Britain for a thousand years – nobody else has really been involved. We're out on the periphery. Poland's situation seems much more complex, having been in all ways at the centre of Europe, a lot starker and more brutal, buffeted on all sides by countries of varying degrees of hostility.

There has been bitterness, intense violence, mistrust and misunderstanding in the relationship between Ireland and Britain, but also a lot of affection, familiarity, shared interest, common understanding and so on. People have hopped back and forth across the Irish Sea for hundreds of years, sometimes regarding the two places as one country, sometimes not. Practically everybody in Ireland has relatives living in Britain, and did even when things were bad. Irish identity was so firmly rooted in opposition to the British 'other' that it's not entirely clear how we see ourselves now that issues between the two countries are mostly resolved.

Regarding the importance of Catholicism, it was a core part of Irish nationalist identity, one of the markers that made us different to the British, at the core of people's lives, whether they wanted it or not. It's hard to convey how central it was to Irish life (especially in rural areas), or how quickly the church went from this absolutely dominant position of influence to one of absolute decline. This was brought about most significantly by a long history of widespread child abuse and cover-ups that began to emerge in the 1990s and has kept emerging. It was hard for people to take moral guidance from an institution whose own appalling behaviour was repeatedly exposed. At the same time, there was a generation of young people who emigrated, but then – maybe for the first time in Irish history – came back as the economy began to do well. For a

lot of them, I think, their religious practice would have faded away while abroad, and they didn't resume it when they came home. Among people I know, friends and family, there are only a couple who would go to Mass on a regular basis.

At the same time, the church is still heavily involved in education (over 90% of primary schools are run by Catholic boards) and would be seen as the default setting for weddings and funerals. People who are not believers themselves will still get their children christened just because it'll keep older family members happy, will facilitate school attendance, etc. Catholicism is ubiquitous in Irish life and there doesn't seem to be any great urgency to change that, despite the fact that very significant numbers of people don't practice it and would profess horror at the Church's behaviour over the last forty years.

JR: Would you say that the Irish and Poles share a common sense of humour?

PC: Naah. Poles have no sense of humour. Just joking!

CB: I don't know enough about Polish humour to be able to comment. I think there's maybe an overlap in terms of dryness, a darkness, something understated and black. The humour in the Polish books I've read reminded me of certain Irish authors – Flann O'Brien, James Joyce, Samuel Beckett. In my limited personal experience, I've found it easy to get on with Polish people, to have enjoyable and lively conversations, and that seems to be common enough. That's always been in English, though. I'm sure there's plenty I'm missing.

JR: Having talked about the similarities between the two countries as regards history, religion, and humour, maybe we can take a brief look at the differences – from a migrant's view. Piotr, what do you appreciate most about your life in Ireland and what do you miss most about Poland?

PC: I enjoy the peace and quiet over here. Even the capital is so rural. Compared to Warsaw, I feel as if I lived in a bubble, sealed and safe. Perfect solitude, a perfect state for a writer.

The Poland I miss is 'my' Poland of the 1990s; it's a feeling of having lost something that I often experience in moments of weakness. I no longer have any ambitions when it comes to my so-called professional career, but I care about my writing, the process of creation, I demand more and more from myself. But sometimes the practical adult wakes up in me, and tells me that I was an idiot to have given up everything I had back there. I have a day job here in Ireland which has nothing to do with my profession as a journalist or writer. I have lost contact with Poland. I have no Poland any more. The one I had is only in my brain. It no longer exists in the real word.

JR: What was your most poignant experience in terms of Irish-Polish (intercultural) relations?

PC: I think there has never been a moment which I could describe as poignant in any sense, regarding any field. I wish there has been one, though! In general, I wish I had more in common with the Irish. I don't know any Irish writers, artists, poets, or musicians. I am afraid I will never know them, because I am just a Polack. Here we go again: I am one of those who came here to do everything they didn't feel like doing. In the bloody best suit and coat. And the stupid umbrella…

JR: Does living in a foreign language affect you?

PC: Frankly, it doesn't affect me at all, I find it quite a natural state. I actually think I spoke this language much better before I left Poland. As a journalist, I used English vocabulary that was much more complicated. Now I just repeat standard phrases. Had I not started reading my favourite English-language classics in the original, I would have ended up pretty badly I think. I wonder sometimes why hardly anybody among the so-called native speakers has at least a vague idea of how to use the apostrophe. And if I ever meet a local who knows the difference between 'their', 'there' and 'they're' in writing, I will buy him a crate of beer. I mean it!

JR: What are your personal views of the Polish community in Ireland?

PC: It's a huge population, like a relatively large town. You have all kinds of people in a relatively large town, from priests to hookers. I think this explains it all. In general, I am against nationalities. I always say that there are no nationalities, there are only personalities. Nationalities are an antiquated invention. There are simply good people who happened to have come over here from Poland, or wherever else. There are also bad people, stupid people, and wise ones. And so on.

CB: As mentioned before, I think Poles have managed to fit into Irish society with no great difficulty. They may have had an advantage by being mostly Catholic and white and from a country with a vaguely similar history. From what I see, most Polish people seem to manage the superficial aspects of Irish public interaction – the smiling, informality, jokiness, laid-backness, slagging, etc. – pretty well.

I'm not sure that this necessarily means that Polish people are integrated, though. Ireland has no real history of immigration, in the last 400 years at least, and there's no easy route for people from outside to become quickly and deeply absorbed into the community. A lot of Irish people, I think, have friends they've known forever and then a second division of people they know and like but are not especially close to. It can be hard to get beyond that barrier. As Polish people choose to stay here, become part of the scene, get married, have children, etc., that's more likely to happen. Also, younger Irish people seem more open to me,

more used to dealing with people from different cultures. The barriers may not be as high for them.

JR: This interview with an Irishman and a Pole living in Ireland is conducted by a Pole living in Germany, and will be published in an Italian journal dedicated to Irish literature and culture. Let us thus conclude on a European note: do you think that migration from Poland and other countries to Ireland is affecting Polish and Irish perceptions of Europe?

CB: Over the last ten years I suppose the Irish perception of Europe expanded about 500 miles to the east. A lot of people came here from countries that were very unfamiliar to most of the Irish population, and in time Ryanair started flying to those places, and Irish people went to them. They became familiar. That's about it.

PC: I doubt anyone gives Europe a thought. 'Europe' for many is a term which stands for money donations. For some it brings back good memories, for some it must sound like a curse. It depends. As regards Polish-Irish cultural interrelations in particular, if we could only skip the stereotypes and see one another as individuals with individual values, our life on this island would be much more pleasant. As for culture, I deeply hope that all it takes is to believe that Poles in Ireland may stand for more than just the user-friendly cheap workforce, 'the hardworking folk', and all that. These descriptions are often accurate, but they don't tell you much about us. You have to think outside of the box, my Irish friends. We all have to. Even if this requires battling complexes – be it of superiority or inferiority.

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2. *"It Is Important Not to Steal Their Lives": Interview with Dermot Bolger*[1]

In his play *The Townlands of Brazil* (2006), Dermot Bolger (*1959), one of the most acclaimed contemporary writers in Ireland, tells the story of an Irish girl, Eileen, forced to emigrate to England when she finds herself pregnant and out of wedlock in the 1960s, and contrasts it with the story of Monika, a Polish immigrant, who works in today's Ireland to support her daughter. By drawing parallels between the experiences of the two young women, the playwright outlines a set of poignant observations on the similarities between Polish and Irish histories of migration. *The Townlands of Brazil* was first staged at the Axis Arts Centre, Ballymun, Dublin in 2006. The play was then performed in the Polish Theatre in Wrocław in 2008. The following year, it was published by New Island as part of *The Ballymun Trilogy*.

JK: What would you say was the most significant change that Ireland has undergone since the 1990s?

DB: Talking about the start of the 1990s, Ireland was just beginning to find its feet economically. Initially, it was not really much of a multi-cultural society, and not a very obvious place for migrants to seek work. When we started to achieve prosperity, the biggest change has simply been that we had this huge influx of people coming into Ireland. It happened for two reasons. One was that there was physical work here because of the property boom. I've even written a poem about that experience, which is called "Travel Light". It alludes to the story of the army of foreign workmen who built the underground Port Tunnel that linked Dublin Port to the motorway. The title refers to the name of the bag that my own father carried with him when leaving home to work as a sailor on the ships that transported the same goods that would pass through that Port Tunnel. The other reason was a loophole in the Good Friday Agreement, which was a vital part of the Peace Process in Northern Ireland, and like all good complex agreements, the final text was a bit of a fudge. One of the agreement provisions was that anybody born on the island of Ireland was entitled to an Irish passport. The intent was that anyone born in Northern Ireland was automatically entitled to citizenship in the Irish Republic, but one unintended consequence was that, when word of this agreement got out, many women from Africa and elsewhere came to Ireland to have their babies here, in search of a better life for them. These new arrivals could claim citizenship for their child, and then apply for citizenship

[1] The interview is a part of the research project no. DEC-2011/01/B/HS2/05120, which is run at the University of Łódź with financial assistance from the National Science Centre, Poland: <www.emigracja.uni.lodz.pl> (05/2015).

themselves as parents of the Irish baby. Therefore, you had these two very different movements of people into Ireland. One was an influx of often highly skilled workers from Eastern European countries, which had recently joined the EU or were on the cusp of doing so, with qualifications that addressed particular needs in the Irish economy at that time. These workers – from countries like Poland – sometimes wished to stay here or sometimes wanted to earn a certain amount of money before returning home or moving elsewhere. Then the second group consisted of people whose children were born here or who came seeking political asylum, and who hoped to settle in Ireland and make new lives for themselves and their families in the long term.

JK: How well has Irish society coped with the influx of immigrants?

DB: It is too early to say how the Irish people have coped with the influx of immigrants because it always takes a generation to grow up before you see how things truly pan out. For the moment, I think, they have actually coped reasonably well, to be honest with you. Because emigration was such a central part in the life of almost all Irish families, many people could recognise facets of the journeys of their own families in the newcomers. Maybe, that's why Irish people have in general been understanding and welcoming. It's also true that it is easier for the society to accept an influx of immigrants when the country is prosperous and, at the time, Ireland reached virtually full employment and had little awareness of the economic crash about to occur. Therefore, immigration never fermented into a big issue.

JK: Has the economic crisis changed this positive attitude towards newcomers?

DB: Some Irish people can possess two differing attitudes to migrants at the same time. One slightly cautious attitude, which relates to migrants in general on a depersonalised basis while, at the same time, the same person can feel a very different, more welcoming, attitude when it relates to newcomers, whom they know and like, on an individual basis. Unlike in the UK and on the continent, no right-wing party has emerged that tries to blame Ireland's economic disaster upon migrants, although there are undoubtedly individuals who feel resentment in a time when there are fewer jobs and who feel – wrongly in most cases – that sometimes foreigners get certain jobs quicker than Irish people because, out of desperation, they are willing to work for less. But this attitude does not pervade on a large scale. On the personal level, I don't think that Irish people feel any wave of anger towards immigrants, because nobody would be stupid enough to blame the foreign workers who are employed in restaurants or who built apartments, for the crash that occurred within the Irish economy. I haven't noticed any more resentment towards immigrants now than ten years ago, and especially not towards Polish

people who are probably the most popular of all the newcomers, in that both nations have a lot of similarities and links. I think that Polish people have integrated well in Irish society and have gradually become a part of their local communities. That knitting-in process wasn't a collective thing that happened overnight. It happened more through thousands of little interactions in small communities on a daily basis as people on both sides came to know and understand each other.

JK: Why do you think Polish people stayed in Ireland despite the crisis?

DB: Home is a very peculiar concept. It isn't necessarily a physical place, but it is more a state of mind. I know country people who have lived in Dublin for fifty years, but they still are talking about going home when they visit their birthplace in Roscommon for a weekend. But at the same time, their real home is in Dublin. At a certain stage, you get married and have children in whatever new place you find yourself in. Suddenly, your children go to school there and make friends. If you're a Pole in Dublin, then one night you go to bed and people in your dream speak English, not Polish, and likewise if you're an Irish person who has started a new life in Australia, then one day you discover that the bedrock landscape of your dreams is the streets of Perth or Sydney, not the streets of Galway or Cork, where you spent your childhood. Gradually, you realise that you feel more comfortable in this new country than you feel in your birth place. You've made an investment in the local community and developed a sense of belonging here. That is a huge psychological step. It can be very hard to go to a new country, but it can be even harder to go back to your old country that you think you still understand, without realising that it can change in your absence so that you do not truly belong in either place.

JK: Have you yourself ever lived and worked away from home?

DB: Ironically, I am the one of the very few writers of my generation who never lived abroad. When I was young, I made a terrible error of being a practical poet. If you are one, you simply do things. At the age of eighteen, when I was a factory worker in Finglas, I started a publishing company called Raven Art Press. I wanted to publish my contemporaries, the emerging generation of Irish writers. At that time, people used to think that the biggest division was between Irish writers who lived in the country and those who lived in the city. They saw an enormous difference between the country and urban world. I never agreed with them. The biggest division was between Irish writers who stayed in the country and those who left. I remember editing an anthology years ago, called *Ireland in Exile*, with the writings of Colum McCann, Eamonn Wall, Harry Clifton and Joseph O'Connor, basically a whole

generation of writers who had emigrated. They wrote about Irish experience abroad and I deliberately made a point of excluding all writers living in Ireland in it. In my twenties, I became so caught up in the business of running this publishing house and providing the forum for other writers that I have never actually had time to think about leaving the country. However, because I have had a huge number of family members who live abroad, I've always felt strong connections with the experience of emigration.

JK: What was it like for your relatives to move to a foreign country?

DB: My mother was from a family of eleven and my father was from a family of seven. With the exception of two uncles, everybody else emigrated. They all went mainly to England. They left Ireland because there was no work, and they were seeking a better life for themselves. Most of them planned to go only temporarily, just to make money, hoping to come back to Ireland after a year or two. But then they met someone there, often another Irish person, fell in love, and ended up getting married and having children. I have very few Irish born cousins but loads who have Coventry, Leicester, Wolverhampton and London accents. The reason why I possess a Dublin accent is that my father worked as a sailor. He 'emigrated' twice a week for forty-four years. Basically, the primary memory of my father, when I was growing up, was that of a registered envelope with pound banknotes coming in the post every Friday. Eighty per cent of Irish children born between 1931 and 1941 had to emigrate. From any group of forty pupils in a village classroom in 1950, only eight could expect to live as adults in Ireland. The others left to the unspoken relief of government ministers, who knew that emigration was a safety valve on social unrest, sluicing away the disaffected and allowing the government not to tackle fundamental problems within the Irish State. They left to the gain of successive Ministers for Finance, who were able to factor emigrants' remittances as an invisible export into their budgets. All those ten-shilling notes sent home from Birmingham and Manchester counted for more than loose change. At a time of low economic output, emigrants were subsiding the Irish economy up to the equivalent of over nine hundred and fifty million Euro every year in today's money. Therefore, it was a huge cultural change for Ireland to move from being a society which people left to becoming one into which people arrived. Ireland's population began to drastically rise again but this time it was a totally different and more varied type of population. It was people coming here looking for work. They were like replicas of my Irish uncles and aunts who had been forced to leave in previous generations.

JK: In your book, The Ballymun Trilogy, *you talk about the issues of migration and portray a couple of Polish characters. What was the inspiration for the plays?*

DB: The book is a trilogy of plays about a suburb of Dublin called Ballymun that was essentially a greenfield site in the 1960s, but later it was turned into a high-rise suburb of tower blocks, a housing experiment that went badly wrong. At the end of the twentieth century, it started to be knocked down and a new, better-planned suburb was built in its place – a process which has been generally successful but very slow to be completed. I wanted to tell the story of the area in three different plays. The first play, *From These Green Heights* goes back to the 1960s when the towers had been erected because of a housing crisis in 1963, when Dublin Corporation were forced to evacuate and condemn many old tenements, following four deaths caused by collapsing buildings. Housing waiting lists doubled, with some families forced to sleep on the street. Already in Europe high-rise schemes were being abandoned for becoming 'vertical slums' whose inhabitants were socially isolated. This did not deter the Irish Government from deciding that a prefabricated high-rise scheme represented "an exciting alternative to the squalor of Dublin's tenements". The original name for the towers – *Ard Glas* (Green Heights) – reflected official optimism. Impressive plans included an ultra-modern shopping centre and thirty-six acres of public gardens and play areas. The initial leases were handed out almost as a reward to model tenants. The flats were large and had central heating. What they lacked was a thermostat. Tenants baked or froze, unable to turn their own heating on or off. Almost from the start, the lifts malfunctioned, with young families facing an ordeal to simply descend from their flats. Once on the ground floor, there was nowhere to go. It was three years before the first shop was built. Indeed all the promised facilities were similarly absent. People had simply been taken from close knit city communities and dumped amid the tower blocks and fields. At the time that towers were built, there was a small, rural community in the area. The rural locals were terrified of all these Dubliners from the inner city coming out. The newcomers were different, and therefore local people were a bit apprehensive about them, in the same way as Dublin people felt a bit of initial uncertainty about the Polish and other immigrants, who began to arrive in Dublin forty years after the towers were built.

When I set down to write the second play, *The Townlands of Brazil*, my intention was to tell the story of my father's and uncles' generation, who all emigrated. But then I looked at most of the workers who were knocking down the old towers and building the new homes in Ballymun. Many of them were foreign migrant workers. I thought it would be interesting, as so much as an outsider could, to write about the lives of these Poles and other Eastern Europeans, who had come to seek work in Ireland. They followed the work in exactly the same way as my uncles and aunts had followed the work fifty years previously. I made it a point that no character in the second act of *The Townlands of Brazil* should be Irish; that everybody would be a foreigner. I was anxious to tell the stories because, as I make it clear in my

programme notes to *The Townlands of Brazil*, the only person who will ever be able to write a proper play about the Polish experience in Ireland will be a Polish writer. My play is like an intermediate, stopgap measure. It is an Irish person trying to imagine these contemporary emigrant lives that echo the history of his own family.

The last play, *The Consequences of Lightening*, talks about the future of Ballymun. It is centred around the death of an old man, one of the first people who moved into the Ballymun tower blocks. When his wife died, he drank heavily, unable to cope with his grief. One of his sons, ashamed of that, built himself a life as a very successful businessman and broke off all contacts with his father. Particularly after his younger brother, who was a junk, died in Ballymun. A Jesuit priest gradually affects a reconciliation between the father and son. It was almost like trying to bring to an end all the old wounds of Ballymun, all the great family tragedies. It is a play about letting go of the past and embracing the future.

JK: What audience were you aiming The Townlands of Brazil *towards?*

DB: *The Ballymun Trilogy* was a unique project. When Ballymun was built in the 1960s, it was supposed to be a paradise, but it gradually became synonymous with the urban depravation. My ambition was to tell the history of the place that hasn't been told in drama before, but also to tell it primarily to the audience who didn't necessarily go to the theatre regularly or who in many cases had never been in a theatre before. We brought in a non-theatre audience, who might have been sceptical about drama, by holding benefit nights in support of the local school, GAA Club, and Housing Association. These organisations sold tickets and received part of the box office takings. It was very much an experiment in building a new audience from local people. They weren't the standard middle-class theatre-goers. Eventually, people from the outside area were also beginning to come. Ballymun had a bad reputation, so it took a while to break down this prejudice and to get outsiders to visit Axis Arts Centre. I think that a lot of them came to see *The Townlands of Brazil* because they were fascinated by the Polish people around them but didn't quite know how to see into their lives. Finally, I wanted the emigrant workers, living in Ballymun and all over the city, to know that someone was trying to tell their story, probably in that very imperfect way which any outsider will do, but that at least the attempt was made. We wrote the programme note in Irish and in Polish. It didn't seem right to have an Irish woman playing the role of Monika so we brought over an actress from Poland, Julia Krynke, who drew a lot of media attention. *The Polish Herald* – a sixteen-page supplement stapled in the middle of the leading Irish newspaper *The Evening Herald* – and some websites wrote about the event. I couldn't give you the figures for how many Polish viewers we had

each night, because we didn't stop people on the way to the theatre to ask what nationality they were. But we did see faces coming in that we hadn't seen before. It was quite an interesting audience that was very different from the other Ballymun plays.

In 2008, we decided to use the play to forge links with Poland and so we brought *The Townlands of Brazil* over to the Polish Theatre in Wrocław. In turn, the Polish Theatre brought over a one-man show, *The Leash*, to Axis Arts Centre. It was staged in Polish and we had subtitles on it.

JK: Have you tried to play with language to mirror the way Polish immigrants speak?

DB: I tried not to put words or phrases in the mouth of Polish characters that they wouldn't necessarily say. At the same time, I didn't want them to speak Pidgin English. The level of English among Poles in Ireland is exceptionally high. What's distinctive about their language is that they speak in a more precise way, probably because they are anxious to be understood. When you use your mother tongue, you take it for granted that everyone understands you. You may use certain nuances and you believe that your listeners have the cultural framework to understand what you're actually saying. Whereas, when you speak in a foreign language, you cannot take it for certain that the person will understand you, so you speak in a more precise and careful manner. I don't know, however, just how many false notes I have hit in *The Townlands of Brazil* although I am sure that a Polish person would notice them very quickly.

JK: Were your Polish characters based on real people?

DB: None of my characters have ever been based on one true person. I talked to people, but I was very careful not to get too close to anyone personally when researching a novel or a play. I would be very cautious of sitting down and interviewing any Polish person and then transporting all they have said onto paper. It is important not to steal their lives. My characters are rather an amalgam of many Poles that I have met and different stories from different places. For example, I spoke to many men working on building sites here. Some of them were from Poland. They worked long hours on official building sites and then extra hours for cash in the evening, often coming home at midnight, and they would be up at six next morning, getting a bus or a Luas into Tallaght and working for the next eight-hour shift before going on doing casual work again. They were relatively young men who had no ties to homeland, except maybe for emotional bonds, and were planning to settle down here. And then there were people who had families at home and never intended to stay here. They simply tried to build a deposit on a better life back in Poland.

JK: Do Irish and Polish people have anything else in common?

DB: On the long list of Irish heroes, there are figures from mythology like Cúchulainn, but there is also a name of a Polish goal keeper, Jan Tomaszewski. In 1973, Poland kicked England out of the World Cup in Wembley, and they did this by Tomaszewski making an extraordinary string of saves. At the time, Ireland was a really unsuccessful football nation. We hadn't won a match in years. The game in Wembley was on a Wednesday, and the Polish team have arranged to play a friendly match in Dublin on the following Sunday. They arrived in Ireland on Friday like national heroes. They were brought on Irish television and were serenaded with Polish folk songs. Then, I think, they just got drunk for two days and so Ireland beat them one-nil at the weekend. The Irish fell in love with Poland at that moment because they had beaten England and then lost to Ireland. After that, the massive succession of friendlies was organised where the Polish and the Irish teams were forever playing each other. These links were forged long before the wave of Polish emigration to Ireland began. Apart from the sporting links, there were the religious links, and a great interest in Solidarity. Poland was very much on the news and in the consciousness of people at that time. Due to this awareness of their history when Polish people came to Ireland, they received a greater welcome and were able to integrate a lot easier than maybe other newcomers.

JK: What differences do you see between the Polish and Irish nations?

DB: Well, obviously there is the difference of the history. I've always had an interest in Poland and a hopefully relatively informed layman's knowledge of the country, in a sense that I tried to keep up to date with what was happening there. I had followed the Solidarity movement and the gradual struggle for a truly democratic state in the 1980s. Maybe I'm wrong, but I suspect that the older generation of Poles still feel trauma, arising from the fact that they were behind the Iron Curtain for so long. Like in many countries (including Ireland, but in a different way), there may be things that people still feel uncomfortable talking about to their children and grandchildren. To survive in an oppressive society, one occasionally had to do or say things to survive that seemed like the only option at the time, but taken out of the context twenty-five years later, can look bad. Every society that emerges into an independent state exists, for some period of time later, in a state of collective amnesia. But if you grew up under a repressive or puppet regime, I suspect that you learned very quickly that reticence was very important, that your own words could be taken out of context and used as weapons against you. Therefore, you become very careful and don't express yourself openly at times so that nobody knows what you are feeling. There would be certain, very slight, parallels with the Ireland where the mind-set was very controlled by the church. The consequences of speaking out were in no way as severe

as behind the Iron Curtain, but if you worked in the public service, teaching, broadcasting or other areas like this, you always knew that words could have economic consequences for you and your family. As a result, many people developed a similar reticence in keeping their real thoughts to themselves.

I don't think that young Irish or Polish people now would feel any need for such restraint in expressing their opinions or living their lives. The gap that existed thirty years ago between life in the two countries has now completely narrowed, and young Irish and Polish people would have a lot in common, although both obviously remain rooted in their national narratives. Even though this may not be visible or immediate to an outsider, it is always there.

JK: What is the image of an Irishman among Polish immigrants?

DB: That I don't know. The Irish for a very long time had an image of themselves as the nation of lovable rogues. We played traditional music all around the world and we had 'craic' as we call it. When we had no money, we felt that the world loved us. I think that some Poles, working for the Irish, may have had a different experience of us, though – as also happened with Irish workers in Britain in the 1950s, very often most cases of migrants being exploited here came within their own communities, especially in things like the restaurant trade. But when a relationship becomes that of employer and employee, it can sour any relationship. Then many Irish investors unwisely purchased vast numbers of apartments in Eastern European countries, which not only helped to cause the crash in Ireland – with many of them made bankrupt – but must have driven property prices well beyond the reach of local people in these countries, which can only have caused resentment.

JK: Do any of your other works refer to Polish culture?

DB: In the book *Night and Day*, which was my portrait of South Dublin, one poem, "On the 7am Luas to Tallaght", is translated into Polish. And at the moment, I am writing a novel with a band of workers from Eastern Europe in it, some of whom are Polish.

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3. *"Polish Theatre Ireland Is a Place Where the Two Cultures Meet": Interview with Anna Wolf*[2]

Anna Wolf (*1983) was born in Bydgoszcz. After graduating in Theatre Studies in 2007, she moved to Dublin where she started to work in a monitoring services company and signed up for a Public Relations course with the European Institute of Communications. Anna has been fascinated by the theatre since she was a little girl, so a couple of months after her arrival, she embarked on setting up a professional theatre group in Dublin.

JK: How did the idea of Polish Theatre Ireland come about?

AW: In February 2008, I met an Irishwoman, Helen McNulty, in the Focus Theatre office where we were supposed to work together. Eventually, I didn't get the job at the theatre, but the meeting brought about the idea of setting up a Polish-Irish theatre group. Helen came up with the name and we wrote the *Mission Statement* together[3]. She took on the responsibilities of the producer and I became the artistic director. Our intent was to create a space where Polish and Irish artists would be able to conceive something original and flourish artistically. We wanted the two cultures to coexist on the stage. It soon became clear that we were actually dealing with two very different cultures. During the rehearsals for our first play in 2010, the Irish, who don't really have any theatre superstitions, laughed at our rituals. They couldn't understand, for example, why we would stomp on a script that had accidentally fallen to the floor or why we would give one another a kick for good luck before the performance. But then they quickly adopted our traditions and secretly trampled on their script pages if they had been dropped.

JK: When did the other members join the theatre?

AW: Half a year after my arrival in Dublin, I came across Kasia Lech on Facebook, with whom I currently manage the theatre. With time we found our other members. One of them was Agata Kaputa, a graduate from the prestigious PWST National Academy of Theatre Arts in Kraków, who later recorded and edited the voiceover for our first production. Then everyone would bring their friends. This was how Oscar Menandi, a Polish actor of Congolese origin, joined the crew. When he was five, his parents left their home country

[2] The interview was translated by Aleksandra Kumycz. It forms part of the research project no. DEC-2011/01/B/HS2/05120, which is run at the University of Łódź with financial assistance from the National Science Centre, Poland: <www.emigracja.uni.lodz.pl> (05/2015).

[3] The text of the *Mission Statement* is available online at: <polishtheatre.wordpress.com/about-us/mission-statement/> (05/2015).

because of the war and the whole family settled down in Poland. A while later, Alicja Ayres joined in. She was a Polish actress living in Dublin at that time and performing at the Abbey Theatre. Our group grew larger every day. Konrad Kania began to compose music for our productions. In February 2010, we started to cooperate with an Irish actor, John Currivan, and that's how our theatre company was formed.

JK: Your first production premiered in autumn 2010 – Radosław Paczocha's Scent of Chocolate*. The play tells the story of a family disintegration after the mother decides to emigrate. The woman leaves her homeland, seemingly in order to raise money for her son's rehabilitation, but in fact she wants to start a new life. Her daughter is forced to step into the mother's shoes and take care of her handicapped brother and her father, who has chosen to withdraw into 'inner emigration'. Why did you select this particular play?*

AW: I first heard *Scent of Chocolate* on Polish Radio Three during their Christmas broadcast. It was so engrossing that I turned to the Polish Theatre in Poznań with a request for contact details to the author of the script. Then I called Radosław Paczocha to ask for his permission to stage the play and, when he gave me the green light, we got down to work enthusiastically. We settled on two language versions, which we staged in turns. One day the play was performed in Polish and the next day in English. It attracted a lot of people, who were queuing in front of the theatre. Even though we brought in some extra chairs, there still wasn't enough space for everybody. After the opening night, we organised a meeting with Radosław Paczocha, during which a number of migrant viewers said that it was a great pleasure for them to be able to watch a play in Polish. However, it turned out that the English nights were even more popular. Apart from Irish people, who made up about forty percent of the audience, Poles were buying tickets, too, because some of them couldn't come when the Polish version was on. As a result, we received more bookings for the English show from the very beginning. Encouraged by our success, we returned to the stage in December and enjoyed unabated popularity. When we staged the play for the third time as part of a charity event in 2012, the theatre was again filled to the rim. We had two hundred people each night.

JK: Did your next project, Chesslsugh Mewash*, gain as much popularity as* Scent of Chocolate*?*

AW: Like with *Scent of Chocolate*, we had the premiere of our second production in September, but a year later, in 2011. The title, *Chesslsugh Mewash*, is a phonetic spelling of the name of the famous Polish poet, Czesław Miłosz, who was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1980. The play is based on his poems from the 1960s when he was an emigrant in Paris. The project received

three very different reviews: one bad, one average and one good. I think that it wasn't fully understood. Perhaps, it's because we used a wide spectrum of languages. We intertwined poems in Polish and English with their translations in Lithuanian, French, Slovak, and even Irish. We wanted to prove that Miłosz's poems embody universal truths, even though reality has changed over the last fifty years. Our world has become multicultural and obsessed with online communication, but our search for identity is not much different from the poet's errands. We came up with a story of six characters and turned Miłosz's poems into dialogues. Interwoven motifs, nationalities, and languages symbolise the difficulties we presently face when looking for our own 'self'. We staged the play at the Dublin Fringe Festival.

JK: What followed after Chesslsugh Mewash*?*

AW: After *Chesslsugh Mewash*, we organised staged readings of plays by Polish and Lithuanian contemporary playwrights. The project was called *Freedom LTD* and we worked on it in cooperation with the local amateur Lithuanian theatre, Alternayva Alternatyvai. We selected four dramas: two Lithuanian plays – *The Girl Who Feared God* by Gintaras Grajauskas and *The Interpreter* by Laima Vince – and two Polish works – Radosław Paczocha's *Be Like Kazimierz Deyna* and *Foreign Bodies* by Julia Holewińska, for which the author received the Gdynia Playwright Award in 2010. We chose the plays because of the topics they tackled. We wanted to capture Poland and Lithuania in their fight for freedom and then ask whether we actually live up to and make full use of our liberation. Do we exercise the right to be free or do we put shackles on our minds? *Foreign Bodies* tries to answer these questions. The play takes place both at the times of communism and at present. It tells the story of a man, called Adam, who was an active member of the Solidarity movement under communist rule in Poland. As he has always wanted to be a woman, he decides to have sex reassignment surgery after the country regains its independence in 1989 and changes his name to Eve. His decision makes everybody turn away from him. The play is based on an article Julia Holewińska read in a Polish daily, *Gazeta Wyborcza*. The character's sexual transformation is a metaphor for the changes Poland has undergone. We've regained political freedom, but can we enjoy social freedom? The same question is posed in Radosław Paczocha's play, *Be Like Kazimierz Deyna*. The drama depicts the Polish road to independence from the perspective of a national football team fan. The father of the protagonist, who is obsessed with the successful footballer, Kazimierz Deyna, wants to turn his son into a top scorer at all costs. But despite the boy's best efforts, neither his dad nor a professional football coach succeed in turning him into Deyna's 'successor'. As a result, the boy embarks on a quest to find his own idea for life. John Currivan, enthralled by the humour of the play, tried to talk me into staging it in Dublin and passing him the baton of the director.

But coming back to *Freedom LTD*, we flew the playwrights over to Ireland and organised a two-day festival in the Submarine Bar in Crumlin, on the outskirts of Dublin. The plays were read by Irish and Polish actors. After each reading, we held a discussion. They were chaired, first by Gavin Kostick, the Literary Officer of Fishamble, one of the most important Irish contemporary theatre companies, and then by Willie White, the Chief Executive of the Dublin Theatre Festival. I was proud that we managed to organise such a significant and interesting meeting.

JK: Then you decided to stage Delta Phase. *The play tells a story of three friends, or rather hooligans, chavs, who decide to have some fun on a Saturday evening. Drunk and doped, they lose touch with reality and end up committing a brutal murder. When did you start preparing for the production?*

AW: I started the preparations in August 2012 with booking the theatre and translating Radosław Paczocha's text into English, actually into Irish English, in order to illustrate that the play was originally written in slang. As a result, *Delta Phase* turned out to be a mixture of strong Polish, Dublin, North-Dublin and Mullingar accents. It took me two and a half months to render the whole text. I wanted to tease as much Polishness out of it as I could. I didn't want the audience to have any doubts that they were dealing with Polish, not Irish or English, hooligans. Unfortunately, we didn't manage to prepare a bilingual project, as we had done with *Scent of Chocolate*, because the Polish actors were snowed under with work at their drama schools and couldn't find the time for rehearsing. That's why we staged *Delta Phase* solely in English, which pleased the scriptwriter, but in my opinion deterred a lot of our Polish audience. There were evenings when we had an entirely Irish audience.

JK: After Radosław Paczocha, you turned to Julia Holewińska's plays.

AW: Yes, the production of *Foreign Bodies* by Julia Holewińska turned out to be our great media and artistic success. We got a chance to stage it in the Project Arts Centre, the largest theatre centre in Dublin. As the play refers to the events from the past and combines them with current affairs, the Irish audience received a dose of knowledge about the fall of the communist regime and the rise of capitalism in Poland. The next play we worked on, *Bubble Revolution*, was especially dear to us because it told the story of our generation. The generation of people who are now in their thirties. A lot of them decided to emigrate to the British Isles after 2004. Not unlike the main character, we have only a vague memory of communism. This time, the play was staged both in Ireland and Great Britain.

JK: What audiences have you been aiming your plays at?

AW: Our initial idea was to start a theatre that would bring Irish and Polish audiences together, but of course, we don't aim our projects at any specific nationalities. I'd say we perform for Dubliners. Our audiences comprise a multicultural mix of actors, artistic directors, critics, and people from the streets who, at least for the time being, are usually Polish or Irish. One of our goals is to promote contemporary Polish culture among the locals; therefore, I've subscribed to *Dialog*, a Polish monthly which publishes brand-new dramatic texts, to be up to date with our modern playwriting. I always do my best to choose texts that somehow relate to the Irish context. Even though I usually go for drama, I'm also open to prose and poetic texts that could be adapted for the stage. On the other hand, our aim is also to familiarise Polish immigrants with the local theatre, its language, actors, and critics. Polish Theatre Ireland is a place where the two cultures meet.

JK: Since we touched upon the topic of nationalities, what do you think of Irish people?

AW: I think they are friendly, optimistic, and helpful. I remember when I first went to Kilkenny. Lost in thought, I stood in the street, and suddenly an Irishwoman approached me and offered to help me find a job. She led me to a nearby supermarket, gave me an application form and went on to explain how to fill it in. Nobody would approach me like that in Poland! I also think that the Irish live on a day-to-day basis. They don't worry about tomorrow and they don't make far-reaching plans. In Poland, it's the other way round. We live on our dreams and we plan everything in hope of a better future. That's why here, in Ireland, people have their apartments made over only every now and then; whereas every time I visit Poland, I hear the noise of drilling, because of someone redoing their flat. It's partly due to our financial situation, but it's also a consequence of our mentality. Unlike us, the Irish are more relaxed. They don't look for problems where there aren't any. It was one of the reasons why I came here. In Poland, I felt under constant pressure to get married, to start a family, to take out a bank loan for a flat. I don't feel that here. And from the perspective of a person running a theatre company, I admire the Irish people's interest in the theatre. During the Dublin Theatre Festival, all tickets were sold out even though they were quite expensive.

JK: And what do Irish people think of Poles?

AW: They regard us as a very hardworking nation and they feel that we're similar to them. We became quite popular here during the Euro Championship in 2012. Irish football fans, who visited Poland, kept repeating on the radio and TV that they were impressed by how well things were organised and by the atmosphere of the whole event. To make the most of these enthusiastic attitudes, the authorities of the city of Poznań set up a photo exhibition in Dublin that displayed photographs of Irish football fans in Polish stadiums.

JK: What differences can you see between the ways theatres are run in Poland and in Ireland?

AW: The Polish and Irish systems are very different. In Poland, the play is run as long as it is popular, sometimes even for ten years. Most actors work full time and are paid a monthly salary. In Ireland, they rarely have a permanent job, and only celebrities can make a living from acting. The other actors work on a contract basis, so they have to have regular day jobs. The audience is perceived as customers and the play as a product. The show is run for three weeks straight, and then it's taken down. The memory of it fades away and the only sign that it had taken place remains in the archives. Not without reason, they call a show here a theatre 'production'. In Poland, there is greater artistic freedom, more time for brainstorming and rehearsing. Here, you have to follow a strict timeframe, imposed on you by the market. The rehearsals have to be covered out of the play's budget so they can't last longer than a month or two. After that, you run out of money.

JK: Since you mention money, where does your theatre get funding from?

AW: We're sponsored mainly by the Polish Embassy and the Consulate in Dublin. Additionally, we raise some money over the Internet and during special donation events. The Polish Social and Cultural Association provides us with a room for rehearsals free-of-charge. Every year, we also apply for subsidies from the Arts Council and the Irish Ministry for Culture, with no success so far. But we'll keep trying until they notice us.

JK: How do you promote your projects?

AW: We use a whole spectrum of channels. From the very beginning, I've done a lot of campaigning via social media, such as Twitter and Facebook. What's interesting, they seem to spread the word more efficiently than our website (<https://polishtheatre.wordpress.com>). We also use traditional methods, such as flyers and posters that are distributed throughout the city. Additionally, I spend a lot of time promoting the theatre in Polish and Irish media. Articles about Polish Theatre Ireland have been published in *Polska Gazeta* – a Polish weekly published in Dublin – and *The Irish Times*, among others. Our members, Kasia Lech and Alicja Ayres, were interviewed for a lengthy feature entitled "Please Don't Cast Me as a Prostitute – Again", which was published in the largest-selling weekly, *The Sunday Times*. In the interview, they argue that they are fed up with being offered the roles of cleaners, builders, and prostitutes all the time. Even though this stereotype doesn't come out of nowhere – on arrival, most migrant women from Poland found employment in hotels and men on building sites – they claim that being cast in the same roles over and over again only reiterates prejudices regarding foreigners that no longer hold true. The actors don't mind taking the part of a cleaner, but they'd rather impersonate an Irish or, let's say, a German character, not always a Polish one. They conclude that Irish producers should acknowledge that Ireland has turned into a multicultural country with a myriad of languages. From all green, it has changed into a multi-coloured island.

JK: Do you have plans to return to Poland?

AW: Poland will always be my homeland, the place where I was born. Even though I left, I consider myself a patriot. We don't have to fight any regime at present, so our patriotism manifests itself rather in our affection for culture. That's why I promote Polish culture among the Irish and among migrants. In Ireland, I met people who inspired me to start a theatre company and they constantly support me in my endeavours. Although I miss my family, whom I left behind in Poland, I can't imagine going back. Currently, I live in Rome, from where I manage Polish Theatre Ireland, and I'm working on a new play, *The Passengers*, which I'm co-writing with an Irish playwright, Rory O'Sullivan. The play explores various dimensions of (e)migration and depicts it from different perspectives. It has been inspired by real life stories and presents the journey of three characters, including an Irishman and a Pole, who are trying to find their place in the ever-changing world of today[4].

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[4] *The Passengers* premiered in April 2015 at the New Theatre in Dublin and directed by Emilia Sadowska.