

# THE ELEPHANT OF REVOLUTIONARY FORGETFULNESS

BEYOND THESE ROOMS | KEYNOTE ADDRESS  
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February 2019

Good morning, I am so very sorry not to be with you in person and gutted to miss this symposium. I would like to offer some thoughts before the next panel and thank you for allowing me share them with you all.

So Why Remember?

We are living in dangerous and challenging times. As our country begins to edge towards the end of the decade of centenaries, we are in the process of tentatively peeling back the plaster to check our wounds and to really look at ourselves. As we head towards the centenaries of the War of Independence and the Civil War, we are reminded, more than ever, of the acute sensitivities at play. A special ministerial committee warned only last week that the *“commemorative programme over the coming years unfolds in the continued absence of agreement on operating devolved structures in Northern Ireland and against the backdrop of the ongoing Brexit negotiations.”* I think that it is more important than ever to make art that asks the hard questions. It’s important to make work that places the audience at the very centre of these questions, not so that we offer answers but that we set provocations to viewers in order that they can consider their own position within it. Through our work across the past decade we have tried to challenge the history of national self-representation in a very direct way, first by choice of subject and then by the complexity of form.

As I write it is holocaust Memorial Day. This morning I read a shocking report that 56% of Canadians don’t know what Auschwitz was. Nobody can deny the dangers of forgetting.

The phrase "Lest we forget" is commonly used in war commemorations. It warns, of history repeating mistakes, of the human cost to those who experienced it and of what they endured. ‘Lest we forget’ is a profound statement and an important one, but how do we not forget that which we didn’t even remember?

THESE ROOMS isn’t about the danger in forgetting, it’s about the danger of remembering... Lest we remember. If we know, we cannot unknow. Once it seeps into our consciousness it cannot be deleted. I fundamentally believe that art holds the capacity not just to show what happened, but to ask us to witness and to question *how* we might understand.

(2mins)

In 2015 (and in the middle of another complex project), PALS at the National Museum of Ireland. Military Curator and historian Lar Joye, placed a document in front of me. *“A FRAGMENT OF 1916 HISTORY”*,

saying this might be of some interest.. In it, I read (for the first time) of a carnage that happened in my community, in a place I lived and passed every day of my life and yet knew nothing of. Of 38 female witnesses who swore that male members of their families had been the innocent victims of a massacre that had literally come through the walls of their homes uninvited and unprovoked.

This began my journey with what happened at in a row of houses in North King Street in the early hours of Saturday 29 April 1916. Alongside the extraordinary CoisCeim, we applied for and were awarded an Art:2016 award from the Arts Council of Ireland. Not sterilised or neutralised, or simplified into pageantry, we wanted to use this project to reaffirm the role of Art in negotiating this contested and complicated terrain. The studio became a nexus of experimentation and research. We animated the multiple forensic layers of archive and site to explore the creative potential of time and space and memory and forgetting colliding. Together, we cultivated a new language and ecology, moving between realms of the real and symbolic, the material and the metaphorical, the perceived and remembered, the experienced and the imagined.

Set in 1966 on the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Easter Rising and also critically of the Battle of the Somme, THESE ROOMS, cross pollinated theatre, dance and visual art. Exploring the rebellion through the eyes of civilians at the moment when the rising invaded their homes with devastating consequence. In parallel, it also explored the experiences of the South Staffordshire regiment who, expecting to be fighting on the front, were instead confronted with urban guerilla warfare for the first time in living history.

(4:30 mins)

Searching for the story from the British side proved very difficult: The elusive KEW file WO 35/67/3: Courts of enquiry into the alleged shooting of civilians by soldiers during Easter Rising, always seemed just outside my grasp. Out of reach. Not to be found, then found, then waiting to be catalogued, then not to be released until 2017. It was finally revealed to us, thanks again to Lar's intervention, on the 04th October 2016 (in the middle of the first Dublin Theatre Festival Run). Inside, half truths made whole, accusations of hostilities and rebel sympathizers. Challenges to the timeline of the witness statements and a private brief prepared for the then Prime Minister, Asquith. In it, Senior Civil Servant Edward Troupe found that soldiers whose explicit orders were not to take prisoners, 'took [it] to mean they could shoot anyone they suspected. *"The root of the mischief"*, he concluded... *"was the military order to take no prisoners It is possible, under the horrors of this particular attack, That some of them may have saw red."*

He noted that: *“Had the North King Street shootings taken place in England, The soldiers would certainly have been charged with murder and these files sent to the Department of Public Prosecutions...*

*But Ireland is different.*

*In the end, it is ruled without genuine consent*

*And the authorities can not afford to publicise let alone punish the excess of its soldiers.”*

Lest we remember.

(6:00 mins)

Having now gone through years of multiple phases and incarnations. Of live performances in Dublin Theatre Festival (2016), reimagined for 1418NOW at last year’s LIFT (London International Festival of theatre). Through a triptych of filmic responses and supported in parallel by the presentation here at the TATE Liverpool, and indeed through this symposium, we have, I believe, created a project that reminds us how important it is to remember.

So how do we remember an unknown event of 100 years ago through two completely different perspectives? If we look at THESE ROOMS from a British perspective, it is a WW1 drama and if we look at it from an Irish one, it is enshrined in the memory of the nationalist uprising of 1916. Once we comprehend that this was an atrocity not just on the side of the victims but also for the perpetrators, the complexity of how that tapestry has been interwoven for both sides becomes apparent.

Positioning it in 1966 as both events are commemorated and un-commemorated on opposing sides, offered to further highlight the complication and contested difficulties that is captured within the work.

Commemoration is often viewed as offering one version of nationhood and national sovereignty. In fact, the act of commemoration, is in itself, a discourse in time and space. Fragmented and positioned between the now-then-now, this itself is often a paradox, offering questions rather than answers. Who are the widows of 1916? There’s no question, it’s the wives of the hero’s executed at Kilmainham. But are they not also also the loyalist widows of North King Street?

In 1966, Taoiseach Sean Lemass stated that the commemorations would signify *“our understanding of the historical importance of the Rising”* and would also be *“a time of national stocktaking, for trying to look ahead into the mists of the future.”* THESE ROOMS takes the jubilee commemoration of 1966 to question

how we as a nation have been shaped by these events. As we moved further away through time, the massacre faded from national (and local) consciousness. It was further erased through the political neglect of town planning of the 1960s and 70s, which resulted in the row of ten houses being left to simply fall. I remember as a child watching them crumble, the last vestiges of wallpapers and scars of fireplaces fading to nothing, yet knowing nothing of what had happened there. As a result, both historical narrative and physical site have become almost invisible and the stories of the people affected by the event, doubly disavowed by politics and by time.

(8:30 mins)

Foreshadowing the history of cultural trauma that we as a nation experienced throughout the next 50 years, we set the original DTF production against the faultline of the Rising, to explore the female body as a post-trauma political site. Examined in close proximity and within their own environments, we meet four newly widowed women, all of whom have undergone the same ordeal; and are thrown together by circumstance, binding them physically and psychologically.

Their physical bodies betray them.

A close up study of grief, isolation and loneliness, our engagements with the women are tender and violent. Similarly, when we reimagined the production for 1418NOW in London, we augmented it to also explore the experiences of the soldiers from the South Staffordshire Regiment who committed this act. Their identities largely anonymous, their actions controversially exonerated at a military enquiry. We centered it around the true story of one soldier, Corporal William Bullock, who so racked with grief and longing to comprehend what “*take no prisoners*” might mean, that in a moment of chaos, he returns to the scene to piece it together and seek solace from the families of those he shot. Those he shot who may have been him. “*...I could have been him, he could’ve been me. We were same age. We even sorta looked like each other. We joked about how we could’ve switched clothes and nobody’d been any wiser...*”

Interlocking both perspectives.

(10 mins)

All cultures recognise that theatre by virtue of its liveness and repetition, presents an embodied experience of place and memory... a sense of coming back, of repeating again and again. And so the relationship

between theatre and cultural memory is a deep and complex one. One could say that every play is a memory play and is subject to continual adjustment as it's recalled in new circumstances and contexts. And I suppose that's the important bit from my perspective... THESE ROOMS tells us about things and people in a particular time and space. About what existed and what was hidden, about what was and what could have been. Through performance, we distilled ethnographical sources and military archives into highly personal encounters. Where audiences on both sides of the story were within and watching at the same time, confronting themselves and ultimately each other in the present, so that they might begin to be able to remember.

As Peter Crawley in the Irish Times articulated, '*we are made to see ourselves as participants in the stories; either obedient accomplices or people capable of support and compassion.*' Thus the politic of the work primarily resides in the dramaturgical agency of the spectator to cultivate their own view. Tumbling through environments that are both dream-like and hyper-real, to ask real questions of identity, politic and citizenship.

These kaleidoscopic responses continue here inside the exchange space, where viewers are invited to restructure the archival text from both sides, thus creating another new narrative. I observed one such engagement, where a young man spent a great deal of time painstakingly piecing together strips of text to form another sentence. "*The rebels had guns. They were going to kill us*". This was his response. This was his belief.

Lest we remember.

(12 mins)

Thank you.