Forum Kritika: Performance and Domination

GLOBAL THEME, LOCAL FORM: TESTIMONY, STORYTELLING AND *THAILAND: WHAT'S LOVE GOT TO DO WITH IT?*

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Abstract

This essay is a reflection on the play, *Thailand! What's Love Got To Do With It?*, by Máirtín de Cógáin and Brian Desmond, first produced in Cork, Ireland, in 2007. *Thailand* is both documentary play and metaphor: documentary in that it dramatizes an analysis of perspectives expressed by Irish sex tourists, and metaphor in the way that this analysis reflects the hysterical electioneering (from both government and media) during the 2007 Irish general election which saw Fianna Fáil's Celtic Tiger government elected for a third term. A reflection on practice, this essay uses postcolonial and narrative theory to discuss *Thailand* as an act of performance which deploys the latitudes of epic storytelling to interrogate Irish attitudes to citizenship, both national and global. It discusses ways in which *Thailand* interrogates Celtic Tiger Ireland's expedient self-narratives, including those of wealth as moral currency, the disposable foreign "other," and the anti-dialectical narratives of the Irish government (and its media allies). First produced in 2007, shortly before the Irish economy went into freefall, *Thailand* documents an affluent Ireland's critical disengagement with the contradictions of prosperity or, after Jerome Bruner, its apparent inability to narrate "itself" as "other." This essay considers how *Thailand's* dramaturgy exposes some of these contradictions and, through epic storytelling, both performs and exposes an apparatus of global domination.

Keywords

storytelling; *seanchaí*; sex tourism; epic theatre; citizenship; folk narrative

About the Author

Brian Desmond is a Lecturer in Drama at Liverpool Hope University. Awarded a PhD in 2011, his doctoral thesis discusses epic dramaturgy according to folk performance traditions relating to the masks of the storyteller and the clown. He has had articles

published on the plays of Alfred Jarry and Bertolt Brecht, and has an article in press on the work of Dermot Bolger. Prior to this, he worked professionally in Ireland as a playwright, director, dramaturge, actor and storyteller, and has been Artistic Director of Be Your Own Banana Theatre Company (BYOB) since 2000. For BYOB, he has developed and directed mainly new work for the Irish stage, performances which fuse elements of traditional Irish storytelling with European approaches to physical performance and clowning.

SELFHOOD IS PROFOUNDLY RELATIONAL ... *self is other* ... *The construction of selfhood cannot proceed without a capacity to narrate* (Bruner 86).

This essay sets out to analyze *Thailand: What's Love Got To Do With It?* (2007) by Máirtín de Cógáin and Brian Desmond,¹ “a documentary play produced by Be Your Own Banana Theatre Company (BYOB). *Thailand* emerged as part of a new wave of politically engaged, contemporary, Irish storytelling theatre, alongside such plays as Pat Kinevane’s *Forgotten* (2007) and Gerard Mannix Flynn’s *James X* (2003). The play will be analyzed in terms of the role of the performer, de Cógáin, an established contemporary seanchaí who re-configures his own practice as a storyteller for this production.² *Thailand* will be discussed as an interrogation of contemporary Ireland and the responsibilities of citizenship, both national and global. Its efficacy as an epic narrative, it is argued, is a function both of the political context in which it was produced (the Irish general election of May 2007) and the devices through which the storyteller (and narrative) invites a critical spectatorship of the contradictions and expediciencies of the State’s relationship to the sex industry in the Far East. Extracts from a brief interview with de Cógáin will expose how the storyteller understood the exchange mechanism between performer and spectator during performances of *Thailand*. As director of the production, the author will reflect on the play in performance as a deliberate epic strategy and explore how this reveals the dramaturgical latitudes available to testimonial modes of storytelling theatre.

It is important to note at this point that the analysis of *Thailand* is not grounded in a practice-based research methodology, but rather as a critical reflection on professional practice. This reflection on practice follows the example of Dario Fo who, as a researcher of popular performance traditions “did not create a theoretical method... [but] analyzed his own practice, developing it, finding parallels with it, and so on” (Ghelardi 225). Since 2000, BYOB has developed its practice to incorporate elements from traditions in storytelling and clowning, and has produced mainly new work for Irish and international stages. De Cógáin and I are performers and scholars in the traditions of Irish storytelling, possessing extensive experience as comedic actors. Between 2000 (when BYOB was first founded) and 2007, the company’s practice enjoyed several transformations, most notably from the rural, more traditional-sounding storytelling voices of early works such as *De Bogman* (2000) and *The Ballad of Badger Bickle’s Youngfella* (2002), to the urban patois of the narrators of plays such as *The Self-obsessed Tragedy of Ed Malone* (2005) and *Thailand*. This departure was significant, moving from the traditional, self-consciously mythic quality of the early work, to the more immediate, contemporary atmospheres of the later plays.

Fig. 1: Mairtin de Cogain as Declan in *Thailand: What's Love Got To Do With It?*

The Rambling House

In any effort to imagine a tradition in Irish storytelling, and a repository of that tradition in the twentieth-century, the person and persona of Éamon Kelly dominates the field. Kelly, the most famous *seanchaí* of modern times, here describes the social context through which he first encountered the art of storytelling as a boy:

[The rambling houses] would be the residence of some honest to God farmer that was pulling the devil by the tail,³ or the house of the postman, the carpenter or the tailor ... as far as I can remember, were a cross between the Dáil⁴ and the Cork Opera House! There you'd have debates, old "statesmen" would answer questions and try to unravel the mysteries of the universe and the economy. You'd have stories and riddles, songs, music and an occasional dance. In the long summer evenings, the Dáil would adjourn! Go to

the country! The company would sit on a mossy bank under a shaped hedge by the roadside, and passers-by could add a note to the general hilarity. (351)

The rambling house (also known as the visiting house) was, as the extract suggests, the principal site of rural Irish entertainment in the early part of that century.⁵ A semi-formal social event, the rambling house was where members of the immediate community could enjoy, as performers/participants or spectators, folk traditions such as storytelling, singing and dancing, while also exchanging the news of the day and debating the vicissitudes—political or otherwise—of the nation. Kelly's contemporary, the playwright Michael James Molloy (born 1917), has similar recollections of the rambling houses of his native Galway, in the west of Ireland. In the first act of his play, *The Visiting House*, the uneducated seanchaí Mickle relates at length the variety of tales one could expect to hear at these social gatherings. Mickle's extensive list includes: ancient, heroic tales from *The Táin*;⁶ the later, heroic tales of Finn, Oisín and the Fianna; stories of Irish saints, such as St. Brigid and St. Patrick; tales from the Bible, such as the Massacre of the Innocents; fairy tales relating to magical creatures in Irish folklore; historical tales relating to

the colonization of Ireland and the Battle of the Boyne (1691); and the humorous tales of Dean Swift and his clever servant boy. Mickle completes the survey of his repertoire with the following:

... I can read you the Blakes and the Bodkins that were landlords over this parish before now, with every oul' moll and bully in the county like merry men in and out to them. I can give you the three men that are standing this night in the pits of Hell—Gorman the Bailiff, and Dennehy the Bailiff, and Bailiff Hynes. I can give you the man that freed us out from all bailiffs and landlords at last—Michael Davitt from Straide (*taking off his hat*),⁷ may Heaven be his rest! (48)

Molloy's dramatized memory of the rambling house describes, alongside ancient stories and supernatural tales, a narrative engagement with the island's recent political past, as is evident from Mickle's reference to tales of oppressive landlords, unscrupulous bailiffs and anti-colonial resistance. As Lawrence P. Morris notes, tales about "the evils of landlordism and the villainy of particular landlords abound in the [Irish] folkloric corpus" (308). Kelly's memoir also attests, through its reference to attempts by the gathering to "unravel the mysteries of the universe and the economy," to an engagement with the political present alongside fantastical folk narratives, such as ancient Irish heroic tales and fairy stories. In the site of the rambling house, therefore, is a co-existence between folk narrative and narratives of the State, narratives about the State, or, significant to this essay, narratives about the state of the State.

The *seanchaí*, in the Irish tradition, has a trickster quality and, accustomed to performing by the fireside to all ages, playfully weaves his tall tales in an atmosphere of dubious spectatorship. Much like the epic narrators of Bertolt Brecht or Dario Fo, the veracity of the *seanchaí's* tale is often paradoxically bound to the fact that the moral or political stance of the storyteller is at odds with that of the storytelling mask he assumes. The craft of the storyteller, in many traditions, reflects the fact that in order to tell truths, the narrator may first have to convey, with ironic conviction, a pack of lies. It is not unusual for one of Brecht's narrators to eulogise the apparatus of contemporary capitalism: however, the stance of the storyteller (actor) must be set in ironic and dialectical contradiction to that of the storyteller's mask (role). Similarly, in order to satirize the oppressive bailiff, the Irish storyteller may choose to advocate, through ironic commentary, the merits of that profession. In the hands of the storyteller, the logic and morality of the oppressor is in great danger, for through ironic exaggeration the storyteller has the power to expose, in playful abandon, both the lies and the truths of established social modes of domination.

Interestingly, direct storytelling as a dramaturgical device has only become a regular feature in Irish theatre in the early 1990s. Prior to this, the dominant

forms in Irish theatre have been naturalism and melodrama, reflective of a neo-colonial fixation with dramatic forms inherited from the metropolitan centre of the British Empire. Irish playwrights who have deployed direct storytelling over the past twenty years have rarely embraced the latitudes associated with the art of the *seanchaí*, although Dermot Bolger and Patrick McCabe's narrators have skilfully engaged with the craft of the "tall-tale." More commercially successful playwrights, such as Conor McPherson and Enda Walsh, have used direct storytelling towards a different end: in both cases, conjuring narratives with cinematic-style immediacy and montage, often through an ensemble of storytellers. For *BYOB*, the aim of *Thailand* was to present an urban narrative voice, while deploying the exaggerative, playful atmosphere of the *seanchaí*.

Thailand: What's Love Got To Do With It?

Thailand: What's Love Got To Do With It? was conceived as a project in November 2006, developed through the following six months, and first presented by *BYOB* as part of the Cork Midsummer Festival in June 2007. Towards the end of 2006, the creators encountered a number of Irish males, both young and middle-aged, who had spoken freely about their experiences as sex tourists in the Far East and elsewhere. These conversations were innocuous at first, chance encounters with men (some known and others previously unknown to the creators) in informal settings, generally in pubs or coffee shops. Following these conversations, *BYOB* decided to research the subject in more detail, and set about developing *Thailand* as a first-person narrative, drawing from the testimonies and moral attitudes of encountered sex tourists. Following this, when it became common knowledge that *BYOB* was developing *Thailand* for production, several individuals volunteered their testimonies. Some of them genuinely thought that *BYOB* was producing a play that would advocate sex tourism. Others, ironically, actually requested that they be credited as contributors to the script.

According to the majority of these testimonies, it was becoming more socially acceptable for Irish men to partake of these global recreational opportunities. What struck the creative company most about these encounters was their expedient logic of self-justification. Several reasons or excuses were generally put forth as means of justifying the opportunistic sex tourist: firstly, the host country (and prostitute) was poor, and in need of the business for subsistence purposes; secondly, modern Irish women were apparently such "hard work" and so diffident to their male counterparts, that it was logical to seek "companionship" elsewhere; thirdly, sex tourism is so cheap for the western tourist that it is difficult to avoid its temptations when in the Far East; and, finally, there is the peer pressure associated with the fact that "all the rest of the lads" are doing it.

The first reason proffered was pivotal to the *Thailand* project: the notion that the Irish sex tourist considered himself an economic benefactor of the Third World,

rather than an exploitative opportunist. The grotesque, expedient logic of this conviction represented, for the play's creators, a "farce of power" (Fo, qtd. in Hirst 43-4) redolent of that encountered by Dario Fo in relation to the events surrounding the Milan bombings, which dictated the dramaturgical form of *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* (1970). While conceptualizing *Thailand*, the authors discussed the reasons for Fo's choice to encode *Accidental Death* as a farce. Fo set about researching police reports defending their treatment of the anarchist Giuseppe Pinelli, who was murdered by his interrogators in the Milan police headquarters in 1969, and decided that the contradictions in the reports were so absurd that the correct drama form for the piece was self-evident: it would be a farce. Similarly, for the authors of *Thailand*, the logic of the self-avowed economic benefactors of the Far East was, simply, a joke. The dramatic representation, therefore, would blend the modes of storytelling and stand-up comedy, in order to reflect the contradictions inherent in the documentary evidence.

The play was workshopped through a series of open rehearsals, mainly in cafés and artists' living rooms, before an invited audience of theatre artists and non-theatre professionals. De Cógáin, an accomplished mimic and caricaturist, would improvise the testimony of Declan, a twenty-something Irish man, recounting his experiences as a sex tourist in Thailand. As dramaturge, I would prompt the actor with questions relating to the testimonies received via encounters and interviews undertaken with sex tourists. De Cógáin's improvisations were framed around some of the more memorable lines heard during these interviews, all of which remained in the final, performed script:

... we're helping the Thai economy ... we're putting bread on the table for them ... they know how to treat a man out there ... I only did it because the lads were doing it ... I wasn't really in the mood, but I'd paid for it ... you see, it's not really prostitution at all ... (Unpublished)

A common element of the testimonies received was their coercive quality. Many sex tourists had spoken of their experiences as if they were letting the interviewers in on a secret, as if this was an opportunity not to be missed. The company came to the conclusion that this coercive quality was intrinsically linked to a project of self-justification: that is, the more people that could be convinced to partake of the sex tourist industry, the more acceptable it would appear to be (justification-by-numbers, as it were). During these open rehearsals, the intention was to generate a good deal of laughter amongst the spectators. In order to reflect the boastful quality of the interviewees, it was decided that Declan would recount his experiences as if he were advertising the possibilities available in the Far East to the uninitiated young Irish male. The spectators were generally appalled, in a light-hearted sense, at the grotesque descriptions of lewd sexual acts recounted by Declan. What they found generally most amusing was that the character—encoded as at once

gormless, innocent, insatiable and cynical—had come to accept these transactions as a perfectly natural consequence of the size of his wallet and the economic relationship between East and West. Declan, living out his wildest fantasies for a meagre financial outlay, revels misogynistically in the conviction that this was his “last laugh,” as it were, in his largely unsuccessful, romantic history with Irish women. For Declan, selfhood, as understood by Bruner, relates to this misogynistic triumph (or delusion) of orientalist desire.

The comic impact of *Thailand* derives from the farcical logic of the self-justifying statements made by those who proffered their experiences. The storyteller fulfils two narrative objectives: firstly, he reports the economic relationship between East and West, via Declan’s testimony; and secondly, he reports the logic of self-justification, according to the documentary material, which is supplied by the testimony of sex tourists. The story is exclusively reported through the first-person narrative of Declan. Declan is the filter through which the Irish audience comes to know the remote social world of the play, a convention which exists in English-language, mainstream, cinematic treatments of events in the recent history of Asia. Conventionally, most English-language films encode a westerner (usually white, middle-class) as an outsider in the social world, through whose revelations the audience acquires knowledge of the *other* world of the narrative. Generally, this character/filter (a cinematic version of narrator) is a sympathetic everywoman/everyman, a reporter (*The Year of Living Dangerously*, 1983) or tourist (*Beyond Rangoon*, 1995) who observes the social world, but plays no significant part as an agent within it. With *Thailand*, this cinematic mode of narrator/filter was insufficient, because the play set out to interrogate the Irish sex tourist as a conscious agent in the global economic market. We considered how films such as *Beyond Rangoon* and *The Year of Living Dangerously* offer the spectator a “way out” of the dramatic/social world, as represented by the filter/narrator’s final act in both narratives, fleeing the country in order to ensure their own safety and escape. Because the company wanted to provide the audience with a “way in” to the hedonistic world of Thailand’s sex industry, Declan needed to be encoded as a perpetrator, with every intention of returning to the scene of his adventures, and intent on encouraging others to follow his example.⁸ Dramatically, therefore, we decided “to tell

Fig. 2: Mairtin de Cógáin as Declan in *Thailand: What's Love Got To Do With It?* (production poster)

the story of evil that takes pride in evil" (Wa Thiong'o 81). This choice was informed by genre convention, as encoded in films such as *Beyond Rangoon* and *The Year of Living Dangerously*. *Thailand*, however, opposes and re-writes the convention, just as Fo re-configured the mechanics of farce in *Accidental Death*.

Thailand is written as a chronological account, in selected episodes, of Declan's experiences in the course of a three-week holiday in Thailand.⁹ The narrative has two sections: the tale of Declan's exploits as a sex tourist in the Pattaya beach resort and, his account of a week-long, safari trek for which he signs up. The Pattaya section documents the range of services available to the sex tourist: brothels where prostitutes are available for as little as five euros; bars where escorts/prostitutes are readily available; bath/massage parlours where sexual favours are negotiable; and, finally, child prostitution. Declan's gleeful, graphic descriptions of the professional services of which he avails himself are set against his determination to justify the morality of his actions. In the following, he makes an expedient distinction between the Pattaya brothels and the escort/prostitution services available in bars:

. . . [In the Souka-Souka, escort bar] you had to pay the bar to take your *wan* away, and she was your wan for the night then.¹⁰ It's like, the *wans* there work for the bar. They're like barmaids that don't serve drink . . . So, if a wan takes a fancy to you, you throw the bar a few bob—a tenner or what have ya—and away ye go. That way you've paid off her wages for the night. It's a really good system, d'y'know, in the way that sure what's a tenner to me, and neither the bar nor the wan lose out either, d'y'know. Everyone's happy . . . I mean, people say it's prostitution, but it's not. I mean, the Thai wans are really up for it like. Fair enough the first bar we were in was, like, pay for your round, and whatever. But the Souka-Souka bar was a different class altogether. I mean, the Souka-Souka wasn't like a brasserie place. The wans there don't have to go away with ya if they don't want to. Sure there was one night, this wan wouldn't go away with Louis. We all had a great laugh at him over that, d'y'know what I mean.

But once you've paid the bar the "bar fine"—that's what they call it, the "bar fine"—that only means you're doing her a favour, like. You see, there's no guarantee of anything happening after with her like. And if you do get a bit of action, happy days, but there's no obligation to pay her anything extra. So you see, it's not *really* prostitution at all. But I always gave them a few bob before they left in the morning. Even though I didn't have to. I always made a point of that. 'Cause I mean, they're broke like. (Unpublished)

The complexity of the storytelling mask is best exemplified here in relation to the italicized "really," which the storyteller emphasizes to double effect in performance. On one level, the mask of Declan is drawing attention to a potential moral loophole in the distinction between a brothel transaction and the "bar fine" service of

solicitation. Essentially, he is advertising this form of prostitution as ambiguous and rhetorically justifiable because the sexual act does not happen in the site where the prostitute is solicited. The mask of de Cógáin as storyteller, however, complicates the meaning of the emphasis. De Cógáin the storyteller, visibly at play with the mask of Declan, emphasizes the contradiction, or expediency, of the sex tourist. Declan presents a loophole: however, the mask of de Cógáin as storyteller peeps through to emphasize, and question, the rhetorical quality of Declan's argument.

For Brecht, the ironic assumption of the mask of the oppressor is a recurring narrative device, and is perhaps most famously manifest in the carnivalesque court of Azdak, in *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*. For BYOB, the masks of authority performed by Fo, in *Accidental Death of an Anarchist*, were a key inspiration. In the following, Fo is disguised as police official Malipiero, and is interrogating the interrogators, masks representing members of the Milanese police who were present at the death of Pinelli:

SUPERINTENDENT: . . . Since the suspect was the only anarchist railwayman in Milan. . . there was a good chance it was him.

MANIAC: Absolutely – I agree. . . crystal clear. Since it's obvious that the bomb on the railway must have been planted by a railwayman, by the same logic we can say that the bombs at the Law Courts in Rome were planted by a judge, the bombs at the monument to the Unknown Soldier were planted by a soldier, and the bomb at the Bank of Agriculture was planted by either a banker or a farmer. (147-8)

This extract perhaps best exemplifies the role of storyteller as interventionist in Fo's play. Intrinsic to the efficacy of this device is the clarity of role and sub-role(s), of the distinction between storyteller and role-play. The storyteller, through parody, reveals the farce of power, and the rhetoric which supports it. Through presenting the mask of the oppressor, the storyteller puts on trial, as it were, the social apparatus which supports this culture of domination. Fo's police official is a mask of arrogance and hegemony, which he exposes through parodic ridicule. For BYOB, it was decided that the mask of Declan would be constructed with similar properties, reflecting the bluster and conceit of the testimonies which inspired *Thailand*.

Thailand is carefully structured around distancing effects, precisely because the testimony is spoken through the first-person narrative of Declan. Throughout, attention is drawn to the presence of the core storyteller, de Cógáin. The opening speech is spoken as if in slow motion:

So we got into Pattaya, right, straight down to Schneider's place to drop off the bags. Schneider was a kind of a half-German fella, whose mother was Irish. McGrath had been talking to him on the internet. So we got a room each for

half nothing, all on the top floor, next to each other, handy out, d'y'know. Twas getting nearly dark by this stage, so we went straight downtown, to check out the action, d'y'know what I mean. (Unpublished)

The introduction is painstakingly slow for two reasons. Firstly, because the enthusiasm of Declan's narrative dictates a fast tempo to the delivery, the opening pacing requires the audience to listen closely to the testimony, and the contradictions embedded therein. Secondly, it gives the sense of narratives being painstakingly constructed, both by the storyteller and by the cynical mask of Declan that he assumes. A third mask also appears during the performance, although he does not speak. We called this mask the "Crooked Man,"¹¹ and he appears twice in the play. On both occasions, the storyteller physically transforms into this grotesque mask, which revels in his hunched body and appears to beckon the audience to buy into Declan's logic. The Crooked Man serves as a foil to Declan's apparent gormlessness and comic potential, celebrating the power of the western consumer, and practically laughing into the faces of the audience. His dramaturgical function, as a sub-mask of Declan, is to suggest that, despite the absurd rhetoric of his apologia, Declan knows exactly what he is doing. The Crooked Man exposes Declan as an unapologetic mask of arrogance, beckoning the spectator to consider availing of the delights of the sex tourist industry, and aggressively flaunting the economic power of the western tourist. Importantly, his function is to negate the possibility of the audience reading the mask of Declan as blissfully ignorant, or sympathetically deluded.

The second appearance of the Crooked Man occurs during a pantomime sequence where the storyteller depicts a child prostitute bound to a bedpost. During this sequence, de Cógáin moves through three masks: the enslaved mask of the child prostitute, bound to the bed; the mask of Declan, who puts his hands over his eyes in shame; and finally the Crooked Man, who superimposes his eerie mask over the image of the child. The child's arms are raised as if bound, and this image transforms into one of the Crooked Man with his arms raised in triumph, as if celebrating the enslavement of the little girl. After this second appearance of the Crooked Man, de Cógáin completely dissolves all masks for a minute or so, as if neutralizing or cleansing the space, or storyteller, for a resumption of the narrative. As a mask, the Crooked Man haunts the narrative, and its narrators. Significantly, the second appearance of the Crooked Man coincides with the only act which Declan does not attempt to justify: the one where he engages in sexual acts with a child prostitute. Instead, the narrative moves on to the safari trek, where Declan philosophizes on his experiences in Pattaya Beach. In the following, the natural world inspires a moment of apparent spiritual reflection:

But when I saw the waterfall, it changed my whole perception of things. I understood that there's beauty beyond the trees, the cars, and the houses.

That there's beauty in the things that nobody sees. And that's where you find your inner solace. That's where you find your inner being. That if you can find beauty in something that people think is worthless, then you're at one with the world. Because everything is worth something. There is no such thing as waste. Like, if you throw rice in the bin, the rats will eat it. D'y'know what I mean. (Unpublished)

Declan's reflections are encoded as bland, rhetorically random and utterly bankrupt of self-awareness. Equally, Declan's closing narrative lacks insight because, as an insatiable, serial consumer, thought eludes him. He sums up his pseudo-spiritual experience of nature with the following:

We were walking down, through some clearance, when I saw this girl. She must have been only, five or eight, or whatever. In these white clothes. They wear these white clothes over there until they reach puberty, and then their kind of innocence is lost. I heard. They grow up fierce fast there because, d'y'know, because life isn't worth the same there as it is here. And I think she was a vision to me. That like, she was going to be my child, and lose her innocence early. And I felt a deepness inside of me saying, "Always wear a johnny when you're in Thailand!" That's what this vision was trying to say to me. "Don't leave a poor child grow up in such a bad area!" That was what the vision was trying to put forth to me. Always wear a johnny in Thailand. D'y'know what I mean. (Unpublished)

Declan clearly craves selfhood. However, he cannot reflect on his "self" as "other." He emblemizes what Badiou calls "zero risks' love . . . the [neo-liberal] idea that love is only a variant of rampant hedonism and the wide range of possible enjoyment available" to the western consumer (*In Praise* 8). Badiou draws the term "zero risk" from a French internet dating site and, significantly, equates it with the western military propaganda of "zero deaths" war, whereby "the bombs they drop kill a lot of people who are to blame for living underneath . . . Afghans, Palestinians . . . [people who] don't belong to modernity" (*In Praise* 9). Here, Badiou reimagines an old metaphysical conceit, that which links sex and death and, in doing so, exposes a bleak correlation between neo-liberal attitudes to love and western military attitudes to the Eastern other. The mask of Declan transposes Badiou's perspective to the context of sex tourism, as the others in his narrative serve a uniform purpose: to satisfy the western consumer's desires of the flesh. Also, as "life isn't worth the same there [in Thailand] as it is here [in Ireland]," those that Declan encounters in Pattaya have a disposable quality as they, in Badiou's terms, "don't belong to modernity."

The perspective of Declan's narrative is dominated by his sense of how the world may serve him. There is no critical consciousness of how Declan as an agent actually

acts upon the world, and the storytelling in *Thailand* deconstructs itself through its unwitting narrative voice: Declan. This contrast relates to distinctions of efficacy within this testimonial mode. Testimonial storytelling theatre, when its narrative strategy is epic, critically re-works the conventions of genre. Its narrative voices must be unpredictable, and its dramaturgies must not be considered prototypical. In *Thailand*, the absurd logic put forth by the protagonist during the safari trek signifies a narrative voice that is unreliable and devoid of insight, because this voice reflects the expedient testimonies which formed the pretext for the play. Paradoxically, these aspects of Declan are specifically crafted in order to produce audience insight. Declan must be deciphered by the spectator, therefore, through a consideration of his actions, which relate to his inability to make critical choices. He does, however, make choices. The fact that he spends fifty minutes or so attempting to justify these choices, through an expediently constructed apologia, relates to the meta-text which informs *Thailand*: the facts surrounding the Irish general election of May 2007.

The Dominant Opinion

Badiou, reflecting on the twentieth century, identifies one of “the guises taken by today’s intellectual hegemony, [as] encapsulated in the slogan ‘there is no alternative,’ what the French call *‘la pensée unique.’*” This, he states, “is really nothing but the promotion of *a politics without an alternative, a politique unique*” (*The Century* 4). Badiou’s *pensée unique* eerily echoes one of the great myths of the Irish Free State, although the aphorism would, in the Irish idiom, be “There is no opposition!”¹² The history of the Irish Free State has, largely, been the history of a one-party state, testimony to Ireland as an apolitical exemplar of the neo-colonial condition. The events leading up to the 2007 general election—a false economy built upon an inflationary housing market, an unprecedented amount of new home owners who could scarcely afford their 100% mortgages, scare-mongering that the opposition couldn’t handle an economic boom when in power and would slash concessions on stamp duty (a tax payable on property purchased)—consolidated the national phobia of democratic and accountable politics. Issues like education and health were shelved in the monomaniacal prioritisation of this false economy which works, as recent history has shown us, like a pyramid scheme: certainly not to the advantage of those on the lower rungs of the socio-economic ladder.

In May 2007, Fianna Fáil were re-elected for a third term, albeit in coalition with the Green Party and the Progressive Democrats, and the neo-colony re-instated for another term. Election-day media comment speculated on their reaching an overall parliamentary majority, despite statistical evidence suggesting that this was never a possibility. Despite losing nine seats in the election, the ruling party, in collaboration with state television and radio, affected a mythic aura of triumph, while in reality cobbling together a coalition majority with more or less anyone who

would barter their parliamentary vote. This false projection of myth over reality is symptomatic of the neo-colony, where the “semblance,” in this case of dependable continuity, is more easily digestible than the alternative of a confrontation with “the real” a false economy on the brink of collapse and an electorate encouraged by its government to live dangerously beyond its means (Badiou, *The Century* 49).¹³

Fig. 3: Mairtin de Cógain as Declan in *Thailand: What's Love Got To Do With It?*

According to the creators of *Thailand*, the Irish people who re-elected Fianna Fáil in 2007 voted in response to the temptations of consumer nihilism rather than according to a consciousness of critical citizenship. Fianna Fáil's electoral promise to ring-fence stamp duty concessions for those purchasing their first homes was a pivotal issue in public debate preceding the election, and arguably swung the electorate in their favour. The fact that the Irish electorate was so easily coerced by the myopic economic voodoo of the government had a big influence on *Thailand*, already in development. Declan “is horrified by thought and loves only opinions,

especially the dominant opinion” of his coterie of sex touring opportunists (Badiou, *The Century* 26). As self-serving global citizen, he was deliberately constructed and positioned as reflective of the Irish electorate of self-serving national citizens.

Repositioning the *Seanchaí*

The following contains extracts from an interview with Máirtín de Cógáin:

BD: What for you was the intention of the *Thailand* play?

MDEC: To make money! Ah, no, in 2006, was it? A bunch of lads in Cork came back from the Far East boasting of their sexual exploits with Thai women. I had come across a lot of this while I was travelling in New Zealand and Australia. Brian (that's you like) and myself said, "There is a play in that." We wanted to make a statement that it wasn't ok to accept that a lot of young Cork men were taking on a second job just so they could balm out and live cheap, free and easy, while having as many women as they want in Thailand: not because of envy, but disgust. Society as a whole had become far too open to the idea that it was okay to have a great time at anyone's expense, "if it was your own money, like," while abroad. Sex had become a need and part of any travel abroad, as one teenager said to me in Spain in 2005, "I've had no luck with the ladies, so I had to purchase!"

BD: What, as a storyteller, did it demand of you?

MDEC: More focus than anything else as the mask used in this has many layers. I found the darker I focused my thoughts behind the stage in the few minutes of build up the funnier and sadder the story became. The more serious and vicious I treated the story the more extreme the reaction.

BD: What is the difference in the relationship between storyteller and audience in *Thailand* and in *seanchaí* performance?

MDEC: The modern *seanchaí* is viewed mainly in a light-hearted position with a punch-line expected more often than not. In that way you are always looking to make the audience come over to your side and be with you on a happy note with uproarious laughter at the finish. A lot of the gruesome, real life, harsh elements [of contemporary lived experience] are left out for the modern listener in the [contemporary] world of Irish storytelling, anyhow, in my own view. With *Thailand*, I wonder am I going back to the origins of the *seanchaí*, the total inhabitation of a character without using the notorious New York "Method" but all the time wearing a mask to keep an eye on the audience reaction but still staying true to the rhythm of the play? I find in this I need to be so real to life that I seem unrealistic, for it is easier to look at a cartoon than a mirror, but once the smoke settles the people can no longer avoid themselves.

BD: Any other thoughts?

MDEC: One of the main guys we interviewed in Cork about his time in Thailand, one which we based a lot of the show on, came up to us after the show and said, 'You hit the nail on the head, I met so many fellas like you out there!' Ironical?

De Cógáin's description of his performance as being "so real to life that I seem unrealistic" refers to the characterization of Declan as a grotesque parody of the informants who informed the narrative material for *Thailand*. In *Thailand*, the storyteller was conceived, in Joel Schechter's terms, as a "clown-cum-storyteller," a playful interrogator, in performance, of the contradictions inherent in the testimonies on which the performance is based (qtd. in Wilson 17). De Cógáin, as traditional storyteller, receives and reports the testimony of members of his community. In collaboration with his director/dramaturge, he helps to shape the material into a playful artefact of politically engaged, storytelling theatre.

Declan is an effigy of an Irish consciousness that emerged during the Celtic Tiger era. This consumerist consciousness, according to *Thailand's* creators, could neither think critically of itself, its government, nor the political economy it generated in Ireland and other places. The epic dramaturgy of *Thailand* exploits the potential of storytelling to deconstruct the contradictions of this uncritical consciousness. *Thailand* is at once a documentary play about the global sex tourist industry, and a metaphorical satire on the smug, western consciousness which participates in it. The consumerist consciousness which emerged in Ireland during and after the 1990s, apparently, has moral consequences in both national and global terms. These consequences relate to citizenship, and the critical purpose of both *Thailand* and the epic theatre generally: the call for critical citizenship, both nationally and globally.

Storytelling and Domination

Molloy's play, *The Visiting House*, establishes that the traditional seanchaí's repertoire consists both of mythical (fantastical or folk) tales, and also stories engaged directly with what is at stake in the lives of her/his audience. For De Cógáin, the modern seanchaí in performance places her/himself predominantly in "a light-hearted position with a punch-line expected more often than not": in other words, s/he is expected to enchant and to amuse, but at a safe, mythical distance. The modern seanchaí may have a playful, trickster quality: however, her/his art no longer engages directly with the politics of the day. For the creators of *Thailand*, the play attempted to reclaim the seanchaí as interventionist and, in doing so, appropriate the spirit of nineteenth century stories which oppose the hegemony of oppressive landlords and bailiffs. Through an engagement with the revolutionary quality of the traditional art of the seanchaí, the creators of *Thailand* attempted to conjure a narrative that reveals something about, after Boal, the "bailiffs in the

head” which outlaw critical consciousness in an affluent, self-serving Ireland circa 2007.

The history of epic narrative, from Brecht through Fo and afterwards, may be described as a reclamation of subversive, folk narrative strategies, appropriated and repositioned to serve a theatre polemic which interrogates problems to do with the state, at that particular time, of the State in which the epic interventionist lives. For Peter Thomson, epic actors (or storytellers) are “double-agents, sometimes self-employed and sometimes employed by the character,” and it is “such contradictory juxtapositions [that] are the typical ammunition of *Verfremdung*” (106). For Brecht “the actor’s emotion does not need to coincide with that of the character,” and the efficacy of epic storytelling relies on the sagacity of the storyteller (in this case de Cógáin), playfully reporting the contradictions embodied by the character mask (Declan) (qtd. in Thomson 107). As Dario Fo demonstrated, through his first production of *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* in 1970, the immediacy of documentary theatre is a very natural habitat for the epic theatre. And, just as Fo deployed the devices of the Italian medieval *guillaire*, or clown-cum-storyteller, in his development of *Anarchist*, so BYOB attempted to re-awaken a latent, revolutionary cultural element from the Irish storytelling tradition of the *seanchaí* in developing *Thailand* as a performative refusal of domination.

Notes

1. *Thailand* was first produced in June 2007 at Fast Eddie's Nightclub, Cork, as part of the Cork Midsummer Festival 2007, by Be Your Own Banana Theatre Company (BYOB). The show was performed by de Cógáin and directed by Desmond. The original production was produced in 2008 and 2009 by Meridian Theatre Company, with the same performer and director. The same production has since been performed in the USA by BYOB in 2010 and 2011.
2. *Seanchaí* is the term used to describe a traditional Irish fireside storyteller. The traditional *seanchaí* was both a teller of stories (or local news) and the "keeper," or oral archivist, of stories of the region in which he was based. The *seanchaí*, in contemporary performance, is still characterised by a rural, or traditional-sounding, narrative voice.
3. The saying, "to pull the devil by the tail," means that one is too poor to do anything about one's vicissitudes.
4. The Dáil is the Irish House of Parliament.
5. Kelly was born in 1914, which would suggest that this memory belongs somewhere between 1920 and 1930.
6. The heroic tales would include those of Cúchulainn and the warriors of Ulster. *The Táin* is an epic poem, which dates from the eighth century, and many of the tales therein are still popular as material for children's story books.
7. Michael Davitt (1846-1906) was from Straide in County Mayo, a county bordering Molloy's native Galway. Davitt was known as the "Father of the Land League," because of his work with the League in securing land ownership for the peasantry during colonial times.
8. Declan's final statement in *Thailand* is that he plans to holiday in Malaysia the following summer, and to participate in the sex industry there.
9. The only exception to the chronology is a flashback to a nightclub incident in Ireland, where Declan recalls dancing with a French lady. In this section, Declan's carnal fascination with the foreign "other" is introduced, as well as his association of instant gratification with selfhood.
10. In Ireland, "wan" is a slang term for a woman.
11. This mask is named after a character in John Connolly's novel *The Book of Lost Things*. In Connolly's novel, the Crooked Man is a child-killer, with a grotesque posture and an unapologetic attitude to his crimes.
12. I refer to this common propaganda (or myth), espoused by Fianna Fáil party supporters, with particular frequency in times of an impending election. This form of canvassing, common to casual conversation and popular public discourse, is a shorthand which could be re-phrased as "We don't need to discuss policies or hard facts. All that matters is that it would be worse if anyone else was in government, and because this goes without saying, the matter is closed to discussion."
13. A full account of the economic difficulties that have ensued in Ireland since the 2007 election is superfluous here, except to confirm that the housing market did indeed collapse, house prices dropped dramatically, and unemployment

figures rose on a weekly basis. Revelations of negligence and mismanagement of financial institutions and pension schemes emerged, and a tax levy was imposed on public servants to help pay for these and other mismanagements. The State also ceded economic sovereignty through the terms dictated to it by the EU/IMF bailout agreement in 2010.

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