

SIGNATORIES

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Commemorations are never easy to handle and especially difficult when what is honoured is a historical event with the magnitude of Easter 1916 and the birth of the modern Irish State. In theatre, commemorations are fraught with the further hazard of negotiating with an audience's expectations, particularly when the event to be memorialised has become mythologised over the passing of the intervening century. Myths can become prey to nostalgia, that softening influence of comforting pieties rendered ever blander by repetition. To challenge the pieties, as O'Casey and Denis Johnston did at a far closer remove from the events of 1916 than a century, is to risk outrage and critical denigration for daring to question what is thought to be established (and therefore untouchable) history. To conceive of *Signatories* with the intention of it being one of UCD's contributions to a year of memorialising was a brave endeavour (the performances were the brainchild of Éilis O'Brien, Head of Communications, and the playwright, Frank McGuinness): eight monologues were to be written by eight alumni of the university and staged as a promenade performance inside Kilmainham Goal, directed by Patrick Mason. Each dramatist was to take one of the seven signatories of the Declaration of Independence (Pearse, Connolly, Ceannt, Clarke, Mac Diarmada, MacDonagh, Plunkett) and compose a twelve-minute soliloquy where the focus would be the (imagined) final experience of each signatory awaiting execution at the hands of the British. What were presented were seven men of disparate beliefs, backgrounds, life-styles, whose elevation to the status of national hero lay in a future far beyond their own expectations, hopes or political vision. This immediately brought diversity of focus to the project, as did the inevitable multiplicity of imaginative approaches and dramaturgi-

¹ Dublin, Belfield, 2016, pp. xxvii + 137.

cal styles to be expected from the eight commissioned writers: Emma Donoghue, Thomas Kilroy, Hugo Hamilton, Frank McGuinness, Rachel Fehily, Éilís Ní Dhuibhne, Marina Carr and Joseph O'Connor.

The eighth, and perhaps unexpected, voice was that of Elizabeth O'Farrell, the young nurse attending the wounded in the General Post Office who was chosen by Pearse to carry his order of surrender to the Commandant of the British Forces in Ireland. It was a brilliant decision to start the whole play with her, reminiscing in older age about her momentous journey across Dublin, armed only with a white flag, to reach the British, only to be further deployed by them in taking news of Pearse's decision to the other Fenian battalions grouped around the city. O'Farrell was a carer, naïve perhaps but committed to the Nationalist cause through the various societies she had joined; and hers was in consequence a disheartening pilgrimage undertaken in a spirit of duty through all the wreckage and bloodshed. Decades later her recollection of that day is vivid and exact; horror and fear colour her consciousness rather than any sense of pride in her contribution to what over the intervening years has been accomplished in Ireland, politically and culturally. Her voice, as imagined by Emma Donoghue, is the ideal intermediary between a staged history and its contemporary audience: O'Farrell was detached, a concerned observer, by virtue of her profession till given a role (the lacklustre, feared role of the messenger of doom) the nature of which has shaped her future psyche; she is not jubilant or pious about the Rising but aware only of the pain and grief that she had kept fiercely disciplined throughout her ordeal, when she was alert only to the prevalence of loss. Her pilgrimage fittingly opened what was for the first audiences an evening journey around the cold, dank, waste interiors of Kilmainham, the setting that had in reality framed the Signatories' final confrontation, less with destiny in this showing than with their innermost selves.

It is in this last aspect of the dramas that *Signatories* may have departed from and consequently challenged expectation: there is no sensationalism or melodrama in the portrayals of the seven men and the nurse, no outbursts of patriotic rhetoric, no claiming a high moral ground or the status of victim or martyr. Spectators watch seven men awaiting certain death and observe their several strategies for coping with the passing of time. If they touch the heroic, it is in not becoming abject: despair may be present but it does not dominate any man's consciousness to the degree where it unmans him. If anything is celebrated in each of the monologues, it is the bare reality of the men's manhood. A quiet courage, experienced in myriad subtle manifestations, rather than an assertive heroism defines their individuality. In what is arguably the most daring of the plays, Frank McGuinness's soliloquy for Éamonn Ceannt, long silences are punctuated by Ceannt's meditations on the simple contents of his pockets: a mounting pile of coins, his watch and chain, rosary, and finally the worn latchkey to his home. They are the minor, routine but defining tokens of a life, disturbed at the moment when peace should come to

him, by the knowledge that he killed a man during the Rising. Exhausted by the tensions between his religious belief and his republican commitment and what it exacted from him, his mind finds relief only in the weight of the key in his hand, though it will no longer give him admission to his home and all it has represented. He recites the details (house number, road, suburb, city, country) as in a private litany, but it is a litany of profound loss.

What surprises with all the contributions, as with McGuinness's, is how the writers deploy the required compression of each performance to twelve minutes to achieve a remarkable incisiveness and intensity, intimating a far wider range of experience than can be contained directly within the one soliloquy. Effortlessly, the dramaturgy of each contribution encompasses naturalism (the urgency of the immediately time-bound), symbolism, and the emblematic. Thomas Kilroy, for example, presents a Pearse troubled less by being forced to surrender than memories of his overbearing and caustic father, of schoolboy bullying, and most recently, of his handling of a "boy" (22) thought to be a deserter, whom he helped to escape by a back route from the Post Office only to watch him being shot down by an enemy gun emplacement. The situation is ambiguous: was Pearse playing to his belief in a form of personal sacrifice, knowing the boy's chances were few, or genuinely trying to set the boy free from a future imprisonment and possible death? Is the memory framed by guilt or hopes that are quickly dashed? Delicately Kilroy intimates the latent homosexuality underlying Pearse's attitude to the boy while subtly respecting his deeply closeted nature. The monologue touches on a momentary experience but reaches out to the range of influences that determined Pearse's complexity. Sean Mac Diarmada does not speak for himself in Éilis Ní Dhuibhne's contribution, instead it is Min Ryan, his girlfriend, who recalls his endless chatter, laughter, songs, games and jokes about the Rising, which were clearly aimed at keeping up her and her sister's spirits as much as his own. His seeming fearlessness dominates her processes of recall, even at the expense of her new fiancé, Risteard; Mac Diarmada's ability to transform a condemned cell into a *craic* will continue to give her life meaning. Marina Carr follows Thomas MacDonagh from his cell to the firing squad, depicting a disciplined magnanimity throughout, in itself a subversive gesture against his guards' attempts to dehumanise their Irish prisoners, till one of them admits, "You're a prince, Mr MacDonagh" (101). His last, amused thought is of his father "waving his big strong hand in dismissal. 'Keep away from them Fenians [...] Great cry, little wool, like the goats of Connacht.'" (101). This degree of studied carelessness is celebrated repeatedly as the source of each man's heroism: his particular strategy to transcend his immediate predicament (with all the attendant temptations to despair) and find a depth of inner peace. But heroism is not once a part of their thinking: if spectators, listening to each of them in turn, are moved to define the men as heroes, that is a choice shaped by a century of political history.

Éilís O'Brien in her "Preface" to the published volume expresses the hope that the originality of the project will influence future experiments in Irish dramaturgy. The extended soliloquy or monologue form has an honoured place in Irish playwriting (Lady Gregory, Beckett, Friel, in particular). There is a gesture too in the preoccupation with *sprezzatura* (the hero in spite of himself) towards Yeats's plays and Denis Johnston's. Site-specific performance, devised within a theatre company, has a long and vibrant tradition in Ireland. The new creative departure here in *Signatories* is the coming together of a substantial group of dramatists willing both to write individually, honouring their several styles, and to work around a shared theme and to an agreed format. This is not a collaboration in the conventional sense in which the term is applied in theatrical contexts, because the uniqueness of each dramatist's voice is not subsumed within the created whole but allowed to stand with its individualising qualities and distinctive tones intact. The subject of this project was undeniably special: a group isolated in prison cells but sharing a common political ambition and a grim fate necessitated the form the project took and allowed for an appropriate and equal division of labour between the writers whose very diversity is key to the strength of the result. It is difficult to imagine how these contributing factors could easily be replicated. A genre of prison dramas would have decided limitations, though it might be possible to broaden out to cover other international contexts. This raises the further question of how successfully the play could be staged outside the Irish historical context and the centenary on which the plays draw for their poignant impact. It would be possible, but perhaps would require an informed audience if the full complexity of resonance (personal and political) were to be fully appreciated. Shed the specifics and one would be left with a series of monologues focusing on approaches to death, which would be powerful certainly but more generalised than the original appeal of the plays. Such ambitions for an afterlife apart, *Signatories* remains a remarkable achievement, far more challenging, subversive, ruthless and genuinely uplifting than writing celebrating a historical anniversary tends to be. MacDonagh speaks of the dehumanising effect of capitulation and imprisonment; but, by imagining the humanity of their several subjects, these eight playwrights have redeemed them from the levelling, equally dehumanising effects of history and myth.