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**The Irish Priesthood Goes Burlesque**

Ed Madden

“DID HE BROWN YEH, Jimmy?” one young man asks another in Roddy Doyle’s popular novel The Commitments, referring to the local priest. “No,” Jimmy responds. “He just ran his fingers through me curly fellas.” The church has little effect on the unemployed young men in Doyle’s 1987 novel about a would-be soul band from north Dublin, which is the basis for Alan Parker’s 1991 film. And the local priest, Father Malloy—Father Paddy, as they refer to him, “the singing priest”—is just a joke to them, organizing the folk mass and perhaps abusing young men. Tellingly, though, they need his permission to use the local community center for their first gig, a reminder that even now the Catholic Church remains deeply and inextricably involved in Ireland’s social infrastructure and social services—including the management of most of the country’s primary and secondary schools.  
  
 Almost 25 years later, the pedophile priest is no longer a joke. A series of priest sex scandals in the 1990s and three major public inquiries into sexual and institutional abuse have shaken the Catholic Church’s hold on Irish culture and politics. Last year, 2009, was perhaps a tipping point—with the publication of two devastating reports on sexual and physical abuse in Catholic institutions, the Murphy and Ryan Reports. In their wake, a range of cultural and countercultural responses—theatrical performances, staged testimonies, protest art, grassroots Web activism, drag shows—suggests the ongoing impact of these scandals on Ireland, as artists and activists grapple with the history of sexual abuse and institutional hypocrisy, the stakes of sexual freedom, and the relation of church and state in Ireland.

Early 2010 was marked by three indicative cultural responses. In February and March, Thomas Kilroy’s play Christ Deliver Us!—a savage indictment of the sexual and emotional repression of 1950s Catholic Ireland—played at Dublin’s Abbey Theatre, followed on the stage a month later by a documentary drama that incorporated testimony from abuse victims. Also in April, a protest art show at the Irish Museum of Contemporary Art not only offered artistic denunciations of clerical abuse but also thumbed its nose at a recently passed blasphemy law. On March 13, the night Kilroy’s play closed, a drag act called Opus Gei and the Glorious Mysteries had priests and altar boys dancing (and fucking) on stage at the Olympia Theatre during the annual drag extravaganza Alternative Miss Ireland. The act was a wickedly parodic attack on the Catholic Church and a sophisticated reclamation of homosexuality against the media’s sometimes too easy collapse of homosexuality and sexual abuse. As Miss Opus Gei fake fisted four semi-naked priests on stage, the audience cheered, but if they were laughing at this performance, it was partly because the pedophile priest is no longer funny, and the powerful church that protected him is no longer so powerful.

**The Map of an Irish Hell**

In the 1990’s, a series of sex scandals—priests with lovers and children, a priest dying of a heart attack in a gay sauna—began to change public opinion about clerical authority on moral matters in Ireland. Scandals involving adult consensual sexual relations, however, were soon eclipsed by more horrifying revelations of decades of childhood sexual abuse by local parish priests and of sexual, physical, and emotional abuse in Catholic institutions. Although statistically farmers were more likely than priests to abuse children and fathers more likely than Fathers—as historian Diarmaid Ferriter points out in his study of sex in modern Ireland, Occasions of Sin—media attention focused on clerical abuse, and the pedophile priest became an arresting (if inaccurate) public embodiment of the growing awareness of sexual abuse of children. Although the image deflected attention from the family, where most abuse occurs, it drew attention to the systemic nature of abuse and the institutional complicity of church and state.   
  
 Popular media, especially television documentaries, played a critical role in breaking the silence and forcing action. The 1999 broadcast of Mary Raftery’s three-part documentary States of Fear on Ireland’s RTE television pushed the Irish government to investigate institutional abuse—a process that would result in the publication of the Ryan Report a decade later. Similarly, the BBC2 broadcast of Suing the Pope in 2002, a documentary about sexual abuse in the Irish diocese of Ferns, led to public inquiry and the publication in October 2005 of the Ferns Report, which detailed the extent of abuse, a culture of silence, a lack of resources, and the long-term consequences of abuse.   
  
 The Murphy Report, released in November 2009, detailed allegations of sexual abuse in the Catholic archdiocese of Dublin. More devastating, however, was the release of the Ryan Report a few months earlier, in May 2009. The Ryan Report was the result of a decade of investigation into abuse at the reformatory and industrial schools run by the Catholic Church, where enormous numbers of orphans and children from broken or deprived homes were incarcerated. The report found physical abuse and violence to be excessive and arbitrary, and sexual abuse to be “endemic,” especially in the boys’ schools.   
  
 Soon after its release, Irish Times religion correspondent Patsy McGarry described the Ryan Report, which included testimony from almost 2,000 people, as “a devastating indictment of Church and State authorities” (Irish Times, May 5, 2009). A few weeks later, as the report’s horrors were sinking in, an Irish Times editorial called it “the map of an Irish hell”: a history of torture, child slavery, and “a deliberately maintained structure of vile and vicious abuse.” The editorial (“Savage reality,” May 21, 2009) concluded: “Abuse was not a failure of the system. It was the system.”\*

**Cultural Responses**

Only a few months later, Thomas Kilroy’s Christ Deliver Us! appeared on the stage of the Abbey Theatre, the national theatre of Ireland—and while it was commissioned years earlier, the timing could not have been more appropriate. An 1891 German play revised as a portrait of 1950s rural Ireland, Christ Deliver Us! would inevitably be received as a comment on the present day. As if to make the connection between Kilroy’s play and the contemporary context even clearer, the Abbey Theatre scheduled for April a documentary drama based on the Ryan Report, No Escape, compiled and edited by journalist Mary Raftery, who had directed the 1999 documentaries States of Fear. No Escape was ultimately disappointing as theatre, as journalist Colin Murphy noted in his blog, more an “illustrated lecture rather than drama.”  
  
 Reimagining Frank Wedekind’s tragedy of sexual desire and societal repression in rural Kilkenny, 1891’s Spring Awakening, Kilroy’s compelling play seems to continue indirectly the critique of institutional abuse. He portrays a society afraid of sex, an oppressive educational system run by Catholic priests, and the incarceration of a young man—with the complicity of his parents—in a reformatory school like those depicted in the Ryan Report. If one priest at the secondary school seems a compassionate witness, the others—especially those running the reformatory school—are depicted as tyrants, hypocrites, and sadists. The darkness of the play seems unrelenting (except for a couple of brief lyrical moments, as when two boys briefly dance together in an abandoned schoolroom), and the only escape, as the play horrifically reveals, is suicide.   
  
 For artists attempting to respond directly rather than obliquely to the horrors of the Ryan Report’s “Irish hell,” the passage of an Irish law criminalizing blasphemy, which went into effect on January 1, 2010, surely complicated things—or exacerbated the outrage. Passed in 2009, the law makes the publication or utterance of blasphemous matter a crime punishable by €25,000 (about $32,000). Blasphemous, a show that directly confronted the law, opened on April 2, 2010, at the Irish Museum of Contemporary Art, a gallery on Lad Lane a few blocks south of Dublin’s major museums and government buildings. In the Irish edition of The Sunday Times, museum director K. Bear Koss argued that even though the law allows for a defense of artistic value, it stifles intellectual debate (Sunday Times, March 28, 2010). In the show’s catalog, noting “increasingly shocking reports” from both Irish and German Catholic churches, including abuse cover-ups that reportedly extended to the current pope, Koss said it was a “perfectly awkward time for such a law.”   
  
 At the show’s opening—on Good Friday—both meat and alcohol were served in direct opposition to Catholic practice of abstaining from meat on Fridays and the Good Friday ban on alcohol sales. The show’s promotional graphic, by openly gay Dublin graphic artist and activist Will St. Leger, took the by-now almost iconic “God Hates Fags” slogan of Fred Phelps and the Westboro Baptist Church and changed it into “God Dates Fags,” words that were superimposed over an image of Christ. Walking into the gallery, the viewer was first confronted with “Child and Rat,” a perverse pietà with a five-foot rat holding a life-size plaster child that seemed a comment on clerical abuse. A more direct comment, however, was in another corner of the gallery, where Una Gildea’s short stop-motion animation film “Resur-erection” was being projected onto the wall. The film opens with images of the crucifixion, with blood running down the cross, across a green Irish landscape, and up the red robes of rather sinister-looking clerics. An increasingly choppy, disorienting, and violent series of images shows priests and boys at an institutional boys’ school, suggesting both sexual and physical abuse. A final sequence of children’s faces morphs into a boy crucified on the cross, a powerful reimagining of the victimization of children by the religious institution. “Christ was betrayed and crucified,” notes the gallery catalog, “as were a generation of Ireland’s children,” adding: “The only difference is that the latter really did happen.”

**The Sexual Liberation of the Altar Boys**

In June 2009, a month after the release of the Ryan Report, a website called Count Me Out (countmeout.org) began to offer technological support for Catholics wanting to remove themselves from parish registers—which provide the statistics used to justify the church’s role in education and social services. On the site you can either formally leave the Catholic Church through a “declaration of defection,” or you can e-mail your diocese to register your feelings. (As of September 6, the website reported that 11,575 people had sent letters of defection.) Central to Count Me Out’s agenda is a protest over the relationship between church and state in Ireland, particularly the Catholic Church’s ongoing influence on public education. It was precisely that issue that made Dónal Mulligan, a young lecturer in new media at Dublin City University and the creative mind behind Opus Gei, remove himself from the parish registers of his own hometown. Mulligan said he heard a priest on television cite the numbers of his parish rolls to justify the church’s involvement in education, and he realized his own priest could use the same justification.  
  
 He also began thinking about an act for Alternative Miss Ireland, Ireland’s annual drag benefit scheduled near St. Patrick’s Day, a kind of drag Rose of Tralee festival. Revived in 1995 as a fundraiser for AIDS charities (the first AMI was held in 1987), AMI draws contestants from all over the island and packs crowds of gay (and increasingly straight) viewers into Dublin’s Olympia Theatre, just down the street from Ireland’s oldest gay bar, The George. The contestants may be mostly gay and mostly Irish, but they have also included straight male and female contestants, regular contenders from Dublin’s Asian gay communities, and serious female impersonators—and, at times, some seriously bad taste. Winners have included drag kings as well as drag queens. In 2009, the winner was Smilin’ Kanker—more performance artist than drag queen—who won the audience over with a sing-along to the hymn “Be Not Afraid.” In Ireland’s Gay Community News, Brian Finnegan called it an “inadvertently subversive” moment—“1,500 mostly gay people singing a pæan to the doctrine of a church that roundly rejects and demonises them.” Despite the subversiveness of the moment, in a later interview Finnegan said he thought the moment had more to do with nostalgia—a song remembered from childhood—than a specific critique of the Catholic Church.  
  
 There was no nostalgia in Mulligan’s 2010 production, Opus Gei and the Glorious Mysteries. (The entire performance can be found at opusgei.com.) As Kilroy’s play was making its final performance across the Liffey River that bisects Dublin, Opus Gei deployed drag nuns, the iconography of the sacred heart, a campy Eucharist, and priests and altar boys in athletic three-way sex on stage. Several stage acts ridiculed Catholicism to such an extent that Panti—a glamorous Dublin drag diva and one of the founders of AMI, now its regular sharp-tongued host—remarked that “blasphemy seems to be the theme tonight!” Religion was clearly a theme, though not always in a blasphemous mode. One of the interval acts featured a performance of Tori Amos’ “Crucify” by Irish actor Neil Watkins, who appeared on stage in a Last Supper scene surrounded by ordinary-looking gay men—the cast, in fact, of Silver Stars, a 2009 play based on the stories of older gay men. This profoundly moving performance, anything but blasphemous, received a standing ovation.   
  
 But among the Lady Gaga numbers, camp drag, and a Virgin Mary impregnated with a meat baster by two drag nurses, Opus Gei stood out for the wickedness of its humor, the sheer energy of its performance, and the pointed and masterful use of key moments in the recent history of Catholic Ireland. The first act began with Miss Opus Gei entering at back, a mask of Pope John Paul II over her face. (Opus Gei was played by a young schoolteacher new to drag, who remains unnamed because his job at a Catholic-run secondary school could be jeopardized. Though Ireland has an employment non-discrimination law that includes sexual orientation, it does not extend to religious-run institutions.) Over the theatre’s sound system, the pope’s thickly accented voice called out, “Young people of Ireland, I love you,” and the crowd roared.

The phrase evoked a paradigmatic moment in recent Irish history, the visit of Pope John Paul to Ireland in September 1979 to celebrate the centenary of the shrine at Knock—where the Virgin was said to have appeared in August 1879—and to designate the church there as a basilica. At a mass for youth in Galway, the pope famously said, “Young people of Ireland, I love you.” Altering the sound sample (obtained from the Vatican archives), the Opus Gei performance continued with the pope’s voice, “Your religious practices are hopelessly out of date,” and Opus Gei tossed aside her mask to dance with a bevy of Sister Act drag nuns to “I Will Follow Him”—a pointed comment on Catholic obedience to papal teaching. In the second act, the interview portion of the evening, Mulligan and Opus Gei continued the counterpoint of broad humor and pointed commentary. When asked by Panti, “What’s with all the blasphemy stuff?” Opus Gei first referred to the blasphemy law, but then said that the people who “see the Virgin Mary dancing in the sky” (surely a reference to Knock) “tell us we’re the ones with problems”—followed by a bout of Exorcist-style projectile vomiting around the stage.  
  
 The third and final act of Opus Gei opened with a huge tree stump surrounded by four chanting priests and a drag television reporter interviewing a stereotypical-looking Traveler (an Irish ethnic minority) about the appearance of the Virgin, lip-synching a recording from a 2009 interview about the Virgin’s appearance in a tree stump in Rathkeale (a rural town in southwest Ireland) last July. Mulligan said it seems inevitable that in times of economic and social crisis in Ireland, there are these moments of superstitious religiosity, Our Lady of the Tree Stump being the most recent example. As the priests began chanting what was clearly the opening of Madonna’s “Like A Prayer,” Opus Gei burst from the tree stump, and altar boys joined the priests onstage. The rather swishy priests served the Eucharist to the altar boys, who promptly snowballed it, sharing the host in deep open-mouth kiss.   
  
 From there, things degenerated and the audience went wild. The altar boys stripped to their white briefs, then they stripped the priests down to their white collars and white briefs and began having simulated sex with them, followed by more acrobatic simulated three-way sex. The erotic and blasphemous performance continued with Opus Gei fake fisting the priests, after hooking leashes to their priestly dog collars and lashing them down the stage. Again, though, parody was put into counterpoint with a political agenda. An altar boy ran offstage and returned to distribute pictures of the current pope, Benedict XVI (formerly Cardinal Ratzinger, alleged to have played a key role in the cover-up of sexual abuse cases). Echoing the infamous performance of Sinéad O’Connor on Saturday Night Live on October 3, 1992 (when she ripped up a photo of Pope John Paul to protest a culture of sexual abuse), the performers ripped the pictures of the pope and shouted the words of O’Connor, “Fight the real enemy,” running offstage as the audience erupted in an extended standing ovation. When Opus Gei came in third to a more conventional drag act—Miss Peaches with her enormous poof of cotton candy hair and Lady Gaga numbers—the audience booed. And they wouldn’t stop. Panti and the judges tried to regain control, but the audience kept booing, and finally the curtain was simply brought down, bringing the show to a confusing end.  
  
 What was at stake in this “glorious blasphemy”? Mulligan said he hoped it was very clear that the altar boys seduced the priests (they rip off their robes): “It’s about the sexual liberation of the altar boys,” he said, “not the abuse of priests.” (Mulligan says he and most of the performers were altar boys in their youth. He adds that none were abused in that role.) Dangerous in its representation, the performance was sophisticated in its politics. Ferriter had noted that in media coverage of the 1990’s priest sex scandals, “It was unfortunate that the issue of child sexual abuse was lumped together with that of clerics involved in consensual adult relationships.” Similarly, in 2009, there were dangerous elisions of homosexuality and sexual abuse in media coverage. Opus Gei’s performance—and Mulligan’s insistence on the sexual liberation of altar boys—is about reclaiming homosexuality from the media representations of sexual abuse, about claiming the sheer exuberance and joy of homosexual pleasure in the face of relentless representations of clerical abuse of boys.   
  
 Did it work? I’m not sure. But I am sure that that night in the Olympia Theatre in Dublin something amazing happened. The crowd’s response suggested the performance was doing some important cultural work for the audience—provoking, affirming, eviscerating, reexamining the stakes of this cultural moment for a gay audience—taking apart our entangled emotions about religion, sex, and power, and teaching us to fight the real enemy, the institutions that perpetuate abuse even as they demonize homosexuality.

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