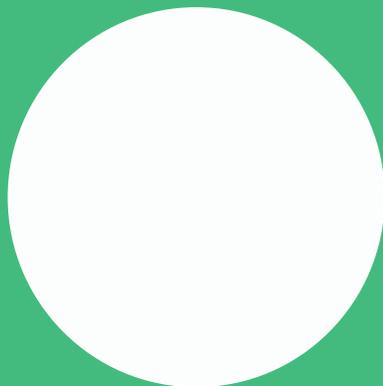
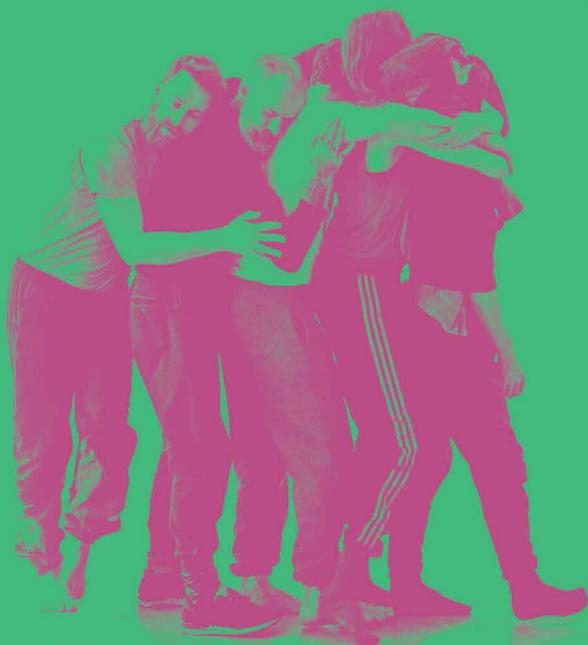




MICHAEL SEAVER

Forgetting and Remembering

finding the future
in the past



Michael Seaver is a musician, writer and dance critic with The Irish Times. His writings have been published in Ireland, Europe and the United States; www.michaelseaver.net.

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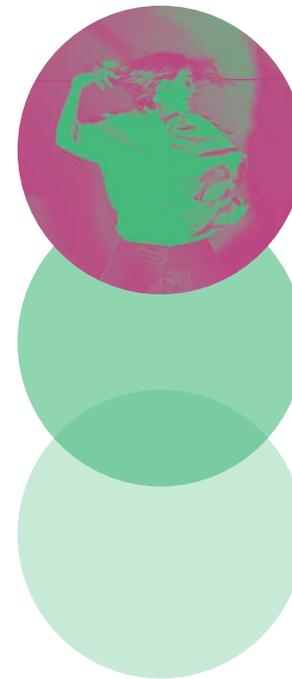
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This essay is being written at a moment of balance between the past and future.

As part of the 1916 Centenary, Irish society - including dance artists - has taken part in an examination of national identity, statehood and cultural value. Along the way old certainties have been torn up, and dancers have highlighted continued patriarchal prejudice within the Irish state and its effects on the body, particularly the female body. More importantly, dance artists have forefronted the artform as a vital communicator and mediator of these issues.

But uncertainty lies ahead. Globally, political maelstroms like Brexit and the election of Donald Trump in the US will affect immigration, LGBTQ rights and the woman's right to choose in those states. Upcoming elections in the Netherlands, France and Germany could empower right wing parties and engender Euroscepticism, limited cultural exchange. Irish dance artists rub against this trend. Their work is inclusive, democratic, just and concerned with the integrity of the body. It transcends national boundaries through performances and artistic exchanges. It values other artists' expression and feedback. In a post-truth political world the honesty of the dancing body is more vital than ever.

In *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* Jean-François Lyotard asserts that all-embracing meta-narratives in historical meaning and knowledge have led to an intolerance of difference. Instead, multiple theoretical viewpoints should be embraced to appreciate the heterogeneity of human experience. These *petits récits* more adequately reflect the shifting and transient nature of modern society. Set against a backdrop of increased homogeneity, the diversity of expression within the Irish dance sector offers a continued balance to any 'grand narrative' of global, European and Irish society.



The tension between remembering and forgetting played out throughout 2016

The *Perchance to Dream* conference offers Irish dance artists an opportunity to look forward as well as reflect on the past. It might seem an odd choice of title, drawn from Hamlet's soliloquy as he contemplates suicide: "To die, to sleep, / To sleep, perchance to dream; aye, there's the rub, / For in that sleep of death, what dreams may come," Sleep, or death, might end life's sufferings, but it must be dreamless sleep, free of memories. Dreams are uncertain and if death is sleep intensified then those bad dreams will too be intensified. Better to forget than remember.

The tension between remembering and forgetting played out throughout 2016. Remembrance was celebrated, mandatory even. But the dangers of remembrance (and the benefits of forgetting) were ignored. Many dance works championed individuals whose stories and roles were forgotten, a systemic neglect that, once revealed, explained ongoing prejudice against those on the margins of the accepted narrative. The dance sector

has also had a mixed record in honouring past work, thankfully in the process of remedy through scholarship and initiatives like *Live Archive* with Dublin Contemporary Dance Theatre.

But rather than expressing Freudian fixations or everyday fantasies, it is better to embrace dreaming as a way to learn. A study by the Center for Sleep and Cognition at Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center at Harvard Medical School found that dreams are the brain's way of processing, integrating and really understanding new information. It is with this spirit that dance in Ireland can dream its future.

In *Untimely Meditations*, Friedrich Nietzsche claims: "We must seriously despise... history as an expensive surplus of knowledge and a luxury."ⁱ History must be at the service of living not vice versa. Nietzsche wrote in an era he perceived as detrimentally historicist, but contemporary writers like David Rieff continue to highlight the dangers of remembrance.

Remembrance has become a duty. According to Susan Sontag, "What is called collective memory is not a remembering but a stipulating: that this is important, and this is the story about how it happened, with the pictures that lock the story in our minds"ⁱⁱ. Furthermore, the importance of historical memory has long been summed up by George Santayana's phrase: "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it."ⁱⁱⁱ Rieff challenges this conventional wisdom and questions whether remembrance has ever prevented the present from repeating the sins of the past. Remembrance neither heals injustice nor reconciles. Consequently historical memory is a moral option rather than a moral imperative. Sometimes, Rieff says, it is more moral to forget.^{iv}

The dance artists that took part in 1916 Centenary events made artistic choices that focussed on the individual rather than scratching post-colonial wounds. The body and the unique individual person inhabiting the body was paramount, in contrast to the military commemorations: members of the Defence Forces marching down O'Connell Street in choreographed homogeneity and anonymity. In works like *The Casement Project*, *These Rooms* and *Embodied*, the prevailing moral imperative to highlight the meta-narrative of injustice towards the 1916 volunteers was ignored, in favour of the *petits récits* of individuals and events that were forgotten.

These Rooms, a collaboration between Coiscéim Dance Theatre and Anú Productions, revealed the brutality of members of the South Staffordshire Regiment who murdered fifteen civilians in North King Street, an incident long forgotten. *The Casement Project* produced by Fearghus Ó Conchúir, asked which bodies are accepted into the collective body of the nation and which are rejected? Ultimately,

which bodies have rights and which don't? This questioning took place across national boundaries, across multiple media and valued equally the input of audience members and heavyweight academics. Most importantly, it focussed on the political nature of Casement's body, which was hanged in a prison yard in London in 1916 and given a state funeral in Dublin in 1965. This was, according to Gerard Howlin, a double denial.

"Contesting narratives required his body, first on the gallows and then on a catafalque provided by the State, be dishonoured in different ways. In London, his homosexual body was blackguarded. Fifty years later in Dublin it was whitewashed. It is not just the bodies of kings that are contested; the politicisation of the body is a recurring Irish motif."^v Casement's 'Black' diaries remain contentious for some, as evident when an audience member vociferously insisted that they were fake at Body of Evidence, a Casement Project event in Kilkenny. How could an Irish revolutionary be gay? Ó Conchúir felt the

objections were aimed at him "or, more particularly, aimed at my focus on the physical and sexual in Casement...It remains fascinating to me that Casement can provoke controversy and strong emotion one hundred years after his death."^{vi}

Embodied brought female choreographers into what Samuel Beckett called the "holy ground" of the GPO and they interrogated the ideals of the Proclamation and how these have failed to serve women in Ireland. "*We are six women, six highly-skilled, trained physical bodies, that have been entrusted with this space and this opportunity*," says Liv O'Donoghue, choreographer of *The 27th Manifesto* in an interview with The Irish Times. "The irony is that even we, who have such intelligence and knowledge in our bodies, don't have autonomy over our own bodies in this country."^{vii} For three nights they had control of one of the state's public spaces, but the state constantly has control of their most private spaces.

The body and the unique individual person inhabiting the body was paramount

In *Walking Pale*, performer Olwen Fouéré is covered in black oil, a reference to the stain society places on women who have abortions. Choreographers Jessica and Megan Kennedy forefront women who have been - literally and metaphorically - airbrushed out of history. Elizabeth O'Farrell delivered the rebels' surrender alongside Padraig Pearse, but was removed from the photograph of the event. The presence of a woman diluted the male military narrative. She was also a lesbian.

"Twentieth-century Ireland owes a lot to Irish lesbians", claims Dr. Katherine O'Donnell, director of the Women's Studies Centre in UCD, particularly the network of suffragette and revolutionary lesbians in Dublin at that time.^{viii} *Walking Pale* also questioned the place of the radical female in Irish society and the choreographers were drawn to the story of Helena Molony, a former Abbey actress and first female political prisoner. However meaningful her and other women's

contribution to the 1916 Rising, the Constitution of the Irish State that emerged placed women in charge of family and homestead. "Marginalised by class, gender, religion and nationalism, awkward women like Molony were long excluded from the narrative of the independence struggle."^{ix} But who decides that narrative?

"Who gets to tell the stories of our nation, and what kind of stories do they get to tell? Whose voices are being given a chance to be heard, and who makes these choices?"^x Not the words of an historian, but Lian Bell, who initiated #WakingTheFeminists in response to the Abbey Theatre's male-dominated centenary programme. The campaign spread throughout the entire theatre sector as testimonials revealed the sexism could be found at all levels of theatre making. "In this year of commemorations for an event that sought to fundamentally redefine our society, #WakingTheFeminists has stood out as an echo of these aspirations."

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This male narrative that programmed the National Theatre is deeply embedded and also prevails in history and philosophy. If the experiences of half the human race are ignored, then men can only have created an unsatisfactory and incomplete form of knowledge. "The (binary) logic that emerges from phallogocentric assumptions produces faulty and incomplete notions, untruths, scientific judgements - it is just not good enough as a system of thought."^{xi}



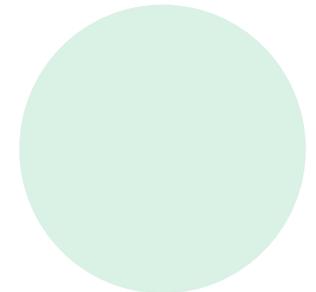
We had to learn the language of men, but we never owned that language

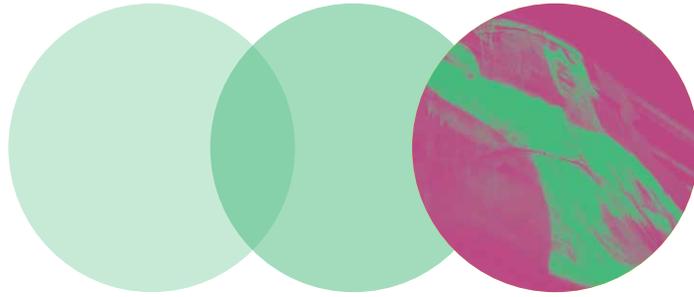
Prejudice towards the female body predates the Easter Rising. In the early 1900s the female dancing form was used as propaganda by the British establishment. Barbara O'Connor outlines how, in the nineteenth century, the Irish male body was depicted as ape-like in illustrations from Punch magazine to George Cruikshank's illustrations for William Maxwell's *History of the Irish Rebellion in 1798*. The negative images contrasted with that of the female body. O'Connor draws her evidence from imperial exhibitions in the early twentieth century that displayed cultures from throughout the empire and used "Irish colleens" to reinforce ideologies. Within a fake Irish village, Ballymaclinton, women were hardworking, clean and chaste, and gave exhibitions of Irish dance.

"The representation of the women of Ballymaclinton was also seen as a weapon against the more militant aspects of the Gaelic Revival as represented, for example, by the women of Inghinidhe na hÉireann...This representation of Irish women as custodians of hearth and home was not to change radically within nationalist discourse of the same period."^{xii} Although these depictions were opposed by nationalist women, revivalists, while refuting the negative portrayal of Irish men, were eager to continue to perpetuate the "positive" depiction of women.

Cultivation of rationality was important to the cultural nationalists, in reaction to the colonial depiction of Irish as irrational. Citizenship and equality was fought on the grounds of women's mental equality with men: their possession of reason entitled them to the rights of citizenship. Those that sought equality had to do so on men's terms.

"We had to learn the language of men, but we never owned that language,"^{xiii} says Liv O'Donoghue. In *The 27th Manifesto* she took excerpts from twenty-six speeches dating back to the 1500s and created her own manifesto. Depressingly, that re-articulation is still needed, as most of the ideals expressed remain elusive. Emma O'Kane's *160 Voices*, based on responses to an anonymous survey, provided further evidence of women's alienation and despair in contemporary Ireland.





Not only has language been appropriated, but dress and deportment. Jessie Keenan, choreographer of *Her Supreme Hour*, investigated how male physical language and power dominate the political world, so that block-colour-suit-wearing female politicians have to suppress any signs of “femininity”.

Dualism in Western political thought continues to impinge on both dance as an artform and feminism as an ideology: reason, the mind and the public are identified with the male, whereas passion, the body, the private with the female. Male is central, female is marginal. This viewpoint devalues other forms of knowledge, unnecessarily so says Janette Radcliffe Richards, who claims that reason need not be in conflict with other types of knowing, but it is frequently based upon them. Although reason may have been (mis) used to subjugate women, “reason is not the same thing as men’s often questionable use of reasoning”.^{xiv}

Identity formation, frequently seen as an exclusively cognitive process, is also a bodily one. This is a constantly re-emerging theme in Irish dance, in works as diverse as Fitzgerald & Stapleton’s *The Work The Work* to Breandán de Gallai’s *Linger* to Michael Keegan Dolan’s *Swan Lake/Loch na hEala*. Society has imprinted our bodies, these works say, but now we are dancing back.

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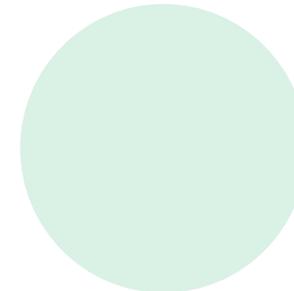


But how should dance commemorate the past? Dance archives and academic studies are important, but so too is a living archive of dance

There was a strong sense of dancing back in Liz Roche’s *Bastard Amber* on the Abbey main stage. The theatre’s press material claimed the dance’s presence on the main stage was a “watershed moment”, but it was really an indictment of the neglect dance has suffered. *Bastard Amber* was the perfect riposte: quietly confident in concept and interpretation, it foregrounded choreography rather than theatrical trappings.

The accepted narrative around dance at the Abbey was also corrected by Victoria O’Brien’s book *A History of Irish Ballet from 1927 to 1963*. In her biography of Ninette De Valois, Kathrine Sorley Walker claimed that only two of the students became dancers.^{xv} O’Brien found seven more, including Muriel Kelly, Cepta Cullen and Sara Payne, and documented the work of Patricia Ryan. Similarly, Deirdre Mulrooney has shone a light on Erina Brady and her Irish School of Dance Art.

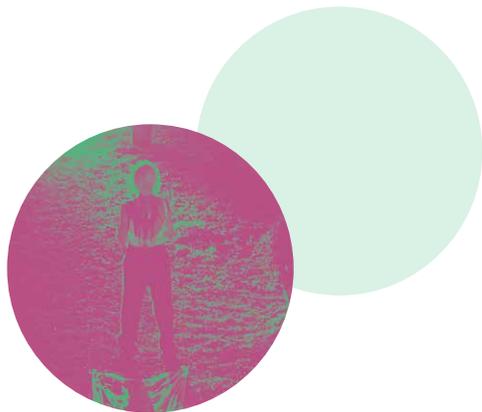
But how should dance commemorate the past? Dance archives and academic studies are important, but so too is a living archive of dance. Postgraduate - and soon undergraduate - studies in dance performance are helping to correct Cartesian bias, but it still exists. Written texts are eligible for tax-free status, but choreography is not. Again dance’s dilemma resonates with feminism: “Producing a book on childcare earns more respect than producing a happy baby.”^{xvi}



Recreating past performances, like the *Live Archive* project, mirrors similar initiatives in Europe and the United States. These aren't dry historical pursuits, according to André Lepecki. "Turning and returning to all those tracks and steps and bodies and gestures and sweat and images and words and sounds performed by past dancers paradoxically becomes one of the most significant marks of contemporary experimental choreography."^{xvii} According to Franz Anton Cramer, "history and forgetting belong together in the same way that source and interpretation do. History would not be history if there were no possibility to forget." Objectivity and completeness are impossible to achieve in performing past works, only an appropriation or "re-subjectivisation."^{xviii}

History would not be history if there were no possibility to forget

Dance remembering any aspect of its past through scholarship or performance isn't an imperative, but it offers a reconnection with the present. It suggests how we are who we are. Just as the meta-narratives in historical memory should be rejected, so too for cultural memory. Dance in Ireland in 2016 has a diversity of expression within contemporary, ballet and traditional forms. It is confident, outward-looking, politicised and identifies with the marginal as much as the mainstream. As Irish society changes in the next few years, new social and artistic challenges will arise, challenges dance is well positioned to confront.



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