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“Well-Staged Syllables”:
From Classical to Early Modern English Metres
in Drama

Edited by Silvia Bigliuzzi

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The Edinburgh Festivals 2021: a Covid-Era Return

Abstract

This article offers an overview of the live theatre programmes of the 2021 Edinburgh International Festival (EIF) and Edinburgh Festival Fringe as they sought to make a tentative return to live, in-person drama following the hiatus enforced by the Covid 19 pandemic in 2020. It attempts to evoke for the reader the significant differences created by the pandemic between the 2021 events and a more typical festival year, and considers whether the reduced size of the live programmes (particularly that of the Fringe) resulted in a much diminished experience for theatregoers. The article then considers the key theatre production of the EIF, (namely, the world premiere of Enda Walsh's *Medicine*) and the author's selection of what he considers to be the strongest live theatre shows on the Fringe, (those being: Grid Iron theatre company's *Doppler*; Mamoru Iriguchi's *Sex Education Xplorers (S.E.X)*; and Michael John O'Neill's *This is Paradise*).

KEYWORDS: Covid; Edinburgh International Festival; Fringe; Enda Walsh; Grid Iron; Mamoru Iriguchi; Michael John O'Neill

In August of every year, the Edinburgh International Festival (EIF), the Edinburgh Festival Fringe and their sibling events (such as the Edinburgh International Book Festival and the Edinburgh International Film Festival) combine, famously, to make the biggest celebration of the arts on the planet. For three-and-a-half weeks every summer the capital city of Scotland (a nation of a little under five-and-a-half million people) becomes a global hub of artistic activity. Consequently, following the pandemic-enforced cancellation of the events in 2020, the success, or otherwise, of the 2021 programmes would be seen as something of a barometer of the health of the arts – and the live stage arts in particular – in the era of Covid 19.

Given the ever-changing government guidelines and the associated uncertainties, it was inevitable that large numbers of artists and festival venues would continue in virus-safe practices of online production. A perusal of the website of the mammoth Fringe programme showed that a substantial majority

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of the productions were either recorded video works or live-streamed online shows. Where the relatively small number of live, in-person works were concerned, a significant proportion of them were presented outdoors. For example, an entirely new, open-air venue called MultiStory appeared on the top level of a multi-storey car park on Castle Street, in the shadow of Edinburgh Castle. The venue hosted a broad range of live entertainment, including some work from the famous programme of Scotland's self-declared new writing theatre, the Traverse (this included *Aye, Elvis*, Morna Young's successful comedy about a Scottish, female Elvis Presley impersonator, performed by the excellent Joyce Falconer).

The EIF itself offered a mix of online works and live performances, many of which would be presented in large, specially-made, gazebo-style auditoria that were designed both to shelter audiences from the rain and to allow the free flow of air through the space; for example, *Lonely House*, a remarkable evening of the music of Kurt Weill, performed by Barrie Kosky and Katharine Mehrling (and in which Kosky spoke fascinatingly about Weill and his work) was presented in such a venue in the Old College Quad of the University of Edinburgh. At both the EIF and the Fringe, a comparatively small number of productions were presented in traditional theatre auditoria, as per Scottish Government regulations (which, in August 2021, had recently been slightly liberalised; albeit that audiences were still required to observe social distancing and to wear face coverings).

The much-reduced live element of the festival programmes and the relatively tiny number of tourists in Edinburgh changed the normally busy and frenetic atmosphere of the city in August. Whilst this was a cause of lamentation for many, it came, paradoxically, as something of a relief to some Edinburgh Festivals veterans, such as (I confess it) myself. Of course, the economic impact of Covid upon the city of Edinburgh and upon the festivals in 2021 was terrible, but the much-reduced number of live shows restored a sense of the festival-goer as a lover of the arts who was making careful choices in selecting which productions to see. Gone was the atmosphere, which has become increasingly prevalent over the last three decades, of the festivals, and the Fringe in particular, as an ever-burgeoning, hyper-commercial free-for-all in which the quantity of shows often trumps their quality.

As the 2021 festival programmes began, the common assumption was that the huge decrease in the number of live productions would impact massively on festival-goers' enjoyment of the events. With relatively few shows on offer, the logic went, the reduced choice would, inevitably, lead to a decrease in the number of high-quality productions on offer. However, in my experience, as someone who has attended the Edinburgh Festivals every year since 1989,¹ the 2021 festival programmes confounded the supply-and-demand, free market logic of

¹ First as audience member (1989-1998), and then, as professional theatre critic (since 1999).

this assumption. Selecting carefully from the comparatively small programmes of live work on offer, my experience of the EIF and Fringe programmes was as enriching in 2021 as in previous years. In fact, I would go so far as to say that the ratio of good and excellent shows to mediocre and poor ones (which is a subjective judgement, of course) was higher among my 2021 selection than in any year I can remember. My explanation for this state of affairs is quite simple: contrary to the philistinism of some conservative politicians and commentators (typically those who are opposed to public funding of the arts and champion the notion that art works should 'sink or swim' on the basis of their commercial success or lack of it), works of art are not mere 'products'. An arts festival is not a supermarket, in which a decline in the range of products available has an unavoidably negative impact on the experience of the shopper. Rather, in the case of a curated programme, such as the EIF, there was no reason why a reduction in the number of productions should result in a decline in the overall quality of the work; and, indeed, I could discern no such decline. As to the Fringe, which is the 'open-market' element of the Edinburgh events, there was a sense that, in many cases, the work being staged had been created by some of the most committed and determined artists. To be clear, I am casting no aspersions on the many serious artists who decided, due to concerns over health and/or financial risks, either to present virtual work or not to present work at all. What I am suggesting, however, is that the impact of the pandemic on the 2021 Edinburgh Fringe was that its live output seemed more selective, more curated, and less driven by commercial imperatives than in recent years and decades. Consequently, in my experience, the overall quality of the work actually increased. Put simply, I saw more excellent and good shows, as a proportion of the work I attended, than I would in a typical year on the Fringe.

At this point it is worth dwelling on the fact that this success was achieved despite the fact that Covid restrictions had an immense, negative impact on the ability of the festivals to attract companies from outside of the UK. The need to quarantine, the costs of Covid tests, the uncertainties over changing restrictions and concerns about the reliability of air travel (among other factors) all led to hugely reduced programmes of international work. Internationalism has always been tremendously important to Edinburgh's festivals and, yet, despite the devastation of the international programmes, the determination of the UK and Ireland-based artists, alongside a smattering of companies from further afield, produced festivals of defiantly high quality.

The positive experience of the EIF began at the Traverse Theatre, with *Medicine*, the latest play by acclaimed Irish dramatist Enda Walsh. The playwright is the author of the bleakly comic stage and screen drama *Disco Pigs*, the screenplay for Steve McQueen's exceptional film *Hunger* and (with the late David Bowie) the stage musical *Lazarus*. In 2007 he was the toast of the Edinburgh Fringe with his play *The Walworth Farce*, an astonishingly hilarious and deeply moving reflection on the Irish experience of emigration.

Medicine, a drama about the medical incarceration of John Kane, a man who appears to have been diagnosed with psychosis, boasted an excellent cast led by the exceptional Irish actor Domhnall Gleeson. It was presented by Dublin-based theatre company Landmark Productions and the Galway International Arts Festival, and directed by Walsh himself. Like *The Walworth Farce*, the piece stands in the darkly humorous, absurdist tradition of the great Franco-Romanian playwright Eugène Ionesco.

The drama unfolds in the gymnasium of the psychiatric hospital in which Kane is detained. Curiously, however, we first encounter the man wearing pyjamas and wandering aimlessly in a sports hall that is strewn with what we soon discover is the detritus of the previous night's staff party. These are hardly ideal conditions for Kane to embark upon what seems to be a crucial part of his treatment. Yet it is in these conditions that the man is set to give his personal testimony; a soul-searching articulation of his personal history, a reflection upon his recent experience of medical treatment and an assessment of his present state of mind. This testimony will be given to two professionals who are external to the hospital and who have been brought in for the particular purpose of interviewing Kane.

The arrival of the interviewers is the first of a series of humorously and powerfully unsettling developments that rip the play away from any sense of theatrical naturalism and open it up to the endless psychological, emotional and political possibilities of absurdism. When the two supposed mental health professionals (named Mary 1 and Mary 2) make their entrances, we discover that they are not, in fact, consultant psychiatrists but, rather, a pair of erratically employed freelance musical theatre performers. Mary 1 (given a high-octane performance by the superb actor Aoife Duffin) comes to the hospital from another job, still disguised (thanks to excellent masks) as not one, but two old men. For her part, Mary 2 (played with extraordinary energy by the impressive Clare Barrett) comes fitted out for her next engagement, at a children's party; hilariously, due to her misunderstanding of a character in a Disney animation, she is wearing a fabulously detailed lobster costume. This startling set-up could, conceivably, be Walsh's ironic comment on the idea of 'drama therapy'. Alternatively, and more plausibly, it is simply the means by which the dramatist takes us into a quasi-surreal situation that reflects either Kane's neglect or his disorientation, or, more likely, both. Indeed, such is the extent of Kane's institutionalisation that we hear him agreeing constantly with a god-like, male voice of authority – which is heard only by Kane and the audience – that he absolutely does require to be detained within the secure hospital.

As the Marys embark on their interview with Kane, the ludicrousness of the process becomes increasingly clear. Not only are these seeing drama therapists unqualified to treat a patient suffering from psychosis, but the whole notion that they are trying to engage the patient in a therapeutic talking therapy is blown apart by the fact that they, the Marys (who degenerate into increasingly

violent, risible conflict), already have a script of Kane's testimony in their hands. There is, in this sham therapy, a going through the motions and a preposterous repetition that is reminiscent of Ionesco's *The Chairs*, in which the elderly 'general factotum' and his wife repeat the absurd ritual of preparing chairs for important guests who will never, in fact, arrive.

As with Ionesco, the absurd situation and the farce of repetition hide a more profound reflection on human experience. The deeper the action takes Kane into a searching of his own soul, the closer it moves him towards his eventual, powerful and incredibly moving articulation of his condition. Gleeson (a truly great stage actor in the illustrious pantheon of outstanding Irish players) embarks upon a series of powerfully evocative, poetic monologues (see fig. 1). Reflecting upon his past life and, in particular, on lost love, these speeches would not be out of place in the *oeuvre* of that greatest of Irish writers, Samuel Beckett. Like the protagonists in Beckett's play *Krapp's Last Tape*, his novella *First Love* or his television drama *Eh Joe*, Kane movingly dredges up years of anguish and contrition from the very depths of his being.



Figure 1: Domhnall Gleeson in *Medicine*. Photo: Jess Shurte.

Gleeson's performance was a genuine tour de force, and one that Walsh's brilliant script richly deserved. The supporting performances were similarly excellent, as were designer Jamie Vartan's hyper-real sets, Joan O'Clery's amazing costumes and composer Teho Teardo's wonderfully diverse and responsive score. In a year of such uncertainty about the Edinburgh Festivals, *Medicine* was a reassuringly auspicious opening theatre production.

If *Medicine* marked a superb start to the EIF's drama programme, the Fringe staged a number of fine productions. One example was Edinburgh-based company Grid Iron's site-specific adaptation of Norwegian writer Erlend Loe's acclaimed novel *Doppler*. Presented in the forest of Newhailes House and Gardens, at

Musselburgh (a satellite town of Edinburgh), it was a perfect, outdoor show for Covid times (although it had been in the planning before the pandemic struck). Adapted and directed by Grid Iron's acclaimed artistic director Ben Harrison, the piece starred the tremendous Scottish actor Keith Fleming in the title role (see fig. 2). Doppler is a middle-class professional who, after banging his head in a cycling accident, has had a sudden epiphany about the ecological and social destructiveness of late capitalism. Consequently, he abandons his comfortable family life in Oslo, preferring instead to live in the woods.



Figure 2: Keith Fleming in *Doppler*. Photo: Duncan McGlynn.

The audience sits on padded wooden logs as Harrison's cartoonish and darkly comic play unfolds. Doppler, having quickly exhausted the vegan possibilities provided by foraging, finds himself compelled to become a hunter, rather than a mere gatherer. However, when he kills a great elk (represented by an impressive puppet created by Fergus Dunnet), our protagonist finds himself in an emotional bind. The slaughtered elk had a child, which, bereft and unable to look after itself, hangs around Doppler's makeshift camp. Overcome with guilt, the trainee woodsman adopts the young animal and names it Bongo. An absent father from his own children and the adoptive father of a young elk, the difficulties of sustaining his new lifestyle drive Doppler to seek to sustain himself through bartering. In particular, he negotiates a "milk deal" with a suburban grocery worker, who agrees to supply Doppler with the dairy product in exchange for elk meat.

Fleming plays the eponymous principal character with an unlikely, but brilliantly effective, combination of certifiable craziness and undeniable lucidity. Harrison's intelligently structured production makes Doppler the unreliable

centre of the play, allowing a series of colourful larger-than-life supporting characters (all played by the excellent actors Chloe-Ann Tylor and Sean Hay) to orbit around him. Those characters include Doppler's exasperated (but remarkably indulgent) wife and eccentric forest homeowner Düsseldorf (a Norwegian man who is disturbingly proud to be the son of a soldier in Hitler's Wehrmacht). The bold, hyper-real element of the production is magnified by clever and subtle set and costume designs by Becky Minto. It is also amplified by ingenious live sound effects and perfectly attuned music composed by David A. Pollock and performed by Nik Paget-Tomlinson.

It is difficult to imagine a greater contrast in theatrical genres and performative styles than that which exists between Grid Iron's show and Mamoru Iriguchi's piece *Sex Education Xplorers (S.E.X)*, which played in the outdoor, but covered, space at the innovative Summerhall venue as part of the Made in Scotland programme.² Performed by Iriguchi (who is gay) and non-binary theatre artist Afton Moran, the show is presented as an illustrated lecture on the physical evolution of human sex and the social evolution of gender identity. The latter has become a highly contested subject in the nations of the UK, leading to highly polarised, often ill-tempered debate in the public and political spheres, and, inevitably, to particularly toxic discourse in social media. This debate and, often, abusive conflict have grown as the governments in London, Edinburgh and Cardiff have responded to changing social mores by seeking to recognise the rights of trans and non-binary people to have their self-identified gender recognised in law. The beauty of Iriguchi's show – which he hopes to tour in Scotland's secondary schools – is that it steps onto that contested territory with a winning combination of fearless innocence and mischievous confidence. That it does so will come as little surprise to those who experienced Iriguchi's previous work *Eaten*, a highly original, hilarious, off-the-wall, but brilliantly educational consideration of the food chain, aimed primarily at young children.

Like *Eaten*, *S.E.X* reflects Iriguchi's academic background in zoology. Human sex and sexuality are put in evolutionary context, with Iriguchi and Moran (fig. 3) bemoaning the fact that humans evolved as primates in the reproductive binary of male and female. If only, they suggest, we had taken the evolutionary route of hermaphrodites or, like clown fish, evolved the capacity to change our biological sex. The pair also speak on the important distinctions between biological sex, the constantly shifting social construct of gender and the broad spectrum of sexual orientation. As they offer us these scientific insights, zoological speculations and sociological contemplations, they wear lab coats and shirts emblazoned with the letters "S.E.X". They do so with more than a dose of irony, however. Their show is very far from being a dry, academic lecture. Rather, it is educational and socially conscious theatre delivered by means of humorous dialogue, comic

² An annual programme at the Edinburgh Fringe, funded by the Scottish Government, which showcases new Scottish music, dance and theatre.

animations and very funny dance (to an entertainingly diverse musical score that stretches from The Beatles to the soundtrack of cult 1983 movie *Flashdance*).



Figure 3: Afton Moran and Mamoru Iriguchi in *Sex Education Xplorers (S.E.X.)*.
Photo: Niall Walker.

In truth Moran is much less of a natural performer than Iriguchi, but they function well as a foil to the Japanese artist's unique comic style, which is comprised of a sparkling intellect, a gloriously eccentric sense of humour and brilliant comic delivery. The sheer boldness of *S.E.X* is exemplified in its concluding proposition. Having already implied that humanity has been poorly served by its evolution, Iriguchi suggests that the next step in human sexual evolution will be to develop the technological ability to completely erase the binary categories of physical sex. This controversial idea is reminiscent of the arguments of the leading second-wave feminist Shulamith Firestone³ and subsequent cyberfeminists in the 1970s that women's liberation would require the invention of technologies that could free women from the human reproductive process. Contentious though it is, Iriguchi's argument is delivered with such imaginative creativity, honesty, openness, and humour that it has, surely, earned its place in the gender debate that is currently taking place in Scotland, and among the nation's teenagers in particular.

In addition to hosting Walsh's brilliant new play for the EIF, the Traverse Theatre also staged its own live Fringe programme, albeit on a far smaller scale than usual. In a regular festival year, the Traverse is considered a theatre hub by critics and audiences. Offering work by its own company and an array of

³ Most notably in her 1970 book *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (New York: Morrow).

respected theatre groups from throughout the UK and beyond, the Traverse's August programme is widely considered to be the most prestigious on the Fringe. Sadly, the Traverse Theatre Company's headline production for the 2021 programme, *Still* by Scotland-based dramatist Frances Poet, was a major disappointment.

The drama is built of four distinct, but ultimately, converging narratives alighting on pivotal moments in the lives of five Edinburgh characters. Addressing such subjects as debilitating chronic pain, bereavement through dementia and complicated pregnancy, the piece is overburdened with soap opera-style life problems. Consequently, none of its characters are sufficiently developed, leaving the play seeming to be, paradoxically, both overwrought and underwritten. This being so, it is hardly surprising that the piece fails in its structure, too, with the convergence of the four narratives being both too weak and too conspicuous. All of which is a great pity because director Gareth Nicholls had assembled a stellar cast of Scottish actors in Molly Innes, Mercy Ojelade, Naomi Stirrat, Martin Donaghy and Gerry Mulgrew.

However, the Traverse company redeemed itself to a large degree when, in the closing days of the Fringe, it staged a minimally set, short run production of *This is Paradise*, an ironically titled monodrama by young, Scotland-based Irish writer Michael John O'Neill. The play traces a key period in the life of Kate (played by the outstanding Irish actor Amy Molloy, fig. 3), a Belfast woman in her late twenties who is trying to have a baby, despite her deep-seated, and entirely justified, fear that her body is incapable of sustaining a full-term pregnancy.



Figure 4: Amy Molloy in *This is Paradise*. Photo: Traverse Theatre.

The action of the drama occurs almost entirely within the British-ruled province of Northern Ireland. It is set in April 1998, against the backdrop of the Good Friday Agreement, which seemed to promise an end to more than 30 years of war in what was euphemistically known as The Troubles within the north of Ireland. Such are Kate's anxieties regarding her pregnancy that she finds it difficult to share the general euphoria of "peace in our time". Significant though they are, the historic political developments of 1998 are very much in the background of O'Neill's narrative. That said, Kate's unfolding story can be read, in numerous ways, as a metaphor for Northern Ireland and its tentative moves towards peace.

Now in a stable relationship with her supportive partner Brendy, Kate is pulled back into a difficult period in her past when she receives a phone call from a desperate young woman. The caller has recently ended a relationship with Diver (a charismatic, chaotic and unreliable figure with connections to the province's criminal underworld) and fears that he may carry out his threat to commit suicide. Having been in a desperately unhealthy relationship with Diver (who has a penchant for teenage girls) when she was aged 16, Kate empathises with the young woman as her former lover's latest 'child bride'. As Northern Ireland celebrates the peace accord, and just days away from an important prenatal scan, Kate embarks on a journey to the fictitious seaside town of Portbenony, in case she has to intervene to save Diver's life and spare the "child bride" the trauma of feeling responsible for the man's death.

The dramatic monologue weaves together Kate's description of recent events (in 1998) with her memories of her dysfunctional, yet often emotionally and erotically exhilarating relationship with Diver. She remembers, too, the guilt and sadness associated with the death of Big Joe, her school sweetheart. These recollections are in constant interplay with Kate's thoughts about her relationship with Brendy (a man who has become the stable, loving and dependable centre of her life) and her desire to give him a child, despite her agonising near certainty that her 'breaking' body will not see out the pregnancy.

The script itself reveals O'Neill to be a fine craftsman. His writing is captivating, clever, humane, and beautifully structured. It is also blessed, in director Katherine Nesbitt's production with an enthralling, emotionally dexterous, darkly comic and deeply moving performance by Molloy. Performing on a minimalist set, which seems to represent a wooden jetty, the young actor captures absolutely her character's jagged intelligence and the smart nuances embedded in O'Neill's script.

Intriguingly, *This is Paradise* is the third consecutive Edinburgh Fringe (excepting 2020's Covid-cancelled programme) in which the strongest Traverse company show has been written by a Scotland-based dramatist from Northern Ireland. In 2018, the hit production of the entire Fringe was the scorching satire *Ulster American* by actor-turned-writer David Ireland (a graduate of the acting programme of what is now called the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland). In 2019,

Meghan Tyler (another RCS acting graduate) received critical plaudits for the quasi-surreal (and blazingly violent) political comedy *Crocodile Fever*. There is talk of the Traverse reviving its production of O'Neill's play in 2022. It would be greatly to the benefit of Scottish theatre if it did so.

