

“Boland: the journey of a poet” —A delicate and powerful celebration of Eavan Boland’s life and legacy

Poetic might not be the ideal word to define a play that celebrates one of Ireland’s greatest poets, Eavan Boland. Poetic in capital letter, under the risk of sounding unconventional, to highlight the marvelous and touching performance delivered by actress Siobhán Cullen as what she calls “a fragment of Eavan Boland” (8:01) or “an all-encompassing essence of her” (8:17) in this beautifully written monologue. It is the single word capable of contemplating the overall effect of this production of the Druid Theatre, streamed live from the Mick Lally Theatre in Galway from the 22nd to the 24th of April 2021 and available on demand from April 27th to May 2nd 2021, as part of the Druid at Home project.

This production premiered in one of the critical moments of the COVID-19 pandemic, a time when theatre companies around the world had to reinvent themselves. It is worth writing this down in this review so that a reader who might encounter it in the future can acknowledge the peculiarity of this play, for both its producers and its spectators. There is no dialogue, no interaction with the audience whatsoever.

It is surprising to learn that this was the first time the director, Garry Hynes, had worked with cameras and that she was terrified about it. It is incredible because the two of them—that represent us, the audience, to whom Cullen looks deeply and directly—are used in such a proficient and delicate manner that one thinks that both Hynes and Colm Hogan, director of photography, had been preparing this project for many years before it was launched to the world. In the post-show discussion, Cullen mentioned that working with the medium of a camera made her look down its lens hoping the gaze went “straight up the audience” (5:41). And yes, it reached us.

Throughout the fifty-minute performance, there are only two people on stage: Siobhán Cullen, as Eavan Boland, and portrait artist Debbie Chapman, who stands with her back turned to the camera as she paints a portrait of the poet. She is a sort of presence on stage, not a character, representing the expressionist painter Frances Kelly, Boland’s mother. We can see a table in the background by her side, on which brushes, and painting material lay very organised, beside a mural where pencil sketches of the female body are disposed. In the foreground, there is a long table, a few chairs, a teacup and a black notebook, where Boland’s poems have been carefully handwritten and from which Cullen reads.

They are just some of the everyday objects that build an intimate ambiance in which we discover an Eavan Boland in her 30’s, in an earlier stage of her writing career

and further away from the time of her most known works. These objects, far from trivial and unimportant, are extremely significant to the performance. The black lace fan, for instance, that Siobhán Cullen used on stage before reading “The black lace fan my mother gave me” was provided to the producers by the poet’s family (Hynes 0:49). The black lace fan the actress touches on stage is the actual Eavan Boland’s fan, the one that had previously belonged to her mother and was given to her as described in the poem. In the same way, the easel on which Debbie Chapman paints Boland’s portrait was also provided to the producers by the poet’s family: it belonged to Frances (Hynes 1:02). This illustrates how Boland’s life experience and personal objects intertwine with her poetry in this moving production.

We accompany her from reflections of her childhood as an Irish girl in England and the US, through the time she moved to the suburbs of Dublin with her family, the upbringing of her two daughters, night feeding and becoming a wife (slash) mother (slash) poet in Ireland. Her challenge at this point, in the late ‘70s and early ‘80s, is to combine her domestic arrangements with her poetry writing. It is the critical period when she realizes that in Ireland the words woman and poet were opposites: “The poets I knew were not women: the women I knew were not poets”, she says (Boland 265).

The text of the play is built with Boland’s own words, with her autobiographical prose and poems, which were edited in the play’s script by Colm Tóibín. It was made combining poems from different stages of her career and the prose contained in *Object Lessons* (1995) and *A Journey with Two Maps* (2011). Tóibín’s script exposes Boland’s descriptions of a journey that would lead to a new phase in her poetry-making, one that allows her life, the female body and women’s histories into her poems, when she overcomes the “having a text but not context”.

The technical aspects of the production must also be praised. In the most confidential moments of the performance, the cameras offer a close view of Siobhán Cullen’s face. Something that would be impossible to achieve in a live performance, as acknowledged by the director herself (Hynes 14:33), a close-up unreachable from the distance of a theatre seat. We feel very close to her. The proximity is such that we follow her wherever she goes, involuntarily. Although the actress is sitting on a chair, the same chair throughout the performance, she moves to other places and decades through the poems, taking us by the hand. The poems are the ones that transport us from the room with table, chair, easel, and canvas to Boland’s childhood, to her suburban house in Dublin, or to her journey throughout the city to embrace her dying mother. This movement is allowed

through the sounds of words, verses, and piano songs, that often accompany the poems so beautifully delivered.

This play is powerful not only because it celebrates a great female poet in the context of Irish writing less than a year after her death, but also because it does it with her very own words, praising her authorship. Many biographical plays are built based on information available in letters or interviews, written in a specific moment and addressed to a specific audience. Researchers obtain these pieces of information, analyse them carefully and put them together in a manner that is adequate for the stage. This is not what happened in this play. Colm Tóibín works with Boland's autobiographical notes, with revelations and memories voluntarily shared by her with anyone who reads her books. And they offer us a vigorous image of a woman who became a poet and then a mother and finally all three things in one body, in one potent and loud voice.

That "Quarantine" is one of the last poems to be read in the play reflects this intensity, as it demonstrates how Boland began to explore silences, and face these silences, and give them voice. It allows the play to end showing yet another phase of her writing, one that looks back into Irish history: how she showed Ireland that it is important to revisit tragedies of its past, like the Great Famine, and talk about them and let them not be forgotten.

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Works Cited

- Boland, Eavan. *A Journey with Two Maps: Becoming a Woman Poet*. W. W. Norton & Company, 2011.
- Cullen, Siobhán; Hynes, Garry; Randolph, Jody; Tóibín, Colm. "Post-Show Discussion." Boland: Journey of a Poet, 27 April 2021, www.druid.ie/productions/boland-journey-of-a-poet. Accessed 30 August 2021.