

The Mute Aisling: Staging Disability in the Abbey Theatre's Productions of *Translations*
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The Field Day Theatre Company, established by Brian Friel and Stephen Rae, premiered *Translations* in Derry, Northern Ireland in 1980 in Guildhall: a recently restored historic building that was damaged by two IRA explosives in 1972 (Morash 546-552). In light of the play's success, the Abbey Theatre premiered its own reprisal in 1983. Despite divided opinions on whether the new cast could compete with Friel's original production, there was one common consent among critics: Ingrid Craigie was a star. Although David Nowlan of the *Irish Times* claims that the new production's rhythm was unwieldy, he notes that Craigie portrayed the difficult character of Sarah John Sally without "caricature" (4). Gus Smith applauds her performance as "moving" (12) while Desmond Rushe of *The Irish Independent* even claims that Craigie outshone Maedara O'Fatharta's performance as Maire, the play's defiant, heartbreaking protagonist. John Finegan's critique is consequently all the more surprising: "The immense pathos enshrined in the character of the retarded child somehow eludes Ingrid Craigie" (10).¹

Set in the isolated, Irish-speaking village of Baile Beag in 1833, *Translations* uses language – both literally and symbolically – to highlight the trauma of Ireland's British occupation. Although the script is in English, the Irish and English characters cannot understand one another within the context of the plot. Designed as a box set, the play takes place entirely in an Irish hedge school operated by Hugh, an alcoholic schoolmaster, and his son Manus who has a significant limp. The play opens with Manus embracing Sarah John Sally – a young woman who is in love with Manus but has a severe speech impediment – after she successfully pronounces the phrase "My name is Sarah." The school's other pupils include Maire, who is courting Manus but longs to emigrate to America, Doalty, Bridget, and Jimmy Jack Cassie. The play's tension

begins when Manus' brother Owen returns to Baile Beag with a militant cartographer named Captain Lancey and an idealistic orthographer named Lieutenant Yolland to complete the first Ordnance Survey, which will translate the names of Ireland's towns into English. Despite rising political tension, act two concludes with Sarah screaming for Manus after accidentally witnessing Maire and Yolland kissing. Their love affair, however, is short lived. Yolland disappears, and although Friel never specifies his fate, armed resistance has been attacking the survey project. Heartbroken, Manus flees knowing that he is a prime suspect, and British troops ransack the village in search of Yolland. The play concludes with Hugh drunkenly reminiscing about joining the failed 1798 rebellion and reciting lines from the *Aeneid* which state that foreign conquest is both inevitable and impermanent.

In a play of divided lands and language, Sarah John Sally presents a unique bifurcation; somewhere between character and caricature, ailing and invalid, the performer must tread the delicate line between silent and silenced. While Finegan's slur is an extreme example of Sarah's diminution, Lionel Pilkington, who analyzed the play following its premiers in Derry and Dublin, similarly describes Sarah as "the shawled girl or [sic] Cathleen Ni Houlihan figure (Sarah a partially dumb woman whom Manus is teaching to speak)" (285). Sarah is both Kathleen Ni Houlihan – the personification of a sacrificing, yet enduring Mother Ireland epitomized in Irish folklore – and the "retarded child" (Finegan 10) whose name Pilkington places in a parenthetical aside. Contemporary theorist Laura Wright conversely argues that Sarah is an empowered figure who chooses to remain silent in the face of the violent British colonial project at work in Baile Beag (51). Accepting Sarah as a personification of Ireland, therefore, is an opportunity both to examine how her struggles resonate with current events during an adaptation's production and the shifting representation of disability in popular culture. Despite their opposing analyses, for

example, neither Pilkington nor Wright address how later performers have adapted the character of Sarah to target new audiences. Although Wright's critique offers a compelling argument about the power of silence, her claim is nonetheless difficult to communicate on stage when writers like John Finegan may be sitting in the audience with their own preconceived notions of disability. Combining mixed media resources, such as press clippings and film footage, this paper creates a short history of the Abbey's 1996, 2000, and 2011 adaptations and analyzes how the actors' performances respond both to sociopolitical events and the success of the theatre itself. Unlike the battle between Irish and English that dominates *Translations*, Sarah's language is present in her gestures, costume design, and staging; as such, tracing her presence across different adaptations reveals the cultural moment of each production through the dynamics of the stage.

A Note on Pathology

Sarah John Sally exemplifies David T. Michell and Sharon Snyder's claim that representations of disability occupy a tenuous position between "constructed and material identities" (3); while Sarah's speech impediment is both biological and socially enforced, she also occupies a symbolic position within the structure of the play itself. Due to this layered conception of disability, Sarah's pathology often varies depending on the theorist or critic who is writing about her. John Finegan, for example, defines Sarah as a child experiencing an intellectual disability even though Friel's description states the opposite: "Sarah's speech is so bad that all her life she has been considered locally to be dumb and she has accepted this...[she] could be any age from seventeen to thirty-five" (256). While F.C. McGrath contends that Sarah is autistic (541), Andrea Ainsworth, the Voice Director of the Abbey Theatre who worked with Dawn Bradfield (1996), Pauline Hutton (2000), and Janice Byrne (2011), explains in an

interview that she never thought of Sarah as experiencing specific disability: “We did not set out to represent any specific speech pathology but looked at someone discovering her voice - the difficulty forming consonant sounds and shaping vowels. Where should she pitch the sound? What is the level of effort?”² Although Ainsworth undoubtedly influenced all three performers’ vocalizations, she similarly notes that she never refers to previous productions during rehearsals. Rather than focusing on *what* Sarah’s pathology is, then, the more relevant question is *how* both the performers and the public interpret her speech. Examining each performance reveals three distinct representations of disability in the Abbey’s adaptations: Dawn Bradfield’s characterization embodies Sarah’s struggle with colonial debilitation, Pauline Hutton’s performance explores cognitive impairments, while Janice Byrne features the impact of silence.

1996: Disability vs. Debilitation in “the aura of, well, Englishness”

Just as the Field Hall’s production of *Translations* highlighted the legacy of the Troubles in Northern Ireland through its choice of location, political tension and violence shadowed the Abbey production that premiered on July 31st, 1996. After the British government declared it would not allow Sinn Féin politicians to take part in peace negotiations until the IRA disarmed, the IRA broke a seventeen-month ceasefire agreement on February 9th, 1996 by detonating a bomb in the Docklands area of London, which killed two people and injured more than a hundred others (Moriarty). Roughly a month prior to the revival of *Translations* on the Abbey stage, the IRA launched another car bomb in Manchester on June 15th, which caused more than £700 million in damages and injured more than two hundred people (Williams). Amidst rising conflict, the thematic questions of *Translations* held a new level of significance: Londonderry or Derry? Ulster or Northern Ireland? After centuries of colonial occupation and decades of secular violence, what does Irishness mean? The itinerary of the Republic of Ireland’s then president,

Mary Robinson, demonstrates the significance of the Abbey's choice of production during this tumultuous period. Only nine days prior to the Manchester bombing, President Robinson made her first official visit to the United Kingdom on June 6th where she met Queen Elizabeth II at Buckingham Palace (*CNN*). A month later, *The Irish Times* reported that President Robinson would attend another official visit: the opening night of the Abbey Theatre's *Translations* (38).

Despite the political potential of the Abbey's choice in production, the 1996 adaptation was a critical failure; as Fintan O'Toole's review aptly surmises – with Robin Lefevre directing, Julian McGowan as the head of costume and set design, and most controversially, Kenneth Haigh in the key role of Hugh – the Abbey made the critical error of portraying the violence of British imperialism through a predominately English cast (18). Critics lambasted Haigh's performance following the play's premier. Gerry Colgan of *The Irish Times* criticized the production as one bathed in an “aura of, well Englishness” (7) while Lorcan Roche of *The Irish Independent* placed the blame on the Abbey's casting director for hiring a “fine” performer that nonetheless sounded like he “came straight from the RADA [the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art] rather than a Donegal wake” (6). The Abbey subsequently found itself in an unusual position for a theatre that, to this day, announces itself as “your national theatre” (Abbey): it had to defend the colonial presence haunting its own stage. Two weeks following Colgan's article, Doreothea Melvin, the Abbey's then Director of PR and Marketing, released a public response in *The Irish Times* (19).³ In a less direct approach, the Abbey also initiated coupon and ticket giveaway campaigns in *The Sunday Tribune*, *The Sunday Times*, *Event Guide*, and even *The Irish Times* offering 25 free tickets to different weekday shows (2-10): a marketing technique they did not utilize in any of their subsequent adaptations. After directing eight plays between 1993 and 1994, Lefevre would not return to the Abbey until 2004 while McGowan and Haigh would never work on the Abbey

stage again (Abbey Public Archive). In a strange twist, the national theatre conflated its fictional production with its reality; the stage became Baile Beag and asked its audience to question how dialect disrupts national identity.

Dawn Bradfield's rendition of Sarah consequently plays a pivotal role in the 1996 production not only because Bradfield had to establish her footing amidst a wave of controversial casting choices but because she had to communicate Sarah's struggles with identity while the country at large was enmeshed in its own political turmoil. Like her predecessor, Ingrid Craigie, Dawn Bradfield's rendition of Sarah received positive reviews despite the overall controversial production. Even though he is critical of the Abbey's casting choices, Colgan nevertheless credits Gary Lydon and Dawn Bradfield for their portrayals of the "lame teacher" and "his inarticulate pupil Sarah" (7). Sean McCarthaigh conducts a full-page interview with Bradfield entitled "A Star is Dawn" in *The Examiner* wherein he applauds her acting maturity compared to her "fresh faced, doe eyed, and elfin appearance" (14). In the interview, Bradfield notes that she intended to convey Sarah as constantly aware of her surroundings: "she has to listen and react more than actually say lines" (14). This attention to detail is particularly evident in Bradfield's decision to add lines when Friel's staging direction notes that Sarah is silence, which marks a striking difference between Bradfield and both her predecessors and contemporaries.

Bradfield's performance, on one hand, resonates with disability's function as, to use Mitchell and Snyder's words "the master trope of disqualification" (3); Bradfield captures the social inferiority that plagues Sarah in Friel's opening staging by exaggerating her voice and closing off her body. Bradfield's deep, guttural voice reflects the "grunts" and "unintelligible nasal sounds" that Friel's initial stage direction lists (256), and she frequently blends consonants, such as pronouncing "flowers" as the monosyllable "fawrs" (5:22-53). She also shrinks her body

throughout the play either by crossing her arms, stooping her shoulders, or sitting with her back slightly bent to diminish her already small stature. Her costume design, in turn, reinforces the stereotype that disabled people are innately desexualized.⁴ Sarah's hair is lank and tied away from her face while Bridget (Siobhan Miley) and Maire (Ali White) wear their hair down and curled (32). The two women also wear tight, buttoned bodices. White wears a sash tied low to her waist to distinguish her hips compared to Bradfield



Sarah (Dawn Bradfield - left) and Maire (Ali White - right) meet Owen (Lloyd Hutchinson) and Lieutenant Yolland (Philip Glenister).

who wears a loose, high-neck dress that disguises her already small frame (32). More critical than the diverging silhouettes, however, is the loose wrapped shawl around Sarah's shoulders compared to the tight aprons that grace Bridget and Maire's dresses. While a seemingly innocuous difference, the aprons symbolize the two women's sexual and economic roles in the community. These are women who are virile, strong, in short, born to be mothers. Sarah's shawl, consequently, not only physically hides her body but symbolically removes her from the domestic economy of the play.

Sarah's desexualization is even more apparent when surveying Bradfield's physical interactions with the hypermasculine Doalty (Frank Laverty) and Sarah's love interest, Manus (Gary Lydon). Friel juxtaposes Doalty and Sarah in the first act by having Doalty jokingly profess his love for Sarah twice. He asks Sarah to run away with him to "plant some corn together" (264) to segue from Jimmy's rambling agricultural advice, and he exclaims "I'm dying about you" (267) when Sarah hands him a spare notebook. In contrast to the charged nature of these lines, Laverty's delivery is noticeably tame. At the stage direction to "grab Sarah" (264)

when delivering the corn line, Laverty quickly picks Bradfield up and swings her in a circle (12:04-21). While a seemingly dramatic action, it is quick and playful; Bradfield responds with a swift kick causing Laverty to place her down almost immediately. Even more explicitly, Laverty exclaims “God, I’m dying about you” with no sexual undertones at all. Rather, after frantically searching for a table-book on Hugh’s desk, he kneels in front of Sarah and quickly grasps her shoulders in gratitude before running to his own chair (17:00-18). In both scenarios, Doalty’s buffoonery is the butt of the joke opposed to Sarah who seems simultaneously well aware of Doalty’s tricks and an unviable target for any explicit sexual tension. Any romantic attraction between Manus and Sarah similarly seems like an impossibility from the opening of the play. While Friel notes that Sarah and Manus embrace twice when Sarah announces her name (257), Gary Lydon does not reach out to Bradfield for an embrace. Lydon instead sits back on his heels and exclaims his excitement (:32-1:45). Although he does kiss her forehead after receiving Sarah’s flowers, the motion feels noticeably rushed to the point that a woman, possibly Assistant Stage Manager Catriona Behan, can be heard speaking into the actor’s earpiece asking “Mr. Lydon, stand by,” possibly to give White enough time to enter the stage (5:22-53).

While the conservative costume design and awkward interactions reinforce Sarah as someone whose speech impairment has left her sexually and socially ostracized, it also creates a powerful contrast for the moments when Bradfield deviates from Friel’s original staging. Unlike the two later performances, Bradfield speaks in two critical moments when the original script states otherwise. In a reversal of act one, Sarah attempts to mime to Owen (Lloyd Hutchinson) that Hugh is attending the wake for Nellie Ruadh’s baby, but he cannot understand her gestures (78:25-40). Unlike Friel’s staging, which notes that Sarah is silent (298), Bradfield first mimes rocking a child and then clearly exclaims “*wake*” (78:30-40). Owen’s failure to understand her is

not because of Sarah's disability but the town's preconceived notion that she is someone inherently not worth listening to even when she does speak. Bradfield deviates again when Captain Lancey (Gareth Forwood) screams "WHAT'S YOUR NAME?" into Sarah's face (77:05-58) when asking the hedge school pupils to reveal Yolland's whereabouts. While Bradfield jerks her head back in fear, she nonetheless looks him in the eye and says "my" twice, first with confidence then with uncertainty, before hanging her head and crying (77:59-78:24). Although the prompt script interestingly does not account for either of Bradfield's additional lines (35-38), both additions demonstrate that Sarah is actively fighting to be heard compared to Friel's original stage directions, which claims that she has accepted the community's rejection (256). By extending Sarah's vocalization beyond her interactions with Manus, Bradfield creates higher stakes for his eventual departure. The true weight of Sarah's loss is not losing a potential lover but losing the only person who listens even when she is speaking the same language.

In the 1996 production, then, Bradfield uses Sarah's speech impediment to embody the disenfranchisement of colonization, which coincides with Jasbir K. Puar's summation that colonization creates a dichotomy between disability and debilitation (xiii). As the definition of disability shifts depending on geographical, cultural, political, and economic conditions, for Puar, disability is best defined as a "capacity framework" (xvii): a system that privileges some by granting state or institutional recognition while forcing others outside of the "respectability" narrative (xvii). In this system, colonization functions as an "ableist mechanism" (xviii): one that debilitates and maims bodies in order to create malleable subjects without then granting institutional support. If adhering to Wright and Pilkington's summation that Sarah is a personification of Ireland, Dawn Bradfield embodies the maimed Irish nation-state that would have permeated news outlets in 1996. With over 3,600 deaths during the Troubles (McKittrick

McVea x), David McKittrick and David McVea's biographical review of the casualties of the "Long War" portray a conflict just as much about maiming bystanders as republican versus loyalist violence. Car bombings incapacitated not only financial districts and military institutions but also civilians; the two casualties of the Docklands bombings were Inam Bashir and John Jeffries who were both blown through their newsagent walls after failing to evacuate Bashir's shop in time (208). Bradfield's final desperate attempt at "my" showcases the consequences of debilitation. The introduction of colonial forces mars the little voice Sarah has and disrupts her static position within the capacity framework of Baile Beag. Manus' departure and Captain Lancey's verbal assault diminishes Sarah from someone with a disability to someone who is incapacitated. As a result, rather than solemnly nodding her head "no" at Owen's reassurance that her voice will return, Bradfield's final nod is a "yes" (89:29-90:28). Occupation has not only taken her voice but her ability to express truth; rather than mourn her loss, Sarah becomes the emotionless void that the community expects her to be. While the IRA responds to the British government's silencing tactics with brute force, Bradfield collapses by the end of the play.

2000: The Celtic Tiger Meets Kathleen Ni Houlihan™

Arguably in an attempt to redeem its casting faux-pas several years prior, the Abbey then launched a new adaption of *Translations* in 2000, which later became a touring production with a new cast in 2001. Unlike the earlier production, the Abbey's Artistic Director, Ben Barnes, selected an arsenal of seasoned Abbey veterans with Monica Frawley at the head of costume and stage design, Barnes himself directing, and Garrett Keogh, who had acted in fifty-five Abbey and Peacock productions by 2000, as Hugh (Abbey Public Archive). In his personal diary, Barnes explains that the Abbey needed to "restore our financial position (and morale)" (100) after the critical failure of *Barbaric Comedies* – Frank McGuinness' twist on Ramon Maria del Valle-

Inclan's Spanish trilogy, which Micheal Billington of *The Guardian* dubbed an "excess run riot" only a few months prior. Not to mention, Barnes' diary entry details that he needed to "justify" *Translations* selection as the Abbey's 2001 tour of Europe and Australia (100). Critics, in turn, applauded Barnes' strategic casting. The 2000 production received positive reviews from Luke Clancey of the *Evening Herald* (1), Emer O'Kelley from the *Sunday Independent* (13), Mary Kate O'Flanagan of *The Sunday Business Post* (5), and even David Nowlan of *The Irish Times* (6), the same writer who critiqued the first 1983 production.

While Barnes' careful direction is evident in the 2000 adaptation's casting choices and design, the one factor that he seems to neglect is whether the tensions inherent in *Translations* could resonate with audiences during the peak of the Celtic Tiger economic boom. The European Commission's 2000 *Economy Review* lists Ireland's GDP as the highest in the European Union in 1999 and 2000, recording 14% and 15.3% respectively (228). Ireland also saw dramatic improvements in their unemployment rate; while they had the second highest unemployment rate in 1983 at 13.6%, by 2000 they were one of the lowest at only 4.2% (220). Barnes' decision to take *Translations* on an international tour may have reflected Ireland's increasingly high disposable income, but some critics were quick to criticize his decision as a romanticization of Irish subjugation. In her critique in *The Sunday Tribune*, Jocelyn Clarke notes that the Abbey's adaptation did not express the urgency of a tragedy but rather was a "foundational fairytale to sooth a nation" (15): a production that used the "idealization and lycrism" (15) of Friel's work to whimsically harken back to Ireland's oppressed, yet noble past. Sophie Gorman of *The Irish Independent* likewise dubs the new revival "a safe bet" that relies too heavily on pastoral tropes: "A strong cast and solid direction may be packing them in the Abbey aisles, but, is it just me or does there seem to be an unimaginative air lingering around the programming in our major

theatrical establishments?” (19). In his desire to pluck Ireland’s emotional strings for much needed financial gain, Barnes manages to manifest a *Translations* more suitable for the Sydney Opera House than the ravaged Guildhall stage.

Unsurprisingly, Barnes’ interpretation of Sarah as an oppressed personification of Ireland, portrayed by Pauline Hutton, subsequently did not resonate with critics as much as Dawn Bradfield’s 1996 performance. Bruce Arnold of *The Irish Independent* is the only writer in the Abbey Archive’s collection of press clippings that explicitly comments on Hutton’s performance, stating that “Pauline Hutton’s Sarah is movingly portrayed” (11). Aside from Arnold, only two other articles mention Sarah at all. Denise Power offers a compelling summary of the importance of Sarah’s character in *Caractacus Magazine*, claiming, “Sarah is not mute but is perceived as so. Her struggle with language personifies the linguistic struggles which encompass this dramatic work” (7). Power, however, composed her article in May 2000, six months prior to *Translations* opening night on November 8th. A week after the play’s premier, Patrick Bennan offers a similar interpretation of Sarah in the *Irish Examiner*: “Pauline Hutton plays Sarah, a mute who symbolizes at the very least the importance of the Irish tongue and the impossibility of self-representation for the Irish in their own country” (16). While both reviews offer a preview of what the audience should expect from Sarah’s characterization, neither offer any insight into whether Hutton achieved this goal. Sarah may still be a marketable figure – the symbolic figure one expects in Irish drama – but she no longer leaves a lasting impression.

The critical indication of Sarah’s incongruity in the economic boom of the early 2000s, however, is Hutton’s portrayal of Sarah’s disability; while Hutton’s version of Sarah similarly struggles with social isolation, her performance veers into “mindlessness” (9), to use Patrick McDonagh’s phrasing. Just as Mitchell and Snyder observe that institutionally enforced

hierarchies posit physical disabilities as ‘superior’ to cognitive impairments (3), McDonagh contends that intellectual disabilities are an “ideologically neutral designation” in academia wherein characters with neurological disabilities are either nonexistent or inherently less worthy of critical analysis (9). The absence of dialogue surrounding Hutton’s performance signifies Sarah’s entrapment within this cycle of invisibility. Sealed in a vacuum somewhere between ages “seventeen and thirty-five” (Friel 256), the 2000 production of Sarah appears more like a child than a figurehead of the Irish spirit. In a December interview with Patrick Bennis, Hutton notes that she envisioned Sarah as someone coping with a “terrible trauma in her childhood” (24), which may explain why her performance seems frozen in time. Unlike Bradfield, who seemed to intentionally deepen her voice, Hutton’s voice is high-pitched and songlike; she pronounces flowers softly, albeit clearly, with a wide grin upon her face (12:34). Her costuming, moreover, is even more oversized than Bradfield’s dress. Sarah now wears layers of long skirts that sweep the floor and a flowing, high cut blouse with billowing sleeves. A large bow also decorates Hutton’s dark hair (12:34). The new costume does include a burlap apron, but it is similarly oversized. Unlike Bradfield shrinking her body to signify Sarah’s diminution, Hutton seems to cast Sarah’s body as eternally prepubescent.

Although Bradfield and Hutton’s performances both explore desexualization, Hutton comparatively portrays Sarah as someone in need of protection rather than a muted outsider fighting for recognition. Rather than outlandishly swinging Sarah around the room, for instance, Doalty (Don Whycherley) wraps Sarah in a bear hug using the survey pole, which prompts her to burst into laughter (13:45-54). Sarah’s relationship to Manus (Andrew Bennett) also feels like a caretaker relationship rather than potential lovers. In the opening scene, Hutton’s gestures are frantic and exaggerated; she points to Jimmy (Brendan Conroy) with her entire body rather than

just her hands. Bennett, in turn, seems to shield her with his body by closing around her knees to block out any possible distraction (1:50-2:11). Even further, when Manus goes to flee in act three, he only seems to pause to speak to Sarah after Hutton forcefully slams her hand on the bench to get his attention. Unlike Bradfield, Hutton sobs throughout this final interaction, which prompts Bennett to embrace her gently (75:22-76:04). The result is a Sarah who seems to be motivated to speak solely to satisfy Manus rather than declare her autonomy, which resonates with Hutton's vision behind the character's motivation: "I wanted to get across how her desire to speak came out of her love for Manus" (24). Without Manus' affection, Hutton's Sarah is not only bereft of an audience but is an already vulnerable individual now ripe for exploitation.

As a result, Sarah's final confrontation with Lancey (Chris McHallem) is the most drastic example of Sarah's vulnerability; rather than leaving her exposed, Bridget (Catherine Walsh II) physically shields Sarah by holding her in a comforting embrace (85:09-86:50). While slightly different staging could have transformed the embrace into a powerful image of female camaraderie in the face of an oppressor, the audience actually disrupts the moment. At Doalty's exclamation "your camp is on fire," the audience bursts into laughter (86:50), which neutralizes Lancey's legitimacy as a threat. Sarah then unnervingly grins from ear to ear while she rejects Owen's comforting remarks. Is Hutton smiling because she does not understand the question? Is she smiling because Lancey's inadequacies as a villain make it obvious that her voice will return? Or, like Bradfield, is she smiling because she is past the point of caring and willing to be the mindless woman that the community perceives her to be? While the final option is arguably Barnes' end goal, Hutton's childlike persona throughout the play dilutes the scale of Sarah's loss.

The 2000 production of *Translations* thus typifies Martha Stoddard Holmes' claim that intellectual disabilities are not "inherently marginal but instead purposefully marginalized" (12).

By casting Sarah as a helpless victim, Barnes' direction seems to manipulate the character as an emotional pawn for an audience watching with rose-colored glasses. Perhaps the best summation of Sarah in the Celtic Tiger era, then, is Jocelyn Clark's article, which pairs a photograph of Andrew Bennett kissing a broadly grinning Hutton with the caption that Barnes' *Translations* is a "thesis drama in Post Colonialism 101"



Sarah (Hutton) and Manus (Bennett)

(15) during a period of economic prosperity. Hutton's Sarah is not a determined aisling figure but Kathleen Ni Houlihan™: a symbolic character that may still render emotional, and more importantly, financial gain but is simplistic and naïve compared to Ireland's fast-paced present.

2011: Finding a "Voice" Amidst the Bubble Burst and Social Change

By the time *Translations* would greet the Abbey Stage for its most recent production on June 29th, 2011, however, the Celtic Tiger bubble was well and truly burst. John McManus reported in *The Irish Times* that Fianna Fáil, the Irish Republican Party, lost majority foothold in Dáil Éireann for the first time since its inception in 1927. In April 2011, *RTÉ News* reported that Moody's Investors Service, which assesses the value of government bonds, lowered Irish bonds to "junk status" even though Ireland received a €3.6 billion rescue package from the European Union's European Financial Stability Facility (EFSF) in January. With student protests crowding the streets of Dublin over tuition costs (*RTÉ News*) and Occupy Dame Street, an offshoot of the global Occupy movement, looming around the corner (*RTÉ News*), *Translations* again found itself addressing a disillusioned, hyper-political audience.

Within this period of economic uncertainty, moreover, another social movement may have impacted Sarah's adaptation on the Abbey Stage: the National Disability Authority (NDA) distributed public polls to assess whether or not Irish citizens with disabilities had the right to

participate in consensual sexual relationships.⁵ Noel Baker notes that while the NDA conducted similar polls in 2001 and 2006, public opinion dropped significantly in 2011, and Mary van Lieshout, the head of research and standards development for the NDA, credits the recession for the drop in public favor (10). In the 2011 survey, eight of ten (78%) respondents agreed that people with hearing or speech disabilities had the right to participate in sexual relationships compared to only 51% support for individuals with learning disabilities such as autism (10). Yet, Baker observes that when the NDA conducted the same poll in 2006, 90% of respondents agreed that individuals with visual or hearing disabilities should be allowed to have sexual relationships while 87% agreed that people with physical disabilities had the right to as well.

In the face of divided opinions about the nation-state's responsibility in both international economic policy and disabled citizens' romantic relationships, Janice Byrne faced a unique set of obstacles when she stepped into her role as Sarah. Sarah's unrequited love for Manus contradicted ableist fueled rhetoric that questioned whether disabled individuals had the right to participate in sexual relationships. Likewise, Byrne could not rely on the political motivations that fueled Dawn Bradfield's characterization in 1996. On May 16th, shortly before the premier of *Translations*, Caroline Gammell of *The Telegraph* reported that Ireland would participate in another official government visit just as when Bradfield was rehearsing. Queen Elizabeth II became the first monarch of the United Kingdom to visit since the nation's independence, which signaled a new era of relations between the two countries. Byrne had to capture a new Irish era: one that achieved independence and yet still witnessed the dramatic economic fall of its nation-state. Using silence, Byrne had to somehow communicate the frustration and disillusionment of coming close to an idealized future only to have it burst.

Compared to the previous productions, Byrne's costuming and interactions with Doalty (Rory Nolan) consequently center Sarah directly within the sexual dynamics of the play. Even though Maire's (Aofie McMahon) and Bridget's (Janet Moran) dresses are still slightly different silhouettes, all three women now wear buttoned up blouses with rolled sleeves and full-length skirts (1). The primary difference in their dress, then, is that Sarah wears her apron around her chest while Maire and Bridget wear theirs across their hips. The similarity in costume design allows for the audience to notice Sarah's self-imposed isolation through her gestures and staging rather than distinguishing her as a childish waif through her costuming. Sarah also notably physically rejects Doalty when his behavior towards her is distinctly hypersexual. Instead of simply thanking Sarah for handing him a table-book, Nolan grabs Byrne by the waist and presses her into his hips first before saying, "God, I'm dying about you" in a deep, guttural tone (18:10-20). When proclaiming that they should leave to plant corn together, Nolan similarly picks Byrne up by her hips and throws her over his shoulder (12:54-13:12). Unlike Hutton, Byrne seems eager to avoid any possible interaction with Doalty; she reaches out to hand him the table-book with her head down and at an arm's distance (13:02-12) and runs back into her position at the front left corner of the stage after both interactions.

While the 1996 and 2000 productions' staging distinguishes how the community either ignores, or conversely, shelters Sarah, Byrne's staging and voice development comparatively highlight her desire for physical autonomy. Rather than taking Friel's initial stage direction literally by imbuing a sense of "mindlessness," Byrne uses her body's positioning to communicate how Sarah has internalized the town's dismissal. Byrne noticeably sits in a left-center stage position opposed to the center-staging used in the previous productions. Although Byrne's off-center placement seems to remove her from the conflict happening center stage, she

uses small gestures to signal that Sarah is always engaged with the activity around her, such as dropping her book in her lap or slightly shifting her head. Andrea Ainsworth similarly observes that the key to Byrne's performance was using silence to communicate how Sarah "sees, hears, and understands what is going on around her." Byrne's body language consequently complicates Sarah's role in the community: at once signaling how the community ostracizes Sarah and, in response, Sarah's own desire to create a physical barrier from the townspeople who scorn her.

Since Byrne's staging is relatively stagnant the audience can further trace Sarah's increased independence through the development of her voice, which evolves more than the previous productions. During the opening scene with Manus, speaking seems to cause Sarah physical pain due to her level of concentration, and Byrne's consonants are distinctly blurred (:25-1:59). Ainsworth notes that she envisioned Sarah blossoming as the play progressed, with Byrne "at first used no end consonants and then only gradually [bringing] them in." Harvey O'Brien's review in *Irish Theatre Magazine* similarly contends that Sarah's opening line is "an act of will, a shaping of self and an enabling of selfhood, as encouraged by Hugh (Denis Conway)." While Conway credits Hugh's encouragement for Sarah's development, Ainsworth conversely Sarah's relationship with Manus as the source of her growth: "We see her begin to blossom under Manus' attention and care – is she in love with him? How does she watch him and listen to him? Does she try to speak for him?" If accepting both O'Brien and Ainsworth interpretations that Sarah's voice is an indication of her emerging selfhood and viability within the sexual dynamics of the play, then it is significant that her development culminates with silence during her climatic confrontation with Lancey. If Sarah's speech and autonomy have both distinctly grown by the time Lancey arrives, then why can she not speak?

Byrne's performance ultimately embodies Laura Wright's claim that Sarah reinforces her agency through intentional remaining silent rather than being forced to remain silent because of her disability (51).

While Dawn Bradfield physically breaks under Lancey's pressure and Bridget



Janice Byrne's "scream," courtesy of Barry Houlihan, NUI Galway

(Catherine Walsh II) shields Pauline Hutton, Janice Byrne neither speaks nor cowers. Rather, after failing to speak, Byrne lets out a desperate, five-second silent scream (87:15). This, as Ainsworth aptly surmises, is Sarah's way of speaking for Manus. Compared to the two previous productions, Sarah is relatively calm when Manus (Aaron Monaghan) leaves. In fact, she makes no indication of trying to stop him as he walks out but maintains her position in the left-hand corner of the stage. Unlike Gary Lydon or Andrew Bennett's renditions of Manus, Monaghan does not have to acknowledge Sarah simply because she is in his line of vision; he physically walks back in and places his belongings at her feet (76:07-54). By silently screaming, Sarah is emoting all of the sorrow and frustration she feels at losing her friend and teacher, and more importantly, demonstrating her unyielding desire to keep him safe. In her silence, Sarah expresses her anger at the colonizer's occupation while at the same time refusing to accommodate Lancey's (Michael James Ford) demands. Byrne's final nod at Owen's (Barry Ward) false reassurances is consequently the most serene of the three performances. While Bradfield answers with a false "yes," and Hutton lets out a wide, confusing grin, Byrne nods with a small smile before exiting the stage (88:52-89:16). Rather than the expression of a broken woman, Byrne's smile is almost secretive. In accepting her role as the "dumb" woman as Friel's

stage direction suggests (255), Sarah can remain out of the colonizer's threatening gaze. To keep Manus' whereabouts from Lancey, Sarah willingly returns to her off-center position on the stage.

Janice Byrne's performance thus responds both the disillusionment of the economic downturn and the social debate surrounding individuals with disabilities in 2011 as Sarah develops her autonomy despite sacrificing her voice to protect the one she loves. By portraying Sarah as someone with agency during the sexual interludes of act one, the audience has a better sense of the potential future she loses when Manus departs. More importantly, in watching her voice grow throughout the production, the audience feels Sarah's final decision to remain silent more acutely. After fighting to develop a voice within the European Union's economic stage in the early 2000s, Ireland had to somehow find a way to regroup. How does a country protect its citizens, like those experiencing intellectual disabilities, if it cannot financially protect itself? Byrne answers this question by refusing to be a person who needs protection and instead becomes the protector. By embracing silence as her own unique form of language, Sarah symbolizes Ireland's need to establish a new voice all its own.

Translating the Performance of Disability

In his analysis of *Translations*, Seamus Heaney contends that Sarah is an anachronistic symbol: "It is as if some symbolic figure of Ireland from an eighteenth-century vision poem, the one who confidently called herself Cathleen Ni Houlihan, has been struck dumb by the shock of modernity" (554). Yet, opposed to a symbol of the past being dumbstruck by the present, Sarah is arguably a mirror that allows Ireland to be shocked by itself. Dawn Bradfield's emotional breakdown conveys its violence, Pauline Hutton its naivety, and Janice Byrne its perseverance. Tracing Sarah's shift over a fifteen-year period also reveals that disability is not a static notion. The very adjectives used to describe the actors' performances of Sarah in each production

noticeably shift. Harvey O'Brien's use of person-first designations in his 2011 description of Sarah as someone who is "attempting to overcome her speech impediment" is a far cry from John Finegan's 1983 misnomer, "the retarded child" (10). The 1996, 2000, and 2011 performances, then, are the manifestation of the changing perceptions of ability marrying with the cultural events of the period. Despite delivering the same lines, through their costuming, staging, and delivery, each performer addresses a unique contemporary audience and offers a new interpretation of what it means to be disabled.

The varying interpretations of Sarah ultimately demonstrate the inexplicable connection between disability and performance studies; while all three performers undoubtedly showcase Sarah's speech impediment, they do not offer a singular definition of disability. Bradfield's inability to speak compromises her free will; Hutton's speech reflects her vulnerability; while for Byrne, silence is ultimately the source of her strength. The three diverging messages validate Bruce Henderson and Noam Ostrander's summation that disability studies is performative at its core (2). Individuals with disabilities must be cognizant of the performances that dictate our everyday lives: the architecture, social interactions, and technology that ultimately shape both our stage and our accessibility to it. Sarah embodies Ireland not because she is oppressed but because her disability forces her to be more engaged with the social constructs that dictate *Baile Beag*. The performers' portrayals of Sarah's silence shift because, as Friel's play demonstrates about nationhood, "disability is something we do, rather than what we are" (Henderson and Ostrander 2). Surveying the three productions side by side demonstrates why Sarah can dance across the scale of invalid and *aisling* – there is no singular symbol for Ireland. Just as Sarah cannot be defined by a specific pathology, Ireland is, at its heart, both divided and resolute, seasoned and naïve, capable of keening silent screams and yet smiling a scene later.

Notes

1. Apart from secondary sources, the information relayed in this paper is from the Abbey Digital Archive housed in NUI Galway. As the archive organizes the information relevant to each production by date and document type (ie: press clippings, production bills, etc.) this paper utilizes their page numbering system for in-text citations.
2. All of the Andrea Ainsworth quotations cited in this paper are from our email interview on August 10th, 2018.
3. Sir, Considerable concern has been expressed by members of the public, and indeed within the Abbey Theatre, about The Irish Times recent review of Brian Friel's *Translations*. This concern emanates from the term "Englishness" as used in relation to Kenneth Haigh's performance. Perhaps your reviewer would care to comment? On a point of information it is our policy to involve the playwright (when living), the director, and the artistic director in all decisions on casting. *Translations* was no exception. (19)
4. For more information about the correlation between romantic relationships and ablebodiedness, please see Irving K. Zola's "Denial of Emotional Needs to People with Handicaps" Archives of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation, vol. 63, no. 2, 1982, pp. 63-67.
5. It was illegal to have sexual relationships with someone who has an intellectual disability in Ireland until 2017. This law was later repealed and replaced with the "protected person" designation for those unable to consent. For more information, see Gráinne Ní Aodha's May 2017 *TheJournal.ie* article, "Decriminalisation of People with Intellectual Disabilities Having Sex Welcomed."

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