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Brave New Worlds? COVID-19 and Irish-Language Theatre Produced under Lockdown in Northern Ireland

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Taking a closer look at the digital monologue series Go mBeire Muid Beo (May We Be Alive [to See Each Other Again]), which was produced by the Belfast-based Irish-language theatre company Aisling Ghéar, this article seeks to document Irish-language theatre produced under coronavirus lockdown measures in Northern Ireland, whilst acknowledging the various issues that continue to haunt the Irish language, and highlighting the particular dangers and potential pitfalls in a context where very limited funding for theatre continues to dwindle. Through an analysis of the monologue series, its content, and the wider sociopolitical context that engulfs Irish-language theatre in Northern Ireland, this article also provides an important snapshot of current and ongoing debates within Irish-language theatre at a critical juncture.

With physical theatre venues having to (temporarily) draw down the stage curtain and send their staff from all sectors off on furlough, the coronavirus pandemic and subsequent containment measures had a significant impact on theatres worldwide. Large London venues were able to perform to a global stage through livestreamed theatre and pre-recorded performances, but on the geographical and linguistic margins, the Belfast-based Irish-language theatre company Aisling Ghéar (perhaps best translated as 'sharp vision') were also performing to the world by digital means.[1] At present, the emerging scholarly literature that unpacks digital theatre and the COVID-19 pandemic in the UK has paid little to no attention to theatrical production in the other, non-Germanic languages spoken across these islands. Various reports and toolkits, all of which aim to help with the transition to digital theatre at different levels, also fail to acknowledge linguistic diversity and do not take stock of how digital theatre can serve the world's minority, regional and minoritized languages.[2] As a remedy to these instances of linguistic imperialism, or perhaps linguistic apathy, in this article I will look at the series of monologues produced by Aisling Ghéar under the title Go mBeire Muid Beo: 6 Mhonológ Dhrámatúil suite sa Tréimhse Aisteach seo (May We Be Alive [to See Each Other Again]: 6 Dramatic Monologues for These Strange Times) in 2020 during the coronavirus lockdown.[3] Considering the distinct funding environments, as well as different social and political forces at play across the island of Ireland, my focus here is exclusively on Northern Ireland. Furthermore, Aisling Ghéar is, at the time of writing, faced with possible closure following a failed

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bid to capture funding from the Arts Council of Northern Ireland.[4] This possible curtailing of our linguistic futures in Northern Ireland serves as the impetus for documenting in this article what was produced by Aisling Ghéar under lockdown.

The COVID-19 pandemic, and all of its cultural impact, were entirely unforeseeable, yet in our rush to adapt to this new viral world, various rights and protections were left behind. In March 2020, as the coronavirus pandemic began to unfold, the high commissioner on national minorities, an office within the Organization for Security and Co-Operation in Europe, issued basic recommendations for social cohesion that urged states to be 'sensitive' towards the needs of linguistic minorities that would need access to healthcare, public information and education.[5] Access to culture, however, was not seen to be part of this attempt to ensure social stability. And yet this omission of cultural rights seems to be rather rash when we consider the link between mental health and access to culture. In their report on the impact of socially engaged creative and cultural projects aimed at those individuals who were shielding during lockdown, which reviewed fifty projects in England and Wales, the Culture, Health, and Wellbeing Alliance place an emphasis on the role of culture in combating 'loneliness and social isolation, and supporting wellbeing'.[6] This view is echoed by Tubadji, who through her analysis of happiness and pro-social behaviour notes that participation in cultural activities serves as a 'mental health shield from uncertainty in shock periods'.[7]

Recent studies conducted with the Lemko community in Poland appear to support the claim that languages and health are closely related as it was revealed that those who frequently use their minority language 'have higher levels of historical trauma availability', but, at the same time, the language serves as a 'protective shield' against trauma.[8] Similar links between indigenous-language use and good well-being have been confirmed in the Nahuatl-speaking context, where positive emotions enhance community-based well-being.[9] Whilst none of these studies are focused on theatre, and there are no studies at present relating to the Irish language and its possible benefits to an individual's well-being, we can argue that access to culture, preferably in the person's own language, does provide a benefit to the mental health of the individual and of society at large. Bringing theatre to dispersed language communities and a global diaspora via digital means could well be a way of improving addressing mental-health issues, but there remains a need to ascertain the importance and position of language in accessing culture.

At present, there are relatively few reports that acknowledge the importance of accessing culture through one of the UK's minoritized languages. With regard to Northern Ireland, no written evidence has been submitted to the Northern Irish Assembly or the Westminster government regarding theatre production in Irish or Ulster Scots. Nevertheless, the effects of the lockdown on cultural production in the Celtic languages of those territories claimed as part of the United Kingdom are better documented in submissions from broadcast media channels. For example, the Welsh-language television channel S4C submitted written evidence to the UK Parliament in June 2020 which revealed that 'most' of their provision of Welsh-language drama, entertainment, soap-operas and documentaries had been 'cancelled or postponed'.[10] Reflecting on the direct economic impact of the pandemic

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on film production, Noonan stresses the importance of screen agencies in ensuring that cinema in minority languages, as well as that of smaller nations, continues to have access to a global audience.[11]

Taking in this panorama, I would argue that the pandemic and its associated health crisis led to minoritized languages being devalued and put to one side as immediacy and a language for all became defining factors and governments attempted to deal with the situation. This turn of events and the trumping of linguistic rights is already part of a set pattern, and it can be seen more clearly when we look at the terms and associations linked to language and identity. Jeannine Woods points to an established linguistic binary that pits Irish against English, and within this framework Irish is always seen as traditional, morally upright and limited to the countryside.[12] The Irish language, in this framework, is thought to be unable to complete with the supposedly fast-paced reality of English and its cultural products. More recent scholarship also notes that an 'Anglocentric attitude towards policy-making' further disenfranchises the Irish language, hindering its normalization.[13] As I shall go on to reveal, this limiting pattern is a constant barrier that the monologue series Go mBeire Muid Beo has to challenge and break.

A troubled stage: contextualizing contemporary Irish-language theatre in Northern Ireland

It is important to acknowledge that Irish-language theatre in Northern Ireland inhabits a unique, marginalized and politically charged space. It has grown organically, responding to a demand from the wider community for cultural events in the language. However, across the island of Ireland, Irish-language theatre has, as Coilféir argues, 'long been considered problematic', basing his argument on the lack of a historical tradition, the need for state subsidies and the daunting question of who the audience is.[14] In Northern Ireland, this bleak outlook is further complicated by the exclusionary Unionist ideology that created this contested territory, as well as the reality of the Troubles and subsequent fallout in peacetime.[15] O'Reilly notes that, from the partition of Ireland in 1922 up to 1972, official policy framed Irish as 'a foreign language with no place in Northern Ireland'.[16] During the Troubles, an ethno-nationalist conflict that gripped Northern Ireland for thirty years, the Irish language would be given new associations as Republican political prisoners saw the language as 'a way of connecting with past Republican history', and it had its practicalities as prison staff would not understand it.[17] Accounts from Republicans held in the H block prisons by the British state during the 1980s show that the jails became a place for learning Irish 'all day' long as separated prisoners shouted words and meanings from cell to cell.[18] Following the Good Friday Agreement in 1998, the reintegration of former combatants into society has been an ongoing challenge.[19] At present, there is no data that reveals the employment destinations of these individuals, but it is clear that Irish, as a language that was embraced by some within the prison system, had become associated with a political agenda.

Conflict and systematic exclusion, however, are only part of the story, and it is important to highlight the growth of Irish-language education in Northern Ireland.

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One thing that becomes clear when we survey these different developments regarding the Irish language in Northern Ireland is that there are different communities of practice, which Wenger defines as 'a kind of community created over time by the sustained pursuit of a shared enterprise' that converges around and meets in the language.[20] These communities find their origins in 1971, when Northern Ireland's first Irish-medium primary school, Bunscoil Phobail Feirste, came into being with nine pupils.[21] The growth of this community is clear as we see that in the 2020–1 school year over seven thousand children attended Irish-medium schools in Northern Ireland.[22] This body of Irish-speaking youth plays a key role in revitalizing the language, and in creating an environment in which Irish-language theatre can thrive and serve a meaningful role in people's lives. Aisling Ghéar became Northern Ireland's first Irish-language professional theatre in 1997, and it has continued to engage with this community. Through the performance of A level set texts, such as *An Triail* (1964) by Máiréad Ní Ghráda, the theatre company is a defining cultural force in introducing young Irish speakers to the potential and importance of theatre and language.

Aside from a value placed on the Irish language by the community itself, the importance of Irish as a language of Northern Ireland has been recognized in the various legal instruments that ensure peace, such as the 1998 Good Friday Agreement and the 2006 Saint Andrews Agreement, and the British government promises to work to facilitate and normalize the language. And yet, despite this language revival movement and promises by the British government to protect and foster the language, it is clear that the legacies of conflict cloud perceptions of the language amongst some communities. This was particularly apparent in the summer of 2021 when an integrated Irish-medium nursery school, Naíscoil na Seolta, was forced out of a predominantly Unionist area after a vicious hate campaign on social media.[23] In his online tweets about the nursery school, one of its main critics, Charlie Freel, establishes an 'us-and-them' binary, referring to those concerned as 'outsider parents', and goes on to suggest that such a school would be better placed in a mainly Catholic area.[24] It would seem that the Irish language is continually perceived as a 'Catholic code', as Elliot notes.[25] This framing of the Irish language as alien or as a direct threat, albeit a view held by a small minority within contemporary Northern Irish society, has significant implications for the normalization of the language and its use within cultural spheres such as theatre.

Walsh reminds us that any kind of 'society which views the past with suspicion and hostility has profound implications for the treatment of culture'.[26] As a result of the Troubles, as well as other colonial legacies that preceded that period, Irish, as a language, has often been perceived as a problem to the cultural hegemony of Unionism and its championed language, English.[27] It would certainly be naive to say that the coronavirus pandemic and various lockdowns facilitated the sociocultural exclusion of Irish-language theatre in Northern Ireland, as the inequalities around access to culture and the sectarian prejudices that torment the language were already deeply rooted in a pre-pandemic society. However, it may be more productive to think about how Irish-language theatre, and indeed the monologue series produced

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by Aisling Ghéar, work to re-package the language and banish the misgivings of others. And, if we are facing digital theatre futures, it is worth considering how a language, like Irish, makes the most of this technological leap and becomes part of a global theatre experience.

An overview of the six monologues

Caiteoir Tobac *(The Smoker), by Gary Mitchell*

A frail, elderly man emerges from a building for a quick smoke, wrapped up in his dressing gown and clinging on to his walking aid.[28] Unable to light his cigarette, he tosses it away. He does not seem too annoyed by this state of affairs, as he turns to face the camera and says that he hates people who complain. He evidences his own happy-go-lucky attitude by revealing that he is due his annual doctor's appointment, but this year, because of the pandemic, his annual ritual has been interrupted. The smoker states that ageing is an unfair process, as the mind falls victim to slips. However, he claims that old people can still understand the way that contemporary youth speak, but quickly shows he has a very limited grasp of slang when he believes that LGBT stands for 'Love, God Bless, Thank You'. Throughout the monologue, the camera is focused on the actor's body; however, it is in these moments of comedy that the camera zooms in to capture his facial expression.

The monologue is dominated by the issue of care, which is explored through different trains of thought. The smoker is aware of the difficulties and uncertainties facing those businesses which have ceased trading over the lockdown, and he asks how they are supposed to earn a living. The smoker also grapples with the cruelty of time and his own duty of care. He feels guilty for selling off the family home, the safe and stable environment where his children were born and grew up, to pay for his time at the care home, a place of vulnerability, particularly during the coronavirus pandemic. Although he does not say anything openly about that situation, it is clear that he sees himself as a burden on others, and this is something that strikes at his feelings of masculinity, particularly the notion of being a providing father.

Frailty, in both a physical and a psychological sense, is another key issue, and this is reflected through the actor's limited actions and weak, shuffling movements. Throughout his monologue, the smoker struggles for breath and desperately clutches at his portable oxygen to help bring him back from the brink. If his misunderstanding of acronyms was not enough, the audience is invited to speculate whether he is a trustworthy narrator as he presents us with scrambled realities and continually changes his mind. The smoker's loose grip on reality becomes clear as he mistakenly believes that Dominic Cummings and Boris Johnson are madly in love with one another, but neither one has the courage to pop the question. Coming to his senses, he realizes that the person he has in mind is Doris, another resident in the care home, and Dom, the pizza delivery guy. Later, he reflects on how doctors at the home would ask him whether he had Alzheimer's, diabetes or dementia, before he finally decides that it was the final one. His fragile grip on reality is shown at the end of the monologue when, after various attempts to find his cigarettes, he recalls that he gave up smoking six weeks beforehand.

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Triantán *(Triangle), by Nuala Ní Néill*

The triangle at the heart of this monologue focuses on the relations between three women: Martha, her sister Mary, and their mother. Martha, however, is the only character we see on-screen. Leaning into the camera, as if sharing a secret, Martha opens her monologue by recalling an order, in English, being put before her: 'You must stay at home.' She tells us that she immediately packed her bags and went straight to her mother's house. This intimate family space, one that carries with it ideas of comfort and sanctuary, quickly leaves Martha with a feeling of isolation. The shared silences between Martha and her mother contrast starkly with the giddy exchanges that Mary has with the mother, and this exclusion embitters Martha. The daily news of death and despair across the world becomes too much for Martha and she refrains from listening to it. As a result of the lockdown, her social life has fallen apart completely, and she becomes frustrated with the pretentious mantras that are bandied around by others ('live your best life', 'embrace your lockdown' and 'take time to enjoy the time'), particularly as she is not on furlough. This toil is reflected in the actor's own actions, as she sorts through laundry and loads the washing machine once again. Martha's feelings of isolation are further intensified as her sister tries to stop Martha from leaving the house, for fear that she may bring the virus home with her and kill their mother.

Reflecting on their daily walks, Martha reports that her mother is adamant that they must stop to chat to every passer-by to ensure that they are not seen to be rude or disrespectful. This inclination to keep up appearances, even with social-distancing measures in place, is too much for Martha as she is haunted by the suffering of others, those who died alone in hospital beds, and these 'Covidian' (to borrow a nifty adjective coined by Heidi Liedke) realities only serve to reinforce the silence between mother and daughter.[29] Their silence is maintained as they watch reruns of old films on the television, exchanging no words, but nevertheless making tea for one another. As time goes on and the three women find their own rhythm, Martha's feelings of jealousy and frustration melt away as she tells us of how the three women are now able to sit in the garden to enjoy tea and sandwiches.

This monologue homes in on the lockdown reality, unpacking the confusing bundle of mixed emotions and insecurities that beset many of us. Martha continually describes this unruly mess of emotions as 'butterflies', warning us that she is near her limit, and this is emphasized by the actor's own facial expressions that reflect her discomfort. The issue of care is, again, a key theme that runs through this monologue. However, attempts at providing care do not always meet their target. Martha's sister, who takes it upon herself to bring over the weekly shop, overwhelms Martha with all the goods that she brings home – not all of them were on the shopping list. Martha shares that she has to turn to her Alexa device for advice on what to do with the surplus avocados that her sister has brought them, but she does coyly admit that she is starting to enjoy guacamole with every meal. The sister's concern for Martha, as well as her reminders to make the most of this time, are understood as unwanted and heavy-handed interference.

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Bean Úr Eile *(Another New Woman), by Séan Ó Muireagáin*

A woman sits on her bed, surrounded with pictures of sunny beaches and her drawings of wild birds. She also has a bird tattooed on her hand. The camera looks down at her, as if she were being watched, and this is confirmed as she likens her lockdown to solitary confinement. The actor's own movements, within this space, are limited and she remains on her bed in a corner. The woman has been stuck for three months in a room on the third floor, where she can hear everything, but can see nothing for there is no window. She longs for a chance to take in the small details of everyday life like the sounds of the street. She also misses birdsong, particularly the call of the magpie. She notes that this is a violent bird in her mind, as she has seen one attacking a dove. This violence of the animal world is what she believes awaits her when she eventually rejoins society and new pecking orders are established. We can suspect that our narrator is clinically vulnerable as her breathing problems are made clear as she reaches for her inhaler.

The character savours the fact that her mother has not come to visit lately, but remarks that she now has a certain power that she never had before. Perhaps in reference to violent childhood memories, she tells of how her mother was the greatest threat to her when she was young. Now, in this pandemic, our narrator savours the fact that she is the greatest threat to her mother. The only other human interactions are morning visits from the doctor and afternoons with the nurse. Perhaps in an attempt to feel something, the women decides that she ought to seduce the doctor. She knows it will never happen and quietly admits this openly, but she says she can certainly dream.

Buantonn Edith *(Edith's Perm), by Dave Duggan*

Bringing herself close to the camera, Edith tells us that she is not happy with her pre-lockdown haircut, a perm that her stylist suggested, comparing it to a wild bush that grows out in her garden. She shares her memories of sailing along the Suez Canal, en route to Ceylon (today's Sri Lanka). Her husband, Harold, a marine engineer, has landed his dream job in Ceylon and brings her along with promises of the best tea in the world and the most beautiful sandy beaches. The exciting landscapes that she describes could well be those captured in the bright painting behind her. Edith is grateful for the house that she currently lives in, and explains that it was bought for their marriage. Bitter regret comes over Edith as she recalls her husband's death at Bandaranaike quay. Whilst Edith is clearly a woman of faith, she asks where God was at that moment, and as they sail through a terrible storm in the Arabian Sea, with her husband in a coffin below deck, she recalls how she would cry out to God in that moment. With her husband dead, Edith's hopes of starting a family are dashed and she must accept her status as a young widow.

Edith's sarcastic remark, 'Tá mé i ngéibheann' ('I'm in captivity'), is revealed to be further accentuated by her refusal to wear a mask, despite the appeals by members of her local church. She is not a conspiracy theorist, but rather sees a mask as a garment of shame. The reason for this is that, when she was a young widow, she had an affair with a married neighbour, Jack, who also attended her church. His initial offer to help

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tame her garden led to a romantic tumble in the garden shed, but they were soon discovered by Jack's wife. When the community got word of the dalliance from Jack's wife, people told Edith to cover her face for shame. Having noticed the feigned concern amongst some of her church's congregation, Edith remarks that many of us already wear social masks that we have crafted over the years and we put these masks on when imposing social norms, all in order to conceal our innermost feelings. Jack and his wife move away not long after the incident, and a developer buys their home to create little 'bijou' apartments. Taking the lockdown into consideration, Edith seems relieved that she is not cooped up in such a small space, and this is reflected in the bright, white room, presumably her sitting room, from which she is talking to us. However, with Jack away somewhere else and with nobody to help her, Edith's garden is overgrown. Edith ends her monologue by saying that she looks forward to getting her hair fixed when it all is over. And, when summer ends, she will take the electric strimmer that Jack left behind and tame the dense bush that now dominates her garden.

Teaghbhálacha trí Sheans *(Chance Meetings), by Don McCamphill*

Relaying his story to us from inside a tent, the character begins his monologue by admitting that he always thought of the countryside as a place of safety, and how the onset of the pandemic led him to pack up his bicycle and flee his small flat in London. He admits that following a break-up with his partner, Áine, he felt lonely, and that the abandoned and silenced urban landscape further added to that sensation of loneliness. His neighbour's cat continually visits him, but the animal is an unwanted distraction. His Indian neighbour soon comes along crying out for the cat, and this only frustrates our narrator further. Sick of his situation, he soon packs up and leaves. Out in the countryside, far from friends, loved ones and familiar sights, the pangs of loneliness continue to afflict the character. However, the following day, he comes back to us from a new homely location, seated in a fine chair, nursing a glass of wine. He tells of an elderly English man searching for his wife in the countryside. The gentleman offers our narrator his house as shelter. The outside of the house is described as being alive with bright, colourful plants that serve as the antidote to his earlier description of London's urban wasteland. The house's furnishings are also just as inviting and the character feels very much at home after coming across a larder packed with every fine food imaginable alongside an overwhelming selection of wine. Temporarily delighted with this turn of events, greed soon sets in. Through a time lapse, he reports back to us, two weeks later, and it is clear that he is still feasting on the house's offerings. As he scoffs down another morsel, but finds himself struggling to swallow the helping, the character admits that he has overdone it and soon vomits off-screen. Feeling guilty for his abuse of the old man's kindness, he is unable to enjoy the bounty before him and his mind wanders back to Áine. Leaving a note that he will pay for all that he has consumed, he returns to London. Upon his return, he is greeted by the cat and its owner, now introduced to us as Arundhati. He admits that he missed the smoke, the noise and the crowds of the city. The lockdown and subsequent isolation have served to bring our narrator closer to those around him.

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Goodfella*, by Tony Devlin*

This monologue focuses on a man who imagines himself as his own self-styled gangster, complete with sunglasses, face mask and a cap, as well as a bright red T-shirt with Elmo on it. He is fully aware of the camera, and continually looks back at the viewer whilst doing other activities. As time seems to lose meaning in this lockdown existence, our narrator is keen to tell us of his daily ritual of getting up, having a 'Belfast bath' (washing only one's face and armpits) and eating cereal, but his schedule ends there as he debates whether life under lockdown is much like Christmas time itself. Isolation is not so much an issue, as the narrator states that Frank, the Amazon delivery man, is now a close friend and whenever he gets particularly lonely, there is the option of Sunday bingo over Zoom with the family.

Holding up a painting of a sunny Irish beach, the narrator declares that he sorely misses Donegal, his happy place. He misses the pre-pandemic urges that would carry him off to the west coast of Ireland, but as he names different locations, he makes it clear that he wants to be in an Irish-speaking town. However, in this Covidian age, he remarks how he would be shot down, albeit with a speed gun, by police on either side of the border. Our narrator makes fun of those who are now doing up their homes under lockdown, saying that anyone who is planning on buying a new house is in for a treat with back-garden bars being installed into every home, but he reminds the audience that such installations will not make it through an Irish winter. Much like in *Triantán*, the monologue brings us into the most intimate spaces of the character's home, including his early morning ritual of going to the toilet. This moment is shown on-screen but the character quickly swipes at the camera, turning it away, just after picking up the toilet roll. Our narrator also states that he believes this time in lockdown is for learning a new skill and embracing a new life, but, much like Martha, he is not interested and is afraid of failing at any new task. He certainly accepts that the lockdown is a time for reflection on the past, and an opportunity to think to the future. The narrator's imagined life of a carefree gangster with no commitments, however, does not last long. As the clock hits 8:45 a.m., his time for reflection and dreams of being a gangster are interrupted by his daughters, who swarm into the kitchen for their Irish lesson.

Analysing the monologues: (im)mobilities in a lockdown

(Im)mobility and containment are constant themes across the monologues, and they would certainly loom large for any pandemic audience, but each character in turn frames and grapples with the question of mobility in different ways. Shame and loneliness are emotions that often go hand in hand with the individuals' mobility and self-esteem. Shame is, as Kaufman argues, 'disturbing to the self' but also 'central to one's sense of identity'.[30] However, in a time of lockdown, movement, including memories of travel, is also closely linked to identity and this is reflected across the series. Leaving Ireland behind, whether it be for political or economic reasons, on a voluntary basis, or because of persecution and punishment, is a central part of Irish history, and this age-old pattern emerges too in the monologue series. The

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monologues, as texts, embrace this rich tradition, but also challenge the question of home and security.

Armed with a bicycle, the character in *Teaghbhálacha trí Sheans* is able to go the farthest in terms of distance. His chance encounter with a generous stranger and subsequent stay in the kind man's home offer temporary relief from his malaise and cabin fever, but even though he has covered a great distance upon fleeing London, he cannot escape the loneliness that stalks him. In *Goodfella*, our narrator tells of how he would sneak away to Donegal in a heartbeat if he had the chance, but he finds himself immobile in the lockdown. The fact that he has two young daughters invites us to speculate whether his dreams of rushing off are little more than part of his ruthless-gangster front. Among all the monologues, *The Smoker* stands out most as he has no set destination in mind, and with his walking aid and breathing problems, he is content to simply reflect on the situation of others. However, this time for reflection is also the root of his shame as he feels that he has let down others in his old age by failing to be able to care for himself and failing to provide for others following the sale of the family home.

Travel and mobility prove to be gendered experiences across the monologues as we see that the female monologues reflect how home-bound some people have become. However, the home, which is traditionally understood as a place of safety and respite, is shown to be a complicated and potentially torturous space across the monologues. Cooped up in the house bought by her husband, Edith, who had sailed the seas in her youth, can still travel in her imagination, but in her loneliness she is also beset by feelings of loss as she recalls her husband's death in Ceylon. Appearance and self-respectability beyond the home are key to Edith's story and lead to her own isolation. Her refusal to wear a mask, seeing this object as a marker of shame, results in further isolation from society at large. The contained woman in *Bean Úr Eile* is frustrated at being locked up and she feels all the more isolated as she has not got a window to simply look out of and grant herself the escape that her mind desperately craves. Her meals are brought to her and the only sense of humanity or the presence of another in this action is articulated through a loud clop on the door. Cut off from everything, the world – namely her mother – has to come to her, a reality that brings with it a chance to gloat. In *Triantán*, Martha quickly leaves her own home to find safety at her mother's house, but even there she is still stressed and uneasy. She is frustrated that she is no longer allowed to do the weekly shop as her sister takes on the task. The news, her only direct connection with the outside world, only serves to depress her further, hence she chooses to sever that strenuous link. It is the family gossip shared between Martha, her sister and their mother that acts as a social glue and feel-good factor by the end of the monologue. In that same vein, we can also see that the contained spaces populated by female characters are, much like monastic cells, open only to other women: the locked-down woman can only meet with her mother, Martha is only ever with her mother or sister, and Edith will remain alone in her own self-isolation until the hairdresser reopens.[31] The male-led narratives, however, are completely unbridled in this regard as they feature many other encounters with a range of individuals. Men, to some extent, seem far more oblivious

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to the dangers and are not held to account by society (in terms of presentability) in the same way that the women are.

Negotiating space with the neighbour language: English and its presence in the monologues

Coilféir believes that the 'marginalized and contested status' of the Irish language is key to understanding Irish-language theatre, and argues that this complicated language question 'is always implicitly attended to' in any staging of an Irish-language play.[32] Although it is not a constant feature, the English language occupies a variety of ideological positions across the monologue series. Historically, the English language has been a problem for Irish culture and identity, an alien language imposed on the people of Ireland. The hostile and intrusive nature of English is fully reflected in the opening lines to *Triantán*, as Martha is ordered to stay at home, an imposition that she somewhat disobeys by leaving for her mother's house. The conceited hashtags that trigger feelings of guilt and frustration in Martha as she cannot make the most of the lockdown by discovering a new hobby are all articulated through the English language, suggesting that there is a divide between her own life and that of a wider world outside her Irish-speaking household. In *Goodfella*, English is also present in the narrator's opening remarks, but when he discusses the towns that he plans to visit in Donegal, he is quick to reject any town that is not Irish-speaking as he is in search of his own version of Ireland. However, later in his monologue, the narrator is unsatisfied with the Irish word *sona* (happy) and chooses to employ a word from English to express his true feeling: 'Tá mé *content*'. In *Teaghbhálacha trí Sheans*, the Irishman relays his Indian neighbour's speech in English for the most part, as this colonial language is the medium in which the two characters meet. However, near the end of his monologue, the Irishman narrates part of his neighbour's welcome in Irish, showing that a barrier of sorts has been taken down. By narrating her speech in Irish, a language that she presumably does not have, we can see that there is an element of trust, a desire to bring her closer to the audience. Each of the characters renegotiates their relationship with the colonial language through pronunciation, rhythm and pitch, but also by incorporating proper names from their own languages into English. The supposed name of the neighbour's cat, Priya ('beloved' in Hindi), initially seems ugly to the Gaeilgeoir, but when he is told that the cat is really called Khaleek, he shows a greater appreciation for the name. Upon his return from the country, language helps lift the alienation of life in the city as he finally asks his Indian neighbour for her name, 'Arundhati, but people call me Runa'. English, in this monologue, is reconfigured as a vehicle for connecting with another culture on equal terms.

Irish-language theatre in lockdown: brave new worlds?

Go mBeire Muid Beo marks a distinct moment in the history of Irish-language theatre. This is, on the one hand, because of the unique Covidian context that surrounds it, and, on the other, because it reflects the development of identities within Northern Irish society, working to dismantle sectarian narratives that seek to derail or taint cultural

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production in Irish. Thinking of the complex politics and long legacies of the Troubles, as well as the recent explosive dynamics that are at play in a post-Brexit Northern Ireland, it is rather curious to note that these wider political worlds are completely absent in the monologues. The coronavirus pandemic has stolen the limelight. And so, across all of the monologues, there is a continuous struggle, as well as attempts, although not all are fruitful, to come to terms with the current reality of a life in lockdown. These characters that come to life on-screen may well reflect and embody the frustrations of the viewers. Through an application of the gender lens, and by focusing on individuals' mobility, we notice that female characters, who appear in these works written mainly by men, are still strongly associated with the household, whereas men are rendered more mobile, and yet they are just as frustrated when their ability to move through the world is limited. Nuala Ní Neill's female character certainly does move through household spaces and performs domestic tasks on camera, but this is simply part of the background as the character is more focused on relating to us the complexities of her shifting relationships with her mother and her sister during this time of uncertainty.

As I stated at the start of this article, the new Covidian reality has become a moment for transformation and innovation for those theatres that are equipped and ready to make a digital transition. Writing long before the coronavirus pandemic, Vincent Miller highlighted three essential elements that make up digital media: technical processes, cultural forms and immersive experiences.[33] Reflecting on how digital approaches enable us to work around rural realities and how digital technologies can lift some socio-economic barriers, Miller places a particular emphasis on the economic factors that may act as drivers for a digital transition.[34] Gooch reminds us that theatre 'takes place within the physical and economic conditions of the world around it'.[35] Thinking of the funding landscape for theatre, we can see that bodies such as the Arts Council of Northern Ireland have put forward funding programmes aimed at technological innovation and enhancing digital performance, but it remains to be seen whether theatre companies have the human talent and technical know-how to make the most of these funding opportunities.[36] It may well be that a gap in skills, and therefore a lack of engagement with digital theatre, will become more evident with time. The unexpectedness and delay in reacting to the need for a digital transition have certainly been noted beyond the cultural sector. In their analysis of small and medium businesses in Northern Ireland and their take-up of digital technologies, Luong, Ri and Hewitt-Dundas note that there was a 'disconnect' between many businesses' ability to harness such technologies and the drivers that would enable this change.[37]

Whilst major theatre venues and festivals in Ireland have shown little commitment to Irish-language theatre, this monologue series helps us to reimagine the possibilities of theatre and the communities that it can reach, particularly as we reflect on this difficult period and look to (re)build resilient communities. In the case of Go mBeire Muid Beo, the inclusion of subtitles, as a technological and linguistic intervention, in English helps open up the performances to others beyond the Irish-language community, and to some extent makes the performances global. Concomitantly, digital performances brought to a

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global Irish diaspora through the medium of Irish can foster a sense of identity whilst also strengthening linguistic communities and their intergenerational transmission of the language by normalizing the use of Irish in settings beyond the home. Such enhanced feelings of community could well contribute to positive health outcomes for the Irish-speaking community, as has been noted in other minority-language contexts. By holding up a mirror to society through the different realities explored in the monologues, the shape of the Irish language is also changed in the public conscious, thus undoing some of the limiting linguistic binaries highlighted by Woods.[38] Cronin argues that, as Ireland moves through the twenty-first century, something 'vital is being transacted in Ireland' and that the Irish language is 'at the heart' of this transaction.[39] Reflecting on the bold output from Aisling Ghéar during the coronavirus lockdown in 2020, I would argue that, as we explore the new and exciting possibilities for digital theatre in a post-pandemic world (if such a world exists), we must ensure that minoritized languages are very much part of that endeavour and we should begin to frame accessing culture through our languages as a part of fostering better mental health and creating stronger communities.

NOTES

1 Aisling Ghéar is the only Irish-language theatre group in Northern Ireland at this moment.

2 Pascale Aebischer and Rachel Nicholas, *Digital Theatre Transformation: A Case Study and Digital Toolkit* (2020), at https://ore.exeter.ac.uk/repository/handle/10871/122587 (accessed 15 December 2021); Maria Chatzichristodoulou, Kevin Brown, Nick Hunt, Peter Kuling and Toni Sant, 'Covid-19: Theatre Goes Digital – Provocations', *International Journal of Performance Arts and Digital Media*, 18, 1 (2022), pp. 1–6; European Theatre Convention, *For the Future of Europe, Theatre Must Remain a Public Space for an Open Society! Reflections & Ideas for Action* (2022), at www.europeantheatre.eu/page/activities/professional-development/etc-international-theatre-conferences/malta-2021-conference/conference-on-the-future-of-europe-malta (accessed 28 February 2022).

3 It should be noted that all of the videos in the monlogue series were promoted via different social media platforms: Facebook, YouTube and Vimeo. However, several videos were deleted and uploaded on new channels at a later date, a reality which has complicated any analysis of viewer numbers. Depending on the platform, viewers could then interact with each video by posting their comments, as well as giving videos a 'like'. All of the monologues are presented with a similar introduction, in which colourful curtain-like blobs rise and fall to reveal the various credits for each video.

4 Claire Simpson, 'Irish Language Theatre Company May Be Forced to Close after It Lost Out on Arts Council Funding', *Irish News*, 1 June 2022, at https://www.irishnews.com/news/northernirelandnews/2022/06/01/news/irish-language-theatre-company-may-be-forced-to-close-after-it-lost-out-on-arts-council-funding-2729202/ (accessed 3 January 2023).

5 The OSCE high commissioner on national minorities offers recommendations on short-term responses to COVID-19 that support social cohesion. See www.osce.org/hcnm/449170 (accessed 18 December 2021).

6 The Culture, Health & Wellbeing Alliance, *How Creativity and Culture Has Been Supporting People Who Are Shielding or Vulnerable during Covid-19* (2022), at www.culturehealthandwellbeing.org.uk/sites/default/files/Short%20report%20-%20How%20creativity%20and%20culture%20has%20been%20supporting%20people%20who%20are%20shielding%20or%20vulnerable%20during%20Covid-19%20-%20UPDATED.pdf (accessed 28 January 2022).

7 Annie Tubadji, 'Culture and Mental Health Resilience in Times of COVID-19', *Journal of Population Economics*, 34 (2021), pp. 1219–59, here p. 1246.

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8 Magdalena Skrodzka, Karolina Hansen, Justyna Olko and Michał Bilewicz, 'The Twofold Role of a Minority Language in Historical Trauma: The Case of Lemko Minority in Poland', *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, 39, 4 (2020), pp. 551–66, here p. 561.

9 Justyna Olko, Katarzyna Lubiewska, Joanna Maryniak, Gregory Haimovich, Eduardo de la Cruz, Beatriz Cuahutle Bautista, Elwira Dexter-Sobkowiak and Humberto Iglesias Tepec, 'The Positive Relationship between Indigenous Language Use and Community-Based Well-Being in Four Nahua Ethnic Groups in Mexico', *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology*, 28, 1 (2022), pp. 132–43.

10 Sianel Pedwar Cymru (S4C), *The Impact of Covid-19 on DCMS Sectors: S4C Submission to the DCMS Select Committee* (2022), at https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/6800/pdf (accessed 17 September 2021).

11 Caitríona Noonan, 'Public Funding in a Time of Crisis: Film Funds and the Pandemic', *Baltic Screen Media Review*, 8, 1 (2020), pp. 11–17, here p. 14.

12 Jeannine Woods, 'Aithníonn Queerόg Queerόg Eile: Gaeilgeoirí Aeracha Aontaithe agus Gluaiseacht Chomhaimseartha na Gaeilge', *Irish Journal of Anthropology*, 3 (1998), pp. 41–59, here p. 42, at https://aran.library.nuigalway.ie/bitstream/handle/10379/7081/Woods%2c_J._%27Aithn%C3%ADonn_queer%C3%B3g_queer%C3%B3g_eile%27.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y (accessed 18 March 2022).

13 Abhimanyu Sharma, 'Whither the Irish Language Act? Language Policies in Northern Ireland', *Current Issues in Language Planning*, 22, 3 (2021), pp. 308–27, here p. 323.

14 Máirtín Coilféir, 'Contemporary Theatre in the Irish Language', in *The Palgrave Handbook of Contemporary Irish Theatre and Performance*, ed. by Eamonn Jordan and Eric Weitz (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), pp. 135–49, here p. 135.

15 The Troubles was a conflict, rooted in sectarian divisions and fuelled by a series of historical struggles, that began in Northern Ireland in the late 1960s and ended in 1998 with the signing of the Good Friday Agreement. The term 'Unionist' in this context refers to Ulster Unionism, a political ideology that seeks to ensure the existence of a 'Northern Ireland' as part of the United Kingdom.

16 Camille C. O'Reilly, *The Irish Language in Northern Ireland: The Politics of Culture and Identity* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999), p. 20.

17 Caoimhghin Ó Croidheáin, *Language from Below: The Irish Language, Ideology, and Power in 20th-Century Ireland* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2006), p. 255. The term 'Republican' in this context refers to Irish Republicanism, a political movement which seeks to create a United Ireland that is free from British influence.

18 Tim Pat Coogan, *On the Blanket: The H Block Story* (Dublin: Ward River Press, 1980), p. 79.

19 Gavin Hart and Camilo Tamayo Gómez, 'Is Recognition the Answer? Exploring the Barriers for Successful Reintegration of Ex-combatants into Civil Society in Northern Ireland and Colombia', *Peacebuilding*, 2022, at https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/21647259.2022.2065792 (accessed 26 August 2022).

20 Étienne Wenger, *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 45.

21 Olaf Zenker, *Irish/ness is All around Us: Language Revivalism and the Culture of Ethnic Identity in Northern Ireland* (New York: Berghahn, 2013), p. 107.

22 Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, *Irish Medium Education: 2020–2021 Key Statistics* (2022), at www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/education/Irish%20Medium%20Education%202021.pdf (accessed 23 January 2022).

23 Mark Bain, 'Online Hate Campaign Forces Irish Nursery School Belfast Relocation' (2022), at www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/northern-ireland/online-hate-campaign-forces-irish-nursery-school-belfast-relocation-40698645.html (accessed 31 January 2022). The term 'integrated' here refers to schools in Northern Ireland that accept pupils from Roman Catholic and Protestant backgrounds, as well as children from other faiths. As education is largely segregated along religious lines in Northern Ireland today, integrated education is still a reality for very few children.

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24 Charlie Freel (@Charliefreel1, 6 September 2021, 10:13 p.m.), 'Relevance to the Braniel Primary School in the very heart of this staunchly Loyalist Estate is what? There are many Irish Language schools in mixed or Roman Catholic areas in Belfast, where these outsider parents could safely take their Children, without causing needless offense', at https://twitter.com/Charliefreel1/status/1434972978161278977 (accessed 31 January 2022).

25 Marianne Elliott, *The Catholics of Ulster: A History* (London: Allen Lane, 2000), p. 453.

26 John Walsh, 'Language, Culture, and Development: The Gaeltacht Commissions 1926 and 2002', in John M. Kirk and Dónall P. Ó Baoill, eds., *Language Planning and Education: Linguistic Issues in Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland, and Scotland* (Belfast: Cló Ollscoil na Banríona, 2002), pp. 300–17, here p. 314.

27 It should be noted that Ullans, or Ulster Scots, has been deployed as a counterbalance to Irish. However, this language is also often attacked within contemporary Northern Irish society.

28 Gary Mitchell is a well-known playwright from an urban, predominantly working-class and Unionist area, Rathcoole. This was not his first play in Irish, nor his first time working with Aisling Ghéar. In 2012, he produced the Irish-language play *Love Matters* in collaboration with Aisling Ghéar.

29 Heidi Liedke, 'Antony and Cleopatra', *Shakespeare Bulletin*, 39, 1 (2021), pp. 151–5, here p. 152.

30 Gershen Kaufman, *The Psychology of Shame: Theory and Treatment of Shame-Based Syndromes* (New York: Springer, 1996), p. xvi.

31 We should remember that all of these short pieces, with the exception of *Triantán*, have been written by men.

32 Máirtín Coilféir, 'Contemporary Theatre in the Irish Language', in Eamonn Jordan and Eric Weitz, eds., *The Palgrave Handbook of Contemporary Irish Theatre and Performance* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), pp. 135–49, here p. 136.

33 Vincent Miller, *Understanding Digital Culture* (London: Sage, 2011), p. 13.

34 Ibid., p. 106.

35 Steve Gooch, *All Together Now: An Alternative View of Theatre and the Community* (London: Methuen, 1984), p. 17.

36 Arts Council of Northern Ireland, at http://artscouncil-ni.org/funding/scheme/health-and-safety-capital-programme (accessed 21 January 2022).

37 Hoang Minh Luong, Anastasia Ri and Nola Hewitt-Dundas, 'The Effects of Digital Adoption Due to Covid-19 on Northern Ireland SMEs Performance: New Empirical Results' (Enterprise Research Centre, 2021), at www.economy-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/economy/QUB-digital-adoption-report.pdf, p. 21.

38 Jeannine Woods, 'Aithníonn Queeróg Queeróg Eile: Gaeilgeoirí Aeracha Aontaithe agus Gluaiseacht Chomhaimseartha na Gaeilge', *Irish Journal of Anthropology*, 3 (1998), pp. 41–59, here p. 42, at https://aran.library.nuigalway.ie/bitstream/handle/10379/7081/Woods%2c_J._%27Aithn%C3%ADonn_ queer%C3%B3g_queer%C3%B3g_eile%27.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y (accessed 18 March 2022).

39 Michael Cronin, *Irish in the New Century* (Dublin: Cois Life, 2005), pp. 58–9.

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