Transforming research into art: the making and staging of My English Tongue, My Irish Heart, a research-based drama about the Irish in Britain

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ABSTRACT
This article explores the use of research-based theatre as an alternative mode of research representation and audience engagement in the field of Irish migration studies. Although theatre-based methods of research inquiry and presentation have attracted growing academic interest in recent decades, there are few examples of research-based projects that originate in literary or historical research, and fewer still that have resulted in full-scale theatrical productions. My English Tongue, My Irish Heart is one such work, a play that purposefully seeks to expand the public reach of research outward from universities into the communities that were originally studied. The first part of the article outlines the play’s origins and development; the second explores the chief conceptual and artistic challenges that arose during its creation; and the third presents a critical evaluation of the play’s reception, drawing on audience feedback data collected during its month-long tour of Ireland and the UK in May 2015.

Introduction
Theatre-based methods of research inquiry and presentation have attracted growing academic interest in recent decades, particularly from qualitative researchers in the fields of health, education and social science. Not all research-based theatre projects have resulted in full-scale theatrical productions, however. Many, indeed, have been “performed solely for small audiences of like-minded academics” at conferences or other such gatherings of insiders, thus failing to meet a core aim of this theatrical subgenre, which is “to move the influence of research outward from universities and other academic settings, to include communities that were originally studied and the general public”.

KEYWORDS
Research-based theatre; migration; Irish in Britain; pleasurable learning
conceptual, methodological and artistic challenges that arose during the play’s composition; and the third presents a critical evaluation of the play’s reception and impact, drawing on the audience feedback data collected during its month-long tour.²

The conception and shaping of the project

In Tom Murphy’s *A Whistle in the Dark* (1961), Harry Carney derides the very notion of the working-class emigrant autobiographer when he tells his brothers: “None of us goin’ writing books of memories later”.³ Harry knew whereof he spoke since few of his real-life compatriots who fled provincial Ireland for the expanding cities of post-war England left a literary trace. Even those who felt compelled to document their lives in print, such as Dónall Mac Amhlaigh, did so furtively, in the knowledge that they were deviating from powerful communal norms that deemed literary endeavour to be “the stamp of a ne’er do well, a man who had no worthwhile qualities, an idler or a dreamer”.⁴ It was reading authors such as Mac Amhlaigh that whetted my desire to discover if there were other such exceptions to the norm. This research eventually led to the publication of *The Literature of the Irish in Britain: Autobiography and Memoir, 1725–2001* (2009), in which I sought to reclaim and evaluate a hitherto neglected literary corpus. The writers featured cover a very broad spectrum of talent and achievement, from such towering figures as W.B. Yeats, to disregarded working-class writers like Jim Phelan, to obscure individuals such as Maureen Hamish, whose idiosyncratic testimony is her sole bequest to posterity.

The fact that the book’s publication coincided with a dramatic upsurge in emigration from the Republic of Ireland, and increasingly heated debates about immigration in Britain, gave impetus to my desire to extend the public reach of its findings beyond the circuits of academia. The era-defining financial crisis of 2008, which abruptly halted a period of accelerated economic growth, net in-migration and rising levels of personal affluence in the Republic, re-catapulted emigration to the top of the national agenda and resuscitated long-established associations of emigration with economic victimhood. The prolonged recession that took hold resulted in soaring levels of deprivation and unemployment, which in turn triggered a sustained wave of out-migration. An estimated 308,000 people left the Republic in the four years to April 2012, 41% of whom were in the 15–24 age cohort. The 2010–2012 period witnessed the greatest net outflow of migrants since 1987, with 87,100 people leaving in the year to April 2012 alone.⁵

Although destinations were more globally dispersed than in the past, the UK retained its long-standing popularity as a magnet for Irish economic migrants. For example, an estimated 20% of those who left Ireland in 2011 moved to the UK, a sharp increase on the 2008 figure of 7.6%.⁶ Many of these new arrivals soon began to put down roots here, thus adding to the proportion of the British population that identifies as Irish by birth or descent.⁷ These newcomers were also gaining first-hand exposure to the pronounced anti-immigrant rhetoric in the British public sphere, and to the animus directed towards the Muslim community in the wake of the 2005 terrorist attacks in London, some of which echoed the not-so-distant days when Irish immigrants were themselves the targets of ideological smearing.

It was against this backdrop that I began to contemplate how I might make my research findings more accessible and meaningful to the wider public, including those communities whose concerns they reflect. In the early part of 2013, I settled on the idea of transforming the originating research into a stage play, a choice quickened by my recognising anew how
inherently dramatic many of the first-person testimonies in my book are and their potential to become the basis for a theatrical production that would engage audiences on themes that I felt had contemporary as well as historical relevance. Certainly, I wanted any such play to pose questions about society’s ability to welcome strangers and provide a corrective to the prevailing emigrant-as-victim/immigrant-as-villain themes in British and Irish public discourses. Back in the 1980s, when an earlier migratory stream was in spate, the poet Eavan Boland compared the emigrant Irish to oil lamps that were consigned to “the back, / of our houses, of our minds” until “a time came, this time and now / we need them. Their dread, makeshift example”. I felt that a commensurate act of cultural retrieval was necessary today, as the amnesia about emigration that was evident during the Celtic Tiger era gave way to doom-laden pronouncements about the prospects of those heading to the airports and ferry terminals in the wake of the Republic’s plunge into steep economic decline.

A research-based drama struck me as a suitably vivid and compact vehicle for this purpose, not least because of the unique communal experience that theatre facilitates. As David Hare puts it: “People think more deeply when they think together. That’s what theatre does”. And while I heeded caveats that research-based theatre is in many ways “still in its infancy as a research methodology” and its efficacy “still largely unknown”, I was encouraged nonetheless by endorsements of its capacity to enrich and enliven research findings, such as those advanced by Vince White and George Belliveau:

Research-based theatre provides researchers with the opportunity to theatricalize their research data by presenting it performatively. In doing so, researchers create a viable alternative means for others to experience a particular research context on a level that is not easily attained through the written word exclusively.

However, when I set about looking for models to inform my thinking and help me define the parameters of the proposed work, it quickly became apparent that there were few examples of research-based drama that sought to represent the outcomes of literary and historical research. Despite assertions that research-based theatre is hospitable to many different disciplines and approaches, the critical literature on the subject shows that this type of drama is almost exclusively associated with the conduct, evaluation and dissemination of qualitative research in the fields of education and the social and health sciences. Yet, the more of this literature I read, the more connections I saw between the conceptual templates forged in these fields and the prospective aims and outcomes of my own migration-themed project. The claim that research-informed dramas about cancer “proved to be meaningful mediums for enhancing understanding of lived experience in different groups and communities” chimed with the hopes I had for my project, as did the suggestion that this particular theatrical subgenre facilitates the communication of research findings in “an emotive and embodied manner”, thus ensuring that the work “be felt to the same extent as it is thought about”. Jim Mienczakowski’s observation about ethnographically constructed dramas bringing about attitudinal change spoke to the educative agenda behind my project, and I was intrigued by the suggestion that disseminating research through theatrical performance “invites a new layer of participation into the inquiry by making explicit the subjective interpretations and extensions that others glean from a research endeavour when it is dramatically represented, a process that itself opens up new investigative possibilities”. Might a play based on the autobiographical testimonies in my book be able to elicit such a response?

At the same time, however, I recognised that there were important differences between my proposal and the research-based theatre projects devised by professionals in other
disciplinary fields. Chief among these was the fact that the play I was envisaging did not fully fit any of the existing traditions and definitions of research-based theatre in the critical literature, such as ethnodrama, documentary theatre, verbatim theatre and performed ethnography. The qualitative research that informs this family of practices tends to be planned and undertaken with dramatisation in mind, as a means of advancing knowledge through unconventional research methods. Judged against such criteria, my proposal looked decidedly anomalous. Not only was the research I carried out for my book not conceived as “preparatory fieldwork” for a play, the notion that I was now “dramatizing the data” sat a little uneasily with me as a literary scholar. The fact that I was proposing to commission the play from a professional dramatist made my approach seem more atypical still, as most research-based dramas tend to be written by researchers, sometimes in collaboration with their research participants. For some in the field, involving a playwright/director also runs counter to the egalitarian ethos of “the collective, collaborative model of research-based theatre”, whereby “researchers and artists try to avoid hierarchies in favour of consensus and group decisions”. I persisted nonetheless, believing that my research was amenable to theatrical rendition and that the addition of a humanities dimension to a set of concerns more usually considered the domain of the social and health sciences would perhaps contribute to a broadening and diversifying of the kind of “data” that can be dramatised by this theatrical subgenre.

The two immediate challenges I faced were to interest a playwright in working with me and to secure sufficient funding to facilitate such a collaborative venture. I was fortunate in that the first dramatist I approached, Martin Lynch, responded positively to my ideas. Chief among the factors that drew me to Lynch was the fact that he is a playwright/director with a strong social conscience who has a long and distinguished record of community-based theatre practice in Northern Ireland, which is underpinned by an adherence to documentary techniques and vernacular poetics. A commitment to social change and to the creative empowerment of less privileged communities spans his entire oeuvre, from his earliest play, We Want Work, We Want Bread (1976), through Dockers (1981) and Castles in the Air (1983) to Chronicles Of Long Kesh (2009). Chronicles, which is set in Northern Ireland’s infamous prison (better known as The Maze) between 1971 and 2000, is a particularly fine example of Lynch’s desire to reclaim the theatre for people who are unfamiliar with it, using ethnographic methods – “preparatory fieldwork” in Johnny Saldaña’s terms. In writing Chronicles, Lynch supplemented his personal memories and family accounts of arrest and imprisonment with material gleaned from interviews he carried out with “over 40 ex-prisoners, prison officers, welfare workers and families affected either directly or indirectly by life in Long Kesh”. From these interviews, he created “a set of fictional characters through whose personal stories the larger narrative of the jail might be told, thereby also honouring the micro-narratives of the individuals who had been his sources”. Since it was precisely this kind of research-informed dramaturgy that I wished to see applied to my own work, I felt Lynch was ideally suited to the task of reshaping some of the autobiographical narratives in The Literature of the Irish in Britain into an empathic drama that would speak to audiences without sentiment or cant. On this basis, I successfully applied to the AHRC’s Follow-on Funding for Impact and Engagement scheme in 2014.
Navigating the transformation from page to stage

As part of my AHRC grant application, Lynch and I had already drawn up a schedule of work for the project, divided into four three-month phases. The first phase was largely given over to meetings and discussions about process and methodology, which were primarily focused on the selection and adaptation of the primary source materials for dramatic purposes. These discussions carried on into phase two, which saw the delivery of the first draft of the script and the holding of casting auditions. Phase three was mainly concerned with the logistics of production and touring. Phase four was by far the busiest for all of those involved in the project. It saw the delivery of the further revised script; the production of the theatre programme and audience questionnaires; a four-week rehearsal period in Belfast; and the staging and touring of the play to nine venues in Ireland, Northern Ireland and England by Green Shoot Productions.

It was during the first phase of the project that the issue that was to become the most persistently challenging emerged: how to strike and maintain a balance between the artistic and aesthetic demands of the theatre and the ethical imperative to honour the integrity of the scholarly research that inspired and underpinned the play. Given Lynch’s extensive track record of sociohistorical documentary playmaking, he and I had already agreed during our preliminary discussions that honouring the testimonies in the primary sources would be best served if the play were informed by the techniques of documentary theatre. In fact, there was a strong synergy between the objectives of our project and the core attributes of documentary plays, as summarised by Derek Paget:

1. They reassess international/national/local histories;
2. They celebrate repressed or marginalised communities and groups, bringing to light their histories and aspirations;
3. They investigate contentious events and issues in local, national and international contexts;
4. They disseminate information, employing an operational concept of ‘pleasurable learning’ – the idea that the didactic is not, in itself, necessarily inimical to entertainment;
5. They can interrogate the very notion of documentary.24

Documentary theatre’s synonymity with verbatim techniques, whereby the actual, spoken words of real people are woven into a play, sometimes in edited form, further underscored its suitability for our purposes. Even though we realised that we would be taking liberties with this technique, which in its strictest form is “understood to be based on the spoken words of real people on stage”,25 we felt the verbatim style was particularly well suited to dramatising the written autobiographical testimonies of historical figures, many of whom adhered to “an ethic and aesthetic of accuracy – the determination to record what one human being has observed and experienced”.26 Sifting through the various claims and counterclaims made about the value and purpose of the verbatim mode, playwright Robin Soans’ aim “to use people’s real words to move us to a new understanding of ourselves”27 struck a particular chord with us, our goal being to produce a play that would elicit reflective, questioning and empathic responses from audiences. There is, moreover, a tradition within verbatim theatre of identifying strongly with the communities that inspired its creation, and which practitioners of the genre hoped to empower and transform through the vernacular re-telling of stories.
that are unique to those communities. This means that verbatim plays are typically “fed back into the communities (which have, in a real sense, created them), via performance in those communities.”\textsuperscript{28} It was precisely this kind of creative loop that our project wished to replicate and which the play tour itself sought to instantiate by bringing the production to community venues in counties along Ireland’s western seaboard that have been emigrant nurseries for centuries, and from there to cultural centres in two major loci of Irish settlement in England, Manchester and London. This tour design was intended to amplify the multidirectional aspects of migration, just as the play itself sought to exploit the capacity of personal accounts of actual journeys to initiate reflective inward journeys in those who heard them.

But while Lynch and I felt a strong responsibility to do justice to the testimonies of the autobiographers, we also recognised the aesthetic constraints of adhering too rigidly to the primary sources. George Belliveau and Graham Lea’s observation that “[w]hile the use of verbatim in ethnodrama may lend veracity to research-based theatre, being bound by the data may limit the aesthetic potential of a script”\textsuperscript{29} registered with both of us, all the more so since the issue of aesthetic potential is so inextricably linked to matters of artistic freedom, dramaturgical intent and dramatic shape and form, including plot, storyline and characterisation. The logic of Max Stafford-Clark’s arresting encapsulation of verbatim theatre’s essence – “I mean really what a verbatim play does is flash your research nakedly. It’s like cooking a meal but the meat is left raw”\textsuperscript{30} – is that one should not tamper with one’s source materials, that theatricality must not trump documentary authenticity. Such an approach is somewhat at odds with Lynch’s own dramaturgical practice, which is closer in ethos to that of Saldaña, which itself chimes with the Brechtian association of documentary theatre with pleasurable learning:

This may be difficult for some to accept, but theatre’s primary goal is neither to ‘educate’ nor to ‘enlighten’. Theatre’s primary goal is to entertain – to entertain ideas and to entertain for pleasure. With ethnographic performance, then, comes the responsibility to create an entertainingly informative experience for an audience, one that is aesthetically sound, intellectually rich, and emotionally evocative.\textsuperscript{31}

Saldaña’s summary acted as a kind of blueprint for our project, driven as it was by the twin desires to give my research embodied theatrical representation and to make audiences care about and be moved by the characters. To achieve this balance, we needed a script and a performance that would combine emotion and information without becoming lecture-like; that would entertain, intrigue, provoke and broaden audiences’ knowledge (including self-knowledge) without becoming a memory play; and that would allow the playwright/director, and indeed the wider artistic team, the flexibility to respond creatively to the autobiographical source materials, while staying as faithful as possible to the “truth” of the first-person testimonies therein. As Lynch and I set about meeting these aspirations, our collaborative relationship began to change in subtle but significant ways: he moving towards the pole of research practitioner, while making no pretence to specialist knowledge; me blurring the line between collaborator and co-creator, while making no claims to play authorship.

The more we worked on the script, the more we found that successfully meeting the triple challenge of honouring the integrity of the sources, allowing the playwright/director creative freedom and serving the interests of the audience depended on our interpretation and application of the verbatim form. As Janelle Reinelt points out: “The term ‘verbatim’ already delineates a narrow orthodoxy since it claims that what you will hear spoken are the
authentic and unaltered words of various real-life agents”. This “needlessly ups the ante on the promise of documentary” and consequently “risks a perception of documentary failure, since it inevitably falls short of technical truth”. Furthermore, as Robin Soans frankly observes:

No matter how compelling the speeches are in terms of truthfulness and revelation in their own right, the verbatim play must be more than a random collection of monologues if it is to sustain interest over a whole evening. A presentation of opposing viewpoints would be a turn-off in the same way.

In view of this, the attractions of an impure approach, such as that which conceptualises verbatim theatre as inhabiting “a spectrum between reality and fiction” were compelling. The views of Soans again proved influential in this regard. Arguing from the premise that verbatim theatre “is as creative a medium as any other”, he contends that there need not be “an embargo on editing creatively” when using verbatim techniques:

To declare that, because subjects are real, they have to be portrayed in a way that fictional characters are not, is to undermine the power of the verbatim playwright. It prevents the tailoring of the material to make it political, emotional or even theatrical.

Lynch certainly wanted to tailor the material to make it emotional and theatrical, which in practice meant adapting excerpts from the original sources to suit the dramatic narrative of the play, investing such excerpts with his own dramaturgical rhythms and inflections and interpolating word-for-word autobiographical extracts with imagined dialogue and invented scenes. Lynch was distinctly wary of the work becoming “political”, however. The lesson that a preachy script is a recipe for deadly dullness was borne in on him early in his playwrighting career and contributed to a defining shift in his dramatic practice, as he told me in an interview:

When I started out and for most of the 1980s I thought I was writing a play to tell a story and advance a set of politics while doing so. My position in this area has changed radically. I no longer write plays with any single set of politics. […] Nowadays, I write a play to tell a story and present the views of all characters in the play.

So while we both valued the verbatim mode as an accessible and supportive scaffold for the dramatisation of the great variety of migrant experiences and mentalités, we agreed that it needed to be deployed in a flexible manner. More contentiously, Lynch felt that for the play to connect with a wide general audience, the literary source materials on their own would not instil the work with a sufficiently strong emotional arc, one dramatic enough to hook and hold an audience’s attention. His argument rested not on an antipathy towards documentary theatre per se but rather on his belief that a play must first and foremost engage audiences emotionally by taking them on a journey involving one or two central protagonists. While I did not necessarily disagree with this viewpoint, I did want to qualify it by arguing that an emotional, empathetic theatre piece can also be intellectually, philosophically and politically freighted, and that we should not shy away from provoking an interpretive response from audiences on these levels (Figure 1).

The choice Lynch and I faced, then, was either to construct a unifying narrative thread around one or two of the historical figures in my book or invent new characters whose story would provide the necessary dramatic unity. Our decision to introduce a new layer of story around which excerpts from my anthology would be woven was influenced by our shared desire for the play to have a strong contemporary focus, the better to speak to its target audience. This fictional narrative traces the progress of a young, educated couple – Gary
O’Donnell, a Mayo Catholic and Susan Hetherington, a Dungannon Protestant – who meet at university in Galway, fall in love, fall out of love, reunite and eventually move to Manchester in the early 2000s when Gary accepts a job as a marketing executive. Once settled in the city, Susan finds employment as a schoolteacher and Gary eventually sets up a marketing company with his friend and colleague, Roger Carney, a Mancunian of Irish ancestry. The birth of two children brings questions of identity and allegiance into sharp focus for the couple and compels them to face up to some troubling home truths. A crisis point is reached in the second act when Susan and Gary’s son, Oisin, shows signs of rejecting his Irish heritage and identity. This manifests itself in his not wishing to wear the Ireland rugby jersey – a fifth birthday present from his parents – during an Ireland vs. England game in the Six Nations Championship. The boy’s decision to fashion his own hybrid jersey for the occasion marks his first attempt to challenge the historically polarised categories of Irishness and Englishness and articulate a sense of transcultural identification for which there is no readymade emblem.

The portrayal of Gary and Susan’s twenty-first-century odyssey is intercut with historical scenes based on the autobiographical sources in *The Literature of the Irish in Britain*, using a combination of verbatim quotation and invented dialogue. Phrases, insights and information gleaned from several other memoirs and autobiographies uncovered during my research are woven into other parts of the dramatic narrative. Given my book’s attention to the diverse histories of Irish presence in Britain, Lynch and I consciously sought to represent male and female migrants from different historical eras and from a variety of regional, occupational, religious, class and generational backgrounds. Dramatic potential was also an important selection criterion. We deliberately sought out characters and passages that had the capacity to make a strong, sensory impact on audiences, and Lynch was ever alert for moments of humour and comedy that might be capitalised upon to enliven the action.

Dramaturgically, *My English Tongue, My Irish Heart* incorporates a number of the conventions and techniques of documentary theatre, including the use of narration, direct address and song. In terms of the play’s formal properties, it demonstrates the “more fluid use of stage space and more flexible expectations of actors” that are hallmarks of the documentary
tradition. The production was performed in the round by a professional cast of five black-clad actors (three male, two female) on a minimalistic wooden set that consisted of an open platform stage, painted black, with ramps leading up to it on two of its four sides. On the stage sat an assortment of differently sized wooden crates, also painted black, the representational function of which changed according to the demands of the scene. The only other props used were two over-sized flags, which feature in the closing scenes. The spartan set and plain costumes were intended to provide as few distractions as possible from the dialogue and action, and to facilitate the play’s rapid transformations of time, place and mood, which require the actors to change characters on a continual basis (although the same two actors play Susan and Gary throughout) (Figure 2).

Given the continual switches between locations and time periods, it was clear from an early stage in the script development that there was a need for narratorial guidance to ensure intelligibility. Rather than having a single narrator, however, the role rotates among the actors, often within the same scene, a device that is in keeping with the ensemble nature of the performance and the play’s punchy, fast-paced style. Direct address of the audience by characters also features, and one of the storylines culminates in a moment of interaction between the cast and a randomly selected audience member, who briefly becomes Susan’s great-aunt, an unseen character in the play. The decision to add songs to the production was arrived at after Lynch and I recalled how often the tribulations of Irish life in Britain feature in the Irish emigrant song tradition, from Percy French’s 1896 ballad, “Mountains of Mourne”, to Paul Brady’s 1981 protest song, “Nothing But the Same Old Story”. The medley with which the play opens includes excerpts from both songs, and later scenes are punctuated by verses from other songs that memorialise aspects of the Irish exilic experience. Rather than acting as pleasant interludes, however, these songs are intended to contribute to the

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Figure 2. Keith Singleton, Kerri Quinn, Margaret McAuliffe and Cillian O’Dee in *My English Tongue, My Irish Heart* by Martin Lynch (Irish World Heritage Centre, Manchester, 26 May 2015). Photo: Ruth Gonsalves Moore.
play as a whole, both structurally and thematically, and to enhance the emotional impact of the piece.

My observation of audiences’ reactions to a number of the performances suggested that the singing of well-loved songs at key moments contributed significantly to the sense of communal consciousness. At times, indeed, the singing was so showstopping in its impact that part of me wondered if the production might be falling prey to a risk indentified by Thomas C. Turner, which is “that the emotion of the material will overshadow the information that the researcher attempts to impart.” To determine whether or not this was the case, I turned to the written feedback on the audience questionnaires that were distributed at all 16 performances of the play. Immediately, I was struck by how many of the comments addressed the role of song, music and movement in the play, almost all of which affirmed the efficacy of these elements in enhancing audiences’ knowledge and understanding of the subject matter. The following verbatim remarks comprise a representative sample:

Perfect play for me – 2nd generation Irish through and through. Excellent portrayal of dilemma, outcomes, politics, passion through song and humour – singing and performance excellent slick, quick, great swings of emotions.

Loved the way song, dance, narrative and interaction were seamlessly integrated throughout the drama. Terrific performances by all actors.

The way the story threads run together: the use of songs to get meaning across. The pace and brio of the piece.

Loved that it was in the round, very different. Loved the songs that broke it up – reminded me of Dermot O’Leary’s recent autobiography told by records in his life.

In the final part of this article, I will look more closely at this questionnaire data in order to present a fuller assessment of the play’s cognitive, emotional and moral impact on audiences.

Evaluating the play’s reception and impact

As already mentioned, an anonymous questionnaire, containing a mixture of seven closed (pre-coded) and open questions, was devised in order to capture audience feedback and reaction. Questionnaires were distributed to audience members before each performance and collected at the end. In the four locations where the production was accompanied by a post-performance audience discussion (Belfast, Castlebar, Manchester and London), the completed forms were gathered in before the discussion began. All handwritten responses were subsequently transcribed and collated in spreadsheet form. The first question on the questionnaire asked respondents to describe their level of theatre-going experience, the second to state how they heard about the play and the third to rate the overall quality of the production using a four-point differential scale (“poor”, “average”, “good”, “excellent”). Four open questions followed, each of which invited a written response. Of the 2,073 people who came to see the play, 744 completed an evaluation questionnaire, almost half of whom (44%) described themselves as first-time or infrequent theatre-goers. The overwhelming majority (94%) of those who returned their forms rated the overall quality of the production as “excellent” or “good”. Sixty-seven per cent of attendees said they learned more than they already knew about Irish emigration and its effects, and 49% said that the play had in some way altered their views about migration.
Analysis of the questionnaire data clearly shows that My English Tongue, My Irish Heart had a strongly positive emotional and educational impact on a substantial number of people who saw it. The great majority of evaluative comments attest to the resonant emotional connection many viewers forged with the play, with a substantial number of respondents seeing aspects of their personal or family experiences of migration reflected in the storyline. Such deeply personal responses bear out endorsements of research-based theatre’s ability to engage audiences on a cognitive, emotional and embodied level. As one team of health researchers put it: “When research-based drama is experienced as real, audience members are more easily able to transport themselves into the story and see themselves and others in a new light.”43 The multiple shivers of recognition recorded on the questionnaires would also appear to support the claim that “[r]esearch presented in dramatic form communicates findings viscerally, beyond or below the usual cognitive filtering mechanisms familiar to academic discourse.”44 Certainly, the fact that the piece produced so many points of recognition for audience members indicates that far from being a historical drama, this is a work that viewers perceived as being about experiences that are still happening and multi-generational affiliations that are still unfolding.

People’s stated motivations for coming to see the play reveal that it reached its target audience on both sides of the Irish Sea, while also attracting viewers from non-Irish backgrounds, several of whom noted the play’s “transferability across e/immigrant experiences” and its capacity to resonate with those who were not “intending to feel part of this history”. Strikingly, several of the responses to the question about motivation resemble highly compressed autobiographies, the vivid details of which make them seem like embryonic play-scripts or mini-dramas in their own right. Interestingly, a significant proportion of the open-ended comments about what people liked or disliked about the play centre on the style and design of the piece, with most people expressing satisfaction with the in-the-round staging and its facilitation of actor–audience intimacy and the energy generated by the actors. Audiences also seemed to appreciate the compatibility of this presentational style with a dramatic narrative that features so many spatial and temporal shifts (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Ross Anderson-Doherty and Kerri Quinn in My English Tongue, My Irish Heart by Martin Lynch (Irish World Heritage Centre, Manchester, 26 May 2015). Photo: Ruth Gonsalves Moore.
But by far the strongest theme to emerge from the audience evaluations is the extent to which the play proved effective as a pedagogical tool, one that increased people’s knowledge of migration and its effects and broadened their understanding of their own and others’ identities. As the sample comments cited here show, audience members rated the use of drama as a knowledge transfer tool very highly. The written feedback reveals that the play managed to impart new knowledge to many viewers, consolidate the prior knowledge of others and challenge the prejudices and assumptions of others still. Most of the laudatory comments about the work’s educative function focus on its efficacy in exposing taken-for-granted conceptions of Irish emigration and raising people’s awareness of its historical scale and extent. The data points to a prevailing association of emigration with the mid-nineteenth-century Famine in the minds of many who saw the play, as encapsulated by remarks such as “Think emigration, think famine – that was me!” and “never really looked past 1846. Interesting!” Many responses also reveal a popular preconception that most of those who emigrated historically were male and impoverished, which may help explain the surprised reactions I witnessed from some audience members to two early scenes that dramatise episodes from the autobiographical narratives of Ellen O’Neill and Laetitia Pilkington.

The audience feedback also reflects a positive appreciation of the play as a means of validating people’s sense of personal and communal belonging and enlightening them about the complexities of diasporic identities. Perhaps unsurprisingly, this element of the audience experience was most pronounced among people of Irish descent in England, particularly those who self-identified as London Irish, several of whom said the play affirmed and authenticated their sense of cultural distinctiveness. The play seems to have helped some such individuals make better sense of what one respondent described as “my strange feeling of nationality” by giving public recognition to partial or hyphenated identities that aren’t always easily claimed or publicly asserted by those with “feet in two countries”.

The post-show discussions at the Irish World Heritage Centre in Manchester and the London Irish Centre in Camden Town elicited further responses on this theme, with several contributors commenting on the difficulties they experienced in giving public expression to their feelings of anomalous in-betweenness, sometimes to the point of disavowing origins of which they feel ashamed. During the audience discussion in Camden, for example, it was notable that a number of Irish Londoners used phrases such as “therapeutic” and “culturally empowering” to encapsulate their response to the play. Comments by such individuals about the unevenness of experiences of second- and third-generation Irishness in Britain were echoed by people from other ethnic backgrounds, who described how precarious the currents of multiple affiliation can be, depending on the levels of paranoia or moral panic that inform debates about immigration, multiculturalism and so-called British values.

Another closely related aspect of the play’s multigenerational and transnational impact is its capacity to raise Irish-born people’s awareness of, and empathic identification with, the negotiated identities of those born of Irish heritage abroad. Such feedback is a marked feature of the questionnaire data collected at the Irish and Northern Irish venues, which suggests that prior to seeing the play, many people with relatives growing up in Britain “hadn’t really thought about being torn between 2 cultures”, as one viewer put it, or reflected much on “the conundrum of belonging to more than one place”, in the words of another.

Taken together, these identity-focused comments demonstrate the extent to which My English Tongue, My Irish Heart speaks to conceptions and perceptions of diasporic identities within the island of Ireland and beyond. Responses such as those cited above correlate with
academic discussions of the complex processes of identity formation and articulation among many of the second-generation Irish population in Britain, who are typically positioned as “inauthentic” by the exclusionary discourses of both Irishness and Britishness. Central to the second-generation predicament, which several of the play’s scenes address, is the fact that while

the notion of hybridity allows for conceptualisation of new forms of identities which arise out of experiences of ‘dwelling-in-displacement’ […], in the case of the Irish in Britain, […] the assumption of assimilation is reinforced by a lack of a hyphenated name to give public recognition to this hybridity.46

Although this lack is not explicitly mentioned in the audience data, the responsive chords struck by the play’s dramatisation of the psychological consequences that flow from this semantic invisibility provide a unique snapshot of how the nuances of diasporic attachment are viewed by audiences in different locations in the Republic of Ireland, Northern Ireland and England.

Moving further along this continuum of empathic response to the complexities of interstitial and borderline identities, the play evidently prompted several viewers to reflect on their own attitudes to the intensifying political, social and cultural fears produced by immigrants and refugees in the Europe of 2015. One respondent wrote of how the play “Made me reconsider what that word ‘immigrant’ means – the depth of human experience it embodies”, another of how it “Made me face my own prejudice as someone who emigrated”. The impact of extra-theatrical realities on such reflections was quite marked, as the tour coincided with a surge in the number of undocumented migrants and refugees trying to enter the countries of the European Union from North Africa and the Middle East, whose influx sparked the migrant boat crisis in the Mediterranean, where an estimated 800 people died when a ship sank off the Libyan coast in April 2015. Some respondents referenced this context directly, including the audience member who wrote:

Made me think about the current situation in the Med and that the initial response to bomb the boats before they set off proved our politicians lack all imagination or sense of history … maybe they should come and see the play.

Although limited in number, such comments indicate that, at least in the moment of its first reception, *My English Tongue, My Irish Heart* showed a capacity to provoke moral reflections on the common humanity that dynamically connects us, the immensely privileged, and them, the gravely dispossessed. It may not be too fanciful to posit a link between such scribbled responses to the play and President Michael D. Higgins’ call for an ethical version of contemporary Irishness that is informed by the constitutive role migration has played in the country’s history.47

**Conclusion**

Saldaña suggests “[t]he ultimate merit and success of a play are constructed by the audience in attendance – the final arbiters of a play and its production”.48 Audience feedback data from the touring production of *My English Tongue, My Irish Heart* provides modest evidence that drama can be an effective medium for the dissemination of research findings in the humanities to audiences beyond academia, including those individuals and communities with which the research is concerned. The evaluative data indicates that an important part of the value of using drama as an alternative research dissemination medium lies in its
capacity to be an instrument of pleasurable learning and an aid to enhanced understanding. The questionnaire responses reveal that the play succeeded as a knowledge transfer tool on several levels. In addition to imparting new insights and affirming prior knowledge, the play had the effect of challenging simplistic, stereotypical or outdated thinking, raising empathic awareness, broadening attitudes and enlarging viewers’ moral and ethical imaginations. One must, of course, be careful not to over-extrapolate from the data or use it as a basis for unrealistic claims, for, as one group of researchers reminds us, “none of the studies have managed to concretely or objectively capture long-term effects of theatre as a learning or dissemination intervention in terms of attitude, behaviour or practice”. Nevertheless, audience reaction to My English Tongue, My Irish Heart provides some valuable insights into the ways in which the purposeful dramatisation of original research can holistically engage viewers and act as a catalyst for fostering greater awareness and understanding of complex issues that are, in Richard Rorty’s words, “not issue[s] to be resolved, […] only difference[s] to be lived with.”

Notes
1. Gray et al., “Making a Mess and Spreading it Around,” 69.
2. A filmed performance of the play can be viewed at http://www.mycountryajourney.org/
3. Murphy, Plays: 4, 49.
4. Mac Amhlaigh, “Dónall Mac Amhlaigh,” 175.
5. McAleer, Time to Go?, 13.
6. Gilmartin, “Changing Ireland, 2000–2012,” 10.
7. In the 2011 UK census, more than 530,000 people in England and Wales identified themselves as Irish. Over 400,000 of these people were born in the Irish Republic.
8. Boland, “The Emigrant Irish,” 129.
9. It might seem at first that my project fits within the category of “Practice as Research”, which Robin Nelson defines as “a research project in which practice is a key method of inquiry and where, in respect of the arts, a practice (creative writing, dance, musical score/performance, theatre/performance, visual exhibition, film or other cultural practice) is submitted as substantial evidence of a research inquiry” (Practice as Research in the Arts, 8–9). The fact that it does not is because my research preceded the practice and the practice functioned not as a method of enquiry per se but rather as a means of research dissemination and public engagement.
10. David Hare quoted in Boon, About Hare, 154.
11. Belliveau and Lea, “Research-based Theatre in Education,” 337.
12. Rossiter et al., “Staging Data,” 131.
13. White and Belliveau, “Multiple Perspectives, Loyalties and Identities,” 228.
14. Mitchell et al., “Research-based Theatre,” 198.
15. Rossiter et al., “Staging Data,” 130.
16. White and Belliveau, “Multiple Perspectives, Loyalties and Identities,” 227. Original emphasis.
17. Mienczakowski, “Theatre of Change,” 166.
18. White and Belliveau, “Multiple Perspectives, Loyalties and Identities,” 228.
19. Saldaña ed., Ethnodrama, 1–2.
20. Saldaña, “Dramatizing Data: A Primer,” 219.
21. Belliveau, “Performing Identity through Research-based Theatre,” 11.
22. Maguire, “Radical Remembering,” 79.
23. Ibid.
24. Paget, “The ‘Broken Tradition’ of Documentary Theatre,” 227–28. Original emphasis.
25. Cantrell, Acting in Documentary Theatre, 3. Original emphasis.
26. MacCabe, “Introduction,” ix. In The Literature of the Irish in Britain, I discuss how insecure and problematic the status of documentary truth is in relation to autobiographical writing. See xxi–xxvii.
27. Soans, “Robin Soans,” 41.
28. Paget, “Verbatim Theatre,” 317. Original emphasis.
29. Belliveau and Lea, “Research-based Theatre in Education,” 335.
30. Hare and Stafford-Clark, “David Hare and Max Stafford-Clark,” 51.
31. Saldaña, “Dramatizing Data,” 220.
32. Reinelt, “The Promise of Documentary,” 13.
33. Ibid., 13–4.
34. Soans, “Robin Soans,” 26.
35. Hare and Stafford-Clark, “David Hare and Max Stafford-Clark,” 74.
36. Soans, “Robin Soans,” 34, 35.
37. Harte, Unpublished interview with Martin Lynch. Original emphasis.
38. Alecky Blythe asserts that one of the biggest challenges of verbatim theatre is “how to escape the confines of retrospective story-telling and include action that takes place in the present”. See Blythe, “Alecky Blythe,” 92.
39. Paget, “The ‘Broken Tradition’ of Documentary Theatre,” 234.
40. Turner, “Researcher-playwright and the Research-play,” 65.
41. My focus here is on the responses of audiences rather than theatre critics. Most reviewers were generous in their praise for the production, as evidenced by the notices in Culture Hub Magazine (6 May 2015), The Irish News (7 May 2015), The Irish Times (11 May 2015) and The Examiner (12 May 2015).
42. This transcription work was carried out by Rebecca Hurst, whose assistance I gratefully acknowledge.
43. Mitchell et al., “The Experience of Engaging with Research-based Drama,” 388.
44. Gray et al., “Making a Mess and Spreading it Around,” 57.
45. See for example Hickman et al., “The Limitations of Whiteness and the Boundaries of Englishness,” 160–82.
46. Walter et al., “Family Stories, Public Silence,” 202–03.
47. Higgins, “Reflecting on Irish Migrations,” 148.
48. Saldaña, “Ethnodrama and Ethnotheatre,” 204.
49. Rossiter et al., “Staging Data,” 139.
50. Rorty, Consequences of Pragmatism, 197.

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