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Breaking the stranglehold of cultural 'rules'



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Fifty years ago this Thursday, the actress Fionnula Flanagan walked out on to the stage of the Eblana Theatre in the basement of Busáras and delivered one of the most striking openings ever in Irish theatre. "I killed my child because she was a girl," she said.

Flanagan was playing a pregnant school-girl, driven out of home and given a place in a "house of refuge for unmarried mothers". Refusing to give her baby up for adoption, she leaves, but soon runs out of options. Desperate, she takes both their lives.

On stage, she addresses the audience from beyond the grave: "Every girl grows up to be a woman. But my child is free. She'll not be the easy fool of any man."

The play, *On Trial*, was by Máiréad Ní Ghráda, who had translated it from her own Irish-language version, *An Triail*, staged in the Dublin Theatre Festival the previous year. The English run at the Eblana Theatre brought it to a wider audience, and then RTÉ filmed it (as *Gaeilge*). It won Flanagan a Jacob's Award, which helped send her on her way to Hollywood.

The film was since lost. For a long time, it seemed as if the play had been too. In 1998, Bríd Ó Gallchoir rediscovered it and staged it with the company Amharclann de hÍde. It has been in regular production on the Irish-language circuit since, and is on the Leaving Cert Irish syllabus. But it has remained largely unknown and unstaged in English. That is a shame, and something of a mystery.

By the time the play was rediscovered, Mary Raftery was starting to uncover the grim reality of the regimes in Ireland's residential institutions for children and single mothers – to the apparent shock of Irish society. Ní Ghráda's play had excavated similar territory more than 30 years earlier. So why was nothing done then?

A partial answer, I think, is because of the power of consensus in Irish society. The ethos of community is particularly strong in our culture, and that brings with it a social preference for conformity and consensus. This, in turn, inhibits dissent. When occasional voices do rise in dissent, they are rejected, ignored or marginalised. This was the case with critics of Irish banking and economic policy during the boom; and, I suspect, was the case with Ní Ghráda's play, apparently unstaged for nearly 30 years after its initial success.

Her play wasn't enough on its own to break through the cultural consensus around motherhood and morality. It found an audience, but that didn't translate into political action. Action (as opposed to merely applause) is inconvenient. It costs time (in protesting, lobbying, canvassing) and, particularly, money. During the boom, action to avert the looming crisis would have cost everybody in terms of higher taxes and reduced incomes. In the 1960s, action to address the circumstances of unmarried mothers would, in the first place, have cost money for improved social services. That was money, the consensus said, that we didn't have. And so, after a brief moment in the sun, these issues slipped back into the shadows again.

For all that, it is easy to be judgmental.

The social mores of the time were rooted in the extraordinary trauma of the previous century's famines. This was evident in an extraordinary series of statistics gathered in the mid-1950s (and cited by Patrick Honohan in a lecture at the Royal Irish Academy last year). Of a range of countries studied, Ireland had the lowest marriage rate, the greatest number of unmarried men in their 40s, the oldest age of marriage, and the highest rate of fertility within marriage. This "demographic exceptionalism" was largely attributed to an "altered risk perception" in the population arising from the experience of famine, Honohan said.

In other words, society was terrified of the consequences of uncontrolled fertility, for good historical reasons, but with perverse effects. The mother who drives her daughter out of the house in *On Trial* may seem cruel, but she was embedded in a culture in which that cruelty seemed necessary.

In the end, Ní Ghráda's play stands in judgement less on those individuals than on the wider society. "She broke the rules of the game," says one of the characters at the end of *On Trial*, of the dead girl.

In a small country, with a strong (and often valuable) tradition of community, cultural "rules" can bind fast. Sometimes, they will be perverse, and need to be broken.

That can be easy to identify in retrospect. Spotting it in our own time is more difficult.

In 30 years, it will, I think, seem incredible that prisoners were "slopping out" until 2014, and that children grew up in residential institutions known as "direct provision" for asylum seekers, and that neither provoked widespread outcry. And when it proves expensive to redress these issues then, people will ask why they weren't addressed when first highlighted, when that would have been less expensive, and more just.

Ní Ghráda helps us understand how things were in this long-ago Ireland, and why. It remains difficult to understand why so little was done about it. That mystery is ongoing.

The Irish Theatre Institute has put up an online archive celebrating Máiréad Ní Ghráda at irishtheatreinstitute.com