

**REGARDING THE RIGHTS OF OTHERS:  
SPECTRES OF THE MIDDLE EAST IN CONALL MORRISON'S  
*THE BACCHAE OF BAGHDAD*<sup>1</sup>**

**Natasha Remoundou**

When we look into a mirror we think the image that confronts us is accurate. But move a millimetre and the image changes. We are actually looking at a never-ending range of reflections. But sometimes a writer has to smash the mirror – for it is on the other side of that mirror that the truth stares at us.

– Harold Pinter<sup>2</sup>

The fundamental deprivation of human rights is manifested first and above all in the deprivation of a place in the world which makes opinions significant and actions effective.

– Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*

In the opening scene of Frank McGuinness's play *Someone Who'll Watch Over Me* (1992), three Westerners, an Irishman, an Englishman, and an American who recites from the Bible and the Quran are all held hostage by unseen Arab kidnappers in a windowless prison cell somewhere in Lebanon. Memorable for interweaving Beckettian absurdity with *realpolitik* and the complexities of cultural constructions of hyper-masculinities, the play was inspired by the hostage crisis that had swept Lebanon in the late 1980s. The narrative grapples with a representational paradox, in theatrical and ontological terms: the image of the three Western men who remain under the panopticon gaze of their captors is, in turn, built upon the spectral invisibility of the terrorising Lebanese agents from the material theatrical stage. McGuinness's dramatic approach in negotiating the problems of 'otherness' by representing the perennial clash between East and West here provides a rigorous exploration of the "problematic history of frequently uneven exchanges driven by Western-led Orientalist aesthetics" (McIvor, "Introduction" 7). This becomes possible with the projection of absence as an ethical encounter with the detainees' identity as Arab 'others.' Such a site of embodiment between cultures within the text provides an ideologically charged ground to debate on humanity stripped of its defences and rights: "Arab? English Arab? Irish Arab? these guys don't need to tear us apart. We can tear each other" (25),

---

1 This paper was written during the time I was a Visiting Research Fellow at the Moore Institute of the National University of Ireland, Galway (2018-2019), conducting research on the Abbey Theatre Digital Archive. I wish to thank all the librarians at the Hardiman Library, as well as Dr. Charlotte McIvor, Professor Daniel Carey, and Dr. Barry Houlihan for their support.

2 From Harold Pinter's pre-recorded Nobel Prize in Literature Lecture shown on video on 7 December 2005.

wonder the three captives of the Western world. Similarly, they imagine having invited their Arab prosecutors to join them in sharing bread: “Take the weight off your feet [...] the same the world over. Have a drink if you like. We won’t tell. Join us” (34-35). On a meta-theatrical level, the imaginary space of reciprocal hospitality negotiating differences between members and strangers (hosts and guests, friends and enemies) juxtaposed against the ghostly disappearance of the foreign guards from their own territory, embodies a kind of regressive representational violence analogous to the missing Middle Eastern ‘other’ from the Western stage itself.

Cast as a particularly charged kind of human rights activism, theatre has the power to protest against cultural norms and hierarchies of race, religion, class, gender, and sexuality on behalf of victims of violence. Theatre that directly engages with performing the rights of others *vis-à-vis* the double standards of the international community is an area that is posited as an epistemological *lacuna*, especially in Irish drama. The representation of others that are coincidentally far away from us, not only geographically but also from our imagined individual and collective comfort zones – especially in the context of the Middle East before and post-9/11 – can often be ethically and performatively problematic on stage. Such a figuration also attracts unavoidable scrutiny in contemporary writing for the theatre, for it succinctly dramatises the inherent violence enacted upon imagining those (we think) we know very little about. Conversely, this guiding principle draws attention to theatre’s power to bear witness, critique various forms of oppression, and advocate for the rights of marginal others on stage. When politics fail, however, how can theatre become that reclaimed forum that Hannah Arendt seeks in reflecting on the re-enactment of significant opinions and e/affective actions on behalf of powerless others? Superimposed upon a representation that problematises even the Kantian mandate to be hospitable to others, how can new insights into ideas of *being foreign*, as Paul Ricoeur argues,<sup>3</sup> illuminate the structural incoherence of rights and their visibility in Irish theatrical praxis?

While the focus on staging ‘Irishness’ in Irish theatre criticism has emphasised how the representation of Irish identity has been ideologically constructed, stereotyped, and othered on the British stage, it has also pulled attention from representations of

---

3 Ricoeur (37-48) illustrates diverse categories of ‘strangers’ in order to scrutinise the legal status of difference as predicated on citizenship. He further argues that the strangers/foreigners “in our country” (visitors, immigrants, refugees) constitute a tragedy whereby the stranger “assumes the role of ‘beggar” (41). The overarching argument of “being a stranger” is reinforced by Kant’s theorisation of the concept of universal hospitality (*Wirthbarkeit*) and cosmopolitan law in *The Project of Perpetual Peace*: “this here is not a question of philanthropy, but one of law. Hospitality signifies the right of the stranger not to be treated as an enemy upon his arrival on foreign soil [...] the right to visit [is] the right that every human has to put himself forward to as a potential member of a society, by virtue of the law of common possession of the earth’s surface on which, it being spherical, we cannot infinitely disperse ourselves; we need to tolerate one another, no one having any more right to a particular piece of land than anyone else” (qtd. in Ricoeur 41).

the Middle Eastern 'other' in contemporary Irish theatre. The dynamics of this contested scope of representation I am interested in exploring here, is manifest in theatrical performances that specifically dismantle dominant assumptions about Muslims, Arabs, and the Middle East for Western (often white Christian/secular) audiences and in Irish theatre in particular. In identifying and addressing the ways through which Irish theatre responds to these imperatives aesthetically and ideologically, this chapter examines contemporary engagements with both an ethics of 'otherness' and the rights of 'others'/strangers as ciphers of the confrontation between East and West on the contemporary Irish stage. As a case study for these multinodal inquiries, I revisit Conall Morrison's play *The Bacchae of Baghdad* (based on Euripides' *Bacchae*) which premiered at the Abbey Theatre in 2006, at the height of the Celtic Tiger period, to condemn the American invasion of Iraq. Written at the backdrop of the widespread denunciation of US imperialist jabs manifested in the reproof of public intellectuals such as Harold Pinter, Adriana Cavarero, and Slavoj Žižek,<sup>4</sup> I draw on the title of Susan Sontag's *Regarding the Pain of Others* and her central argument that "being a spectator of calamities taking place in another country is a quintessential modern experience" (16), in order to interrogate how this argument brings human rights issues in contemporary Irish theatre into sharper focus.

### The Spectatorship of *Horrorism*

The representation of violence against 'others'/strangers in the Western theatrical tradition, from Aeschylus to Sarah Kane, has had a long uninterrupted history and an equally mythical staying power in the various dramatic reimaginings of brutality and suffering. The innovative representational strategies and epistemic modalities through which the act of Dionysian *sparagmos* has inspired writers and fascinated (or shocked) audiences, provide a useful lens to understand violence in its contemporary theatrical expression in terms of what Emmanuel Levinas designates as a "first philosophy" of the agonistic confrontation between self and other(s) (75-87). The present chapter surveys current theatrical stages in Ireland as cultural spaces where ethical encounters with terror occur when confronting 'otherness.' On this basis, I propose a reckoning of violence against 'others'/strangers not just as embodied performance and staging approach, but also as an ideological preoccupation with political theatre through the prism of what Adriana Cavarero defines as twenty-first-century *horrorism*. In this light, the ways through which mimetic trajectories between source and target cultures foreground a representation of Western politics and notions such as war, persecution, and torture, are effectively rendered obsolete in encompassing the scope of violence on stage. In doing so, I seek to survey *The Bacchae of Bagh-*

---

4 In *Iraq: The Borrowed Kettle* (2005), a sequel to Žižek's acclaimed post-9/11 *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, Žižek employs the Freudian metaphor of the borrowed kettle to present the invasion of Iraq as predicated on an inconsistency.

*dad's* efficacy to be no mere ideologically biased medium of “sermonising”<sup>5</sup> gestures, but a “mirror-smashing” agent, as Pinter argues, on the grounds of a timely vehicle of justice, free speech, and righting. Without neglecting to consider the troubling and conflicting genealogies of “cultural imperialism, appropriation and colonisation” (Knowles 2), Euripides’ *Bacchae* as a ‘classical’<sup>6</sup> text (European/Greek) is enmeshed in while originating from “the home of the rights of man” (Stonebridge, *Placeless People* 4). Morrison’s *The Bacchae of Baghdad* further interrogates received notions of ethnic dichotomies between natives and strangers (Greeks/Barbarians, friends/enemies, us/them) within the Western tradition. Translated thus for a largely Western/European stage and audience, while directly engaging with racial and ethnic ‘others’ under the white gaze, Morrison’s version renegotiates the political subtext and aesthetic tenets of the original play by Euripides, taking into account the complexities of identity and power and their role in the Greek tragic convention. This argument can be read opposite one of the central claims in Edith Hall’s study *Inventing the Barbarian* and her analysis of the historical conditions during the Persian wars that gave rise to the evolution of the Hellenic ethnic self-consciousness against the barbarian/stranger as the “universal other” (*Inventing the Barbarian* 6). Such contradictions that touch upon identity politics and ethnic/racial legitimacy are mirrored in Aeschylus’ *Persians* (472 BCE), the play that constitutes one of the first theatrical accounts of an East/ West encounter. Morrison takes up the ambiguities of this legacy in his version of *The Bacchae* in twenty-first-century Ireland: his version of the tragedy functions as an instantiation of the acts of both speaking for marginal ‘others’ and listening to the voices of privilege (Wilkinson & Kitzinger 92). By means of this contradistinction, Morrison’s *Bacchae* attempts to interrupt the processes of racial and ethnic othering. In doing so, the play, thus, destabilises rather than legitimises received binaries of self/‘other’ established by the Western-driven Orientalist imaginary.

Before examining the potentialities and methodologies of a rights-based approach to the performance of such binary relationships in contemporary Irish theatre, I want to dwell further on Adriana Cavarero’s theorisation of *terror* and *terrorism* as conceptual

---

5 See Pinter: “Political theatre presents an entirely different set of problems. Sermonising has to be avoided at all costs. Objectivity is essential. The characters must be allowed to breathe their own air. The author cannot confine and constrict them to satisfy his own taste or disposition or prejudice.”

6 Here, I draw attention to recent debates on the elitist use of the eighteenth-century term ‘classics’ to describe the study of the cultures and languages of the ancient Greeks and Romans often used to further the atavistic causes of slavery, imperialism, whiteness, and female oppression. As Edith Hall argues, “the title could do with revisiting” to include civilisations in constant ethnic exchanges with the Greeks and Romans extending beyond the Mediterranean and as far as the Middle East while also acknowledging the use of these texts to defend “the abolition of slavery [...], anti-colonialism [...], gay rights, female suffrage, and the Trade Union movement” (“On not Apologizing.” See *Edithorial Blogspot*, 21 February 2021).

markers of the experience of being in the position of a spectator or audience member viewing an act of actual or simulated violence. The application of the spectatorship problematic in theatre is imperative here. To begin with, responses to these critical approaches are pivotal in analysing *The Bacchae*, one of the most violent narratives in theatrical history, while illuminating the impact these events have, real or imagined, upon the victims who suffer their immediate repercussions in times of war, conflict, natural disaster, or everyday life. Cavarero posits those who simply witness these acts at the centre of her analysis of *horrorism*, investigating its impact on spectatorship. By providing first an etymological and linguistic *exegesis* of the terms 'terror' and 'horror,' Cavarero exposes a fundamental contrast within the semantic shifts of both words that resonates strongly with the kind of dramatic *mimesis* Conall Morrison is preoccupied with in his version: in consonance with tragic conventions, *The Bacchae of Baghdad* dramatises the brutal attack of Pentheus and his dismemberment by the Maenads without ever graphically displaying it on stage. What is more, in a post-9/11 context, the rewriting of the tragedy operates as an act of recognising cultural trauma, mourning, and re-membering the dismembered parts of collective memory and grief embodied in Pentheus' corpse, literally and metaphorically. The reclaiming of a horror-inducing and "sorrowful" vacuum or "gap" in an attempt to make sense of tragic events, as Jennifer Wallace observes in *Tragedy Since 9/11: Reading a World out of Joint, "hollows out"* (34) the final part of both Euripides' and Morrison's *Bacchae*.

Whereas 'terror' construes the physical response of fear that compels the body to mobilise itself, to act towards flight, Cavarero remarks, 'horror' designates an awareness of standing frozen, immobile, paralyzed, the antithesis of *praxis*. In this light, Lucy Nevitt's questions regarding the reverberations of Cavarero's theoretical framework in theatre are consonant with the ethical questions Morrison's writing and theatre work are committed to in staging Irishness:

Does theatre generate horror more frequently than terror? What might we learn from experiencing spectatorial horror in a theatre, where it can be pleasurable as well as disturbing? Cavarero's term prompts us to put spectatorial experience to the fore in our considerations of theatre and violence. It also insists that we notice the workings of language, and the significance of the choices that we make when assigning words to actions, images, representations of their effects. (4)

It is thus the morphological trajectories of terror and horror that Irish playwrights find themselves in when trying to speak on behalf of the Middle Eastern 'other' on the stage. In Morrison's case, *The Bacchae of Baghdad* enact a performative site of communal lament by seeking to restore the scattered body parts of Pentheus's body in the ending of the tragedy.

### **The Middle East in Contemporary Irish Theatre**

Representative engagements with the Middle East in contemporary Irish theatre include figurations of the protracted Palestinian-Israeli conflict in cultural events like those organised by PalFest Ireland in support of Palestine. One of the earliest exam-

ples of theatre that focuses on issues of citizenship, asylum, and ‘welcoming’ host cultures anticipating the establishment of the Direct Provision system and the 1996 Refugee Act drafted in Ireland is *Asylum! Asylum!* by Donal O’ Kelly staged at the Abbey Theatre in 1994 (and published in 1996). Similarly, playwright Charlie O’Neill examines Ireland’s growing multi-ethnic landscape and the tensions that arise between guests and hosts, natives and newcomers, in his play *Hurl* (2003). Conall Morrison wrote a version of Sophocles’ *Antigone* for the Project Arts Centre in 2004 that reimagines the titular protagonist as a Palestinian suicide bomber in Gaza while he also collaborated with The Ashtar Theatre company in Ramallah. In 2007, a panel discussion of the Irish Society for Theatre Research highlighted the difficulties of producing a collaborative Northern Irish, Jewish, and Arab production in Arabic, English, Hebrew, and Irish through the lens of the 1972 *Bloody Sunday* massacre and the bombings in Israel and Palestine.<sup>7</sup> Palestinian-Irish writer Hannah Khalil’s work deals exclusively with the rights of the dispossessed Palestinian people and their right to return in plays such as *Scenes from 68 Years*, *Scar Test*, *Plan D*, and *Waiting for Barack O* based on Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*.<sup>8</sup> Rosemary Jenkinson’s plays *The Lemon Tree* (2009) and *Basra Boy* (2012) recount the impact of the conflicts in Palestine and Iraq upon the lives of the Northern Irish youth in post-conflict Belfast. In the same ideological context of rerouting the public attention to the chronic tensions in the Middle East between Israelis and Palestinians, Mutaz Abu Saleh’s *New Middle East* directed by Bashar Murkus travelled from the Druze community of the occupied Golan to be hosted at the Peacock theatre as part of the Abbey Theatre’s “Waking the Nation” programme. The play, originally staged at the Oyoun Theatre and the Khashabi Theatre of Haifa in 2016, formed part of the commemorating repertoire of the Centenary of the Easter Rising in Ireland. Within Irish youth theatre organisations, important contributions and interventions in human rights theatre include Calypso Productions’ intercultural project *Tower of Babel* that engaged with the people living in direct provision in Ireland as well as Kildare-based Crooked House Theatre company in collaboration with Athens-based Kinitiras Theatre company and their staging of the *Supplicants* in 2018 Athens, Greece. More recently, Morrison dealt with the refugee crisis and the draconian anti-immigration EU policies – at the

7 Orna Akad, a writer and director from Tel Aviv, and David Grant, a theatre director, lecturer at Queen’s University Belfast and director of the Dublin Theatre Festival worked on a production involving Arab and Jewish actors in Israel, as well as Northern Irish actors that was set to be staged in Belfast and Haifa. Grant’s ambition to develop an image-based performance that would explore parallels between Bloody Sunday and a similar event in Israel in 2000 did not materialise. Following the panel discussion, a group of students from the drama department at Queen’s gave a short multi-lingual performance.

8 Khalil’s script *Deportation Room* for BBC Radio is based on verbatim accounts and fictional drama recounting Gazans’ experiences in the ‘waiting room’ for Palestinians at Cairo airport. Khalil, who never lived in Ireland but grew up in Dubai and the UK, argues, “I do feel like you can’t get away from the political if you want to write something really meaningful: with my background being Palestinian-Irish, I suspect it’s why I have a keen sense of injustice, and that’s the thing that inspires me to write.” See [www.hannahkhalil.com](http://www.hannahkhalil.com).

same time extending the critique to Ireland's immigration laws – with his modern-day adaptation *Pericles* based on one of Shakespeare's romance tales and staged at the Lir Academy, Dublin in 2019. The thematic preoccupations of these productions of the Celtic Tiger period transposed to present-day political and human rights' issues, both in Ireland and the world at large, reflect changing approaches to what staging 'Irishness' in a post-Celtic Tiger context means.

### Human Rights Irish Theatre since 9/11: Rethinking Interculturalism

Echoing Pinter's Nobel Prize speech, Morrison's 2006 production for the Abbey Theatre directly responds to a politically turbulent turn-of-the-millennium, locally and globally: on the one hand, it participates in the international intellectual movement castigating the American invasion of Iraq in 2003, a trenchant reproach that resurfaced with the Guantanamo and the Abu Ghraib prison photo leaks. On the other hand, it considers the explicit impact these events have on the relationship between political and aesthetic practices in Irish art, culture, and society without eschewing a broader examination of public debates on social policy structures and human rights violations in an Irish context, following increased immigration flows in 1990s Ireland. In fact, a more attentive reading of *The Bacchae of Baghdad* necessitates a reckoning of Ireland's strategic geopolitical role in international military operations and warfare as well as its increased racial and ethnic diversity structures. This is crucial in considering the impact these shifts have had upon cultural and artistic performance and practices under the rubric of 'interculturalism'<sup>9</sup> following the Celtic Tiger demise. In a post-9/11 European context, the play also interrupts in performance Eurocentric narratives of othering, migration, rights, tolerance, and freedom of expression (religious, political, artistic) between East and West (Europe and Islam) that intensified following the 2005 Danish cartoon controversy.

These tensions and catalytic shifts set the tone for Morrison's subversive reworking of Euripides' tragedy. Theatre writing, in this context, is re-conceptualised as a form of activist and righting inquiry that scrutinises "the foundation of human rights themselves" (Potter & Stonebridge 1) by dramatising encounters between 'us' and 'others.' As a model of representation, human rights theatre enables a confrontation with the silence of disenfranchised 'others' (notwithstanding the silence of privileged ones). This point of departure presents a pivotal corrective to the romanticised focus by dominant voices on the weakness and suffering of 'others' that, according to Sue Wilkinson and Celia Kitzinger, tends to "study down" 'otherness':

one of the problems endemic to 'studying down' [...] is 'the temptation to exaggerate the exotic, the heroic, or the tragic aspects of the lives of people with little power.' The

9 For an in-depth examination of the contemporary history and genealogies of intercultural and multi-ethnic Irish theatre post-1990s which simultaneously surveys the relationship between social and aesthetic Irish interculturalisms as social policy in the European Union to tackle racism and promote equality, see McIvor, *Migration and Performance* 1-36.

danger lies in romanticising Others and in using our representation of them to delineate 'our' vision of the Good Life. Some early ethnographers saw in 'primitive' cultures the nobility of the 'savage,' the healing rituals and harmonies of the 'natural' life, and the pure essence of the pre-colonial. (88)

Such critical representational strategies in theatrical praxis and human rights discourse further draw attention to the contingent frameworks that shape engagements with migrant 'others' and ethnic minorities in Ireland today. In an Irish postcolonial context, the multiple intersectional discourses (and silences) of 'otherness' challenge structural power in a globalised perspective. As such, their reenactment can open up sites of countering a number of human rights issues prevalent in Irish culture and society today. Among these, one of the most inconsistent policies with human rights agendas is the contentious identification of Shannon Airport as a transatlantic gateway between US and Europe, acting since 2002 as a stopover point in the US Government's extraordinary rendition programme that was used for the invasions and occupations of both Iraq and Afghanistan. The implication of Ireland in the US-led 'war on terror' led thousands of people, including members of the Irish Kurdish Iraqi community and the anti-war Muslims 4Peace and Justice group,<sup>10</sup> to march in Dublin in order to oppose Irish support for the US invasion of Iraq. In 2014, playwright, activist, and Aosdána member Margaretta D'Arcy – known for protesting for women's rights and civil liberties among other causes and controversies in Ireland – was arrested and imprisoned along with Niall Farrell for refusing to sign a bond that put a ban on entering parts of Shannon Airport closed to the public and for taking part in the protests over the US military stopovers there.

Almost two decades after its first production, Morrison's *The Bacchae of Baghdad* is also read against experiences of a contemporary structural racism reinforced by social policy directives and legislative measures which claim to integrate new minority communities as Ireland's 'others': asylum seekers, refugees, and migrant women and children. In this context, *The Bacchae of Baghdad* critiques a number of systemic rights' breaches against both the Irish Constitution and the European Convention of Human Rights. Among these are the State's controversial Direct Provision<sup>11</sup> system operating since 1999 under the auspices of the Reception and Integration Agency (RIA) and

---

10 Since the late 1970s, there is a growing Iraqi *diaspora* of refugees and emigrants that live in Europe as a result of their displacement due to the massacres of the Kurdish population, the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988), the 1991 Gulf War, and the US-led Invasion of Iraq in 2003, among other violent events. Based on The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) resettlement programme, only a minor percentage of the Iraqi refugee population are hosted in the EU. A great part of the Irish Kurdish Iraqi community that was (and still is) a minority in Ireland, expressed at the time of the invasion their mixed feelings and was ultimately divided into pro-war supporters who wished for the removal of dictator Saddam Hussein and those who opposed it as criminal. See Haughey (*The Irish Times*, 11 April 2003) and Murphy (*The Irish Times*, 10 April 2003).

11 Current academic research on direct provision and Ireland's breach of international human rights law is conducted by Dr. Liam Thornton at the UCD Sutherland School of Law: <<https://expertise.ucd.ie/direct-provision/>>.



the Department of Justice, as well as the landmark 2004 Citizenship referendum that contained constitutional legislation to remove automatic rights to citizenship from children born in Ireland. These jurisdictional arrangements feature large in the increasingly aggressive neoliberal rhetoric undergirding human rights' concerns in Irish society.<sup>12</sup> Studied opposite Pinter's Nobel lecture following the catastrophe in Iraq and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights drafted in the aftermath of WWII, Morrison's version emphatically alludes to the indivisibility, inviolability, and inalienability of certain collective rights that are fundamentally inconsistent with the universality of human rights' articles. In a post-conflict theatre-making landscape indebted to genealogies of civil activism, *The Bacchae of Baghdad* reiterates the specific covenants addressing racial discrimination (1966) in the representation of Dionysus, discrimination against women (1979) in the figuration of the Bacchae and Agave, torture (1984) with the lynching of Pentheus, and the rights of the child (1989) in the kinship rules between Dionysus and Pentheus that represents a conflict among equally oppressed, vulnerable subjects. At the same time as the delicate distinction between victims and perpetrators is often obscured in tragedy, Morrison provides a critical view of theatre as a rights-bearing entity used to promote and protect human rights that can often be reductive. According to Paul Rae, these ambiguities can be precariously amplified in human rights' theatre that involves "sensitive and sustained engagement with specific communities and contexts," particularly in intercultural performances of ethnic 'others' produced by Euro-American practitioners. This is because, he warns, such 'human rights' theatre demonstrates

how the language of human rights can be used for self-serving ends. In the name of universal values, it smoothes the passage between recognising the plight of another and identifying it as one's own, cannibalising and diminishing the original suffering in the process [...]. The warning against taking up the localised atrocities of 'our' universal instruction must be as keenly felt by theatre-makers as by anyone. The generalising impetus in any staging of suffering entails an ethical responsibility to those individuals, communities or cultures being represented [...]. [I]t is similarly ill advised to shoehorn the universal truth of human rights into every concrete situation. (36-37)

The aesthetic and ethical strategies of adapting and translating Euripides' *Bacchae* for the Irish theatre, hence, are elucidated by Morrison's engagement with such histories and genealogies of conflicts over the rights of minority ethnic communities in a majority white secularised society. Postdating another Abbey production written in response to the American invasion of Iraq, *The Burial at Thebes* by Seamus Heaney in 2004, *The Bacchae of Baghdad* anticipates Cavarero's explosive study on horror, terror, and violence in times of war. Within this temporal trajectory, Morrison's work

---

12 Attitudes pertaining to issues of religious tolerance and ethnic, political, gender, racial, and social prejudices in the Republic of Ireland (based on a series of national surveys conducted by Micheál Mac Gréil from the late 1970s to 2008), reflect the demographic shifts in the size of a non-Irish resident population, whereby immigrants of Middle-Eastern, African, and Asian origins such as Arabs, Iranians, Israelis, Nigerians, Indians, Palestinians, and Pakistanis are perceived in a negative light (see Mac Gréil 71-83, 92-93, 101, 149, 156).

navigates a dangerous territory on the margins of what is ethically tolerable, informed by the atrocities committed against the Iraqi people. His 'horrorist' version of the *Bacchae* becomes thus the public plateau of a visceral political analogy of ethical dismemberment or *sparagmos* in material, social, and ethical frames of reference. Morrison, accordingly, sets the play in the Green zone of Iraq: he reimagines Pentheus' and Dionysus' confrontation as the violent opposition between George W. Bush and Saddam Hussein, between law (*nomos*) and nature or custom (*physis*), between the enlightened 'civilised' West that stands for democracy, freedom, and reason pitted against the 'barbarian' Muslim Eastern 'other' as synonymous with tyranny, autocracy, irrationality, and terrorism.

### **Strangers, Others, *Xenoi*: From Euripides to Conall Morrison**

*The Bacchae* was written around 410 BCE and premiered at the City Dionysia posthumously in 405 BCE winning the first prize. Central to the tragedy is the foreign god Dionysus, an 'other' and a stranger. The myth revolves around Pentheus, the King of Thebes and his mother Agave who are punished by the vengeful god Dionysus (also known as Bacchus) for refusing to honour him as a legitimate deity of the city. In fact, Pentheus (who is Dionysus' cousin) has declared a ban on worshipping the latter as idolatry. The title of the play takes its name from Dionysus/Bacchus and his ferocious, terror-inspiring cult of fanatical female disciples from the city of Thebes called 'Bacchae,' 'Bacchantes,' or 'Maenads' whose allegiance to Dionysus is 'absolute' (Walton 206); they revere him as the ultimate god in ecstatic frenzy while dancing and hunting. Dionysus was worshipped in a Delphic festival every second year in the middle of winter with the female Bacchae practising an ecstatic dance culminating in the dismemberment of animals (*sparagmos*) and the eating of the raw animal flesh (*omophagia*). The play ends in mayhem when the Bacchae become Dionysus' accomplices in mutilating Pentheus's body on Mount Cithaeron.

The political and psychological underpinnings of the original text reiterate Ricoeur's fundamental distinction between members and strangers of a community, and Cavarero's *horrorism* paradigm, so vigorously dramatised in the play. These facets are emphasised with the invasion and incursion of prominent Asian and Near Eastern influences in cult practices and religious beliefs by making a half-god (not fully integrated into the cultural and religious life of the Greeks, as it were) the protagonist of the tragedy. Dionysus is a foreigner or *xenos*, an 'other' and alien, an intruder in Greek culture from the barbarian fringes of Phrygia and Thrace. By virtue of his foreignness, he is thus portrayed as encompassing a set of polarities and antinomies which destabilise notions of membership, kinship, and gender, simultaneously dismantling even an understanding of the sacred and the psychopathology of revenge. For being a threatening intruder, he is a dishonoured young god of "ruptures" and "demolished structures" (Morrison, *Bacchae* 23), enraged for being scorned by his own mortal family, the royal house of Cadmus that has denied him an honourable place as a de-

ity. Exacerbating the primordial *hubris* of his identity, Dionysus is the offspring of an illegitimate affair between Zeus and his mortal mother Semele and an orphan, since Hera murdered her husband's pregnant mistress:<sup>13</sup>

Semele, they said, mated with some mortal,  
 humped some human  
 shagged some soldier.  
 (Morrison, *Bacchae* 2)

Having travelled through Asia and other foreign lands where he was worshipped, Dionysus returns home disguised to take revenge upon his own family. Due to his ancestry, he is the god of contradictions, embodying simultaneously a divinity and a mortal stranger, a foreigner or *xenos* worshipped as a primitive force in the wild and within the order of the city. Symbolised by a giant phallus, he is at once intensely masculinised and feminised giving permission to women to question the supremacy of men. As Edith Hall notes,

Dionysus challenges many of the social, chronological, spatial, and other boundaries with which the ancient Greeks tried to demarcate and control the world around them: he is an effeminate male, an ancient god of youthful appearance, a Greek god who leads hordes of oriental barbarians, a god worshipped both in the untamed wild and within the walls of the civilised city, the tutelary deity of both tragic and comic theatre, instigator of total ecstasy but also absolute terror. (2)

At the backdrop of such heterogeneous embodiments, Euripides' play questions, in psychoanalytic terms, the existence of irrational forces which operate within a well-structured and ordered community as a struggle between two extremes: the tyranny of self-control versus the savage instincts of collective desire. This conflict is fundamentally gendered in the manner it reflects the female transgression of the manic Bacchantes juxtaposed to the cross-dressing scene of Pentheus and Dionysus' effeminate attributes. By intentionally obscuring the distinction between tragedy and comedy, Dionysus is an androgynous trope of the unfathomable, the unintelligible forces of the unconscious impulses that elide us epitomised in the natural cycle through birth, death, and resurrection. Most crucially, he is also the god of the theatre, the mask, and the protagonist in a play performed during the dramatic competitions in his own honour, the City Dionysia in Athens. In this sense, Euripides has Dionysus effectively play the central role of 'self' and 'other' at the same time, self-directing, choreographing, and orchestrating what Pinter calls the never-ending range of reflections "staring back at us" in performance. The *Bacchae* assume their own collective "corporate nature" (Walton 206) as a subversive female *thiassos* that acts both as a protection and a challenge to a masculinist authority. As such, their catas-

---

13 In the Orphic version of the Dionysus myth, Brian Arkins remarks that "Dionysus Zagreus was born from the union of Zeus and Persephone [but] Hera was jealous and incited the Titans to tear Dionysus to pieces and devour him; but the virgin goddess Athena rescued the heart of Dionysus and brought it to Zeus who swallowed it and was therefore able to beget Dionysus later with Semele when he came to her in the form of lightning" (85). It is this later part of the myth that is central to Euripides' *Bacchae*.

trophic defiance becomes the theatrical device that epitomises the limits of sexual difference most acutely. It also directly conjures the biopolitical relationship between life, rights, and art superimposed upon the desire to become someone else, an 'other,' through theatrical *mimesis*.

The figuration of Dionysus as 'other' resolutely puts to the test the cultural, ethical, and legal principles of the right to movement and hospitality as performed by many Western states in times of crisis and war. Such a strategy problematises contemporary notions of the 'stranger' at the backdrop of such terms as migrant, refugee, asylum seeker, and foreigner (often referred to as a 'non-national'). The etymology of the word 'stranger' denotes a 'foreigner' from the Latin *extraneus* and the Old French *estrangier*, an unfamiliar entity and a foreign body, who, according to Ricoeur, is threatening because it is "someone who is not "one of our own" – someone who is not one of us" (38) but an outsider. The Greek equivalent of 'stranger,' *xenos*, signifies such contradictory concepts as 'enemy/foe' or 'foreigner' and 'guest friend,' so often referred to in Homeric epic in the context of *xenia* (hospitality).<sup>14</sup> Dionysus is a barbarian *xenos* who is an enemy barred from entry into the civilised world of Pentheus. As such, his status is reminiscent of the current persecutory and exclusionist practices of modern Western states against immigrants and refugees. Playing off metaphors and allusions of strangers, outsiders, and (il)legitimate members<sup>15</sup> (Bush's notorious distinction between 'us' and 'them'), a feminist reading of the play (consistent with Morrison's translation) interrogates yet another oddity which eradicates the rules of belonging and expulsion. For it is not Dionysus that will be exiled (or deported), but a female collective, Pentheus' mother Agave along with her sisters (55-57).

### The *Bacchae* Effect: International & Irish Adaptions

From Nietzsche's aesthetic theory of the Dionysian and Apollonian elements to the outset of the political and cultural revolutions of the 1960s, Euripides' *Bacchae* has offered itself to a myriad of re-framings and adaptations, particularly since the outbreak of the Vietnam war. Before that and as early as 1922, it was performed at the Ancient Theatre of Syracuse, and in 1950 in the same theatre with Vittorio Gassman in the role of Dionysus. One of the most emblematic twentieth-century productions in the history of theatre was the premiere of Richard Schechner's revolutionary *Dionysus in 69* in New York's Performing Garage on 6 June 1968, later documented on film by Brian de Palma in 1970. With its radical reinterpretation of *The Bacchae*, Schechner's unsettling experimental staging draws on anthropological studies and theories of primitive ritual. The production took place at a time of unprecedented post-WWII violence responding to the *horrorism* of armed conflict precipitated by the US involvement in the Vietnam war. Other significant precedents at important historical junctures in the second part of the twentieth century include Luca Ronconi's pro-

14 For an in-depth analysis of 'xenia' and 'refugeeness,' see Remoundou (16-30).

15 The Irish 'other' or 'migrant other' is cogently conceptualised by Loredana Salis.

duction in the Vienna Burgtheater and Hansgunther Heyme's in the Cologne Theatre in 1973 (Ronconi restaged it in Prato two years later). In the same year, Wole Soyinka's retelling of the myth as an allegory of civil unrest in his native Nigeria titled *The Bacchae of Euripides: A Communion Rite* was presented at the British Royal National Theatre in London (later staged by Carol Dawson in Kingston, Jamaica in 1975). In 1977, Tadashi Suzuki's version premiered in Tokyo while in 1986 Caryl Churchill and David Lan adapted the tragedy as a dance-theatre performance titled *A Mouthful of Birds*. In 1993, Charles Mee gave his *Bacchae 2.1* a modern spin as a critique of the clash between barbarism and civilisation exploring hyper-masculinities and sexuality, while Ingmar Bergman dealt with Euripides' text on three distinctive occasions, in a libretto for the Royal Swedish Opera in 1991, in a 1993 production for Sveriges Television (SVT), and for a stage production for the Royal Dramatic Theatre in Stockholm in 1996.

In an Irish context, according to Marianne McDonald,<sup>16</sup> Dionysus can be seen as a symbol of the Irish post-colonial condition and the struggle to reclaim rights against the British colonisers and oppressors. Conjuring up the pretexts of the tragedy to interpolate 'friends' versus 'foes' – or members of a civic community against alien 'others' and strangers that are not 'our own' –, *The Bacchae's* afterlife in Ireland has reached what Simon Perris identifies as the "age of its fame" (164) since the turn of the twentieth century. Plays by Irish writers or plays connected to Celtic sensibilities that echo Euripides' *Bacchae* include George Bernard Shaw's *Major Barbara* (1905) and Brian Friel's *Dancing at Lughnasa* (1990), while in 1944, Christine and Edward Longford produced the latter's translation of *The Bacchanals* for the Dublin Gate Theatre. Moreover, in 1967 New Zealand, James K. Baxter's version *Mr O'Dwyer's Dancing Party* has Dionysus perform Irish jigs and reels. In addition to Morrison's 2006 *The Bacchae of Baghdad*, translations of the ancient Greek text that make urgent explicit or implicit parallels with Middle Eastern vs. Western politics comprise those by Derek Mahon (1991) and Colin Teevan (2012). Recent productions of Euripides' *Bacchae* for the Irish theatre include a new translation by Classics Stage Ireland for the Project Arts Centre in 2010 and 2012, respectively, directed by Andy Hinds. In 2017, NUI Galway's Drama and Theatre Studies students performed the play directed by teaching staff Max Hafler at the Mick Lally Theatre.

---

16 Qtd. in Perris (165).

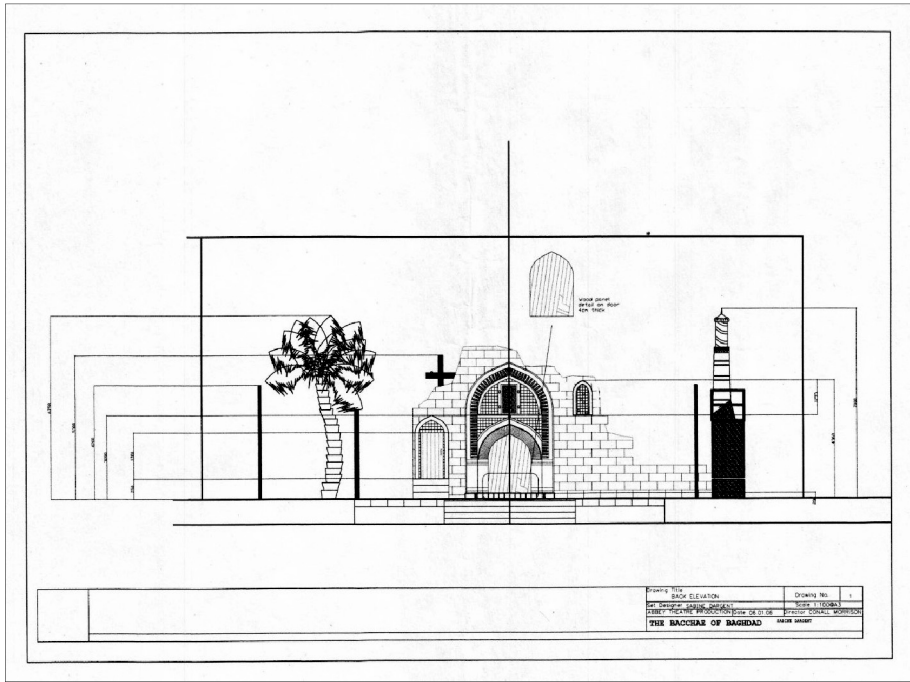


Fig. 1. Drawing of the set design by Sabine Dargent based on Saddam Hussein's Republican Palace in Baghdad, Iraq (2006, The Abbey Theatre Digital Archive, National University of Ireland, Galway)

Conversant with the performance of 'otherness' as well as the source play's reception history in the twentieth century, Morrison's post-9/11 version simulates a distinctive Middle Eastern aesthetic to represent the terrain of the rational and irrational forces that transform Dionysus into a cipher for Saddam Hussein and Pentheus into another for Bush. While narratives of political radicalism, religious devotion, and sexual freedom embodied in the title of the play itself were extended to the material stage, the production highlighted the intersections between prevailing discourses separating Europe from Islam. This was highlighted as a result of the visual hauntology of the US invasion of Iraq in the post-9/11 era through the ubiquitous dissemination of photographs and videos of atrocities inflicted upon Iraqis, which brought about a fundamental shift in the way violence is reckoned and represented.

In her introduction to *Horrorism: Naming Contemporary Violence*, Cavarero revisits the scene of the massacre in Iraq as reported through the western media in order to reframe notions of the visuality of collateral damage and the lexical failure to name violence. The blurry border separating 'martyrs' from 'terrorists' is caught up in Morrison's scene of Pentheus interrogating Dionysus whether he would "suffer more and be a holy martyr" (29). Yet, this is no mere re-enactment of the former's dismemberment by his mother and the Maenads, but an ethical encounter with horror head-on:

Baghdad, 12 July 2005. A suicide driver blows up his automobile in the middle of a crowd, killing twenty-six Iraqi citizens and an American soldier. Among the victims of the carnage – dismembered corpses, limbs oozing blood, hands blown off – the greatest number were children to whom the Americans were handing out candy. Did the perpetrators want to punish them for servility toward the occupying troops? Did they think that violence makes a stronger impression when there are no qualms about sacrificing children? (Cavarero 1)

As a visual medium of the liminality upon which terrorism and *horrorism* are predicated, Morrison sets the action nominally in the heart of Baghdad's Green Zone, the twenty-first century fortified forefront during the 2003 invasion of Iraq also known as 'little America.' In 2004, Colin Teevan employed the theme of the US invasion of Iraq in the first play of his war trilogy, *How Many Miles to Basra?*<sup>17</sup> as an ethical inquiry of neutrality in times of war and the role of media in disseminating the truth. Like Morrison, Teevan transposed the ancient plot to 2003 Iraq to perform a direct critique of its invasion and the relationship of that conflict to earlier British military operations, including those in Northern Ireland. Both plays are engaged with the hard ethical questions regarding representation and the power of the mediated image in shaping public opinion about the Middle East. Both Morrison and Teevan advocated that the war in Iraq was a catastrophic imperial project breaching the international declaration of human rights, echoing Pinter's anti-war address:

The invasion of Iraq was a bandit act, an act of blatant state terrorism, demonstrating absolute contempt for the concept of international law. The invasion was an arbitrary military action inspired by a series of lies upon lies and gross manipulation of the media and therefore of the public; an act intended to consolidate American military and economic control of the Middle East masquerading – as a last resort – all other justifications having failed to justify themselves – as liberation. A formidable assertion of military force responsible for the death and mutilation of thousands and thousands of innocent people [...]. We have brought torture, cluster bombs, depleted uranium, innumerable acts of random murder, misery, degradation and death to the Iraqi people and call it 'bringing freedom and democracy to the Middle East. (Pinter n.p.)

By rendering the drama of modern foreign politics as a compelling investigation of the lethal clash between two irreconcilable positions represented by Pentheus and Dionysus, victims and perpetrators, political sovereignty, ethical certainty and religious fundamentalism, Morrison reiterates Cavarero's reflections on the shifting meaning of violence in the new millennium that begs for a neoteric understanding:

in war and terror, horror is not an entirely unfamiliar scene. On the contrary. But this scene has a specific meaning of its own, of which the procedures of naming must finally take account, freeing themselves of their subjugation to power. To coin a new word, scenes like those I have just described might be called 'horrorist,' or perhaps, for the sake of economy or assonance, we could speak of horrorism – as though ideally all the innocent victims, instead of their killers, ought to determine the name. (3)

---

17 The play was produced in the UK and the US and staged as a rehearsed reading at Dublin's Abbey Theatre in 2009. The other two plays of the trilogy are *The Lion of Kabul* (2009) and *There Was A Man, There Was No Man* (2011), set respectively in the Middle East, in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Jordan.

In order to simulate the image of remote contemporary *horrorism* as a result of relentless warfare on the Abbey stage,<sup>18</sup> the set and the costume design along with the sound and choreography reinforced a distinctive Middle Eastern aesthetic. Sinuously highlighting what Edward Said terms as instantiations of 'latent' and 'manifest' orientalism (203), and deconstructing at the same time the demonising fantasies and stereotypes of Occidentalist thought, the aesthetic choices of the production affirmed the virtual antithesis between the secular West and radical Islam as something more than a geopolitical rarity. In this light, the cover of the programme note depicted the interior of a house in ruins in Baghdad after a bombing with an ornate armchair at the centre still standing amid the rubble. On the Dublin stage, the set design plans by Sabine Dargent deliberately replicated the façade of Saddam Hussein's luxurious palace, built based on the principles of Islamic architecture, with an enchanting garden with a palm tree on the left of the stage. The pronounced material dynamics of the production, emanating from a quintessentially Western performance milieu and defined by evolving Western theoretical frameworks of theatre making, critically re-directed and reassessed the received historical/imperialist record into a 'rhizomatic' intercultural archive exchange driven from the margins of 'otherness.' This explosive performance encounter of collective and individual identities from below is remediated in *The Bacchae of Baghdad*, in both local and global contexts, through what Ric Knowles perceives as a dismantling, reversing, and complicating of hierarchical binaries of prestige, power, and, therefore, rights that "no longer retain a west and the rest binary" (59). The transformational discursive shifts of Morrison's play further explore the multivocality of new intercultural exchanges within Irish theatre and culture as a primary ideological *topos* of resisting the East/West imperialist binary by extending it to a rights discourse. Symptomatic of these emerging methodological and theoretical approaches in interculturalism and human rights theatre is *The Bacchae of Baghdad's* momentum to confront the political expediency of such terms at a historical and critical juncture when such preoccupations, representations, and embodiments were understudied or elided.

The possibilities of such critical engagements and political frameworks with the utopian intercultural imaginary (Fischer-Lichte, 11) were opened up on the contemporary Irish stage. Pentheus, whose name in Greek means 'grief,' emerged as a Bush-like "swaggering, tyrannical"<sup>19</sup> patriot and leader of the American insurgency forces in Iraq. The army uniform, the distinct American accent and the close-cropped haircut deliberately superimposed against Christopher Simpson's Dionysus (accentuated by the actor's hybrid ethnic identity with Irish, Rwandan, and Greek roots) and the female Chorus of Bacchantes (Mojisola Adebayo, Ruth Negga, Mary Healy, Donna

---

18 The play premiered at the Abbey Theatre on 4 March 2006 with a cast reflecting an intercultural Irish theatrical and cultural landscape including Christopher Simpson in the role of the god Dionysus and an all-female chorus of manic Bacchae played by Mojisola Adebayo, Mary Healy, Shereen Martineau, Donna Nikolaisen, and Ruth Negga. Robert O'Mahoney impersonated Pentheus, and Agave was played by Andrea Irvine.

19 See the Programme Note of the production for the Abbey Theatre, 2006.



Nikolaisen, Merrina Millsapp, and Shereen Martineau) dressed in *chador* emphasized the intercultural fabric of the production. The deliberate aesthetics of Orientalist metaphors and allusions conjuring the traumatic historical event, also paid homage to Wole Soyinka's *The Bacchae of Euripides: A Communion Rite* (1973). Commissioned by the UK's National Theatre, the play's scope carefully surveyed issues of race, gender, and class reflected in Soyinka's note that "the Slaves and the Bacchantes should be as mixed a cast as is possible, testifying to their varied origins" (234). In his essay "The Future of Ancient Greek Tragedy," Morrison expanded on these ideas of dichotomising East and West as predicated upon a historically nurtured fallacy:

The notion of the Chorus dressed in *chador* also takes its cue from Euripides' instructions, when they are described as Asian women [...]. I thought, making a play for a contemporary audience, why couldn't I use an image (i.e. the *chador*) that resonates more with us when you think of that which is other, foreign, exotic [...] and the one of the most piquant and poignant images in our popular imaginations, I believe, is the image of fundamentalist Islam. (151)

The Islamic veil and the architectural mystique of the stage served as subversive symbols of the simultaneous strangeness, familiarity, and threatening exoticism of Islam reminiscent of the new and barbaric Asian invasion that threatens Theban order. However, the play's internal argument seemed to stretch the metaphor to its limits by aiming at this kind of unveiling that exposed, through the use of this particularly clichéd imagery of the Eastern 'other,' the rogue political tactics of the West in the twenty-first century. By focusing on this perennial encounter between pervasive binary concepts from the perspective of the non-Western/minority/subaltern agent, Morrison's use of these images aimed at something more than challenging collective spaces of "in-betweenness" beyond postcolonialism, racism, and "what is currently unimaginable" (Fischer-Lichte 12). The production further interrogated interculturalism's "performative aspiration" shaping the transformative role of theatre to act as an agent of rights discourse in contemporary postcolonial cultures. It is this particular mode of new intercultural engagement that *The Bacchae of Baghdad* seeks to represent textually and in performance by "stay[ing] with the challenge" of Ireland's own postcolonial condition while,

these very dynamics continue to shape and interrupt its own critical and aesthetic utopian imaginings in the present [...] new interculturalism demands that we do not lose sight of the power dynamics and historical genealogies that interrupt this performative aspiration (particularly postcolonial ones), even in the very moment the intercultural performative achieves temporary utopian states in and through performance. (McIvor 5)

With the psychological foundations of this performative aspiration being more intense than their political equivalent, the opening scene of the play finds Dionysus – feral, ferocious, fearsome, lawless – bursting out of an ancient, cracked urn to become a vague, broad reference for the oriental 'other,' a stranger who has "come from the East / from the golden ground of Lydia and Phrygia" (Morrison, *Bacchae* 1) to reclaim his legitimacy within the city. Unfolding as a conflict between a fanatical religious intensity and a rational autocracy, the Bacchantes are refigured as suicide bombers

terrorising the house of Cadmus and Dionysus as an Islamic fundamentalist with high ambitions that threaten to avenge “the sinners who don’t sing his song” (3) in battle. This is the East gazing back at the Western ‘civilising’ forces not in order to rectify a sense of flawed ‘otherness,’ but so as to aggravate it by exacting revenge. Dwarfed by Dionysus’ Nietzschean resolve, Pentheus plays the role of a passive spectator who gradually moves from the periphery of the action to the heart of darkness. His absolute disapprobation of the female Bacchic rites that have lured even his mother and aunts is analogous to his repudiation of their spiritual leader Dionysus who, in his eyes, emerges as the paradigmatic emblem of fundamentalism precisely because he hails from the Orient, the “fertile ground for fanatics and fools” (18). In Pentheus’ public proclamation, Morrison’s text vocalises the intransigence of US neoliberal politics of horror after 9/11 as a tacit condemnation of the Bush administration:

Go straight to this man’s cave  
 Where he plucks his birds and dreams and raves;  
 Take crowbars and coals – scorch his ground,  
 Break it all up and burn it down!  
 Throw to his winds the charms he uses to foretell,  
 Let him divine that I am powerful as well!  
 Go scour this city, every souq and alleyway –  
 You bring this man-girl freak to the light of day.  
 We must catch our infectious foreign tempter,  
 Wipe him out before every bed is empty!  
 Chain him, hood him, bring him here to me.  
 I’ll hear his case and then we’ll see  
 If death by stoning in a public place  
 Fits his description of Bacchic grace! (13)

### Staging *Horrorism*: Pentheus in Abu Ghraib Prison

The dialectical deflection into the imagery threading Morrison’s opaque language readily provides a direct allusion that predates the scandalous legacy of the controversial *Iraq War documents leak* (aka *Iraq War Logs*) or ‘torture memos’ (McKenzie; Mirzoeff; Perucci; Phelan) published by *Wikileaks* in 2010 and documenting reports of over 150,000 civilian deaths as a result of abuse, torture, rape, and murder by Iraqi police and soldiers classified by US troops as enemy casualties. Looking back at the digital archives of horror which comprise leaked photographs of Iraqi prisoners tortured by American soldiers in Saddam Hussein’s infamous Abu Ghraib prison, it is hard to miss the continuity of the caricature of the Middle Eastern ‘other’ concurrently problematising the symbol of the *jihad* turned into terrorist, enemy, and here, into a victim. Pentheus’ public edict visually evokes one of the most shocking images from the war disseminated in mainstream media for the world to see, the ‘Hooded Man.’ With arms outstretched in an unnervingly Christ-like pose, the photograph of a hooded semi-naked man sprouting wires in Abu Ghraib exposes the systemic *horrorism* authorised in military torture policies. The unapologetic graphic brutality of these photographs erroneously simulating the Dionysian entrapment and Bacchic mutila-

tion of Pentheus' body, replicates a public spectacle, and memorial of torture and shame archived in the Western memory museum. The aim here is to humiliate the prisoners whose lives matter less than those of 'others,' as Sontag reflects in *Regarding the Pain of Others* and her subsequent *New York Times* article "Regarding the Torture of Others."

Reframing the intricacies of the original plot, Morrison's language lays bare how the inherent polarities in the play are often inadequate in illuminating the drama of a tragic ethical encounter between East and West in a straightforward way. Pentheus is the ethnocentric zealot whose repeated xenophobic insults levelled against Dionysus are formulated on the basis of both race ("foreign freak," 30) and gender (the "obscenity" of dressing in "a woman's clothes," 32). On the other side of extremism, Dionysus the 'libertarian' is at once 'strange' and 'intimate,' cautioning "those whose reason is closed to otherness" that "they will be the first to be overwhelmed by it" (Eagleton 4).

What is more, Dionysus presages the corruption of the women of the city by encouraging them to defy the state and with it, male authority. At the intersection between a "fascist cult" and a "utopian community" (Eagleton 2), the Bacchae liberate themselves from the confines of the domestic sphere under the emancipatory influence of their master, who metamorphoses them into the ultimate *nemesis* of patriarchy. Such radical deviations from reason to the exuberance of collective desire and from the rule of law to the lynch-mob (Walton 209) imperil social order because they derive from the core of 'otherness.' This dynamic culminates in Pentheus' cross-dressing scene: "We are told we are 'foreigners' / Well, your grief is foreign to us. We don't weep over FREEDOM" (Morrison, *Bacchae* 40), the cast-out Maenads declare when it is too late for Pentheus to escape his fate or *kismet*.

Invoked as a rumination on the experience of spectatorship, the scene of Pentheus confronting the Bacchae has obvious theatrical overtones in the manner it equivocates the recognition of a "world that is not really there" (Arkins 87), echoing McGuinness's elision of the Middle Eastern 'other' from the Irish stage. At the climax of the action, when the Dionysian *horrorism* prevails and the royal house is shattered, the panopticon of Pentheus' demise is unforgiving. Cadmus urges Agave who has been seeing "double" to "look again," to "stare," to "take a glance," and "look into the truth" (50), namely the crime she has committed in dismembering her own son without knowing. The rhetoric of blind allegiance to fanaticism juxtaposed to a kind of vengeful theophany, leads to an elusive dead-end divorced from any hope of resolution in the exodus. This confrontation with anarchy, Terry Eagleton argues, which is momentous because it emanates from the menace of 'otherness,' offers no simplistic liberal melodrama in the manner it depicts Bacchic savagery: "Neither Pentheus nor the Pentagon understands that the most obtuse way to deal with terrorism is to turn terrorist yourself [...]. The Bacchae, who, like Islamic suicide bombers, rip innocent bodies to shreds, is not to be excused" (3) nor eulogised in its pictorial *horrorism*.

Morrison's script recasts the words 'look' and 'visual' in parentheses, as a chilling reminder of the ocular spectacle of war that remains profoundly undemocratic according to Nicholas Mirzoeff (23). The play, thus, ends with the iconoclastic obliteration of the royal house of Cadmus. The Dionysian rage might have prevailed, but Morrison (after Euripides) reminds spectators that *horrorism* "lies at the root of all civility" (Eagleton 1):

And now, Cadmus [...]
   
you are an exile in your own country;
   
these are no longer your streets;
   
Dishonour is for dark comers in some strange land.
   
Now, forever, we will all be foreigners. (Morrison, *Bacchae* 52)

Morrison invites the audience to see theatre as that space of ethical encounters with self and 'others,' a zone that is often disjointed by the advent of the unknown (Peperzak 60). Providing a prescient rereading of *The Bacchae's* formulaic concluding lines, Morrison ends his play with a theophanic gnomic for mortals that does not simply incite religious fundamentalist sensibilities to pantheism and tolerance, but prescribes the certainty of divine *nemesis* as a result of intransigent fanaticism. While Dionysus remains dancing on the stage, the Chorus chant:

The divine will takes many forms.
   
Men think they can forsake it,
   
Or make it perform
   
To their ends,
   
Make the norm be what they decide.
   
But God does not respect any one brethren,
   
Does not choose a side;
   
He produces the unexpected
   
And we'd have no chance of knowing,
   
No tradition, no holy text showing
   
If he had laughed or he had cried
   
As he watched mankind dance,
   
Dance blindly, dance madly,
   
Dance towards suicide. (57)

Despite receiving mixed reviews, Morrison's Abbey production managed to raise a set of pressing questions regarding the role and the place Irish theatre occupies in highlighting the "deep narrative grammar" (Slaughter 4) that writing and theatre share with human rights. It also opened up a margin to rethink the way the arts and the media provide unbiased contexts for moderating means, tools, and methodologies that actively help writers and theatre practitioners to represent others ensuring the evasion of cultural appropriation. In this vein, the dramaturgical parameters that affect the way we perceive and represent the Middle East on stage were carefully balanced with the production's post-show discussion where *Irish Times* journalist Lara Marlowe talked about her own experience as a war correspondent in Baghdad and the proclivity of western media to represent the Middle East in a certain 'other' light.

Uncannily prefiguring the motifs of terrorism and *horrorism* in a world characterised by rage, the programme note featured intellectual meditations by various thinkers,

writers, and academics from both sides of the 'divide' (East & West). With an introduction by Terry Eagleton titled "Holy Terror," the programme note included quotes by George W. Bush and passages taken from Eliot Weinberger's *What I Heard About Iraq*, the Operation Iraqi Freedom article "An Isolated Retreat for Busy Americans" by Ariana Eunjung Cha (2003), and Malise Ruthven's *Fundamentalism: The Search for Meaning* (2004). In addition, the programme incorporated verses from the Iraqi poet Muslim Saint, Sufi mystic Rabia of Basra read opposite excerpts from *Occidentalism: A Short History of Anti-Westernism* by Ian Buruma and Avishai Margalit (2004), and Salman Rushdie's 1990 Herbert Read Memorial Lecture "Is Nothing Sacred?"

### **Agave's *Anagnorisis*: Envisioning Alternatives in Irish Theatre**

The ideological impulse to explore the possibilities of theatre as a space for dramatising the realities of violence and the defence of rights in the twenty-first century is quintessentially predicated on visibility. By providing the ethical tools to look through the gaps, the fissures that deem 'others' absent, theatre makes visible that which we fear to look at in the eye, like Agave. If today we are once more turning specifically to Irish theatre writing and performance to imagine rights as "something that is not there," something that is absent like the Arab captors in McGuinness's play *Someone Who'll Watch Over Me* – an elision that could furthermore "confer [and] disseminate privilege" (Potter and Stonebridge 3) only to what is present/visible on the same stage –, it is because in doing so we might contribute to a more inclusive theatrical *praxis* that creates, as it were, the possibilities for a more just and peaceful world. The perils of this absence (or *sparagmos*), as Eagleton contends, still, remain timely:

The Bacchic women signify something precious, which civilisation forgets at its peril; yet they have also sunk their individual selves in a mindless collective, one quite as violent and authoritarian in its own sweet way as the social order which casts them out. Human bodies may be interchangeable in the orgy, but so are they in the death camps.  
(3)

Given the manifold and often contentious nature of the role and scope of human rights in their claims for universality, it is imperative to reframe representations of this dilemma in theatre upon what Pinter refers to in his Nobel lecture as "the other side of that mirror," refracting multiple sides of the story-telling spectrum. Representations of the Middle Eastern 'other' in Irish theatre that engage with human rights debates show how little is written and known about the region and its people beyond stereotypical figurations through the media exacerbated negatively since 9/11. Theatre productions like Morrison's *The Bacchae of Baghdad* restore what Arendt calls the deprivation of a place by actively co-writing "a history of suffering and survival" (Stonebridge 113) that remains to be acknowledged and archived in w/ri(gh)ting and performance.

Almost two decades following the invasion of Iraq and while internal political divisions and military reforms are underway in the Middle East, the world remains out of joint: the war in Syria is still raging, Yemen is being annihilated, refugee and economic cri-

ses deepen, the Direct Provision<sup>20</sup> system in Ireland gains fixity, and the Covid pandemic exacerbates our global environmental and ontological uncertainties whilst the fantasy of a better world is perpetually deferred. In such a climate of uninterrupted upheavals, one feels compelled to question the power these often tele-transported images continue to hold collectively for members of the international community and for Ireland's 'newcomers' seeking international protection. The same questions resurface when discussing the potentialities of sustaining and representing human rights debates in Irish theatre as an activist forum that actualises Arendt's claim for a place that safeguards human rights precisely because it "makes opinions significant and actions effective" in the twenty-first-century history of theatre writing and performance.

By averting the amplification of stereotypes and biases that surface when the tragic plot is patronisingly used to 'shed light' into contemporary conditions of oppression and marginalisation which claim to 'give voice' to the suffering subject, Morrison's play widens the insights and similitudes of *The Bacchae of Baghdad* to its ancient counterpart, casting both writing and theatre as gestures towards diversity, inclusion, recognition, and representation in contemporary culture and society. Such processes of representation and critical engagement in cultural and social policies (long taken up by feminist and post-colonial thought), foreground an ethico-political conversation in theatre for the rights of *all*, which is imperative right now more than ever, as it interrogates "the basic conditions within which those rights must be anchored and, where they do not hold, to envision alternatives" (Rae 41). By discontinuing a theatre semiotics of rights "intrinsic to the fantasies of the democratic conscience" (Stonebridge 92) that tells the story of the powerless from the perspective of the powerful, Morrison's rewriting of an ancient Greek tragedy in the Middle East for Ireland's stage does something more than galvanise trenchant re-evaluations of tribalism, materialism, fundamentalism, Occidentalism, and nationalism, while assuming that it will lead to justice by making the tragedies of 'others' visible on the stage. By rewriting an ancient tragedy to map the contemporary tragedies of rightless people, fifteen years since its premiere, *The Bacchae of Baghdad* participates in the process of constructing a new archive recording a history of oppression and mourning in the twenty-first century. Above all, it re-assembles its fragmented constituent parts in the act of rewriting as a reclaiming of human dignity back "from inhuman historical processes" (Stonebridge 113) to diagnose, often in uncomfortable ways, what it means to regard the rights of others as our very own.

---

20 Just as I am putting down the concluding remarks on my chapter, news of the publication of the 'White Paper' to end Direct Provision in Ireland by establishing a new International Protection support service fully in operation by 2024 surfaced with the announcement of Minister for Children, Equality, Disability and Youth, Roderic O'Gorman, T.D. (see *White Paper*).

**Works Cited**

- Arendt, Hannah. *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. New York: Meridian Books, 1958.
- Arkins, Brian. *Irish Appropriation of Greek Tragedy*. Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2010.
- A *White Paper to End Direct Provision and to Establish a New International Protection Support Service*. Government of Ireland, Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth. <<https://www.gov.ie/pdf/?file=https://assets.gov.ie/124757/ef0c3059-b117-4bfa-a2df-8213bb6a63db.pdf#page=0>> (26 February 2021).
- Bromwich, Kathryn. "Interview Hannah Khalil: 'With theatre you can get into people's hearts'." *The Guardian*, 25 June 2017. <<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2017/jun/25/theatre-q-and-a-hannah-khalil>> (26 February 2021).
- Cavarero, Adriana. *Horrorism: Naming Contemporary Violence*. New York: Columbia UP, 2007.
- Eagleton, Terry. "Holy Terror." Programme Note to *The Bacchae of Baghdad*, Abbey Theatre, 2006: 1-4.
- Fischer-Lichte, Erika. "Introduction: Interweaving Performance Cultures – Rethinking 'Intercultural Theatre': Toward an Experience and Theory of Performance beyond Postcolonialism." *The Politics of Interweaving Performance Cultures: Beyond Postcolonialism*. Ed. Erika Fischer-Lichte, Torsten Jost and Saskya Iris Jain. London: Routledge, 2014. 1-24.
- Hall, Edith. *Inventing the Barbarian: Greek Self-Definition Through Tragedy*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1989.
- "On Not Apologizing for Teaching and Promoting 'Classics.'" *The Edithorial*, 21 February 2021. <<https://edithorial.blogspot.com/2021/02/on-not-apologising-for-teaching-and.html>> (26 February 2021).
- Hall, Edith, Fiona Macintosh, and Amanda Wrigley, eds. *Dionysus Since 69: Greek Tragedy at the Dawn of the Third Millennium*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2004.
- Haughey, Nuala. "Irish Iraqis Voice a Mixture of Feelings." *The Irish Times*, 11 April 2003: 12.
- Knowles, Ric. *Theatre & Interculturalism*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.
- Levinas, Emmanuel. "Ethics as First Philosophy." *The Levinas Reader*. Ed. Sean Hand. Oxford: Blackwell, 1989: 75-87.
- Mac Gréil, Micheál. *Pluralism and Diversity in Ireland: Prejudice and Related Issues in Early 21<sup>st</sup> Century Ireland*. Dublin: The Columba Press, 2011.
- Mahon, Derek. *The Bacchae: After Euripides*. Oldcastle: The Gallery Press, 1991.

- McGuinness, Frank. *Someone Who'll Watch Over Me*. London: Faber & Faber, 1992.
- Mclvor, Charlotte. "Introduction: New Directions?" *Interculturalism and Performance Now: New Directions?* Ed. Charlotte Mclvor and Jason King. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019: 1-26.
- . *Migration and Performance in Contemporary Ireland: Towards a New Interculturalism*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.
- McKenzie, Jon. "Abu Ghraib and the Society of the Spectacle of the Scaffold." *Violence Performed: Local Roots and Global Routes of Conflict*. Ed. Patrick Anderson and Jisha Menon. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009. 338-56.
- Mirzoeff, Nicholas. "Invisible Empire: Visual Culture, Embodied Spectacle, and Abu Ghraib." *Radical History Review* (April 2006): 21-44.
- Morrison, Conall. *Antigone*. Unpublished Script. Dublin, 2003.
- . *The Bacchae of Baghdad*. Unpublished Script. Dublin, 2006.
- . "The Future of Ancient Greek Tragedy." *The Dreaming Body: Contemporary Irish Theatre*. Ed. Melissa Sihra and Paul Murphy. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009.
- Murphy, Piaras. "Iraqis in Ireland thank Bush in Dublin March." *The Irish Times*, 10 April 2003. <<https://www.irishtimes.com/news/iraqis-in-ireland-thank-bush-in-dublin-march-1.471328>> (26 February 2021).
- Nevitt, Lucy. *Theatre & Violence*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.
- O'Kelly, Donal. *Asylum! Asylum! New Plays from the Abbey Theatre 1993-1995*. Ed. Christopher Fitz-Simon and Stanford Sternlicht. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse UP, 1996.
- O'Neill, Charlie. *Hurl*. 2003. Unpublished script.
- Peperzak, Adriaan Theodoor. *Beyond: The Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas*. Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1997.
- Perris, Simon. *The Gentle, Jealous God: Reading Euripides' Bacchae in English*. London: Bloomsbury, 2016.
- Perucci, Tony. "Performance Complexes: Abu Ghraib and the Culture of Neoliberalism." *Violence Performed: Local Roots and Global Routes of Conflict*. Ed. Patrick Anderson and Jisha Menon. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009. 357-71.
- Phelan, Peggy. "In the Valley of the Shadow of Death: The Photographs of Abu Ghraib." *Violence Performed: Local Roots and Global Routes of Conflict*. Ed. Patrick Anderson and Jisha Menon. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009. 372-84.
- Pinter, Harold. "Art, Truth, Politics." Nobel Lecture, 2005. <<https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2005/pinter/lecture/>> (26 February 2021).



- Potter, Rachel, and Lyndsey Stonebridge. "Writing and Rights." *Critical Quarterly* 56.4 (2014): 1-16.
- Rae, Paul. *Theatre & Human Rights*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.
- Remoundou, Natasha. "The Suppliants of Syria: Narratives of Displacement and Re-settlement in Refugee Performances of Greek Tragedy." *The Arab Journal of Performance Studies* (2017): 16-30.
- Ricoeur, Paul. "Being a Stranger." *Theory, Culture, and Society* 27.5 (2010): 37-48.
- Said, Edward. *Orientalism*. New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing, 1978.
- Salis, Loredana. *Stage Migrants: Representations of the Migrant Other in Modern Irish Drama*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2010.
- Sihra, Melissa, and Paul Murphy, eds. *The Dreaming Body: Contemporary Irish Theatre*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009.
- Slaughter, Joseph R. *Human Rights Inc.: The World Novel, Narrative Form, and International Law*. New York: Fordham UP, 2007.
- Sontag, Susan. *Regarding the Pain of Others*. New York: Picador, 2004.
- . "Regarding the Torture of Others." *The New York Times Magazine* 23 May 2004.
- Soyinka, Wole. *The Bacchae of Euripides: A Communion Rite. Collected Plays I*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1973.
- Stonebridge, Lyndsey. *Placeless People: Writing, Rights, and Refugees*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2018.
- . *Writing & Righting: Literature in the Age of Human Rights*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2021.
- Teevan, Colin. *Bacchai: After "The Bacchae" of Euripides*. London: Oberon Books, 2012.
- Wallace, Jennifer. *Tragedy Since 9/11: Reading a World out of Joint*. Great Britain: Bloomsbury, 2020.
- Walton, J. Michael. "Outside Looking in: Subversive Choruses in Greek Tragedy." *Rebel Women: Staging Ancient Greek Drama Today*. Ed. John Dillon and S. E. Wilmer. London: Methuen, 2005: 193-214.
- Wilkinson, Sue, and Celia Kitzinger. "Representing the Other." *The Applied Theatre Reader*. Ed. Tim Prentki and Sheila Preston. New York: Routledge, 2009: 86-93.
- Žižek, Slavoj. *Iraq: The Borrowed Kettle*. London: Verso, 2005.
- . *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*. London: Verso, 2002.