

# Clowning as Human Rights Activism in Recent Devised Irish Theatre\*

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*Abstract:*

This article focuses on clown techniques in devised theatre pieces by Charlie O'Neill and Brian Fleming, claiming those strategies as an emergent category of human rights activism in Irish theatre. Fleming's *Trilogy* (2011, 2012, 2014) and O'Neill's *Hurl* (2003) and *Dodgems* (2008a) are influenced by clown as practiced by Barabbas, but they return to a more text-driven, issue-based theatre to advocate for human rights. In close-reading these theatre pieces, I examine the following clown techniques: physical theatre, audience participation, parody and reversals of power, and self-examination. I argue that clowning is a growing undercurrent in Irish theatre, advancing human rights speech that challenges neoliberal and conservative views on immigration, racism, poverty, and homosexual rights.

*Keywords:* Clown, Devised Theatre, Human Rights, Physical Theatre, Resistance

## *1. Send in the Clowns*

Following the withdrawal of Ireland's Arts Council funding for his company Barabbas in 2010, Raymond Keane devised and performed in *City of Clowns* (2011) as the homeless clown Fibril, in which he playfully interacted with a sea of cardboard boxes and was ultimately enveloped by 50 volunteer clowns (Crawley 2011). "Clowns are by nature homeless", Keane muses when discussing the show, remembering his time working as a hairdresser in London in the late 1970s where he first witnessed a large homeless population (*ibidem*). Keane's inspiration from both artistic economic deprivation and the condition of homelessness is an example of the social justice imperative embedded within contemporary clown work in Ireland. The resistant

politics of the performance surfaced when a workshop of the production was staged during the International Monetary Fund (IMF) visit to Dublin, characterized by Peter Crawley as a “much angrier show” (*ibidem*). Indeed, the clown’s response to his environment is *not* apolitical as it may seem, but absorbs the political atmosphere surrounding it and reflects its own precarious position. Fibril’s emergence from storage in a large packing box, his playful interactions with an imagined world, and his recognition of his place within a world of other clowns enact the metaphorical journey of the clown: from play to self-knowledge and recognition of others as equal beings. Keane’s philosophy of clown centers on the clown as “very truthful”, as fools who can proclaim that the Emperor is not wearing clothes (Murphy 2007). He insists, “A clown is a state rather than a character. I am very much a clown. Everybody has a clown within them” (*ibidem*). Within this framework, the clown’s role as observer and mimic of society offers a subversive form of resistance to forms of power that threaten human rights.



1 - Raymond Keane in *City of Clowns*. Photograph by Patrick Redmond

While several scholars have discussed the ‘theatre of clown’ in Ireland as originated by the Barabbas company, few if any have explored how subsequent theatre practitioners are adapting and projecting clown techniques forward in

Irish theatre. This article focuses on clown techniques in devised theatre pieces by Charlie O'Neill and Brian Fleming, claiming those strategies under an emergent category of human rights activism. Fleming's *Trilogy*<sup>1</sup> (2011, 2012, 2014) and O'Neill's *Hurl* (2003) and *Dodgems* (2008a) draw from Keane's clown perspective and modes of devising, but they return to a more text-driven, issue-based theatre to advocate for human rights. While there are several different types of clown and clown techniques, I will examine the following here: physical theatre, audience participation, parody and reversals of power, and self-examination. These four 'clown' techniques enhance the social justice imperatives of the theatre-makers' work and assert its function as resistance to abuses of human rights. I argue that clowning is a growing undercurrent in Irish theatre, advancing human rights speech that challenges neoliberal and conservative views on immigration, racism, poverty, and homosexual rights.

Clown-influenced theatre is overdue for critical recognition within a growing body of scholarly interest in contemporary Irish devised theatre. Identifying a lineage of physical clown theatre in these pieces charts a path from social justice theatre in Ireland to a larger movement of human rights theatre that uses clown tactics to advocate for recognition of the dignity and rights of others. In this way, clown-driven performances build intentional micro-communities of awareness concerning human rights abuses. Clowns are necessarily irreverent, implicitly interrogating systems of power and parodying authority. What is accepted without question as logical is suspended and even reversed by the clown figure. Eric Weitz explains that in clown theatre, "A playful quality of behavior loosens, floats, frees its participants from the earthbound embrace of the physical" (2000, 270). The conscious presentation of a clown can suspend gender binaries and bring intentionality to the emotions clowns embody, such as a tear drop painted under one eye, or the exaggerated red upturned mouth. Their red noses, big shoes and wigs denote self-conscious performance and play, yet even when not in costume clowns use techniques of physicality and power reversals to command self-reflection. The clown performer can get away with provocative statements and dangerous parodies, because the utterances are coded as clown. Inherent within the dynamics of clown theatre's oppositional stance is an interactive, authentic, politicized engagement.

As a white, middle-class native Irish *bodhrán* player, Brian Fleming comes to the clown persona as an outsider, asking audiences to believe that clowning was thrust upon him. Using the clown persona, however, Fleming is able in his

<sup>1</sup> Fleming's *Trilogy* consists of three pieces: *Gis a Shot of Your Bongos Mister* (2011), *Have Yis No Homes to Go To?* (2012), and *A Sacrilegious Lesbian and Homosexual Parade* (2014). All three pieces were directed by Raymond Keane. Each piece has been performed separately at times, but I viewed them at the Galway Theatre Festival in 2015 billed as a trilogy, therefore I will consider them as a connected series in this article.

work to transcend his own embodiment and bring audiences along in identifying with marginalized groups in Ireland. Charlie O'Neill draws upon his own fairgrounds upbringing to channel clown technique into his performers' depictions of the lives of individuals speaking from subject positions not typically heard. His use of humor, physical theatre, and storytelling raises awareness and inspires empathy. O'Neill's work centers around the concept of the outsider, a figure whom he finds compelling because it "[gives] us a sense of another world, another possibility, another set of rules, it helps us 'make ourselves up'" (2016, personal communication). If the outsider shows an alternative state of being, his theory of clown envisions the clown with the power to inspire self-knowledge: "the clown draws people in, subverts power, educates and survives. The clown is flawed like all of us so we can identify with him – or her" (*ibidem*). Fleming, too, sees clowns as subversive: "they don't leave anything, they don't take anything away. They don't go as powerful people, they are not telling people what to do, they're Fools, people laugh at them" and yet in his experience "they broke down barriers everywhere they went" (McBride 2015). For both theatre practitioners, the clown provides an entry-point to exploring the lives of those lacking power and to guiding audiences towards identifying with them.

Clowns call attention to themselves, and they create a connection with audiences that has political potential. Veronica Coburn, one of the trio of Barabba founders with Raymond Keane and Mikel Murfi, wrote in her book *Clown Through Mask* (2013) with Sue Morrison of the potential of clowns for resistance speech: "The clowns are then society's safety valve. The clowns provide the emergency exit. They keep society safe by being unafraid. Unafraid to say what needs to be said, see what needs to be seen and, if necessary, tear down that which should no longer be allowed to prevail" (2013, 3). Raymond Keane further explains, "clown is a mask behind and through which is revealed the very essence of being human" (quoted in O'Connor 2012). The clown's red nose, what Jacques LeCoq called "the smallest mask in the world" conveys exaggerated emotions that can either affirm or mock the audience (quoted in Keane 2004, 96). When a white man who blends in with the majority and retains unquestioned privilege dons clown garb, he joins the minority, the outcasts and outsiders. Thus, the clown allows for a limited disavowal of privileged status that opens up avenues for incisive critique. Unfortunately, clown-influenced theatre has not yet been connected explicitly with human rights theatre, despite its compelling symbolic articulation of essential human equality and dignity.

## 2. *Human Rights Theatre and Devised Performance*

In his book *Theater and Human Rights* (2009), Paul Rae asserts a special role for theatre as an "inherently social activity" with the capacity for making vocal human rights interventions:

As an art form operating at the charged point where lives are given voice and experiences form, and where representatives of one group can make their address to others, the theatre is well-placed to bring to light behavior that contests or contravenes human rights standards. (22)

Following the idea that the theatre gives voice to issues of human experience, Mary Luckhurst and Emilie Morin describe human rights theatre as “tied to the unspoken and the unspeakable: it exploits silence, site, the body, gesture and objects in order to speak to, for and against” (2015, 6). Through performance, the paradox of human rights – a concept that ironically emerges only in the *absence* of rights – is explored through silences and expressions of voice. Further, the relationship created between the performers and the audience is an essential aspect of theatre that allows for contemporary critique of social and political conditions. According to David Román, “Performance proves an especially effective means to engage the contemporary in that artists and audiences are constituted and composed as a provisional collective in a particular temporal moment and in a specific localized space ... they enact and perform a temporary and conditional we” (2005, 1). Following the “provisional collective” of contemporary performance, this “conditional we” is poised to address shared concerns. This potential is maximized when theatre pieces are made in collaboration, as in devised performance.

An understanding of O’Neill’s and Fleming’s work as devised theatre paves the way for recognizing clown techniques within it, and further for exploring how those methods articulate resistance to human rights abuses. In *Devised Performance in Irish Theatre*, Siobhan O’Gorman and Charlotte McIvor define devised performance as “material that is collectively created by individuals working together in ways that resist (but do not necessarily reject altogether) the hierarchical organizational structures usually associated with institutional theatre” (2015, 2). They go further to identify devised theatre as a “politicized practice” employed by Irish theatre makers to address complex social issues, to create “theatre that contests hegemonic, stratified constructions of community that are grounded in such interconnected identity categorizations as gender, sexuality, social class, ethnicity, and religion” (*ibidem*, 13, 21). The collaborative, multimodal, and physical nature of Fleming’s *Trilogy* (2011, 2012, 2014) and O’Neill’s *Hurl* (2003) and *Dodgems* (2008a) places them firmly in the category of devised theatre. I contend that the very features that make these pieces devised theatre are contiguous with clown theatre.

Devised theatre also overlaps with physical theatre when discussing the theatre pieces examined in this article. Physical theatre, with its integration of movement, visual aspects, and music, unsettles the dominance of text-based Irish theatre, making it an apt venue for clown-influenced work and a theatre that challenges hierarchies of power. Deirdre Mulrooney contrasts the

prevailing tradition of Irish theatre as “static, neck-up ‘stand and deliver’ Abbey acting style, which was used to deliver the typical wordy, cerebral Abbey script” with physical theatre as a “new idiom” in Irish culture that became prominent beginning in 1993 with the inception of *Barabbas the Company* (2006, 175). Colleen Szabó notes that “*Barabbas* attempted to break into a theatre market that famously wanted to banish all movement from the stage” (2012, 35). Charlie O’Neill also cites the absence of physical theatre prior to that period: “While Irish drama and arts policy was (rightly) obsessed with our wonderful literary tradition, there was no sense of the physical, the body, of movement in our canon” (2016, personal communication). Therefore, the decision to privilege movement and music equally to language in Fleming’s and O’Neill’s pieces is itself a kind of revolutionary act, a choice to resist the canon of Irish theatre in order to create an alternative expression suited to representing marginalized people and controversial issues.

### 3. *The Outsider in Charlie O’Neill’s Work*

Charlie O’Neill’s *Hurl*, first produced at the Galway Arts Festival in 2003, is a signal example of clown influences acting on a more naturalized theatre piece. Eight actors play thirty-two roles, rotating in and out of roles and relying on gesture and mannerism to differentiate the characters. A hurling team in a rural town forms out of the boredom of several characters stuck at a Direct Provision center, and it comes to be made up of African, Latin American, and Bosnian members as well as a few native Irish ‘outsiders’. The play exposes the very real challenges of asylum-seekers, who are prohibited from work yet only receive 19 euros per week, and who must wait sometimes years for their applications to be heard while isolated 2 miles outside of town. While the play acknowledges that the human rights abuses in their home countries are often much worse (i.e., the team’s captain, Musa, knows he will be killed when he returns to Sierra Leone), the complicity of the Irish in stowing away vulnerable human beings in refugee camp conditions is simultaneously projected as a violation of basic humanity and dignity.

*Dodgems*, produced in 2008a by CoisCéim dance theatre, envelops the audience in the frenetic energy of a carnival atmosphere and colliding bumper cars on a working track (called dodgems in fairgrounds vernacular) to represent the exotic and chaotic world of “new arrivals and indigenous misfits”<sup>2</sup>. O’Neill’s rationale for the piece distinctly claims a human rights agenda:

<sup>2</sup> All references from *Dodgems* are from an unpublished version, the 5<sup>th</sup> draft of the play from August 2008, which Charlie O’Neill generously shared with me. It must be noted that any critical discussion of *Dodgems* is necessarily limited by the fact that the performance continued evolving throughout its two and a half week run, including deleted scenes and the two acts in the script combined into one.

Exclusion is becoming systemic in certain areas and socio-economic classes. The arrival of new cheap labour is causing fear and jealousy. ... Because of these systems and events, we are blindly germinating a race of outsiders, inside our own borders. ... Our outsiders need to be supported and invited in - not shunned and excluded. (O'Neill 2008b)

The piece is episodic, constructed as a series of dance vignettes about various types of outsiders confronting resistance to social and policy barriers towards their success. The movement language establishes the common humanity of the characters and evokes empathy from the audience. The central conceit, a dodgem car, is transformed throughout the piece to represent different images of mobility or crashing against obstacles. *Dodgems* builds to a raucous, hoofing dance at the end that encourages unity between the players and the audience.



2 - *Dodgems*, photograph by Patrick Redmond

In *Hurl* (2003), physical theatre is a transformative tool that harnesses the cultural influence of sport to drive its dual imperatives of social justice and creative artistry. The show incorporates puppets, choreographed dance, and shadow play as a response to racism and bigotry towards inward migrants residing in Ireland. The percussion of *De Jimbe* (composed by Brian Fleming) works with a screen projection to conflate the scenes of civil war in Africa, where children use hurleys as weapons, with the rural Irish setting of the foreground hurling pitch. This aural conflation with war and sport

is representative of the types of equalizing found in *Hurl*<sup>3</sup>. In addition, the choreographed hurling sequences liken the sport with dancing, poetry, and laughter. Prior to a match, Father Lofty coaches his team: “Let poetry write ye’re script today lads. ... They won’t rhyme like ye” (2003, 103). Metatextually, the play employs hurling to merge different cultures under an Irish banner; hurling is not just a physical competition but also an artistic and cultural expression of Irish resistance. The stylized and physical choreography of the play by Raymond Keane resembles a clown performance. For example, when the coaches deliver intercut team pep talks, the players are lined up on a bench representing each team in turn, with each coach giving a pep talk and the team spinning around to play the opposite team between speeches. The game of hurling is presented as a dance, with the Freetown Slashers “[dancing] the opposition into submission” (*ibidem*, 110, stage directions). Physical clowning is used for humor when a Yarn Teller describes the Slashers as “shitless” as they cower and shiver in terror with their backs to the audience. As each game moves them closer to the final the players become more politicized with their clown techniques, wearing identical masks bearing the face of their team captain Musa, who was deported to Sierra Leone through the intervention of local GAA chairman Rusty. When they remove those masks in synchronization, they wear their ‘game faces’ so to speak, and the unity of the team’s statement of support is registered. Using mask as a clown technique in this instance, to equalize and depersonalize, offers a powerful non-verbal form of opposition to injustice.

In *Dodgems*, too, physical theatre aspects are central to the piece: the stage is a working dodgem track with 12 electric cars, the live circus band joins both the players and the audience, and the sign-language interpreter becomes a character. Choreographed by David Bolger, who admits to being “fascinated by circus” from a young age, the movement vocabulary in the piece displays the themes of avoidance versus collision and the displacement of outsiders (Mulrooney 2006, 145). In one visual example David Toole, a 3 foot, 2 inch amputee, dances with taps on his hands and leverages his differences in physicality to unsettle expectations about ability and humanity. Traditional Irish dancing is also referenced subversively when a black man dressed in a girl’s Irish dancing costume step-dances while delivering a lecture about ‘the burqa’ that combines Irish and Islamic religious traditions.

Audience participation in *Hurl* occurs primarily through interactions between the players and the audience. The storytelling structure, which ro-

<sup>3</sup> Several discussions of *Hurl* have been unfavorable regarding what some see as the play’s oversimplifications, notably those by Colleen Szabó and Susan Conley. Szabó concludes that despite the engaging choreography of hurling through dancing, “It seems as if all the possible clichés and stereotypes that can be associated with the topic of the play appear in the performance” (2012, 126).

tates “yarn-tellers” who sometimes act roles and other times narrate or act as spectators, destabilizes the boundary between audience and players. In *Theatre and Globalization*, Dan Rebellato links the audience’s position with a unified “cosmopolitan ethical principle” explaining, “There may be something distinctly ethical in the position of the audience. First, their identification with characters on stage – often kinds of people that we would not ordinarily encounter – perhaps prepares the way for such identifications outside the theatre” (2009, 72). The audience enters the space where actors are selling tickets to the hurling match, reminding them that they are part of a collectively imagined stadium of fans come to watch a performance *and* sporting event. This becomes evident in the scene when the actors play spectators at a Freetown Slashers match who are making assumptions about each other. A local man assumes that a black man next to him supports the Slashers because of his race, and a Chinese man in the stands turns out to be an Irish language teacher. The audience of the play, perhaps having judged the other audience members themselves, is encouraged to reflect on biases and perhaps recognize their own unintentional racism.

As conceived by O’Neill and enacted by the players in *Dodgems*, audience participation is a ‘total immersion’ in the sights and smells of the fairgrounds environment. The audience interacts with the characters in the prologue, selling tickets that include a voucher for free candy floss, a Polish pierogi or an African plantain. At the end of the performance, the audience is encouraged to join the cast in dodgem cars, stimulating a feeling of unity with the players. By bookending the performance with audience-response activities, the audience resembles a circus clown’s spectators, constantly reminded that their reactions are being watched as well as the players, and that events depicted in the show are based on reality though packaged as circus fantasy. When immigrants arrive on shore via a dodgem car imaginatively fashioned as a ship, each passenger performs a nervous dance to present him or herself to the authorities, transforming the audience into the officials responsible for stamping and thus affirming or rejecting their humanity (McGrath 2013, 153). Another dance using suitcases as props reflects the restless, crowded waiting that asylum seekers must endure, while employing stylized and non-verbal movement with the suitcases that is reminiscent of clown performance.

Parody, one of the clown’s most effective tools, is also used to advance a human rights agenda on behalf of acceptance of the refugees. In *Hurl*, Rusty, who resents the outsiders invading his turf, recruits his own team of native Irish brutes and is portrayed in the language of the play as a dictator with terrorist ideologies. Lofty describes Rusty’s xenophobia in terms of zealous American “war on terror” initiatives: “This is his empire... anyone outside the townland boundary is Taliban” (2003, 93). Rusty advocates ruthless violence towards the other team: “winning usn’t enough lads—I want terrorism!” (*ibidem*, 110). Rusty’s vulgar accent signals his provincialism, and his speeches incite racist

violence towards the Freetown Slashers. He instigates: “they’re fired up in there definy now with their blow-ins and black fellas and Bosnians. They’ve red diesel in their veins. They’ve curry on their chips. Look out in the crowd there biys. It’s a fucking circus out there!” (*ibidem*, 103). It is telling that he calls the outsiders a “circus”, the word choice indicating that a circus stands for diversity, variety, freakishness, and uncontrolled energy. As a parody figure, Rusty animates the voice of those who wish to exclude inward migrants due to racist stereotypes, and dismantles its rhetoric by becoming the clown himself. The audience is encouraged to laugh at Rusty’s ridiculous perspective, such as when he attempts to redirect the hopeful players away from a sport associated with Irish culture: “Would ye not do the runnin biys? Yeer good at that” (*ibidem*, 95). By recognizing Rusty’s wrong-headed fear of losing his heritage by sharing it with those who don’t conform to his idea of Irishness, his language is disarmed and replaced with a more inclusive concept of Irish culture.

The clown’s ability to reverse power imbalances is well represented in *Dodgems*, when the same car that represented the boat of precarious refugees becomes a lap-dancing booth and then a taxi driven by an insensitive driver with Muslim passengers. These transformations retain the initial impression of a dodgems car, originally associated with funfair recreation and glee, then becoming a space of anguish, terror, and discomfort. The symbolic reminder of space as occupied by the powerful, and of the outsider at risk of being bumped while trying to avoid collision is a potent one. Some outsiders are on the margins of one group, but become gatekeepers of another, a concept that may be portrayed through linguistic variances. For example Toberboss speaks to a Romany man named Stanislav in Palari, the cant of fairground workers:

Stan my apple flan, I can’t waste my reason or rhyme getting bamboozled with some rinki-dink, didikoi like you coming far and near to maund for leer and lurk, from some fucking, foreign, faraway drum and base, dressed like a dog’s dinner in that filthy whistle and flute, fishing and hooking for work, out to steal our palones and expect to be given an uncle Ned to Bo-Peep in. What are you like? Look at the mooeey on you! (2008, 9)

The phonetic nature of Palari means that the audience will understand the broad strokes of the speech yet still feel confused, replicating the humor and embarrassment of a clown interaction. While his alternative vernacular marks him as an outsider himself, he refuses a job to Stanislav, despite the fact that Stanislav partially understands his language due to its overlap with his own. Through this linguistic exchange, the economically marginal, ‘Othered’ figure of the carnival worker becomes the force of exclusion for an even less powerful Other, the Romany migrant.

Self-reflection in *Hurl* happens primarily through acknowledgement of the ironies and injustices in Irish policy towards outsiders. For example, the player Santos from Argentina is a descendant of Irish emigrants – he can't claim Irish citizenship but his parents can. Dong is of Vietnamese descent but Irish, a self-described “feckin culchie”, yet he wouldn't be seen as Irish due to his race (2003, 101). Several moments of irony are conveyed through the character Father Lofty, who initially tries to talk Musa and Fatmata out of hurling and is humorously reminded of his insensitivity. He insists, “You'll stand out a mile playing hurling”, to which Musa replies “Because now of course we merge in perfectly. The nice tan and all that” (*ibidem*, 92). Lofty's journey to understanding and empathy is charted when he educates Rusty that hurling is a game brought to Ireland by immigrants, and advanced when he rejects the label of Musa as an “illegal alien”: “Watch who you're talking about sonny! He's our captain! He's a...hurler!” (*ibidem*, 117). The vehicle of sport thus transforms perceptions of asylum seekers and refugees from abstract political subjects to individual, human agents to be supported and included. Musa's Irish identity is affirmed at the end of the play when he speaks Irish from his jail cell, recalling the famous 1928 acceptance speech for Kildare by Bill ‘Squires’ Gannon. That the play ends with an African man speaking Irish models the accountability it demands of its audiences. Musa claims a place for the unjustly detained by invoking hurling's intersection with cultural nationalism and historic claims to Irish identity. While scholars like Szabó critique *Hurl*'s “predictable story and characters” and argue that it entrenches stereotypes, the play must be commended for breaking new ground in its weaving of physicality, lived experiences, and the mythological nature of hurling in Ireland into a coherent narrative that moves towards processing complex recent events (2012, 122).

Self-reflection in *Dodgems* occurs for both characters and the audience through the metaphor of the dodgems themselves. The instructive sign that reads, “the less you bump, the faster you go” serves as a reminder to native Irish people that discrimination against newcomers serves no one (2008a, stage directions). When locals shove to get to every dodgem car while the cars of the outsiders won't start, the outsiders' frustration inspires a self-reflective moment for those who wonder why inward migrants can't just support themselves or even return to their countries of origin. Within the carnival frame, the ‘fairness’ of human rights becomes more evident: everyone should get a chance with a car that works. In another clown-influenced moment of pathos, a woman irons a hole into her coat in the shape where her heart would be, non-verbally inducing empathy for her pain. Those who consider themselves progressive may still question their own ableist assumptions when the sounds of lovemaking in a caravan end and a man with no legs emerges, or when a disabled man refers to himself as “some sort of freak”, but he's speaking of his Polish identity rather than his disability.

#### 4. Brian Fleming's *Red Nose Theatre of Alliance*

Fleming's *Trilogy*, which can be viewed in any order, begins chronologically with *Gis a Shot of your Bongos Mister* (2011). In that theatre piece, Fleming tells the story of his friendships with his drumming mentors Bala and Chico from his travels to Senegal, and the reverse culture shock he sustained when his friends came to Ireland. Amidst the story of cross-cultural friendship, Fleming includes a sub-narrative about the Fatima housing project and its regeneration that suggests both the similarities between the Irish and African treatment of the poor and the vast difference in lifestyles<sup>4</sup>. Next, *Have Yis No Homes to Go To?* (2012) interrogates the nature of home and humanitarian efforts in chronicling Fleming's adventures as a clown in a Clowns Without Borders relief trip to Rwanda. This piece, which opens and closes with Fleming wearing a red nose, depicts his reluctance to join the clown troupe, his apprehension towards performing at the refugee camp, and finally the ability of clowns to transcend violence and horror and build humanity. The final piece, *A Sacrilegious Lesbian and Homosexual Parade* (2014), places Fleming more in the background as an observer of the efforts of Brendan Fay, a homosexual Irish man who organized the "St. Pat's for All" parade in New York City as an alternative to the official St. Patrick's Day parade, which until recently did not allow homosexual groups to participate under their own banners. The subjects of hospitality, ownership and export of Irish culture, and questioning capitalism entwine in this piece in support of free speech and the rights and dignity of homosexuals.

Fleming's theatre pieces are highly physical performances, featuring juggling, puppetry, movement and combining music from distinct cultures in inventive ways. In *Gis a Shot of your Bongos Mister* (2011), Fleming dances while relating the experience of dancing in a pub in Dakar, making himself ridiculous through exaggerated movements: "I'm rolling down windows, electric windows, rolling back the sunroof, electric sunroof, doing the monkey dance, riding the pony, spank that pony, throwing in a few local moves...". He is similarly self-deprecating in *Have Yis No Homes to Go To?* through obvious clown technique, when he wears a red nose and struggles to put on his too-tight yellow clown costume. Through puppetry, Fleming recognizes the cultural difference of the African spiritual relationship with masks and puppets. In Fleming's re-enacted telling of the story with a puppet and a trunk, the clown named Mr. Orange interacts with a silly bird puppet that airport authorities are trying to confiscate: "The bird comes to life on his arm. It

<sup>4</sup> Both Brian Fleming and Charlie O'Neill participated in the Fatima Regeneration project, a scheme for redesigning the low-income Fatima housing project with the influence of artists and contributions of the residents to have a voice in their own homes. Fleming produced "Tower Songs" as part of the project.

doesn't go down well". Instead of seeming like a mockery of the airport security worker's insistence that the puppet "can kill", the moment plays as a mockery of Mr. Orange's inability to stop clowning in a serious situation. Fleming's description of the clowns on the plane to Rwanda acts out their physical play to cast himself as the "straight man": "As the plane takes off, three clowns beside me all throw their hands in the air like kids on a roller coaster. You've got two choices, you throw your hands in the air too or you ignore them, in which case, you're the straight man". His recognition of clowning as infectious prepares the audience to be won over to clowning themselves during the performance: "*They* can't just switch off the clowning and *you* can't avoid getting involved". As he performs the characters of each of the other clowns: Mr. Green, Mr. Orange, and Mr. Blue, Fleming asks the audience to identify with his "straight man" position of skepticism toward clowning. And yet, the straight man is a clown himself, thus Fleming's persona of the anti-clown is itself a clown character.



3 - Brian Fleming juggling in *Have Yis No Homes to Go To?*  
Photograph by Amy Miller

Being an audience member in any of the three *Trilogy* performances is an active and at times unsettling experience. During seating for *Gis a Shot* (2011), Fleming greets audience members himself and hands out tickets with phrases to be used later in the performance, instructing the audience in when and how to participate in moments such as an African Kumpo chorus. In *A Sacrilegious Lesbian and Homosexual Parade* (2014), Fleming hands out cards and tells the audience: "So the deal, is you've got to shout out your line

right after the person beside you and once we get to the end, everyone shouts out their lines randomly. You got it? Do we need to do a practice?”. When he announces a new piece called “The Cast of ‘Riverdance’ Falling Down a Stairs”, audience members yell out their lines while Fleming acts it out musically with three sets of bones and a *bodhrán*. Fleming’s engagement with his audiences performs clown as theorized by Colleen Szabó: “It is not possible to be a clown for the audience; the clown comes into being through the play with the audience” (2012, 24). This interaction inserts the audience into both Fleming’s personal stories and the political positions he subtly reinforces.

The clown techniques of play and parody feature heavily in Fleming’s *Trilogy*, especially in *Have Yis No Homes to Go To?*, during which Fleming puts on a red nose and a yellow clown jumpsuit as he tells the story of his recruitment into and participation in Clowns Without Borders in Rwanda. He stares dolefully out at the audience in clown garb, communicating his misgivings about both adopting clown costume *and* agreeing to perform in Rwanda at all. The call to go “away with the clowns”, which he mocks by likening it to being “Away with the bleedin’ fairies” finally seduces him and he ultimately witnesses the positive humanitarian impact of clowning. Another power reversal occurs with a little boy during his clown solo, relating the boy’s mimicry of his dance moves: “When it comes to my solo, there’s a kid who starts imitating me and we’re riffing off each other, him being brilliant and me being shit”. Significantly, the boy’s “riffing” off of Fleming’s performance of the Michael Jackson suite using a loop pedal is characterized as “brilliant”, underscoring the way Fleming sees performance as a conversation with the audience and a way to give power to the marginalized. Fleming also describes Mr. Green as effectively reversing power relationships, explaining that the kids delight in making a fool of him, which represents “their chance to get one back on authority”. While Mr. Green allows himself to play the fool for the young refugees, he also makes a fool of men who beat the children back with sticks, putting a red nose or wig on them and turning them into clowns during his show. According to clown activist John Jordan, “One fundamental tactic of clowning is the use of absurdity to demystify the aura of authority” (2016, n.p.). Fleming’s piece clearly illustrates how absurdity can fragment the monolithic appearance of power.

In *A Sacrilegious Lesbian and Homosexual Parade* (2014), Fleming opens the performance dressed in a cloak as St. Patrick, and cuts to Panti Bliss’ viral “Noble Call” speech at the Abbey Theatre. Panti Bliss, whose parade outfit is “a cross between Mary Robinson and Marilyn Monroe” becomes a figure of intentional parody in the piece, and her statement about parade as a site of queer subversion follows the logic of clown. She asserts: “If they’re not kind of gay, they’re not really a parade. A heterosexual parade seems to me an organized walk in the traffic lane”. LGBTQ groups have applied since 1990 to march in the 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue parade but until 2014 they were denied par-

participation and even heckled in their own parade by people such as a woman Fleming parodies, who attends every year to protest with a bigoted sign that demands: “Stop the Sacrilege! Protest the Homosexuals’ Parade!”. In Fleming’s depiction of the woman who sparked the idea for the performance piece, he creates another clown figure. This woman, captured in photos holding a sign with a dour expression, is made ridiculous and her protest of the parade is mocked. In fact, Fleming himself appropriates her photo as the publicity photo for the performance, photoshopping himself into it. In an inversion of expectations the larger-than-life spectacle of Panti Bliss renders her a heroine of the piece, while the disapproving homophobe becomes a kind of clown.

Fleming’s theatre pieces are deeply personal stories of his confrontations with other cultures. His exposure to political realities requires him to reflect on his own biases and privilege, which he also implicitly asks of audiences. In *Gis a Shot* (2011), transnational friendship through drumming leads to an understanding of how the poverty in Africa might correspond with poverty in Ireland. Fleming reconsiders his own identity through his relationships with his African friends, reflecting, “I’d never been the only white person in a room before”. His new awareness of whiteness as a racial category embedded with privilege permeates his experiences in Dakar. Differing cultural norms also require him to challenge his homophobia; Fleming relates that when Chico holds his hand “I had to get used to it”. Conversely, when Bala and Chico come to Dublin, Fleming realizes that the Fatima mansions “regeneration” project he’s been working on as an artist in the form of the Tower Songs album is not even seen as necessary by the visitors from Senegal: “The way things were now, with a whole flat for each family, with running water, electricity and even television seemed like unimaginable wealth”. Fleming attempts to equate Ireland with Senegal under a “common history of colonization and oppression”, but his friends educate him about the ongoing effects of colonialism for them – the IMF and France recently devalued the Central African Franc by 90%, while “You robbed that bloody post office and the British gave you back your country!”.

In *Have Yis No Homes to Go To?* (2012), Fleming persistently questions the role of humanitarians, whether they are unintentionally imperialist, if they upset the balance of ravaged areas, and even if they bear responsibility for suffering, including genocide and its fallout. The playfulness of clown is undercut by Fleming’s serious self-reflection on his privilege and complicity in systems of global oppression. When he was approached by Clowns Without Borders to participate in their relief efforts at refugee camps, which promise via their website to foster “resilience through laughter” Fleming recalls being surprised and baffled that his talent set was necessary, since Africa is known for its drummers: “It’s Africa, man. Why would you want to bring a drummer to Africa?”. Fleming relates to the audience a crucial moment of self-questioning about the political agenda of Clowns Without Borders and what his participation might mean:

We're going over to entertain Congolese refugees. They're fleeing a country ravaged by 20 years of war. It's not too much of a stretch to say that white European colonialism and global economics are at least partly to blame. ... Could we be just another invading wave of the global economic machine?

Fleming's repetition of what he calls the "Madonna moment" – the photo opportunity snapped of one who thinks (s)he's being altruistic amongst African children – gets an audience laugh every time he mentions it. He re-appropriates this image through clowning, for instead of looking like Madonna, magnanimous and basking in the moment, he digitally inserts himself onto the image the final time he references it, wide-eyed like a deer caught in headlights. Fleming's conveyance of his awareness of "how this must look" develops trust with the audience and assumes a mutual skepticism of the "white savior" who goes to Africa intending to fix poverty, genocide, and disease. Audiences are then able to overcome skepticism and release tension about their own complicity during the performance. The clown ethos requires that you join the festival atmosphere and let go of both prejudice and anxiety about "getting it wrong".



4 - Brian Fleming as the Madonna clown in *Have Yis No Homes to Go To?*  
Photograph by Brian Fleming with photo montage by Bernard McGlinchey

Further, Fleming makes the claim that clowning goes beyond empathy and actually empowers displaced people, since at least temporarily all the talk in the camp was of fools and acrobats and “no one asked for help for two whole days” after the performance, which was a profound measure of success in that camp. If one believes this, then clowning in Rwanda functioned as a mechanism to heal trauma, and further, the re-telling and secondary enactment of the narrative in retrospect as a theatre piece honors the humanity of the refugees and calls for further effort from those who hear the story once removed. Fleming further calls for accountability for Irish complicity in genocide, remembering, “We watched while Kofi Annan and the UN airlifted foreigners out of Rwanda, but declined to send very same number of troops to stop the genocide. We watched it happen again in Darfur and Syria”. The cycle of violence and silence from the West confers a sense of accountability for genocide by the end of the piece. Fleming channels this accountability towards recognition of the contemporary refugee crisis:

We’re becoming more aware of refugees with all these people drowning in the Mediterranean, we’re realising that all these rich countries, one of which we live in, have all pulled up the drawbridge. You can’t keep sticking people in refugee camps, at some stage you have to open up the borders. It took the clowns to show me that.

Fleming’s realization that the clowns have forced him to acknowledge his connection to the lives of others suggests that clowning places humans in critical relation to one another, and develops a deep sense of validation that benefits both sides of the interaction.

In *A Sacrilegious* (2014) Fleming muses on what culture means, and how the appropriation of Irish culture for bigotry has made him think differently about what it is to be Irish and what happens when Irish culture is exported abroad. His statement “Culture is owned by us” meaningfully summarizes the stake he felt in returning each year for the St. Pat’s for All Parade. He reflects on hospitality and exclusion, and how homophobia strips people of their cultural belonging. Brendan Fay’s assertion, “Hospitality is such a justice issue” references the stereotype of Irish hospitality but in reverse. Once again, art, this time through parade and spectacle, has the capacity to express resistance to abuses of human rights.

The parable of “the man with two skins” that Fleming relates, is an important symbolic thread in *Have Yis No Homes to Go To?*, appearing as it does three times in the performance. Mr. Orange tells the story of a “man with two skins” in an African accent, clowning in his impersonation, who carries two skins upon his back. One is cracked and leaking, and the skin says to the man, “You should leave me behind, I am losing water and holding back your progress”. The man said to the skin,

Look behind you. Do you see that trail of flowers and greenery? It is because the water coming out of you watered the path and left new growth trailing behind you. You have left a trail of water on the ground all the way to the well for years now and in that trail flowers and shrubs have grown and it is looking at these that gives me the strength to go on.

This parable illustrates the clowns' perspective that their efforts have an impact that even they may not yet know. Supporting the human rights of others may seem to hold one back, but the collective benefit to the whole is beyond what one can assess himself.

##### 5. Conclusion – *“This really positive side of how Ireland can be in the world”*

Clowning is a political act, uniquely poised for contemporary protest. In Finland in early 2016, a clown troupe called the LOLdiers of Odin followed around the self-proclaimed Soldiers of Odin, an anti-immigrant group that patrols streets to ‘protect’ Finnish people from migrants and asylum seekers they viewed as destroying the Scandinavian way of life. Wielding lollipops, feather dusters, and toilet brushes, the clowns blustered and bumbled after the right-wing ‘Soldiers’, drawing attention to their affected machismo and bravado through parody and exaggerated performance. The police finally ended their street demonstration, or as one clown tells it: “The blue clowns stopped us”. Yet the aim of the clowns, to draw attention to the absurdity of keeping the streets safe from migrants and to undermine the xenophobic oppression of the Soldiers of Odin, had been achieved. Throughout Europe and indeed throughout the world, clowns are supporting human rights resistance efforts through opposition via performance. They affirm the humanity of all through embodied activism and play, and affectively destabilize the structures that threaten to disenfranchise those lacking institutional power.

When the techniques of clown intersect with Irish devised theatre work, the inventive combinations engendered generate resistance to unquestioned patterns of hierarchy. In the process of destabilizing audience expectations, clown theatre inverts and thereby makes visible the institutions and conventions that reify privilege. O’Neill and Fleming each use clown techniques that mask their oppositional nature through humor, experimentation, and reversal. Tracing their work back to Barabbas’ theatre of clown suggests that these clown techniques bear a powerful potential to stand in solidarity with marginalized groups, including inward migrants, people with disabilities, and homosexuals. And yet, the question of whether these artists may at times speak *for* the oppressed lingers. Given the danger of making art on *behalf* of those whose rights are abrogated, both Fleming and O’Neill rely on devising practices to create collaborative art. The clown’s ability to address serious issues effectively through physicality, audience interaction, power reversals and self-reflection are

among its most effective tools, empowering art to question the distribution of power and privilege. With a history that includes Samuel Beckett's plays, figures like "the Irish singing clown" Johnny Patterson, and the Barabbas company, today's Irish artists invoking clown build upon and transcend its history. Fleming found himself drawn to telling the story of the St. Pat's for All parade because it offered "This really positive side of how Ireland can be in the world" (2014). These politicized pieces of theatre are steeped in awareness of a colonial past, but also in the knowledge that the current neoliberal political environment positions Ireland as a contributor to systems of oppression that dehumanize precarious people. Clowning in devised theatre acts as a contribution to an ongoing, progressive resistance speech advancing human dignity through art.

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