

Travelling Tales: *Stories of a Yellow Town* and the Brazilians in Gort

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Abstract: This paper explores the potential of theatre to facilitate tolerance and understanding between a host country and its migrant communities. It investigates how the ‘verbatim’ theatre form is employed by a duo called The Gombeens to tell the stories of the Brazilian and Irish residents in the west of Ireland town of Gort, Co. Galway. The Gombeens also draw on the Irish oral tradition and its use of stories to rationalise and foreground the experiences of daily life, so that the traditional storytelling form takes on a contemporary resonance in representing Ireland’s multicultural reality. The power of their portrayal of both migrant and Irish stories is a consequence of their engagement with the audience and the verbatim style of their storytelling. The paper assesses the value of this form of theatre as a means of exploring the migrant condition, illustrating its capacity to convey the negative as well as the positive experiences and presenting the audience with some uncomfortable truths.

Keywords: The Gombeens; theatre; Brazilian community in Gort; migration.

There it is, this Irish village on the edge of the Burren that has become an extended suburb of a city in central Brazil. If there was ever a statistic that captured the suddenness, the extent and the occasional surrealism of the immigration into Ireland at the turn of the twenty-first century, it is this one (Hegarty 2009: 187).

Stories of a Yellow Town is a storytelling performance that reflects the arrival and experiences of Brazilian migrants in the Irish town of Gort, Co. Galway from 1999 onwards, and its impact on migrants and local people alike. Created and performed by Miquel Barceló and Jonathan Gunning, a Majorcan-Irish duo who call themselves The Gombeens, the performance

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provides a snapshot of the migratory experience at a particular place and time in Irish history. This virtually entirely white and Irish west of Ireland town almost doubled in population to reach approximately 2,700 in 2006, at the peak of Brazilian inward migration. Initially recruited to work at the town's meat factory, the migrants also branched out to work in other sectors. Although more than half of the migrants had returned to Brazil by 2009 partly as a result of the economic downturn, the impact of their presence and the fact that approximately 400 Brazilians have settled in Gort for the long-term, have changed this west of Ireland town permanently.²



Fig. 1. Miquel Barcelo and Jonathan Gunning (The Gombeens)
Photograph: Joe O'Shaughnessy 2009

Drama has always been at the forefront in reflecting changes in Irish society, while the oral storytelling tradition has historically been a feature of Irish community life. Although the social and cultural conditions that encouraged and nurtured the storytelling tradition have altered significantly, there is still an appetite for the performed story. Barceló and Gunning (2010) explain that “as an intercultural duo, we’re attracted to that aspect of modern life [migration] and all the different stories that go with it – stories of arrival, departure, love and heartache”. *Stories of a Yellow Town* was created over a six-month period during which Barceló and Gunning recorded and transcribed verbatim the stories told by Brazilian

² For an insight into the lives of the Gort Brazilians who returned to Brazil, see David McKechnie's *Irish Times* article, “Gort still reverberating to the samba beat”, 3 July, 2014 <<http://www.irishtimes.com/sport/soccer/international/gort-still-reverberating-to-the-samba-beat-1.1855994?page=1>>, accessed 3 Nov 2014.

migrants and local Irish residents in Gort. The piece was first performed in March 2009 at Cúirt International Literary Festival in Galway, and has subsequently been performed in a variety of venues around the area, ranging from town halls and arts centres to pubs and peoples' homes. The intimate nature of these venues is instrumental to The Gombeens performance, the local resonances adding authenticity to the portrayal of the Brazilian migrant experience and rooting it in a recognisable reality for the audience. Gunning (2010) sees a direct link between their Gombeens performance and the old oral tradition, explaining that in *Stories of a Yellow Town* he and Barceló "tell stories that carry a cultural weight just as the traditional travelling storytellers used to. We see ourselves as modern bards or social clowns". The Irish *seanchais* (storytellers) of old narrated tales of past glories as an escape from the far from glorious realities of daily life. However, as George Zimmerman notes, their stories were also "a means of ordering and making sense of actual experience through the awareness of analogies and the magnifying, or systematizing, of what was so far only half-perceived" (2001: 470). In the same way, the stories told by The Gombeens place the migrant experience in Gort centre stage, articulating and drawing attention to the realities of the situation for the people of Gort as a whole.

The Gombeens' production can be regarded within the context of the increasing number of Irish theatre companies that are experimenting with new forms of theatrical representation and creating "a space for the stories of people on the margins as well as those in the centre" (Trotter 2008: 177). *Stories of a Yellow Town* reflects the actual experience of social change in a small community by combining the traditional storytelling form with the modern form of verbatim theatre (also known as documentary theatre). Verbatim theatre is a description coined by Derek Paget in 1987 and distilled in the following explanation by playwright Tony Robinson:

[verbatim theatre is] a form of theatre predicated upon the taping and subsequent transcription of interviews with 'ordinary' people, done in the context of research into a particular region, subject area, issue, event, or combination of these things. This primary source is then transformed into a text which is acted, usually by the performers who collected the material in the first place. (Cited in Holdsworth and Luckhurst 2008: 202)

Early verbatim practitioners in the UK such as Peter Cheesman in the 1970s and 1980s and contemporary practitioners such as Alecky Blythe approached their work from a similar perspective. Their particular concern was and continues to be that of preserving "local idiom, tics of speech and linguistic markers" (203). It is precisely this emphasis on reflecting the spoken word authentically that makes verbatim theatre a

distinctive dramatic form, and The Gombeens choice of this form reflects their desire to render the migrant experience as authentically as possible. They do not alter the recorded stories syntactically or grammatically when performing them, frequently breaking off mid-sentence or leaving statements incomplete as in natural speech. Hence, their description of *Stories of a Yellow Town* as “the voice of the people of Gort” (2010) is justified. While the performance is in English, there are occasional lapses into Portuguese and Irish, reflecting the evolving hybrid vocabulary of the community, and indicative of its developing intercultural nature. Interestingly, there is an historical precedent in Gort itself for this authentic rendition of speech. Lady Augusta Gregory, a key exponent of the Literary Revival, noticed the peculiarities of the Hiberno-English spoken by local people and when collecting stories from them, replicated their dialectical and idiomatic phrasing in her work (Zimmerman 2001: 331-332).

Michael Billington describes how, “in a world drowning in opinion [...] verbatim theatre offers us the bracing stimulus of fact”, adding that “if we now accept it as a genre, it is not only because it offers necessary information. It is also because it can move and stir us as profoundly as any fiction” (2012). Alison Jeffers comments on the popularity of verbatim theatre in projects involving refugee or asylum seekers in the UK and cites Carolyn Nordstrom’s reference to Roland Barthes’ claim that “in the act of listening, the listener can begin to understand the existence of those who speak” (cited in Jeffers 2006: 7). The extent to which *Stories of a Yellow Town* facilitates understanding between its Irish audience and the Brazilian migrants whose stories are recounted is evident from the response of both communities. Gunning (2010) describes how, until The Gombeens recorded their stories, the Brazilian community in Gort thought “they should keep their heads down, survive and go home”. However, the positive audience reception of *Stories of a Yellow Town* has changed the Brazilians perception of themselves because, as Gunning (2010) explains, “they *know*, they’ve come to realise that their stories are important [...] they are valued, and they’re delighted that we want to talk to them”. The value of the performance to the Brazilians themselves is made clear in an incident described by Barceló:

When we read out one of the scripts early on, one of the wives of the characters was there. She loved it and at the end she said “Now I can see things that my husband didn’t tell me. Now I can see things from the distance and I can see the effort he made in coming here”. (Barceló: 2010)

In addition to telling stories from the Brazilian perspective, The Gombeens also perform those told to them by the Irish inhabitants of Gort. While the

dislocation experienced by the Brazilian migrants is understandable, the local Irish population also experienced a sense of disorientation as a consequence of the changing social and cultural landscape. Many families have lived in Gort or its environs for decades, with ancestral connections going back centuries, and some find “the nature of their relation to place ineluctably changed, and the illusion of a natural and essential connection between the place and culture broken” (Gupta and Ferguson cited in Duyvendak 2011: 14). The performance therefore brings their concerns to the stage and, importantly, reveals that over time mutual understanding overcomes wariness in the local Irish population as a result of the direct interaction of the Brazilian and Irish communities.

The Performance: Style

A key element of The Gombeens’ performance is the level of their engagement with the audience. This is a feature of verbatim theatre whereby “the classic proscenium arch convention of the ‘fourth wall’ collapses [...], and the actors speak directly to the audience and acknowledge audience reactions” (Jeffers 2006: 3). Discussing the dynamic between The Gombeens and their audience, Gunning (2010) distinguishes their performance from that of mainstream theatre companies that “generally perform in the confines of theatre spaces and stick to critically acclaimed scripts”. Barceló and Gunning begin their performance by addressing the audience directly, explaining the context in which *Stories of a Yellow Town* was written. After the performance, they ask for feedback and welcome questions. The stories they include in their repertoire vary according to their audience – if they are performing for children for example, they will select stories accordingly. Occasionally, they will record and add new stories to the performance.³ Jeffers raises the point that the audience can forget that there is such a selection process at the heart of a verbatim play, describing verbatim theatre as “a lesson in suppression; more material is recorded than can ever be used. It is manipulated, crafted and edited to create an effect” (Jeffers 2006: 6). Selection of certain stories for performance in *Stories of a Yellow Town* does not entail suppression of others, but rather a foregrounding of those that are most relevant for a particular audience. Stories not told to one audience will potentially be told at another performance, so that Jeffers point about editing for effect is

³ In an interview with the Galway Advertiser newspaper about a performance of *Stories of a Yellow Town* at the Nuns Island Theatre in Galway in October 2014 (as part of Barboró International Children’s Art Festival), Gunning explained that they have added a new story to their performance. He added that “Barboró gives us the opportunity to perform to children of the generation that first encountered a multicultural Ireland. With this show we want children to get excited about real stories and their power to enchant. We do not underestimate the capacity of children to engage with emotions”. See Kernan Andrews, “The Gombeens - reliving stories of ‘Little Brazil’”, available at <<http://www.advertiser.ie/galway/article/72658/the-gombeens-reliving-stories-of-little-brazil>> [accessed 3 November 2014]

valid. However, her use of the terms ‘suppression’ and ‘manipulation’ are problematic as they imply a dishonesty at the heart of verbatim theatre that is not the case in *Stories of a Yellow Town*.



Fig. 2. The Gombeens performing *Stories of a Yellow Town*
Photograph: Liam Carroll 2013

In the course of their performance, The Gombeens training in mime is evident in the subtlety of movement that denotes their representation of their various characters. This physicality also incorporate key components of storytelling, in their “ways of sitting and standing, movements of hand, head nods to reinforce words, facial expression, eye contact to involve a listener into the story” (Zimmerman 2001: 492). Set and props are kept to a minimum so that the audience’s attention is on the words being spoken. The performance begins in an empty space, apart from some suitcases stacked on top of each other, signifying arrival/departure. On top of the stack are a melodeon and a small guitar. Barceló and Gunning enter and play the instruments, singing an Irish folk song about emigration, “Muirsheen Durkin”. A change of character is indicated by an item of clothing such as a shawl (female shopkeeper), a coloured beret (Brazilian

female translator), a grey, dishevelled wig (middle-aged builder/employer), young Brazilian men (black baseball caps, worn the right way round to denote sensible, hardworking character, or back to front to denote younger high-spirited characters). Achieving the right balance between humour and gravitas is key to The Gombeens technique, because, Gunning (2010) says, “if we over-perform, then suddenly people are no longer listening to the story, they’re thinking about how funny this woman is or whatever, so it’s the *words* [my italics] that are important”.

The Performance: Stories

The Gombeens tell the *Stories of a Yellow Town* through the voices of two Irish characters, Margaret, the local shopkeeper and Mick, a local builder, along with a range of Brazilian characters including construction workers, factory employees and translators. Many of the stories focus on the similarities between the Brazilian and Irish residents of Gort, by reflecting on experiences common to both groups. The stories of the character of Margaret recount her efforts to find common ground with the Brazilian customers who come into her shop. Describing the local people’s initial reaction to the Brazilians, Margaret admits to a retrospective embarrassment at the excitement generated by their perceived exoticism:

The people that arrived first lived uptown, so they used to pass down every morning down to the meat factory. And we were so excited about seeing them. [...] we’d be at the door waiting to see them passing by and we thought it was great. We had actually seen them. And I just think it is so silly now ten years later, that we’d do such a thing [...] We actually were in awe of them to be honest. (*Stories of a Yellow Town*, ‘Margaret’ 2009: 3)⁴

As she subsequently points out, the frequent interactions that took place in the contact zones of her shop, workplaces and sporting events allowed both the Brazilians and the Irish to develop an understanding of each other. The sense of the Brazilians’ exoticism became less prevalent as their engagement in the life of the local community increased. As a result, they became less peripheral and more central to the life of the town. Similarly, Mick’s interactions with his Brazilian employees reveal what they have in common rather than how they are different:

⁴ In all subsequent quotes from the script, *Stories of a Yellow Town* will be abbreviated to *SOYT*. The name in quotation marks indicates which character is speaking, or the story from which unnamed characters’ quotations are taken. There is no published script and quotes are taken from a working copy given to me by Barceló and Gunning. As discussed in this paper, The Gombeens add to script as they transcribe new stories so that it is not a ‘fixed’ but an evolving document.

Just because you're born in Brazil, I don't think you're any different than if you're born in [fucking] Ballyfermot, where I was born, or Holland or London. It doesn't matter, you know? (*SOTT*, 'Mick': 4)

Despite the fact that both the Brazilian and Irish communities experienced a sense of displacement, the stories recounted to and subsequently performed by The Gombeens in *Stories of a Yellow Town* indicate that for many of the Brazilians, what Kwame Appiah terms 'rooted cosmopolitanism' has taken place, so that they are "attached to a home of [their] own, with its own cultural particularities, but taking pleasure from the presence of other, different places that are home to other, different people" (Appiah cited in Duyvendak 2011: 31).

This relationship to the new place, however, took time to establish. Many migrants experienced a sense of dislocation on their initial arrival in a town devoid of familiar structures and spaces. In one of the stories, a young Brazilian man discusses his disappointing first impressions of Gort:

I have been hearing about Gort for two and a half years before I really moved to Gort. And then, I was even thinking 'Oh! is gonna be yellow town with Brazilians flags everywhere'. I was expecting that type of vision. Even, Brazilian pub or Brazilian restaurant, all that stuff. And...but it wasn't like that, no ,no. (*SOTT*, 'Yellow Town': 1)

We are used to rice and bean every day. But we could hardly find rice and bean in the supermarket because they just brought a small packet. So the first one get to the supermarket will get all the food, all the rice and bean. The others will be left with none. After that they get used to the Brazilians so they would have plenty of rice and bean for us. (*SOTT*, 'Beginnings': 1)

As the above extracts indicate, and as Olivia Sheringham discusses in her study of the Brazilian community, the availability of Brazilian food central is to the migrants' sense of home and belonging. This desire to create spaces "to accommodate the consumption preferences" of the Brazilian community and thereby help them to feel more at home in Gort resulted in the opening of two shops selling foodstuffs imported from Brazil (Sheringham 2010: 69). A Brazilian hairdressing salon provided another familiar and social space in which to establish a home away from home. Aside from the indoor spaces of consumption and entertainment, the geography of Gort was unsettling for the migrants, and highlighted cultural differences in the social usage of space. As a migrant himself,

Majorcan Barceló (2010) can relate to this dilemma, explaining that “it’s difficult; there are no places where people can gather. Of course you don’t have the outside here because of the weather. But the Brazilians here in Gort and all over Ireland, reclaim the outdoor space”. Creation and negotiation of indoor and outdoor spaces for social interaction between Brazilians has been instrumental in the creation of a sense of belonging, giving migrants the confidence which ultimately facilitates interaction with and integration into the broader Irish community.

Interaction between the two communities initially arose within the work environments that were the pull factor for the Brazilian migrants who came to Gort. Originally recruited to work in the town’s meat processing plant, over time migrants found employment in other sectors including construction. The Gombeens perform a story told by Mick about a Brazilian employee of his building company whose work ethic reminded him of the Irish emigrant labourers of his generation:

We take our lunchtime from one to half one. Not one to two minutes past one. “Sit down Jose, I’m going to have a cup of fucking tea”. They want to work every day, they want to work every day, but I don’t want to work every day, five days is enough. Jose de Silva was always on about that, he’d say “It’s not good enough. You should work Saturday”. (*SOIT*, ‘Mick’:1)

Mick goes on to describe an encounter in his local pub where an Irish construction worker berates a couple of his fellow Irishmen when he hears them criticising the Brazilians for ‘taking their jobs’:

I drink in Carroll’s and there was one or two lads there and they was talking about the Brillo-pads. That’s what they were calling them, you know. And “Taking our jobs!” this one fella said, and a block layer turned round and he says “What are you talking about, taking your jobs? You never come in Monday. You were missing Friday, and you wanted me to pay you for both days? Taking your jobs! You don’t have a fucking job, you don’t want one”. There was a lot of answering back. Which was good, you know. (*SOIT*, ‘Mick’: 3)

What emerges from The Gombeens’ performance of this story is the refusal of Irish employers to tolerate racist behaviour in relation to the Brazilians whom they perceive to be dedicated and hardworking. The defence of the Brazilian workers by the block layer, highlighting the lack of commitment of some of their Irish counterparts, reinforces Mick’s earlier

story about the Brazilian work ethic. In drawing attention to the contrasting attitudes of Irish migrants of earlier generations who had to leave Ireland to find work with the more complacent attitude of the current generation that has not had to emigrate, this scene evokes parallels between Ireland's emigrant workforce of the 1950s in particular and the current Brazilian migrant workforce in Ireland. The story also highlights the failure of Irish historic memory to inform Irish responses to contemporary migrants in Ireland and the defensiveness that arises amongst certain Irish people in response to the perceived threat of the 'other'. Such a response raises questions about the effect of Ireland's postcolonial legacy on Irish identity, constructed as the country set about establishing itself as a nation free of the 'others' who had oppressed it.

While this story raises questions of tolerance, another concerning employment combines humour and pathos in relation to the scenarios that can arise as a result of linguistic misunderstandings. With echoes of the experience of Irish construction workers in London, Brazilian men not employed on a long-term or contract basis congregate in the town square each morning, hoping to be selected by employers who drive through looking for short-term or daily labourers. The procedure for hiring is mutually understood so that verbal exchanges are minimal. A story featuring one such exchange however, told to The Gombeens by a Brazilian woman who worked as a translator at the meat factory, is comically told and performed:

They used to stop here in the square and collect people for work. I remember one morning, in 2003, I was walking in the street. There was about ten Brazilians there and a postman stopped the car and one of the Brazilians get into the postman van, and the postman was saying to him, "No, no no, I'm not looking for work, I just stopped here to deliver..." "No, I go with you!" "No, No, No!" "No, I go with you!" And I was crossing the street and the postman knew me, and he knew that I could explain to the guy. I get there and I say "What are you doing there?" (*o que você está fazendo lá?*) "I go to work, it's my time, it's my turn" (*Vou trabalhar, é o meu tempo, é a minha volta*). I said "No, he's not collecting people, he's just delivering letters, he's the postman" (*Não, ele não está prendendo pessoas, ele está entregando somente cartas, ele é o carteiro*). That was something really funny, someone sit on your car and you say "No, No" and then "No, I go with you!" The only thing he could say was "I go with you." He just want to go to work. (*SOYT*, 'Mariza': 1)

Even the Brazilians who do have work continue to rely to an extent on the support network within the Brazilian community. During a gruelling spell in hospital where he contracted the bacterial infection MRSA while

recovering from an accident at the farm where he worked, one young Brazilian tells the story of how the visits and support from his Brazilian friends helped him through:

All the Brazilians that I know here I meet here, and I have only good things to say about them. Cause, we come to here with one dream, to make a better life for ourselves, the family, and look for a new life. I come with one dream and the friend the same dream, they find space to help me as well you know, the never left me alone, always someone coming. “Oh, how are you doing? How you are? Are you good? Do you need some things? Is one year and a half like this and one year and a half the friends always by my side, you know. (*SOYT*, ‘Guilherme’: 1)

The experiences related through the stories are not all positive; many deal with the problems of bureaucracy and unscrupulous employers. Another story concerns the paranoia of an Irish woman living next door to a Brazilian household. A Brazilian man describes how she rings the police when they have a loud party, convinced that they are terrorists and eventually she moves out of her house. Some migrants tell stories of having to return to Brazil through necessity rather than choice. One story told by Mick describes his disappointment when Jose, a hard-working Brazilian employee, has to return to Brazil because his wife cannot find work in Ireland.

Nevertheless, even with all the concerns of daily life, the stories told by The Gombeens in *Stories of a Yellow Town* convey the sense that Gort has settled into its new community makeup. A mutual understanding has developed as the Irish townspeople get to know the Brazilians as individuals, where they have come from and their reasons for coming. Margaret, pre-empting the future hybrid community, peeps into the pram of a Brazilian customer’s new baby and remarks, “Aren’t you gorgeous? An Irish baby” (*SOYT*, ‘Margaret’, 4). Her conferring of Irish nationality on the child is indicative of an increasingly inclusive attitude whereby the Irish-born children of the first generation Brazilian migrants are regarded as equal citizens of the local community and by extension, the nation. *Stories of a Yellow Town* operates therefore on number of levels. It reflects the evolving understanding between the Brazilian migrants and the Irish residents of Gort, while also validating the migrant experience of the Brazilians in their own eyes. The nature of the performance facilitates the audience’s understanding of the Brazilians’ situation by engaging with them directly and drawing parallels between the Irish and Brazilian’s experiences of economic migration.

Fig. 3. Miquel Barcelo and Jonathan Gunning (The Gombeens)



Photograph: Joe O'Shaughnessy 2009

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