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"The Lost and the Lonely": Crisis in Three Plays by Enda Walsh

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Abstract

This article explores the theme of crisis in three plays by Enda Walsh: *Penelope* (2010), *The New Electric Ballroom* (2008) and *The Walworth Farce* (2006). By showing how *Penelope* directly addressed the collapse of the Celtic Tiger, the article identifies major themes that can help to understand Walsh's work more generally. This is demonstrated by a discussion of the other two plays, which are placed in the context of events in Ireland before and after the collapse of its Celtic Tiger in 2008.

Keywords: Enda Walsh, Druid Theatre, Celtic Tiger, Magdelene Laundries, *The Odyssey*, Emigration, Multiculturalism, Irish Theatre, Irish Culture

Résumé

Cet article explore le theme de la crise dans trois pieces d'Enda Walsh: Penelope *(2010),* The New Electric Ballroom *(2008) et* The Walworth Farce *(2006). En montrant comment Penelope traite directement de l'effondrement du Tigre celtique, l'article identifie d'autres thèmes majeurs qui peuvent contribuer à une meilleure compréhension de l'œuvre de Walsh en général. Ceci est démontré par une discussion des deux autres pièces qui sont resituées dans le contexte des événements en Irlande avant et après la mort du tigre celtique en 2008.*

Mots clés : Enda Walsh, Théatre du Druide, Tigre celtique, blanchisseries Madeleine, L'Odyssée, émigration, multiculturalisme, théâtre irlandais, culture irlandaise

The 2008 global financial crash had a famously devastating impact upon Ireland, which went from being celebrated for its prosperity under the Celtic Tiger period (1995-2008) to being mocked internationally for the collapse of its economy. The resulting economic and social crisis has also had an impact upon its culture. If Irish writers and artists have been slow to address the financial crash, this may be due to the collapse in arts-related funding in the country – a collapse that has led to the closure of theatre companies, the withdrawal of numerous funding schemes, and the emigration of many leading actors, writers and directors. Nevertheless, we have seen the emergence of a small number of plays that seek to understand the impact of the crisis upon Irish life, to investigate its

causes and consequences, and to historicise the events that transformed Ireland so quickly in the post-2008 era of austerity.

One of the first plays to directly address the end of the Celtic Tiger era is Enda Walsh's *Penelope*, which appeared in 2010. By comparing that play to two earlier Walsh works, *The Walworth Farce* (2006) and *The New Electric Ballroom* (2008), I want to show how Walsh's work has always placed crisis at its centre. Beginning with the play that most explicitly addresses this theme and then working backwards, I will argue that these three plays may collectively be seen as an attempt to comment on some of the major issues of the Celtic Tiger period – but they also locate crisis at being at the heart of Irish life generally. They therefore can be seen as examining how a disastrous social transformation (such as that of 2008) can enable positive as well as negative responses.

Walsh first came to prominence in the late 1990s, as one of a group of young male Irish dramatists who were writing violent and vivid monologues that seemed as much influenced by Quentin Tarantino as they were by Brian Friel or Samuel Beckett. Like other writers of his generation (such as Conor McPherson and Mark O'Rowe), Walsh has subsequently developed his skills and his profile – as could probably have been expected. But what could not have been predicted when *Disco Pigs* premiered in 1996, or when *Bedbound* became the unexpected hit of the 2000 Dublin Theatre Festival, was how Walsh's reputation would rise so quickly – so that he is now regarded as one of the leading playwrights in the English-speaking world. His stage adaptation of the movie *Once* won him a Tony Award in 2012; his plays *Misterman* (revised in 2012 having premiered in 1999) and *Ballyturk* (2014) both played to sold-out audiences at Britain's National Theatre. In 2015 it was announced that he was collaborating with David Bowie and Ivo Van Hove on the production of a new musical called *Lazarus* while his stage adaptation of *Pinocchio* for Disney is scheduled to premiere in 2016. Very few playwrights have managed to combine commercial success with a reputation for aesthetic experimentation in the way that Walsh has done.

Those successes were enabled to a great extent by Walsh's collaborations with Druid Theatre, the Galway-based company that became internationally famous for its discovery of Martin McDonagh in the mid-1990s. For Druid, Walsh wrote the three plays explored in this paper, and their success played a key role in the establishment of his reputation worldwide. Druid brought those plays to international attention in various tours between 2006 and 2011, but they also benefited Walsh by allowing him to work regularly with a small number of collaborators. Hence, Mikel Murfi (director of *The Walworth Farce* and *Penelope*) also acted in *The New Electric Ballroom*, while Tadhg Murphy appeared both in a revival of *The Walworth Farce* and in the premiere of *Penelope*. All three productions had the same set designer (Sabine Dargent), and there was also overlap in such areas as

stage management, costume, lighting, and dramaturgy. So because the plays were not just produced by one company but developed by it too, they share several important strands and themes. That practical unity allowed Walsh to develop shared themes across the three plays – as this paper will show in more detail.

I want to begin by discussing *Penelope* because it most clearly addresses this article's themes – even though it is the last of the three to be produced, having appeared in 2010. It is Walsh's reimagining of the Homeric story of Odysseus's wife and her suitors, who are represented by four Irishmen who gather every day in a drained-out swimming pool to compete to win the love of the eponymous character. As the play begins, a fifth suitor, called Murray, has just killed himself, leaving a large bloodstain on the pool wall. As the other men gather to discuss their colleague's death, they realise from the fact that they all had the same dream the night before that Penelope's husband – who is never named but whom we may safely call Odysseus – is going to arrive home that day. And, as in the Homeric original, the suitors all understand that he will massacre them immediately upon his arrival. Faced with the prospect of certain death, the four men have to overcome an instinctive competitiveness with each other in order to ensure that one of them seduces Penelope before her husband arrives, thereby making sure that Odysseus will have no home to return to.

In bringing *The Odyssey* into a contemporary Irish context, Walsh is, of course, doing something that has been done before: the influence of James Joyce is evident throughout the play, and it also informed its reception in Ireland, where audiences have been conditioned by the influence of Joyce to draw and detect parallels between ancient Greece and modern Ireland. And in an international context, the play is certainly not the first attempt to find a contemporary approach to Greek myth: it is, for example, reminiscent of Charles Mee's re-imaginings of Greek plays (such as his transformation of Aeschylus *Suppliant Woman* into *Big Love* in 2000). There is a further context, which is that in 2010 both Ireland and Greece had been lumped together as Europe's "PIIGS', a deeply insulting acronym for Portugal, Ireland, Italy, Greece, and Spain – the indebted nations whose financial indiscipline was threatening to destroy the European project generally. While the Irish and Greek cases diverged after 2012, with Ireland's leaving its bailout programme whilst Greece struggled to abide by the terms of its own arrangements with its creditors, Walsh's decision to blend Irish characters with Greek myth in 2010 had subtle contemporary resonances.

Interestingly, however, *Penelope* premiered not in Ireland but in Germany. Since *Disco Pigs* was first performed in Germany in the late 1990s, Walsh has worked very closely with a German dramaturge named Tilman Raabke, who has collaborated with him on the drafts of several plays. It was Raabke who invited Walsh to write *Penelope* as part of a group of six plays by European writers, all

of which were about the Odyssey, and staged as part of the Ruhr Valley's year as one of Europe's Capitals of Culture in 2010. One of the interesting features of Walsh's career is that many of plays since 2000 have premiered in German translation before his own English-language text appears – thus giving him immediate access to two very different "first" audiences. Walsh has stated that he felt the play was particularly suitable for the Theater Oberhausen because it is based in a city that he considers quite isolated and impoverished; he therefore believed that its audiences might identify with the suitors. But he also wrote the play with an Irish production in view: he has stated that he created the three eldest male characters with the Irish actors Niall Buggy, Dennis Conway and Karl Shiels specifically in mind[1]. So the play was intended by the author to be meaningful to audiences both within and beyond Ireland.

Nevertheless, *Penelope*'s status as one of the earliest post-Celtic Tiger dramas is indisputable. The play dramatizes a situation in which an era of debauchery and excess is about to be brought to a violent conclusion – a conclusion that everyone in the play had secretly been anticipating, but was nevertheless hoping to avoid. *Penelope* asks whether, in such situations, it is possible for people to change: to use crisis as an opportunity for creation rather than destruction. The play is therefore motivated by a unifying question that was terribly pertinent in Ireland (and elsewhere) in 2010: if our world is about to be destroyed, will we be destroyed too, or can we invent new ways of living? As this article argues, that theme dominates Walsh's work (it is present in Homer and Joyce too, of course). But it is unsurprising that many audiences who saw the play in Ireland in 2010 were quick to read it as an allegorical representation of the end of the Celtic Tiger era.

Such an interpretation can easily be justified. We might, for instance, note the names of the four protagonists. They have been given what will seem to many to be generically "Irish" surnames, rather like the way in which Beckett used the common names Malone and Molloy to make his characters seem less individualised. One can also make the argument that the names draw on the melodramatic convention of revealing character through name. The eldest character Fitz, for instance, seems most self-aware and of all the men is most at peace (albeit that his peace is produced through self-medication) – so we might see him as "fitting" into his own life and environment. The next eldest is Dunne – and the play frequently puns on his name in order to show that he is in many ways "done": a has-been, someone whose best days are behind him. The most dominant character, Quinn, uses aggression to dominate the other men; his name appears to combine the words "kill" and "win" and thus hints at his personality, which is violently competitive. Finally the youngest man Burns is also the most passionate and indeed

1. These remarks were made at the Synge Summer School, 2013, in a public interview that I conducted.

is the one who will finally seduce Penelope – but too late to prevent Odysseus's triumph.

Another way of looking at those names is to see them as allusions to the Irish businessmen who helped to create the Celtic Tiger and who also might be accused of having brought about its demise. Fitz might refer to Sean Fitzpatrick, the Chief Executive of Anglo-Irish bank, the financial institution that, more than any other, helped to undermine Ireland's reputation and economy. Dunne could be an allusion to Ben Dunne, the former chairman of Dunnes Stores who bribed numerous politicians (including the Taoiseach Charles Haughey), and who was infamously arrested in a Florida motel where he was charged for cocaine possession and soliciting a prostitute. Quinn might relate to Sean Quinn, the former Chairperson of the Quinn Group: in 2008, he was Ireland's richest man, worth almost €4 billion, but he was declared bankrupt in 2012; his irregular dealings with Anglo-Irish bank continue to be a subject of much speculation in the Irish media. There are no obvious correspondences in the Irish business community with the name Burns (there is a property developer of that name, but he is nowhere near as prominent as the other three figures). And it is worth mentioning in passing that the name of the fifth suitor, Murray, is shared by another offstage presence in a different play about a competition between a group of men : David Mamet's *Glengarry Glenn Ross* (1984).

Walsh has hinted that he intended for those names to remind audiences of those prominent Irish businessmen, but it would be inaccurate to suggest that he is attempting to portray any of those people directly[2]. There is however one very direct allusion to the Celtic Tiger in the script. It comes in Dunne's description of his favourite childhood book, *The Magic Porridge Pot*, which, in Quinn's view, is "the only book there is":

> Fitz — There are others actually.
>
> Quinn — Not that speak so clearly of investment and growth or the fast development of an unstable economy… There is a whole town that grounds to a standstill when it became awash with porridge, yeah… A pot that gave and gave, a community that took with no notion of responsibility or future.
>
> Fitz — I thought the magic porridge pot lifted the people out of poverty.
>
> Dunne — And into obesity, those fat bastards! […] What the pot needed was regulation. It needed that little girl to stay at home with the sole purpose of saying "Cook-pot-cook" and "stop-pot-stop". Outside of which she didn't need any more words

2. He confirmed this at the 2013 Synge Summer School.

> Fitz — She would have grown up retarded, mind you.
>
> Quinn — She would have grown up in power.
>
> Dunne — She'd be the keeper of the pot[3].

This passage reproduces jargon and ideology that were ubiquitous during the Celtic Tiger period, with Fitz repeating the commonplace assertion by neoliberal politicians that the enrichment of a tiny Irish elite would alleviate poverty by having a trickledown effect (though in fact Ireland then as now had one of the biggest gaps between rich and poor in the world). The references to regulation are also important: it is now fully understood that the Irish crisis arose due partly to a failure of regulators to do their jobs. It is also notable that the dispute between the old man and the younger is a competition between different sets of values: Fitz has the wisdom to understand that to have power over only one thing is to lead a pointlessly limited life, but for Quinn and Dunne – men in their forties and fifties respectively – the girl with the magic porridge pot has an admirable status. The older man admires discipline, but the two middle-aged men admire showy abundance.

So we can see how the play could be seen as an allegory for the collapse of the Celtic Tiger. Interestingly, these lines were cut from the Druid premiere of the piece on the grounds that they made *too* apparent the link with the Celtic Tiger (though they continue to appear in other professional productions of the play). While that decision highlights the way in which the play has multiple resonances and meanings, it also underlines the fact that Walsh's thinking in the composition of the play was influenced by contemporaneous Irish events.

Walsh himself shows early in the play that the meaning of a story – or indeed the meaning of a phrase – is dependent upon where it is uttered, whether in Ireland or Germany (or at the bottom of a swimming pool). An immediate example of this approach appears in the opening scene, in which Quinn fries a sausage with a blowtorch, an act that is at once aggressive, proprietary, and an assertion of masculinity. When asked how it tastes, Quinn thinks carefully before replying that it is "sausagey":

> This is the very last sausage, men, and I wanted you all to know that it's a superior sausage. Not some dust-filled, cigar-shaped hunk of pig-shit… but an actual sausage! The sausage of our youth. Had I just said, "this is a hot sausage"… well, that has negative connotations.

3. Enda Walsh, *Penelope*, London, Nick Hern Books, 2010, p. 9. Subsequent references appear in parentheses in the text.

> Fitz — Not if we were cold, it doesn't. A hot sausage would be quite nice in the cold!
>
> Quinn — Obviously not if we were cold, Fitz. Had we been sitting in a yurt in Mongolia, shivering into a herd of yaks and I was clutching this sausage… I would look you each in the eyes and smile… "Gentlemen, this is a hot sausage! The last hot sausage! The final sausage, heated!" What do you feel about that then, lads?
>
> Fitz — Jealous. And cold.
>
> Dunne — Leaning in trying to get a modicum of heat off that delicious-looking banger, no doubt. (6-7)

This passage prepares the audience for the rest of the play in at least three ways. First, it uses inflated language to talk about inconsequential matters, and thus is rather like the play itself, which offers a very amusing fusion of the epic with the trivial. The second is how the men constantly narrate stories to and about themselves. One of the key features of Walsh's plays generally is not just that his characters tell stories about themselves, but that those stories are almost always told in the present tense. Performance thus becomes a way for his characters to imagine the lives they would be living if they were not trapped somewhere that made living impossible. And the third is the notion that meaning is dependent upon context and location, that it can shift between places, that there can be times when a man can offer you some hot sausage without the offer seeming unwholesome

This idea that meaning is fluid, and that it is dependent upon place, might appear to contradict one of the play's other important ideas, however, which is that there are no new stories, that everything is a repetition of something else, including of course the play itself. Many such repetitions exist. Walsh has been known to reject comparisons with Beckett as being too limiting, but there are countless Beckettian allusions in the play, as well as imitations of his style. As I mentioned above, the play also echoes Mamet's *Glengarry Glenn Ross* in equating business with male competition for sexual dominance. Quinn, for example, explains that he persuaded Murray to kill himself because Murray "always [had] the better sale than me, always the clearer presentation!… We are all men of business" (30). Many other allusions can be identified: the play concludes with Quinn's cabaret show, which mixes the stories of real people such as Napoleon and John F. Kennedy with the fictional romances of Rhett Butler and Scarlet O'Hara, and Romeo and Juliet. Walsh's point appears to be that everything can be retold as a version of some earlier story – and this is true even for reality: it is not so much that life imitates art, but that art gives us the frame through which we

interpret life. The men themselves seem aware of the fact that they too are repeating themselves, as if trapped in a looping film: each man is bored not only by his companions but by himself – Burns describes the group as "the talking dead" (29), and he is not far wrong.

This fictionalisation of the real helps us to understand the status of Penelope in the men's eyes: she operates for them not as a real person but as an objectification of their own desires, so that it become apparent that the men are competing for her not because of *who she is* but rather because there are other men nearby who want to possess her, both as sexual object and symbol of status. Walsh has received some criticism for the fact that Penelope exists in the play only as an object:[4] she never delivers any lines and it is not made clear whether she is in control of the CCTV system that allows the men to address her. Put against Joyce's *Ulysses*, this criticism could seem valid: in that book, after all, we are shown how men objectify Molly Bloom, and Joyce handles this characterisation in such a way that we see such objectification as being emblematic of what is wrong with the men, rather than as any kind of statement about Molly herself.[5] But Joyce does give Molly a voice of her own at the end of his novel, and while we can debate whether in doing so he gives her subjectivity, he is in any case doing something that Walsh does not do. When asked about Penelope's voicelessness, Walsh admits that her development surprised him as he was writing the play:

> I kept thinking "This woman is going to get involved", but the more it went on the more I thought, "I can't actually have her talk, it would just completely lessen her by having her talk. Her story is much larger than [the suitors'] and to have her even begin to open her mouth is a whole new piece[6]".

I return to the topic of Penelope's voicelessness below, but first it seems important to assert that these passages show how the men in the play are capable of thinking of women only in symbolic terms, and only in relation to themselves. We also see this trait in their discussion of their mothers. Fitz, for example, says that:

> She was never a woman for words, my mother. She could talk but I was always of the opinion that she hated the debris that conversation let behind. She couldn't see the point of offering an opinion on anything. (13)

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4. Peter Crawley, "Stage Struck", *Irish Times*. *The Ticket* Supplement, 30 July 2010, p. 32.
5. Consider, for example, the characterization of Lenehan in the *Wandering Rocks* episode of the novel: his crude remarks about Molly make Bloom seem dignified by comparison.
6. Charlie McBride, "Enda Walsh: From the Odyssey to Penelope", *Galway Advertiser*, 10 June 2010. [*http://www.advertiser.ie/galway/article/27155*].

Quinn later asks a surprising question: "Your mother was a woman, right?"

> Fitz — Oh completely! And rather than thinking of her as a halfwit, I like to think of her as a revolutionary! Had her ideas on vocal abstinence caught on, you could image, boys, a world with absolutely no wars. (14)

Fitz's response – "oh completely" – implies that it is possible for someone to be more or less womanly: gender is not an inherent trait but a way of being seen. Dunne is rather more negative about his mother, but he too considers her only in relation to her impact on himself:

> She left little impact on the world, my mother, except for her size. She was a fat lady and unpleasant with it. I was still wetting my bed as a teenager and I put that down to a total absence of a physical affection. I found the only way to get a hug off her was to season my neck with a little gravy. (14)

Hence, women in the play operate at the pinnacle of a hierarchy of symbols for the men's own appetites, needs and desires. This explains why Fitz complains of the barbecue being "pornography" because it is "placing unworkable images in our heads" (16): the men's world is a world of objects, desire for which can only be construed in sexual terms. Earthly power and sexual power over women operate as metaphors for each other's dysfunction.

Walsh has described the play as a "cranky love story": "the most moving moments are when the suitors manage to articulate their ideas of love, only to be faced with imminent extinction", he observes[7]. He might have expressed that sentence the other way around, though, since in the play it is *because* the suitors are faced with imminent extinction that they manage to articulate their ideas of love. As Walsh states:

> These four men… have been having conversations about nothing – for like, ever – but when faced with their death, they begin to reset themselves in some way. It's like everything is blank and then they begin to create actual worlds to place themselves in. They have a need to find something to leave behind them, to try and leave something good behind[8].

The play asks whether that kind of change is possible, and shows that, in fact, it is – and that love is possible too. But what he is also doing is dramatizing his idea that his characters' lives are trapped in patterns that make both love and change almost impossible. And that too is one of his major themes.

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7. Aleks Sierz, "Waiting for Walsh", *The Stage*, 4 February 2011.
8. Hilary Whitney, "Interview: Enda Walsh", The Artsdesk.com, 4 February 2011. [*http://www.theartsdesk.com/theatre/interview-playwright-enda-walsh*].

How then does *Penelope* map on to the Celtic Tiger period? The audience knows at the end of the play that the four men are soon to be slaughtered: and if the characters are to be seen as emblems of the crass materialism of the Celtic Tiger years, then the appearance of Odysseus can be seen as the arrival of the long-overdue reckoning. But Walsh's use of performativity and allusion allows for a more nuanced interpretation of the play to be put forward. By suggesting that everything that we see on that stage (and by extension, everything that we do in our lives) has been performed before, Walsh presents the idea that human history needs to be seen in cyclical rather than linear terms. That thinking can undermine the notion of historical progress that underpinned commentary about the Celtic Tiger, which was often portrayed as a kind of evolutionary development from earlier versions of the Irish state and society. But what is crucial here is how the men respond to their imminent death, even as they acknowledge its cyclical inevitability: they do so not by embracing their materialism but by rejecting it for such values as love and the appreciation of the beautiful. Walsh's suggestion seems to be that crisis is a recurrent feature of Irish life – that the Celtic Tiger and its collapse are examples of a cycle of rise and fall that has happened countless times before. But he also reminds us that another constant is the extent to which people seek to overcome those crises: to go on even when they can't go on, to use that well-worn but apt Beckettian construction.

What I wish to do in the remainder of this article is to show how this direct attempt to address the Celtic Tiger era can be seen to have its roots in two earlier Walsh plays, thereby underscoring the importance for Walsh of the theme of repetition and the cyclical. I want to do so firstly by considering *The New Electric Ballroom*. The most obvious approach to comparing *Ballroom* and *Penelope* is not to focus on crisis but rather to think of gender. One way of defending Walsh against the charge of misogyny in relation to *Penelope*, to return to that topic briefly, could be to point towards the end of the play: the four men are "ready for the end" but Penelope is looking into "her new future" (51). As Walsh states, Penelope's story is much bigger than those of the men, and the play's conclusion emphasises the validity of his assertion. It is not that the men's perspective is prioritised over hers but instead that the men's view of the world is shown to be so narrow that the play cannot accommodate hers. Another defence could be to point out that, to an extent that we have not seen in Irish drama since Beckett, Walsh's plays need to be seen not individually but as parts of an interlinking body of work: it would not be entirely unfair to claim that Walsh is writing the same play over and over again, from slightly different perspectives each time (a characteristic in his work that Walsh himself acknowledges). In such a context, *The New Electric Ballroom* can be put forward as one possible response to the criticisms of *Penelope*, though of course it was written many years before, premiering

in Germany in 2004 before having its English-language premiere in Galway in 2008.

Given that the play features three sisters, it is immediately apparent that one objective of *The New Electric Ballroom* is (as in *Penelope*) to recycle old images, to take over-familiar stories and to find ways to make them seem fresh: the New Testament looms as large in the play as Chekhov does, for instance. What Walsh is doing, though, is offering us a glimpse of what reality from Penelope's perspective might look like, since *The New Electric Ballroom* shows that, for its three female protagonists, having one's life constantly narrativised is not a form of celebration but a way to be imprisoned.

The two elder sisters in the play, Breda and Clara, have both been traumatised by separate but interlinking encounters forty years earlier with a showband leader called Roller Royce. Their younger sister Ada – whose birth, somewhat ambiguously, occurred not long after the events described by her sisters – forces them daily to retell the story of their heartbreak; Ada thus acts as a kind of demented director figure, rather like the director in Beckett's *Catastrophe* (1982). Breda and Clara are affected not just by having been betrayed by Roller Royce, but also by the gossip that ensued from those events. Walsh thus dramatizes the way in which gossip operates a form of control and surveillance over the lives of people in small communities, especially in the case of women who challenge taboos relating to sexual agency. The impact of gossip on these women's lives is revealed very poignantly when Clara imagines winning a baking competition, thus showing her superiority to the other women in her village. "You're the best Clara" she imagines them saying. "Better than all them who locked you inside. Who spun out the gossip in the canneries and locked the door behind you[9]."

There is one male figure in the play. When this man, whose name is Patsy, arrives in the house, he often finds himself desperate for something to say – and he too turns always to gossip, most of which is about women whose bodies are in some state of degradation. These include the one-hundred year old Nana Cotter who has "Little bones like summer kindling, hands like pigeon's feet, hearing shot from years of working in the cannery but by Jesus can she eat trifle? Eat it? Like a hoover" (11). It also includes Mary Calley who is "fighting fit after her fall at bingo" – because, Patsy says, "she had a few to drink" – as well as Phyllis Ryan who "went to the doctor's to get him to move his car and walked away with a burst appendix" (21). Patsy's stories show how women will constantly be spoken about in relation to their deviation from ideas of physical perfection and desirability, and in terms of their appetites, whether for drink or trifle. He may seem to

9. Enda Walsh, *The New Electric Ballroom*, London, Nick Hern Books, 2008, p. 14. Subsequent references appear in parentheses in the text.

be connecting Ada, Breda and Clara to the outside world by visiting them every day with these stories but, by reminding them of the gossip that they might face outside, he is inadvertently reinforcing their determination to stay indoors.

Walsh also shows that this process of surveillance over women does not just involve talking, but also involves language itself. We see this at the beginning of the play when Breda refers to the way in which birth is undignified because it happens in what she calls "the waterworks department" (6). Her use of euphemism shows an inability to talk about sexuality explicitly – which in turn makes evident a sense of shame over her body. Both of those traits explain but also complicate some features of the story that follows. Clara likewise is limited, though more by the language of religion than by bodily shame; this is shown by her references to the Virgin Mary as a kind of role model whose example she can never quite live up to. She also describes how her mother determined that she was a "born baker". Their mother "said I had a gift for coffee cake the way Jesus had a gift for sacrifice", she remembers, boasting gently (8): Clara's skill is thus described not in a positive light but as a form of martyrdom. The pair experience different forms of inhibition, but they are linked in many ways. Walsh provides a vivid image that shows that the two women understand what is expected of them when Breda speaks of how, cycling to the ballroom, they "move through the evening with pleated skirts hiding the busy legs beneath" (16). Outwardly they are expected to display tranquillity and peace, even if beneath the surface there is a flurry of motion.

The problem that identities can be fixed by our communities' intolerance is not felt exclusively by the women. As Patsy says, "in a town this size we've all got our roles to play and mine is to play a man of no great purpose" (34). And all of the characters show a capacity to imagine themselves as being objectified by others, from Patsy who sees himself as if in a photograph, to Breda who prepares herself carefully by looking in the mirror (27). As the two elder sisters say, we are all "stamped by our stories" (35). However, it is Patsy who is offered the chance to begin again. Two of the sisters wash him clean, though their claim that they are giving him a new identity by freeing him from stories is undercut somewhat by the fact that their actions evoke the Christian sacrament of baptism while also alluding to the story of the anointing of Christ by Mary in John 12: 1-8. Patsy and Ada then co-create a new scene for themselves, again delivering their shared story in the present tense, as Walsh's characters always do. In that story, they imagine having a life together: one that would give both of them what they want, which, in Patsy's case, is *certainty* and in Ada's is *possibility*. Things begin to unravel, however, when Patsy reveals that he is the son of Roller Royce, and that his mother was the Doris Day look-alike who distracted Roller from the competing claims of Breda and Clara. The baptism of Patsy is then ironically reconfigu-

red when Breda pisses herself in response to Patsy's revelation of his parentage: the masculine ritual of renewal is thus reimagined in terms of female incontinence. Patsy soon talks himself out of taking the opportunity to live with Ada: his fear of change causes him to flee. Like so many of Walsh's characters, he shows himself to be too frightened to live in the real world of uncertainty and instead falls back on stories.

As the play concludes, Ada has created a new story, this time about herself and her abandonment by Patsy – and by now the power has shifted: where Ada dominated her sisters, now they dominate her. Ada's story matches the sisters' in crucial ways, with Ada being let down by the false promises of the son, just as Clara and Breda were let down by the father. So the story of the elder generation is visited upon the younger one, with the elder sisters taking the power, as symbolised by the fact that they finally have the cup of tea that they have craved throughout the play.

It is clear that Walsh intends for this play to have wide-ranging impact and relevance, but it can also be placed in the specific context of its Irish premiere. With its discussion of the relationship between women's bodies, imprisonment, and the use of discourse about sexuality as a means of surveillance and control, the play speaks directly to matters of Irish concern. Its premiere in 2008 coincided with the publication of the Ryan Report into the treatment of women and children in institutions run by the Catholic Church in Ireland – a theme explored more explicitly by such plays as *Eclipsed* (Patricia Burke Brogan, 1992) or *Laundry* (Anu Productions, 2011), and by films such as *The Magdalene Sisters*, which starred Eileen Walsh (whose breakthrough role was in the premiere of Walsh's *Disco Pigs*). Walsh's play should not be seen as a direct (or even indirect) treatment of those themes, but its characterisation of Irish women locked in a cycle of imprisonment and abuse certainly resonates with contemporary concerns. *The New Electric Ballroom* shows that traumas are never fully left behind; there is often a risk that they will merely be translated into something new that is derived from the same root cause. Irish audiences might choose to see a message from this theme: we cannot assume that the closure of the Magdalene Laundries means that the attitudes that caused them have been banished fully. As is shown by recent controversies about the Irish system of direct provision for asylum seekers, the country still finds reasons to limit the movement of vulnerable people, using the language of blame and authority to legitimise their imprisonment.

Stepping back further into Walsh's career, it can be argued that *The Walworth Farce* also speaks to matters of contemporary concern, including both immigration and emigration. Yet is also can be seen as an attempt to write a play that deals with a very conventional Irish theme: the dramatization of a reversal of the natural order, whereby younger generations have to give way to older ones (instead of the other way around). We can see evidence of this theme in plays

such as Synge's *The Shadow of the Glen* (1903), in which an old man is left holding the stage, his young wife banished; it also can be detected more subtly in such plays as Brian Friel's *Philadelphia Here I Come!* (1964) or Tom Murphy's *A Whistle in the Dark* (1961). In this case, we find a father who attempts to force his two sons to atone for his own past sins. As in *The New Electric Ballroom*, we have in the character of Dinny (the father) a demented director figure who forces two others to enact a series of events from the past. Walsh's stage directions tell us that the performance style resembles *The Three Stooges* but it is apparent that Dinny wants to believe that his story is, if not a reality, then certainly a representation of a truth. As he says to his son Sean, "the story doesn't work if we don't have the facts[10]". The trauma that Dinny is trying to escape through his performance is that he murdered his brother and sister-in-law in a dispute about their mother's will some twenty years earlier. As Dinny says, "the family routine keeps things safe" (68), so for him the performance of the farce involves making a new routine that will allow him to retrieve the sense of safety he destroyed through his act of fratricide. When confronted with the accusation that the farce is not reality, Dinny says that "It's my truth, [and] nothing else matters". (70)

The problem for Dinny, however, is that the real world repeatedly intrudes upon the performance. We see this in his discovery that Sean – whose job is to go to the local shop each day to purchase food that can be used as props in the performance – has brought home Ryvita rather than bread; and Dinny's violent reaction to Sean's mistaken purchase of sausage rather than chicken is shocking in performance. These intrusions multiply, each time making Dinny seem more unhinged, until the first act concludes with the arrival of a young black woman called Hayley. A Tesco checkout girl, Hayley appears to have formed an attachment to Sean and is perhaps using the opportunity to return his shopping as an excuse to get closer to him. And in doing so – by being kind, by seeking the possibility of love, by offering Sean redemption – she inadvertently ruins everything for Dinny and his sons.

As Nicholas Grene has pointed out, one of the most frequently used motifs in Irish drama is that of the stranger in the house – whereby an outsider figure arrives into a settled domestic environment and, through flaunting the conventions established in that environment, destabilises but ultimately renews it[11]. Hayley clearly fits into such a category, as indeed does Patsy in *The New Electric Ballroom*. She is a woman intruding into an all-male world, black where the others are white, English where the others are Irish and, perhaps most impor-

10. Enda Walsh, *The Walworth Farce*, London, Nick Hern, 2006, p. 14. Subsequent references appear in parentheses in the text.

11. This idea is developed in Nicholas Grene's *The Politics of Irish Drama,* Cambridge University Press, 1999, *passim*.

tantly, from the real city of London rather than the characters' imagined version of Cork. Her presence makes Dinny's stories unravel; it also provides Blake with the evidence that he needs to go through with his decision to kill Dinny.

In an Irish context, we can read Hayley's presence back into Irish debates about race and citizenship. *The Walworth Farce* premiered in 2006, just a year after an Irish referendum withdrew the right to citizenship from parents of children born in Ireland. With the memories of that debate still fresh in everyone's mind at the time of the play's premiere, the arrival in the play of a black woman who disrupts an idealised story about Ireland was certainly provocative. Again this shows how Walsh's plays are rooted in an Irish social context – even as they draw on and evoke other resonances and meanings.

A concern for the three men upon Haley's arrival, however, is not whether to reject her but to consider how she can be assimilated into the performance. Dinny asks her two questions when she arrives: does she have the shopping and can she cook chicken? He has decided immediately that she can play the mother figure that the performance so badly needs. There is a problem though: as Dinny says, "You're black. What are we going to do about that Maureen?" That is, he calls her not by her own name, but by the name of his absent wife. Dinny's solution will be to whiten her face by using moisturiser; her age and nationality do not seem to require similar kinds of adjustment or disguise. Blake is more interested in Hayley's gender than her race: he imitates her from the moment of her arrival and copies her "perfectly" according to Walsh's stage directions. This initially might seem like his attempt to perform a female identity more realistically, but as we later discover, he is instead trying to contrive a situation that will result in his father's death and Sean's freedom. And at the play's conclusion, in what is perhaps its most upsetting scene, Sean will cover his own face in brown shoe polish in order to act out Hayley's part. That action calls to mind the history of racism that is inherent in western performance, evoking memories of minstrelsy and its relationship with Irish clowning and melodrama. But Sean's use of blackface also has more immediate thematic consequences: what we see in the play is that the markers of identity that we may regard as inherent – which may, in fact, trap us – are not realities but performances: that is, they are presences that must be constantly re-asserted before an audience that is willing to believe in the reality of those markers[12]. We cannot change the fact of being born in one country rather than another, or being born one gender rather than another or of having one particular colour of skin – but the play is showing how none of those facts should determine our sense of how to live.

12. The subject of Irish performances of blackface has been widely explored, most notably in Eric Lott's *Love and Theft* (OUP, 1995).

Shortly after her arrival, Hayley points out to the men how easy it is to get "stuck in a pattern" in a job like hers at Tesco. By doing so, she shows how Dinny's lust for routine has real world correspondences: he is a fantastical figure but his desires are easy enough to identify with. So too is his desire to invent an Ireland in his own London living room, since that too gives him safety. Indeed, Walsh provides an overarching metaphor for the play in Blake's story about being an astronaut (as retold by Sean): "Blake's full of talk about being an astronaut. He's read a book on it and knows some big words to do with space. He says he'd feel safe up there. He said if he got nervous he'd hide the Earth behind his thumb" (58). The farce is a way for those men to hide the Earth behind their thumb. As a critique of Irish history, Irish performance and the representation of Irish culture – or, more precisely, the uses to which those things are put – *The Walworth Farce* has a devastating and harsh impact. But its dramatization of how easy it is for people to isolate themselves in the parochial because of their fear of the vastness of choice available now has universal importance.

The tragedy is that the sons cannot help repeating the past: as Dinny predicts, Sean is fated to become his own father. This happens when Blake kills Dinnny and then tricks Sean into killing him. Blake's last action is to kiss his brother and say "Now go, love" (81). That gesture repeats exactly their mother's actions towards Dinny twenty years previously – so that, like his father, Sean has killed the brother that he loved and been forgiven by a female figure who wants him to be free. But instead of grasping that freedom, keeping faith with Blake's act of love, Sean instead does what Dinny did. He slams the door of the flat shut and creates a new play, but this time with all of the roles played by himself alone: that is, he performs in five minutes the play that the audience has been watching for the previous two hours. "What are we… if we're not out stories?" asks Dinny. Blake replies, "We're the lost and the lonely" (82). And that is the sadness of the play: Sean chooses to begin a new story to lose himself in rather than allowing himself to choose uncertainty and freedom.

Again this is a play that has multiple resonances and potential meanings: if its 2006 premiere seemed rooted in the context of the Irish citizenship revival, its first major Irish revival in 2015 seemed most responsive to the renewal of Irish emigration. Or put another way, the first production was contextualised by the movement of people into the country while the revival can be contextualised by the movement of people away from it. Here again we find evidence of the truth of Walsh's theme: that history has a way of repeating itself, with minor (but telling) variations arising from one iteration to the next.

I have suggested above that the three plays under discussion can be seen in the context of contemporary Irish crises: that *The Walworth Farce* dramatized concerns about citizenship and emigration, that *The New Electric Ballroom*

explored the issues of gender and imprisonment, and that *Penelope* can be seen as a response to the collapse of the Celtic Tiger period. I made the decision to begin with *Penelope* and work backwards because it is the play that most directly and explicitly seeks to respond to an actual Irish situation; the other two in contrast do so only implicitly. As Walsh told me at the 2013 Synge Summer School, he does not directly address matters of Irish life, but he cannot help being influenced by events that occur in his country. I believe it would be incorrect to state that *The New Electric Ballroom* is in any meaningful way "about" the closure of the Magdalene Laundries or the publication of the Ryan Report, but it must not be read in isolation from those events. The same is true of *The Walworth Farce*: it is not about the Irish citizenship referendum, but it can be located in the context of a culture's attempts to come to terms with the mobility of people to and from Ireland. In this context, it is useful to be reminded that the premiere production of *Penelope* removed the story of the Magic Porridge Pot – because it was too directly relevant to the Celtic Tiger. These contextual elements are a starting point for the plays but they are not their primary concern or focus. My suggestion, therefore, is that specific Irish crises are the basis upon which Walsh writes plays that address the theme of crisis much more generally.

What these three plays have in common is a focus on the capacity of the individual to respond to moments of crisis. The businessmen in the pool in *Penelope* know that they are doomed; what matters is that they struggle to prevent their demise with play rather than falling into despair. The three sisters of *The New Electric Ballroom* and the three men in *The Walworth Farce* are traumatised by earlier crises but in their ultimate fate comes a warning: the moment when a governing illusion falls apart offers us the opportunity to break free – but it also provides the chance to create new illusions, new stories, that can entrap us anew. This is Walsh's most valuable message for an Irish audience: on the surface, things may be different, but we always run the risk of repeating our stories (or our parents' stories). His plays therefore come as a challenge to consider how damaging cycles can be broken, how traumas can be healed, how rituals can be brought to a conclusion.

Where the three plays have an international impact and relevance is in their articulation of a sense of the transformative power of the outsider (especially when that outsidedness relates to gendered differences). Patsy and Hayley open out to the trapped characters in the respective plays the chance to renew, to be free, to live in the "real world"; Penelope offers her suitors a literal salvation – albeit one that they are too self-absorbed to fully understand or grasp. Those opportunities are lost upon the plays' other characters, who fail to see how difference can offer the potential for change.

Walsh's plays can map readily onto Irish culture during the years of their composition and production. Ireland in 2006 (the year when *The Walworth Farce* appeared) was dominated by the Celtic Tiger period, which by 2008 (the year of *The New Electric Ballroom's* premiere) had been revealed to be a mirage: a story that people believed in because they kept telling it to themselves, over and over again. *Penelope* offered some hope, however, in showing that the destruction of the story need not rule out the possibility of new forms of expression being created. What these plays do, in other words, is to remind Irish audiences of their country's enduring capacity for myth-making in the face of crisis – for storytelling, for moving in endlessly recurrent cycles rather than linear development. These themes have broad resonances of course, and not just in Ireland – and this accounts for Walsh's growing success internationally too. Yet as Ireland emerges from (yet another) crisis and faces into a period of re-imagining and re-inventing its identities (again), these plays challenge us to answer a question that Walsh's characters never seem able to fully respond to: what are we if not our stories?