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ANU PRODUCTIONS

The Monto Cycle

Brian Singleton



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To my mother, Eleanor

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Introduction

Abstract ‘The Monto Cycle’ was an award-winning tetralogy of performances (2010–14) by ANU Productions that operated at the intersection of performance, installation, visual art, choreography, site-responsive and community arts. Set within a quarter square mile of Dublin’s north inner city, colloquially known as The Monto, the performances featured social concerns that have blighted the area over the past 100 years, including prostitution, trafficking, asylum-seeking, heroin addiction and the scandal of the Magdalene laundries. The Introduction places the four productions in their social, historical, cultural and economic contexts, and sets out strategies of analysis for performances that were concerned with time, place, history, memory, the city, ‘affect’ and the self as agent of action.

Keywords Social history · Site-responsive · Site-specific · Immersive · Intimacy

‘The Monto Cycle’ was a multi-award-winning tetralogy of performances (2010–14) by one of Ireland’s leading theatre companies, ANU Productions, that operated at the intersection of performance, installation, visual art, choreography, technology and community arts. Devised and set in various locations in a quarter square mile of Dublin’s north inner city, colloquially known as The Monto, the four performances featured social concerns that have blighted the area over the past 100 years, including prostitution, trafficking, asylum-seeking, heroin addiction, and the shame

and scandal of the Magdalene laundries. While operating in many instances site-responsively, the four performances were played in intimate settings, often to individual spectators who at times were invited to engage, respond and interact with the stories unfolding around them. The Monto Cycle performances at the time of writing are the most talked about and studied of contemporary Irish theatre and speak to wider and international interests in site-responsive and immersive performance, theatre and communities, visual art and dance, as well as to the complexities of staging history in the contemporary moment.

The Monto, as site, was made popular in song by The Dubliners¹ that refers directly to the history of Montgomery Street, now Foley Street, on the area's southern border, which was in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the red-light district of Dublin. The four parts of the cycle reflected the changing fortunes of the area, told through multiple micro-histories in sites that stand testimony to the economic impact and social changes that have visited the area since. The cycle began in 2010 with *World's End Lane*, a representation of the area as an early twentieth-century locational site for the sex trade in which spectators as individuals encountered the world as a punter, tourist and a complicit worker in the trade. In 2011 *Laundry* brought us into the world of the so-called Magdalene laundries, challenging spectators by making them copresent at moments of committal and escape from the asylum/laundry that stands abandoned at the northern end of the Monto, as well as to assist, interact and bear witness to the histories and experiences of some of the women incarcerated there. Ultimately the performance ended in a contemporary laundrette at the back of the former institution in which spectators were put to work as a contemporary framing of a representation of the past in which we had been copresent performatively. Next *The Boys of Foley Street* (2012) brought us into the world of the heroin blight that decimated the area's youth in the 1980s in which spectators were complicit in the trade as well as in the anti-drugs campaign that operated, too, on the wrong side of the law. Finally in 2014, *Vardo* reflected the contemporary, and virtually invisible, international sex trade and people trafficking in the area, the limbo state of asylum-seekers who are unable to go anywhere, and some local women who still held out hope for better fortune despite nothing ever changing in their world. In this final production spectators, again implicated through intimacy, saw flashbacks of all four performances, on video and through the choreography of a fortune-teller in which the future was told through the lens of the past.

Many names have been attached to the form of The Monto Cycle and yet no one name is able to capture the complexity and multiplicity of performative strategies used by ANU Productions to enable spectators to encounter the history, people, geography and very materiality of the Monto. At times the performances were site-responsive, site-specific and immersive, but they also used projected street art, community actors, abstract choreography, documented testimony as well as direct address. In all four performances spectators travelled, either on foot or by cars driven by actor-characters, journeying through the streets and encountering real life and its obstacles and interventions along the way. At times the distinction between reality and performance was blurred to the point of spectators not knowing what was real or performative. It was a strategy that awakened in spectators a heightened sense of consciousness, and an alertness to the possibility of anything and everything in view being important and vital, whether it was intended to be, or an accident of the performances' encounter with real lives.

Given the multiplicity of performance forms and strategies it is impossible to locate directly comparative companies either nationally or internationally. Much celebrated immersive work in the UK has emerged contemporaneously to ANU Productions. One of these UK companies is Punchdrunk that since 2000 has performed in non-theatre buildings often with the raw material of epic stories and plays but told in non-linear ways and in installation-like environments. They describe their work as 'immersive'² in which the audience is embedded in the structures of the performance and often the spectators feel they have free reign and a sense of agency in journeying through it. Another UK company, You Me Bum Bum Train, has produced work regularly since 2004 and in various locations their eponymous performances in which individual audience members encounter staged scenes with an army of volunteer performers who confront the spectator with improvisatory challenges, such as to conduct them as an orchestra, lecture them as an expert on contemporary art in a gallery, prepare vegetables in a restaurant and commentate on a snooker match. Mark Lawson, writing in *The Independent*, described their 2015 production thus: 'the show's interactions with love and death, comedy and tragedy are an unprecedented and unforgettable experience that resembles being alone in a combination of Disneyland and Banksy's Dismaland'. You Me Bum Bum Train seeks not only to challenge spectators individually, but also to reconfigure them as active agents copresently creating performance in installation-like tableaux, but, unlike ANU's work, is not grounded in history, truth or social reality.

To what tradition then does Irish site-specific theatre, and ANU Productions in particular, belong? First of all it is important to determine and locate the various types of non-building-based theatre that have originated largely in festival contexts in Ireland. Since 1994 Cork-based Corcadorca blazed a trail with what they term ‘off-site’ performances of playtexts, the first location being Cork City Gaol. From their celebrated outdoor version of Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice* as part of Cork City of Culture in 2005 to their indoor (and in a real apartment) portrayal of Franz Xaver Kroetz’s one-woman show *Request Programme* in 2011, in which spectators followed a woman around her own home, and even into the bathroom and stood idly by as she took an overdose, the company’s work has pushed theatre and audiences out of their comfort zone and into intimate contact with each other. That type of off-site work also includes more recent productions such as Wilfredd’s *Farm* (2012) ironically in a disused urban warehouse whose scenographic materiality clashed with its imported contents of a tractor, hay, soil, chickens and a horse. This metonymic substitution of one environment for another was seen to great effect in the hugely successful *Berlin Love Tour* by Lynda Radley (2010) performed by Playgroup who have reconfigured Irish cities as the divided city Berlin, and Siamsa Tíre’s *What the Folk* (2011) in which audiences were invited to tea and a conversation with the dancers (and also to their bedrooms) to reveal their innermost secrets, fears, loves and losses. What characterizes all of the productions is their locations, empathetic environments for the performances that have been created in rehearsal rooms, and transported more often than not into temporary off-site homes.

ANU Productions’ Monto Cycle, all performed as part of either the Dublin Fringe Festival or Dublin Theatre Festival, however, is distinct in the context of Irish off-site theatre. First their work does not primarily relocate to sites but responds to the sites in the first instance. The stories, images and journeys of characters and spectators alike all emanate from the sites, from their macro- but largely micro-histories and at times from the very materiality of the sites themselves. Performing to audiences of four or fewer at any one time, these micro-histories are experienced in extremely intimate settings, often when the spectator is alone with one or more actors, unable to use other audience members as guides to reaction, and often invited to engage in the performance in some small way either verbally or physically. Challenged by direct interpellation the performances embed the spectator within their dramaturgies and those dramaturgies are sufficiently porous to allow for unexpected audience reactions, or no