

Revisiting *Samhain*:

Two Directions on a Theme

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Since its inception in the 1960s, Siamsa Tíre, The National Folk Theatre of Ireland, has presented various aspects of Irish folklore on stage incorporating elements of Irish traditional music, song and dance. In this essay, I focus on two particular productions, both entitled *Samhain*, produced in 1993 and 2001. While both productions were directed by Oliver Hurley, they were devised in cooperation with the core company of professional performers, most of whom had developed their skills and experience through the Siamsa Tíre training system. The creative team also involved external artists who contributed in particular to the visual aesthetics of the production but whose creations, particularly in the area of masks and puppetry, influenced the development of movement and choreography. Although both productions are in the form of folk theatre, based on music, song and dance and little or no spoken language, they follow very different narrative outlines on a shared theme.

The process of devising highlights different ways in which the theatre can interact with folklore and how, by drawing on a theme such as *Samhain*, different aspects of folklore can be included or excluded to develop both a structured narrative and something to which an audience can relate. In this essay, I briefly consider the development of Siamsa Tíre and the form of folk theatre that it presents, acknowledging the position of *Samhain* within the wider repertoire of the company. The process of devising folk theatre productions is itself a learning experience through which cast members rediscover meanings or translate old customs and stories for a contemporary audience, often using pantomimic dance. Like the traditions of *Samhain*, narrative or pantomimic dance has existed internationally from before the Christian era (Phelan 2014). Often using hobby animals and props,

their purpose is to develop the dramatic telling of a story. Throughout the essay I consider the potential use of music, song and dance to enhance the presentation of folklore on the theatre stage.

I am approaching my research as an ethnomusicologist concerned with the relationship between music and identity and aware of the role of folkmusic in the modern world; a cultural geographer with a keen interest in the representation of place and community; and a folklorist concerned with changes in identity formation and the usefulness of folklore in an era of unprecedented cultural circulation (Ó Giolláin 2000). I return to the seminal work of folklorist James Frazer, *The Golden Bough* (1922), a comparative study of folklore, magic and religion and reach towards theology and philosophy to develop a deeper understanding of folk culture within contemporary Irish theatre practice. At the heart of the essay is the concept of the muse, the seed of creativity that comes from beyond the human world, the existence of things that cannot easily be explained or understood but are perhaps more easily accepted through artistic presentation.

Published accounts of customs related to Halloween include the work of Gailey (1969), Danaher (1972) and Glassie (1982). Focusing in on the rich traditions of music, song and dance in Ireland, my research is influenced by the recent work of uí Ógáin and Sherlock, who state:

While music, dance and song reflect a key aspect of our inherited traditions they do not exist alone, or in isolation from other aspects of lore and tradition but are an integral part of the community from which they come. Social context, associated lore and the dynamic process of related song, story, custom and belief are vital parts of the presentation and performance of music and song. (2012: 7)

In this essay I consider how folklore does not only provide inspiration for folk theatre but also acknowledge how theatre groups can create productions drawing on inspiration from the past that are relevant to a contemporary audience. Inspiration is drawn from the essence of 'folk'; the shared

thoughts and ways of thinking of all peoples, which moves beyond language or other manifestations of culture, through which people seek to understand the world they inhabit. Following Santino, I acknowledge that contemporary activities and symbols associated with Hallowe'en 'can be examined from both a contemporary and a historical perspective' and 'an examination of the origin and history of Halloween illuminates the continuity and the change in the meaningfulness of the symbols' (Santino 1983: 2). The theatre provides one space in which to engage with these traditions.

***Samhain* / Hallowe'en**

Samhain is the Irish language term for a pre-Christian Celtic festival marking the Celtic New Year and identified by many as the precursor of Hallowe'en (Santino 1983 & 1994; Rogers 2003). Highlighting festivals as a period when the normal rules of behaviour might not apply or are transgressed, Peillon notes that most festivals 'imply, directly or indirectly, conceptions of the sacred' (1982: 40) and many have a link with religious celebrations or sacrifice. In presenting a comparative study of Irish festivities, Peillon (1982) outlines six common characteristics: generosity, transgression of rules, sacredness, playfulness, depersonalisation and communion. Many of these characteristics are inherent in the productions of *Samhain* and become represented in the theatre productions through a focus on themes or motifs. These motifs include death, belief in a spiritual world, bonfires, and the use of masks.

According to Santino, Samhain was 'a day of the dead, a time when it was believed that the souls of those who had died during the year were allowed access to the land of the living. It was a time when spirits were believed to be wandering' (1994: xv). Despite a common focus on death, Rogers (2003) critiques the imagination of Samhain as a festival dedicated to the dead or ancestor worship, highlighting other conceptualisations of Samhain including the importance of the harvest and stocktaking (Danaher 1972). Contemporary practices in many parts of the world include the use of masks and symbols of the dead including skeletons and ghosts (Santino 1994; Brandes 1998). The

enactment and portrayal of death is a predominant motif of Hallowe'en (Santino 1994; Clark 2005) but in many instances Hallowe'en is the moment when the worlds of the living and the dead interact.

The productions being considered here draw upon ideas of an Otherworld, beliefs about death and the use of masks to create a production based on entertainment but with a desire to communicate a deeper meaning. Ó hÓgáin presents an understanding of an Irish folk belief system, stating:

Members of the otherworld community were imagined to live lives that were broadly parallel to those led by the human community, and they sometimes entered the human world for quite natural reasons, such as trading or seeking assistance. There was also a strong and ancient tradition that had the dead highly respected as preservers of ancient learning, and under certain conditions, they bestowed special types of knowledge on the world of the living. (2006: 266)

An important aspect of both productions of *Samhain* was the idea of a time between the years when two worlds came close together or overlapped. The deeper meaning is explored, to some extent, using customs and practices associated with children, with folkloric rather than religious perspectives represented.

Despite the somewhat sinister undercurrents of the festivity, children are very much to the fore in its celebration. Clark highlights Hallowe'en as 'a holiday when adults assist children in behaviours taboo and out of bounds, as children impersonate creatures evil and dead in an atmosphere of carnivalesque, norm-suspending liminality' (2005: 183). She presents Hallowe'en as a time of enculturation, noting the role of the child as a dynamic power in the construction of norms, practices and rituals. American popular culture also impacts on the understanding of Hallowe'en,

notwithstanding its Celtic origins, and Santino (1994) also recognizes the influence of American corporate culture on the celebration of Hallowe'en (Rogers 1993).

Hallowe'en is not a localized cultural phenomenon and may be examined in the context of international festivals, rituals and folk culture (O'Donnell and Foley 2008). Frazer identifies All Hallow's Eve or Hallowe'en as the 31st October, one of the fire festivals of Europe and one of the two great Celtic festivals on the eve of May Day and the first of November (Frazer 1959). Though they closely resemble each other in the manner of their celebration and in the superstitions associated with them, Frazer states: 'Of the two fests Hallowe'en was perhaps of old the more important, since the Celts would seem to have dated the beginning of the year from it rather than from Beltane. [...] In ancient Ireland, a new fire used to be kindled every year on Hallowe'en or the Eve of Samhain, and from this sacred flame all the fires in Ireland were rekindled' (1959: 625). Similarly, Rogers identifies Samhain as a period of 'supernatural intensity' (2003:12) during which bonfires were lit to ward off spirits and invoke the help of the Gods. Despite regular reference to bonfires, Santino states: 'While neither bonfires nor fireworks displays are always part of Halloween festivities (the bonfire tradition is highly localized, within both rural and urban areas), the ways in which these customs are enacted imply that people recognize at least a metonymic relationship between the two' (1996: 213). Bonfires are still popular at Hallowe'en, along with a range of games that have developed from ancient customs and beliefs, and are often part of the iconography of the festival. Many customs or practices relate to food and/or the lifecycle including predictions of marriage, birth and death. In the first production of *Samhain* by Siamsa Tíre, an apple is a core symbol while the programme for the second production includes the image of a ritual around a bonfire.

Other influences on identity and folk culture are also important in understanding the development of Hallowe'en celebrations, including national and religious identities. Santino (1996) presents Hallowe'en as a non-political, non-sectarian social event and the activities that people engage in are not completely separated from sectarian identity in Northern Ireland, noting different interpretations of Hallowe'en customs relating to fire and explosives between nationalist and unionist

communities, despite the fact that it is largely appreciated (Robinson 1994).¹ Despite the historical roots of the festival in Irish culture (Santino 1983; Kugelmass 1991), the connection of the festival with a sense of Irish national identity is not clearly evident, if it ever existed. As in Mexico, the connection between the folk rituals and the Catholic Church are not always absolute. While the Catholic Church celebrates All Saints' and All Souls' Days, 'most of the activities and artistic displays connected with this holiday [...] are a folk elaboration entirely separate from liturgical requirements' (Brandes 1998: 360). Returning to ideas of nationalism, Brandes notes how the 'rapid penetration of Halloween symbols into Mexico increasingly evokes Mexican national sentiments, embodied in a campaign to preserve the country from US cultural imperialism' (1998: 380). However, the increasing significance of the Day of the Dead for the expression of national identity in Mexico is not reflected in activities in Ireland and, although this essay considers a production of the National Folk Theatre of Ireland, the potential for the expression of an Irish national identity is not considered.

Various themes in these studies provide a lens through which to examine and reflect upon the two productions of *Samhain* by Siamsa Tíre. Death, spirits and 'otherworldly' creatures are integral to the productions that, though developed by the National Folk Theatre, are not overtly nationalist and may resonate with international audiences. Both productions feature children prominently and challenge adult audiences to remember their childhood beliefs and allow their imagination to engage with the fantastic.

Developing and Defining Folk Theatre

¹ A number of other events in Northern Ireland involving bonfires are inextricably linked to the expression of nationalist or unionist identity, such as Bonfire Night on 11 July, commemorating the victory of William of Orange at the Battle of the Boyne in 1690, or 14 August, the eve of the Catholic Feast of the Assumption. Santino (1994) notes the association of Hallowe'en with the Catholic church calendar and the emergence of Mischief Night on the eve of Guy Fawkes' Day as more significant in England. Guy Fawkes was accused of attempting to blow up the Houses of Parliament on the 5th of November 1605 as part of a Catholic plot against the Protestant government. Highlighting the secular existence of Hallowe'en, Robinson (1994) notes the engagement of Presbyterians in Hallowe'en celebrations despite the fact that other important quarter days of the Celtic year, such as St. Brigid's Day, were ignored.

The history of Siamsa Tíre is dominated by Pat Ahern, a Catholic priest from Moyvane in North Kerry, who was appointed to the parish of Tralee following his ordination in 1959 with the purpose of establishing a choir in St John's Church; a choir that continues to sing each week over half a century later (Kearney 2013a & 2013b). In 1963 Ahern produced and directed the Passion play *Golgotha* and was involved in a group that entered *Scoraíocht* competitions under Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann,² a form of stage show that Ahern himself helped develop (Ahern 1969: 10). A group named Siamsóirí na Ríochta ('Merrymakers of the Kingdom') was formed and they devised short theatrical pieces, incorporating music, song and dance based on themes from farm work and Irish rural life, later developing into a full length stage show entitled *Fadó Fadó* [Long ago].

In the 1980s, a full-time professional core company was established, which allowed for greater exploration of the potential of folk theatre and the development of new repertoire material. Ahern sought to explore the deeper meaning of 'folk', moving beyond the representation of everyday life to explore the beliefs and customs of rural people. Some elements of this were evident in the 'old show' including the strawboys³ and *piseogs*.⁴ It was a member of the original core company, Oliver Hurley, who went on to direct two productions for the company independent of Ahern based on themes of Samhain or Hallowe'en.

Oliver Hurley joined Siamsa Tíre as a child, auditioned and put through rehearsals by Ahern himself. His early involvement included a part in the company's Broadway cast in 1974 and he went on to become part of the first core company in 1985 before being appointed Assistant Artistic Director in 1988. Later he directed the 1993 production *Samhain* while Ahern was still Artistic Director, before becoming Artistic Director himself in 2001 following the departure of then Artistic Director John Sheehan. Hurley stood down from this post in 2006.

² According to their website, Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann 'is the largest group involved in the preservation and promotion of Irish traditional music'. Founded in 1951, it is a non-profit cultural movement that has an international branch network. They organize classes, performances, competitions and assessments in Irish traditional music, song and dance.

³ Strawboys refer to an ancient tradition, often associated with weddings or St. Stephen's Day (when they may be referred to as wrenboys), when people disguised in costumes made from straw would go from house to house performing to make money or provide entertainment. See (Gailey 1968). Phelan (2014) further elaborates on these traditions with reference to Siamsa Tíre.

⁴ *Piseogs* are superstitions that often relate to fairy magic and relate to acts that help protect against evil or can help bring good fortune.

For Ahern, Samhain provides an ideal opportunity to explore the potential of folk theatre and in particular ideas that consider the connection between the human world and an Otherworld, a world of the beyond, that may involve beliefs in spirits or fairies (Ahern 2013). Informed by his studies in theology and interest in the work of philosophers such as John Moriarty and James Frazer, Ahern draws a distinction between folk theatre and the folk drama of contemporary writers such as John B. Keane. For Ahern, it is important to understand the universal deeper meanings and belief systems that are largely shared by all communities and societies.

Almost all productions of Siamsa Tíre present a common theatre experience with a focus on music, song and dance. Utilising large sets, sometimes elaborate costumes and props and high-tech lighting, the audience is invited to enjoy a theatrical experience inspired by Irish folk culture. In reviewing the production *Immram*, which shares many traits with both productions of *Samhain*, Lucey suggests that ‘Not even the much hyped *Riverdance* can move an audience the way Siamsa can’ (1996: 32), a statement not relating to the particular show but to the potential of folk theatre itself. Escaping to or experiencing another world is a common motif in many productions by Siamsa Tíre.⁵

Music, song and dance are integral to the folk theatre productions of Siamsa Tíre but Ahern notes that these are merely the manifestations of folk culture, something that is based on the human quest to understand or find meaning in the world around them. In his study, *Keening and other Old Irish Musics*, Breandán Ó Madagáin notes the belief systems surrounding a variety of song types in the Irish tradition: ‘It is clear from international comparison that work songs were an essential part of the magic ritual performed to ensure the success of the work, a function which is still quite common today in Asia and Africa, especially with such vital operations as ploughing or sowing the seed – the mysterious forces of nature had to be harnessed’ (2005: 100). Songs such as ‘Ding Dong Dederó’, ‘Amhráin na Cuiginne’ and ‘Aililiú na Gamhna’ were incorporated into the early productions with the cast representing the occupations and beliefs of rural north Kerry through music, song, dance and mime. Further recognition of the importance and prevalence of beliefs relating to the supernatural

⁵ For example, in the production *Oileán* (2003), also directed by Hurley, the audience explores the way of life, traditions and customs of the Blasket islanders. The opening scene features a character in a contemporary setting or context who is transported through space and time to the island community.

could be found in references to the dead and the protection of children. The *keen*, which features in a number of productions by Siamsa Tíre, has a supernatural ritual function in Ireland, as in other countries of Europe and worldwide, ‘to transfer the spirit of the deceased from this world to that of the spirits’ (2005: 81). Ó Madagáin also points to the function of the lullaby in protecting children from the fairies, noting Ó hEochaidh’s assertion that ‘the better it were sung, the more exquisitely, the more lonesomely and the more plaintively, all the more effective it would be as a protection’ (in Ó Madagáin 2005: 103). Ó Madagáin states: ‘The repetitive vocable refrain which characterizes the lullabies, which is now taken to be for soothing the baby, strongly resembles the old magic formula’ (2005: 103). Many such elements have been explored in various short and full length productions by Siamsa Tíre in an exploration of the spiritual dimensions of folklore.

Producing *Samhain*

The idea and traditions of Samhain provide much material and inspiration for development within folk theatre. Prior to plans for a full-length folk theatre production, a night of ghost stories was organized in the Teach Siamsa in Finuge, a training centre, on the 23rd of February 1980 (Rushe 1980). The existence or link between two worlds became a recurring motif. An episode entitled ‘Carraig a’ Phúca’ was introduced to the repertoire in 1983, based on the happenings around a haunted rock using a mix of dance and mime (Nowlan 1983). In 1990 a visiting choreographer Anne Courtney worked with the core company to develop choreography encompassing Irish and contemporary dance to Mícheál Ó Súilleabháin’s music, *Idir Eatarthu*. In the programme, Bryan McMahon wrote: ‘The dancer plays a game of immortality, he defies gravity and plays a mocking game with the ground which is always pulling him down so it is the dancer who is caught forever in our minds between time and eternity’ (Siamsa Tíre 1990). Other productions, including *Ding Dong Dederó* (1991) also incorporate folklore of the otherworld, engaging with the notion of spirits or other creatures playing a part in the happenings of the human world. *Samhain* attempts to develop this interest in another world even further.

For Hurley, *Samhain* provides an opportunity to connect folk theatre with a wider audience.

In an interview, he stated:

It is something I was always fascinated by because [...] it is one of those traditions that is quite strong through the whole Halloween tradition and because that's something as a kid everyone connects with. [...] For me this one was always one that was going to be, should be readily accessible I suppose to everybody and anybody cause we have all grown up with the masks, the Halloween, the traditions surrounding it and without knowing really what it was about we still knew that there was a sense of it and a sense of the dead being alive on that night and all that all souls and all that sort of stuff [...] I suppose I was always aware of trying to make folk theatre accessible to all in a sense rather than an exclusive thing. (Hurley 2013)

Hurley identifies the continuing role of folk theatre in society and the potential to turn to folklore to inform creative development in folk theatre. He noted how research led him to a realization of the quantity of material that existed and the potential for that to be theatricalized.

Both productions of *Samhain*, although directed by Hurley, are developed using the devising process that involves the skills of a team of practitioners. The team in each production differed – the first was a small team whose strengths lay in dance/choreography and singing but not in instrumental music or rigorous academic research. The second production involved a larger cohort that included musicians and a number who were studying folk theatre and related subjects at third level. Both productions are shaped by the skills and imagination of all involved and the devising process instils a sense of ownership in the cast. During the devising process, much discussion centred on not only what

is communicated but how material is communicated to the audience, particularly in a medium that does not use language as the primary mode of communication.

A challenge when attempting to develop a show around the theme of Samhain or Hallowe'en was the sheer quantity of folklore and source material available. Hurley notes that the process involved taking time to read as much about the subject as possible and attempting to visualize it for the perspective of folk theatre. In relation to Samhain, Evans also notes:

An astonishing amount of lore still clings to Hallowe'en, and we must restrict ourselves to picking out some of the main elements of this crowded occasion. The crops should now be all gathered in and no fruit should be picked after this date, for the *púca*, a supernatural being, is busy befouling unpicked fruit at Hallowe'en. Here again we notice superstition acting as a stimulus towards the completion of routine tasks. (2000: 277)

Using his sketches, Hurley worked daily with the core group to give shape to the production and 'create some sort of link and storyline and who concept of what it was and the process leads itself onto obviously developing steps and music and dance' (2013). The product is a music, song and dance production that attempts to both entertain and provide insights into folk culture in Ireland.

Hurley attempted *Samhain* twice, explaining: 'I think it [the first production] was overcomplicated. Maybe we over-researched it and tried to get too much in [...] whilst the first show was successful I always remember a comment by a person in the audience, saying "you director, it was great but what was it about?"' (2013). And so, with more experience as a director, and working with new people with new skills, particularly in the areas of choreography and devising, Hurley set about the task again, noting that the approach was very much the same, if generating different results.

Take One

The first *Samhain* was a dance production based on the stories, images, recording and folktales documented in 'Traces Face Us', a schools project (Thompson 1993). The masks were inspired by children's collages (White 1993). The initiative brought Des Dillon to the Art Gallery as part of the schools project before he became involved in the devising process. It was his first attempt at theatre but his creativity and friendship were valued by Hurley. Dillon, a visual artist and puppeteer from Clonmel, worked mainly with textiles and fabrics to create large three dimensional tapestries and puppets. Subsequently, in 2003, Dillon created a unique puppet show called *Teac A Bloc* and in 2013 designed all the props, costumes & puppets for *Mag Mell* by the Whobeganit Theatre Company, the latter described as 'a creative adaption of old Irish ghost & folk tales that tells a truly modern story' (Whobeganit 2014).

The process for devising the first *Samhain* production is remembered as a very enjoyable experience. Hurley recalls 'there was no boundaries to that and I can remember the comedy' (2013). In particular Hurley remembers a scene involving 'daft spirits', an almost *Cirque du Soleil* type piece that incorporated different voices. Unbound by rules, the community of practitioners could express themselves in their own way and use their own understanding of ghosts and spirits to inform these artistic expressions. Characters from the Otherworld included the Departed Soul, played by Tracy Foley, and the Pooka, played by Jonathan Kelliher. Similar characters would reappear in the second production.

The *púca* (pooka) is an interesting character in the context of Hallowe'sen. Half-goat and half-man, it is reminiscent of the Greek nature god Pan, 'with his horns, his cloven hooves, his goat-like, animal nature, as well as the passionate ecstasy of his female devotees, was the most direct influence on the conception of the devil in Christianity' (Santino 1983: 12). In Irish folk culture, the *púca* can be malevolent or benevolent and is not solely associated with Halloween. The *púca* is a recurring character in productions by Siamsa Tíre and can bridge pre-Christian traditions with Christian beliefs, highlighting a sense of folk culture that is universal and beyond a particular religion.

Paula Murríhy, who played the central character *Sail Óg Rua* in this production as a fourteen-year-old, remembers the time fondly, noting there was a great ensemble feel to the production (Murríhy 2013). Although she had a significant part, describing it as taking the audience on a journey and, indeed, being present on stage for the entire production, Murríhy remembers being surrounded by her friends and having a great time in rehearsal. She spoke with me of the ‘oddly collaborative’ process, involving a director with imagination and Des Dillon always working in the background. Dillon was responsible for successfully creating a number of masks that were combined with choreography to create fantastic characters. The importance of masks is also noted by Hurley, and is a feature common to both productions (Hurley 2013). These masks contribute significantly to the theatricality and visual spectacle of the production.

A difficult aspect of the first *Samhain* was the lack of a full time musical director or musician working with the devising team. While music is a core element of what *Siamsa Tíre* presents, Hurley (2013) states:

When I look back at it now thinking, ‘God, how, you know, the process is so informed by [music]’, and I suppose motivated by a tune or a rhythm or whatever. We had [no musical director] through that process and to me, now, it’s working the wrong way around where you add the music afterwards. That’s what we did at the time. [...] We did use a lot of percussion in that show for some reason which was fine because any of us can play a *bodhrán*.

Hurley’s comments highlight the imbalance in research between the folkloric and dance elements of the production, and the musical aspects, including songs, which were drawn from a limited number of sources such as *Cas Amhráin* (Ó hEidhin 1975). There was little composition of new musical material and Hurley found this aspect of the production somewhat contrived. In reference to other productions,

he highlights how older musical material that is properly researched can sit with new compositions and inform the compositional process.

Despite the lack of music-specific skills, Hurley was very conscious of the role of music in both productions of *Samhain*. In relation to the first production he states:

One of my issues always was with Siamsa, you know having been involved, was music was always, musicians were always kind of separated and we always had people in the show that were multi-talented, like a singer who could play music or a dancer who was [...] an accordion player. Even in the style of our production it was always musicians at the side stage and I always felt isn't that a pity. I would love to see musicians walking around and becoming more part of it. (Hurley 2013)

Murrihy also remembers being given the opportunity to play the concertina onstage. She recognizes that the role gave her the opportunity to show off her talents in singing, dancing, acting and playing musical instruments. Hurley remembers elements of this in older productions of *Fadó Fadó*, in which cast members also performed as musicians. It was planned that some cast members would also perform as musicians in both productions of *Samhain* in the role of fairies. Due to some unfortunate circumstances this did not materialize in the second production.⁶

Take Two

The second production entitled *Samhain* was based on research conducted by the core company in Siamsa Tíre. It was structured into eight scenes following the experiences of five

⁶ I myself was due to perform on the whistle on stage in the second production but injured myself in the dress rehearsal contributing to a decision to postpone the opening of the show. When the production premiered, I was part of the orchestra and chorus; the music was performed solely by the orchestra.

characters, aged in their late teens or early twenties, on Hallowe'en night. The music was a mixture of new compositions by Tom Hanafin with older tunes from the tradition. An additional layer of complexity was developed through instrumental harmonies and the addition of timpani and double bass as well as an orchestra of uilleann pipes, flute, fiddle, button accordion, banjo, mandolin and piano. There was little singing in the production, although Noel McAulliffe and Seán Ahern provided exemplary performances of new material in a natural *sean nós* style, largely unaccompanied but with some hummed SATB vocal harmonies arranged by Colm O'Brien. The sense of ritual was developed through the use of chanting, a bell and recurring motifs in the newly composed music. In many of the scenes music contributed significantly to the evocation of emotion.

The first scene placed the audience in the present, watching children play at Hallowe'en with many familiar, and perhaps less familiar, games, customs and traditions enacted on the stage. It represents what Santino identifies as the most notable traditional beliefs and customs associated with Samhain including 'the practice of leaving offerings of food and drink to masked and costumed reelers, and the lighting of bonfires' as part of 'the night of the wandering dead' (1983: xvi). In the scene, the five principal characters tease the children but, while messing with the masks, become caught up in the otherworld as midnight strikes. Reviewing the production, Carolyn Swyft wrote:

[*Samhain*] marked a return from recent shows, based on tales from Irish mythology and combining contemporary with Irish traditional dance, to the type of show that made Siamsa Tíre famous. This one focuses on customs and superstitions, in this case based on Halloween, with its bonfires, carved pumpkins, apple bobbing and masks. On the stroke of midnight, the real ghosts make their presence felt, together with the pooka and the cailleach, and a night of fear and enchantment follows. (2001: 10)

The understanding of Samhain as the point in time when the boundaries between worlds is removed underpins the narrative of the production. Each character interacts with aspects of or characters from the Otherworld in different ways. In the programme notes, Hurley states: ‘At the precise hour of midnight on Samhain eve, there is a moment of time that belongs to no time, a suspension of reality when the boundaries between the Otherworld and us are no more’.

The first encounter with the Otherworld is with the fairies. Ó hÓgáin notes: ‘The native attitude to the dead in Ireland was that they formed a sort of otherworld community, and this tradition has survived into recent folklore in the context of the fairies’ (2006: 266). It was the night of the festival of All Hallows, when every peasant implicitly believes that the fairies and other supernatural beings have double power over the destinies of mortals. In the production, the fairies are presented as benevolent dancing beings seeking fun with a sense of foreboding introduced through the *púca*, the goat-like creature that also appeared in the first production.

The second episode in the Otherworld involves a fight between two Celtic gods, representing light and darkness (possibly Lugh and Balor), echoing themes from previous productions. It is an epic and energetic dance piece utilising the hard shoe rhythms of local step dance traditions and incorporates some elements of contemporary dance to help portray a fight. While some associations of death and the Otherworld may be linked to the devil,⁷ Rogers dismisses links between Hallowe’en and Satanism, recognising Satan or Lucifer as a Christian creation but acknowledging the existence of a ‘dualistic struggle between the God of Light and the God of Darkness’ in some pre-Christian religions (2003: 13). Samhain legends tell us that it is on this night that Dagda, the god of the Tuatha Dé Dannan, mates with Morrigan, the goddess of death and destruction. However, this scene potentially suffers from a focus on choreography over thematic development, a characteristic of a number of productions by Siamsa Tíre and other Irish dance shows more generally.

The third episode in the Otherworld involves the druids. According to Hurley: ‘The druids, controllers of the elements, ritualize the changing season until the last leaves have fallen and the earth

⁷ Santino points to the identification of faeries as the fallen angels who followed Lucifer, presenting an alternative interpretation of some beliefs based on Christian teachings (1983).

becomes dormant' (2003). The scene reminds us of the belief that Samhain is a time to peer into the future and ascertain destiny, with various customs relating to marriage and other aspects of life. Rogers also considers the potential inclusion of druids in the imagination of Samhain. He examines the historical references to druidic culture, acknowledging the benevolent identity of druids as an eighteenth and nineteenth century invention while questioning the contrary Roman depictions of murderous rituals associated with druidic culture in early sources (2003). Highlighting the influence of Christianity on the changing imagination of Samhain, Santino notes: 'Druids were considered evil, devil worshippers; and the gods and spirits they worshiped were just as devilish and demonic. The Celtic underworld inevitably became associated with the Christian Hell' (1983: 7). The druids presented in the second production of *Samhain* represent notions of rituals and magic. Moving in an almost monk-like procession, they reflect the collage of imagery involved in the construction of representations of druidic culture that have been incorporated into the popular imagination today.

The fourth episode involves the *cailleach* or witch. Although they have an entirely different origin and history, witches are often identified and even confused with fairies in the folk imagination, especially in Scotland and Ireland (Santino 1983: 11). They provide much imagery and material as Evans writes: 'Witches then speed on their errands of mischief, some sweeping through the air on besoms, others galloping along the roads on tabby-cats, which for that evening are turned into coal-black steeds. The fairies, too, are all let loose, and hobgoblins of every sort roam freely about' (2000: 626). In this instance the *cailleach* is a source of fun and it harks back to the 'daft spirits' of the previous production, providing comedy but also a focus on the more traditional aspects of the step dancing. The shapes created by the dancers' feet were viewed like the writing of spells on the ground, invoking a sense of magic through dance. In many cultures dance is an integral element of ritual with inherent magical qualities.

The fifth episode involves meeting with death. In her review, Swift states: 'There is a touching moment when a recently bereaved man (dance master Jonathan Kelliher) is comforted by the spirit of his dead sister' (2001). For Hurley, this is an important aspect because 'the likes of a Siamsa Tíre could be seen as a museum piece but it has to be more than that [...] it can draw you in

emotionally because you as a person connect to what you are seeing. So it is to make that connection is what is important' (2013). Death is a common element in many productions by Siamsa Tíre and often acts as the climax of a production, evoking deep emotions amongst an audience that contrast with the often uplifting experience of music and dance. Death is an integral part of many Hallowe'en beliefs. Evans states:

Hallowe'en was pre-eminently a commemoration of the dead, a time when ghosts and fairies were unusually active, the whole of the world of the supernatural astir and the dead returned to their earthly homes. On that night the grass-grown homesteads – the fairy raths – were wide open and the fairies were on the move to winter quarters, surely a folk memory of a former transhumance. It used to be thought unlucky not to make preparations for the return of the dead by leaving the door of the house open, putting out tobacco and traditional dishes such as sowans – a kind of porridge – and setting seats around the fire. (2000: 277)

Frazer also notes:

Not only among the Celts but throughout Europe, Hallowe'en, the night which marks the transition from autumn to winter, seems to have been of old the time of year when the souls of the departed were supposed to revisit their old homes in order to warm themselves by the fire and to comfort themselves with the good cheer provided for them in the kitchen or the parlour by their affectionate kinsfolk. (1959: 625)

Amongst the reasons for returning were for vengeance and destruction, seeking help to get out of purgatory or to help others to do something. Thursby highlights how funeral festivals and rituals can help the living come to terms with death (2006). In this instance, there is a sense of comfort in witnessing the relative again. Returning to the point of attempting to make folk theatre (and by extension folklore) relevant to the audience, Hurley states:

If you are tackling something that is otherworldly or, you know, especially in looking at things that are past, sometimes you are afraid that you are losing your audience by them thinking it is a museum piece. [...] For me this time I was trying to get some kind of emotional connection. [...] We had a certain amount of characters who were of the now, in a sense being exposed to the Otherworld. Emotionally there was an angle there of a spirit of a younger person, you know, and again very relevant in a sense because people have lost people and there is still a belief that there is another world where they are. That was kind of important to me just to get something tangible there, emotionally, do you know. So I suppose for me having seen that perhaps the first one didn't totally connect I wanted this one to connect with an audience. (2013)

Throughout the production, the audience are pushed to question their dismissal of older traditions and customs. Indeed, the finale involves a renewed enthusiasm for the festivities of Samhain with those on stage representing the potential for the audience to rediscover the magic and wonder of the related folklore and customs.

Masks

The use of masks was a feature of both productions. Masks are found in many folk rituals and in theatre and can often be used to illustrate stories connected to death, the Otherworld and imagined creatures. As the work of Emigh highlights, the meaning and role of the mask in ritual and Western theatre performance may differ but masks can enhance the development or exploration of human identity and otherness (1996). Peillon recognizes the use of masks as part of the characteristic of playfulness that can be identified in many folk festivities (1982). Santino notes how Halloween is a transformative experience: ‘Just as the pumpkin is transformed by giving it a face and a new personality, so are people transformed by adapting a mask, a new persona’ (1983: 17). Noting the use of masks in the second show, Hurley states that ‘mask for me is always extraordinary on stage. Masks can do so much and can be so effective. So, yeah, there was always going to be mask in it’ (2013). These thoughts are echoed by others involved in the productions but it should be noted that masks are not integral to, or even used in, all productions by the company.

While Siamsa Tíre’s strengths in the 1990s undoubtedly lay in dance, there was no fulltime costume or set designer employed. Various artists were contracted for different productions who would work to varying degrees with the director and core company to realize a shared vision. Artist Des Dillon was an integral part of the creative process of the first production, while puppeteers Cliff Dolliver and Davy Dummigan brought their skills to the second production. Dolliver and Dummigan both had extensive theatre experience and sought to combine the visual arts with the development of a folk theatre approach to the themes of Samhain. In both productions, there is a clear sense of a collaborative effort in bringing together a production that combines the skills and imagination of a group of people. As with other members of the collaborative team, these artists sought inspiration from folklore to create visually impressive pieces that contributed to the fantasy of the production.

Making reference to the use of masks in various forms of theatre around the world, Bell states: ‘Puppets and masks are central to some of the oldest forms of performance’ (1999: 1). Not only

that, but Bell argues strongly for the potential of masks within contemporary performance activities. Ahern had previously considered the role of masks in various cultures, being inspired in particular by an experience in Toronto. He remembers a ritual being performed by an Australian Aborigine and, in telling me, pointed out that myth and ritual ‘together with dance, is the essential territory of folk, and it is surely here that we find the common denominator of all cultures’ (Ahern 2013). While masks are used for scenes related to the Otherworld in *Ding Dong Dederó*, it is in *Samhain* that they take centre stage. The masks used in both productions of *Samhain* enhance the illusion of theatre transforming actors into strange and sometimes grotesque creatures.

The masks for the first show were designed by Des Dillon after a project involving school children from the area. Some represent subtle alterations to the human features of the actors while others attempt to create otherworldly creatures that, in some instances, relate to animals and other creatures. Inspired by the related ‘Traces Face Us’ project, that they are informed by a community who would then become part of the audience for the theatre production creates a sense of extended community; the masks represent that collective imagination of the folk from whom and to whom the production is developed and presented.

The set, props and puppets for the second production were constructed by Dolliver Design. Davey Dummigan, a member of the team, remembers that challenges included using materials that would allow for movement in the context of the performance. In this production, masks were integral to the narrative presented. Borrowing from ritualistic ideas whereby the mask is a spiritual conduit and the wearers become affected by the mask that they wear. Emigh notes: ‘In many shamanistic performances around the world – from Siberia to Sri Lanka in Asia, and, more generally, from the tundra of North American Eskimos to the rain forests of West Africa – masks are used to facilitate the entry of a “spirit helper” into the performer’s body’ (1996: 14).

While the *Siamsa Tíre* production does not seek actively to channel the spiritual force from a mask to the performer’s body, the suggestion of such a belief that is shared by many folk cultures again aligns the company with an exploration and presentation of the essence of the folk. In Western

society, the suspension of reality for the purposes of theatre does not equate with the belief systems of other audiences, such as the Tolai people of New Britain, where the mask is an instrument of visitation (Emigh 1996: 14). However, the mask remains a powerful symbol, drawn from the human imagination but attempting to represent that which cannot be easily explained.

Conclusion

Siamsa Tíre has developed a unique form of folk theatre that aims to present on stage material that draws from Irish folklore and traditions, not only in a creative and aesthetically pleasing manner but also in a way that presents insights into the beliefs of the folk. The traditions and beliefs associated with Samhain have provided inspiration for two productions by the company that, while developing in different ways, attempt to engage audiences in an older belief system that can still be relevant in a modern world. The presentations are fun and entertaining and, despite dealing with strange and sometimes dark subject matter, can engage children and help them relate to mysterious aspects of the world in which they live, as well as traditions of music, song and dance. The subject matter is not only meaningful to an Irish audience but is part of a global set of human beliefs that, though they vary in detail from place to place, share many core elements and manifestations.

Rogers states: ‘To examine the history of Halloween is to recognize that it is not a holiday that has been celebrated the same way over the centuries, nor one whose meaning is fixed’ (2003: 10). Despite significant changes over millennia to the festival of Samhain, it remains to the fore in contemporary culture as a recognisable festivity with equivalents in many parts of the world. Inspiring films (Rogers 2003; O’Donnell and Foley 2008) and developing a commercial impetus (Santino 1983; Rogers 2003; McKechnie and Tynan 2008), it retains core elements and ideas that are grounded in folk culture. Despite strong links to Christianity, which assimilated or challenged the practices and customs of the pre-Christian festival in Ireland, Santino notes: ‘The old beliefs never really died out. The very powerful symbolism of the traveling dead was too strong, and perhaps too basic, to the

human psyche to be satisfied by this new, more abstract Catholic feast day' (1983: 7). While Hallowe'en remains a part of the calendar of the Catholic Church and retains a religious significance, the meanings of Samhain are constructed from older, primitive concepts of the folk, which are universal in their appeal.

Hallowe'en presents an opportunity for humans to make the strange familiar (Clark 2005). It places an Otherworld of ghosts, fairies, witches and druids at its core and allows people of all ages to engage with their curiosity and fears. Hallowe'en also retains an association with the harvest, particularly in the decorations and customs, 'bobbing for apples, and its pumpkins, and its fruits and nuts and cider' (Santino 1983: 19), which remains a source of connection for people in urban places with their rural hinterland (Santino 1983; Kugelmass 1991; Siporin 1993). Folklore presents a deep well of inspiration for creative arts practitioners. Hallowe'en holds a vast array of meaning, memory and identity for many people and resonates with international audiences. Developing the pioneering work of Ahern in Irish folk theatre, Hurley represents the artist who is curious about the deeper meaning of folk and who explores and examines the folk through the medium of theatre. Through the work of *Siamsa Tíre*, the theatre also becomes a space for education, providing people with an insight into old customs and practices in an entertaining manner. When asked would he do it again, Hurley indicated that indeed he would like the opportunity (2013). Ahern also noted still untapped potential (2013). A challenge may be that, for a theatre production, there is too much to draw upon at once.

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