

# Woman Undone by *Brokentalkers*: *Activism with a Difference*

## Woman Undone *de Brokentalkers*: *Ativismo com uma diferença*

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**Abstract:** *Brokentalkers* theatre company first set up in 2001 may be described as a fearless, innovative organisation which has from the outset tried to balance the inequalities prevalent in Irish society. It comprises of Feidlim Cannon and Gary Keegan who describe their ethos as to devise original, accessible live performance and explore new forms that challenge traditional ideologies of text-based theatre. They use the postdramatic medium in order to convey the urgency of a particular situation and in line with this, their performances can often include slapstick, violent physical action, pop cultures, breaking of the illusion and hysterical outbursts from the actors. One of their more recent performances, *Woman Undone*, which premiered in 2018, is an impactful reimagining and reconstruction of an aspect of blues singer, Mary Coughlan's life. This essay investigates the use of dramaturgical strategies such as musicality, bodily movement and cross gender casting in the performance in order to highlight the situation of those who have been abused in Ireland. The microcosm of one well known woman's experience is brought to the macrocosm of society to educate and enlighten all women.

**Keywords:** *Postdramatic; Memory; Gender; Patriarchy; Embodied Trauma.*

**Resumo:** *A companhia de teatro Brokentalkers, criada em 2001, pode ser descrita como uma organização destemida e inovadora que, desde o início, tentou equilibrar as desigualdades prevalecentes na sociedade irlandesa. É composta por Feidhlim Cannon e Gary Keegan, que descrevem o seu*

*espírito de conceber performances ao vivo originais e acessíveis e explorar novas formas que desafiam as ideologias tradicionais do teatro baseado em texto. Eles usam o meio pós-dramático para transmitir a urgência de uma situação particular e, com isso, suas performances podem muitas vezes incluir pastelão, ação física violenta, culturas pop, quebra da ilusão e explosões histéricas dos atores. Uma de suas apresentações mais recentes, Woman Undone, que estreou em 2018, é uma impactante reimaginação e reconstrução de um aspecto da vida da cantora de blues Mary Coughlan. Este ensaio investiga o uso de estratégias dramáticas como musicalidade, movimento corporal e elenco de gênero cruzado na performance, a fim de destacar a situação daqueles que foram abusados na Irlanda. O microcosmo da experiência de uma mulher conhecida é trazido para o macrocosmo da sociedade para educar e esclarecer todas as mulheres.*

**Palavras-chavras:** Pós-dramático; Memória; Gênero; Patriarcado; Trauma corporificado.

## **Introduction**

In November 2018 I chose *Woman Undone*, the dramatic adaptation of the life story of Mary Coughlan, the Irish blues, jazz and soul singer, co-written by Brokentalkers and Coughlan herself, for my monthly theatre club. As we are a large group, one only gets to choose a show every eighteen months, therefore I was delighted to discover that the innovative duo, Feidlim Cannon and Gary Keegan, Brokentalkers, co-artistic directors, had something showing at that time. However, the majority did not enjoy it and some even went so far as to ask me to never to choose something again. It certainly has to be agreed that this is a harrowing piece of work but arguably an exceptionally important one which deals with multiple feminist issues. Feidlim Cannon, one of the Brokentalkers duo explained that it was after a performance of another of their works, *A Circus Animals Desertion* (2016), that Coughlan first approached their theatre company about the possibility of doing a collaborative piece on the happenings in her life. She liked their use of dance and costuming and when she referenced artists such as Robert Wilson and Marina Abramovic, he and Keegan were sold on the idea as they both agreed that she would be a very good fit for them. Their methodology first involves writing what is known as a Hollywood version of the performance which provides a structure and a scaffold for work. Contrary to popular belief, structural cohesion is of particular importance in postdramatic theatre.

Subsequently, Brokentalkers implement their use of image, action and text. A wall is filled with these ideas and then the connective tissues of music, song and props are added.<sup>1</sup>

I argue that Brokentalkers has achieved, in *Woman Undone*, an impactful reimagining and reconstruction of an aspect of Mary Coughlan's life in order to draw attention to the abuse women still endure in society today. It was not a straightforward process as while rehearsing for this show the singer was attending therapy which was, as Cannon described, integral to her life, to cope with the abuse that she had endured.<sup>2</sup> Brokentalkers has implemented innovative dramaturgical strategies including musicality, bodily movement and cross gender casting in order to highlight the marginalised Other, in this case a woman who has over the years become completely destroyed by the treatment proffered her by the male figures in her life. With the use of their craft and the subsequent affect instilled in the audience, Keegan and Cannon, together with Coughlan have made the individual universal or in other words the microcosm of one woman's story become the macrocosm of effecting awareness with possible societal change.

In order to bring this about, awareness and education are necessary and while *Woman Undone* makes for uncomfortable viewing it is imperative that every woman who is violated not only learns how to, but also feels courageous enough to speak out.<sup>3</sup> Sexual abuse of women is presently a very topical subject for discussion and this production needs to be seen through the framework of highlighting the great necessity for women to assert themselves, rather than being seen as another personal therapy session for Coughlan as was relayed to me by a member of the theatre group.<sup>4</sup>

## **Postdramatic and Memory**

As *Woman Undone* was Mary's own story, she was given free rein to include whatever she saw fit. Images were to be given precedence in this performance as the text is in her autobiography, *Bloody Mary, My Story* (2009).<sup>5</sup> Emancipation from text is a major, if not one of the most important, component of postdramatic theatrical practices. As Marvin Carlson remarks "the emancipation of the performance from the literary text is arguably the most central concern of the postdramatic" (379). It was Mary's insight into the images pertaining to her life, rather than an interrogation of them, was deemed most important. Images regularly popped into her mind and were very difficult for her to let go. Car crashes seemed to feature heavily in her life story therefore it seemed prudent to have a car on set.<sup>6</sup> According to Cannon, Mary first learnt to drive in a repurposed post office van painted orange so one was sourced for the show. It was decided that because her

story involves a series of survivals, from such horrors as a traumatic childhood, alcohol addiction, suicide attempts and subsequent incarceration in psychiatric hospitals, it would be more impactful to place emphasis on the first survival experience, the escape from her toxic home environment, in *Woman Undone*, which is predominantly a snapshot of Mary Coughlan's life from her birth to the age of sixteen.

The work addresses the use of memory to home in on particular events but also, as memory is always fluid it could be described as having an “ability to move, both metaphorically and literally, across physical and disciplinary boundaries.”(Pine, 2). Moreover, it gives a voice to the previously unheard (45). As Lehmann has described, the stage ultimately becomes a memory space for the audience thereby encouraging thoughts of possible latent bodily capacities (348). The material being relayed by Mary's forceful presence on stage is all coming from a real place but delivered in a postdramatic fashion in order to involve the audience in a more active way. Challenging the audience and performance spatial relationship are important aspects of the postdramatic (Carlson, 586). While *Woman Undone* is not as high energy as some of Brokentalkers' other works, such as *The Blue Boy* (2011), it does introduce an element of playfulness, such as Coughlan's delayed entrance, in order to make the serious content matter more palatable.

Musicality is a strategy used in *Woman Undone* to highlight vulnerability but, because there was no room for sentimentality, it was felt that Mary's own repertoire of songs would not be used. A libretto by “renowned Icelandic composer and music producer, Valgeir Sigurdsson, who fuses electronic music with live instrumentation and a haunting vocal score written for female voices” (brokentalkers.ie) is used. The band is an all- female quartet called Mongoose described as a “jazz infused folk-pop group (who) take their cinematic sound into brand new dimensions.”(hotpress.com).<sup>7</sup>

The soundscape in this production is haunting which is particularly relevant for the subject matter. Ivan Vyrypaev, explained in an interview about the use of sound in his performance: “If you see the dance, then the dance is nothing more to you than the one you just saw. But if you hear it, then you will have your own dance. As soon as you hear it, an image of the dance manifests. The word comes to life – that is, within you the image is born” (Weygandt,195).<sup>8</sup> Moreover, extreme trauma can be conveyed to the audience in a universal way with the sound methods that are used (196).

The other postdramatic dramaturgical strategy executed in this performance is physical movement. Dance is implemented in such a fashion as to embody pain and trauma. As Lehmann attributes in his reassessment of the postdramatic, “in dance we find most radically expressed what is true for postdramatic in general.” (163). Erin O'Reilly,

the sole dancer on stage, who emerges from the car as if it is a moment of birth, vividly represents the abuse that Mary's body, over a lifetime, has had to deal with. The dancer, apart from Mary herself, is the only female stage presence as the band members represent the male figures in her life. Coughlan is omnipresent on stage maintaining a strong physical presence often centre stage seated in a throne like chair. Highlighting the subjugated condition many women have to suffer, *Woman Undone* uses music and storytelling as one of their postdramatic dramaturgical strategies. The former fittingly plays a huge role in this performance as it did in Mary's own life, she even cites it as her redemption. During the performance, after an unsettling scene depicting sexual abuse, Mary tells young Mary represented by the dancer "that music will be (her) first love. It understands (her) and will comfort (her). It will soothe (her) soul. (She) is not alone" ([www.vimeo.com](http://www.vimeo.com) 32:00). The cross gender casting is used not only to disrupt ritual and allow for immediate attention by the audience but more importantly, it acts as a means of feminist activism as female-male re-gendering can, not only highlight and question misogyny but "also expose the ideological structures that continue to collude with these values on the contemporary stage and in society more generally" (Miller 4).

In *Woman Undone* repetition is used from the very beginning with each band member asking the same question "Where are you now Mary?" ([www.vimeo.com](http://www.vimeo.com) 5:45).<sup>9</sup> The question is also displayed on the audio-visual system at the back of the stage, a strategy used to blur the boundaries between performers and spectators where the intermediality is used to transform and deconstruct original thought processes throughout the performance. (Chappel and Kattenbelt 11-12). When the story of the car accident is recounted, Mary repeatedly utters "if you let me live, I will be good" ([www.vimeo.com](http://www.vimeo.com) 7:52). When words are rhythmically used, in this fashion, in order to form a refrain, "the burden of authenticity shifts to the audience, allowing the spectator an entrance into the performance." (Weygandt, 195). It in effect becomes more of a participatory art. The echolalia and musicality implemented in the description of the car crash, as Mary sits on the ground alongside the car, allow the trauma she encountered not only to be imagined by the audience members but also to put them into the frame of the wider social implications of how a young girl found herself in this situation to be taken into account.

As the performance progresses it gets even more harrowing with Mary describing her father driving her to "the mad house" ([www.vimeo.com](http://www.vimeo.com) 1:03:09) at the age of sixteen because of his inexplicable inability to parent a girl because he was expecting a boy. As Mary recounts "He would have known what to do with a boy, a boy would have been easier, they were expecting a boy" ([www.vimeo.com](http://www.vimeo.com) 13.06). This statement by Mary is

followed by sprechstimme of “My son will be different to me, my son will be a man” ([www.vimeo.com](http://www.vimeo.com) 13:56).<sup>10</sup> This is repeated to reinforce how in the 1950s Ireland that Mary was born into, society placed a higher regard on male children. Certainly, it was traditional for the firstborn male to inherit the parental estate often leaving other siblings no option but to emigrate or to join a religious congregation.<sup>11</sup>

## **Gender and Patriarchy**

The refrain about Mary’s father favouring a son is accompanied by audiovisual images of children and toys to juxtapose the picture Mary is describing. As evidenced in her autobiography, while recounting many happy times spent with siblings and friends the parental experience paints a very different picture because it explicitly describes her mother’s inability to cope with her wilful behaviour and the subsequent beatings she had at the hands of her father as he was often waiting for her “leather belt at the ready” (Coughlan 52). This is demonstrated during the performance with the mention of popular foodstuff of the era, Fry’s Cocoa Powder and Marietta biscuits being contrasted with a simulated beating accompanied by the utterance “Put manners on her. Beat it out of her” ([www.vimeo.com](http://www.vimeo.com) 52:16).

Another poignant chorus “My son will never wear a soldier’s uniform” ([www.vimeo.com](http://www.vimeo.com) 15:49) points to the fact that Mary’s father was probably aware of the toxic masculinity prevalent in the Irish army at that time. Tom Clonan has been outspoken about the patriarchal situation during his time in the defence forces. His groundbreaking research on the bullying, sexual harassment and assault that occurred within this organisation while he was a member (and most likely during Mary’s father’s time) has contributed to a book and two documentaries ([tomclonan.ie](http://tomclonan.ie)). This situation has also recently been highlighted by the Women of Honour whistleblower group.<sup>12</sup> Bullying was also a frequent occurrence in 1960’s domesticity. Tom Garvin cites how essentially during that time “children were practically the personal property of their parents and social worker supervision of dysfunctional families scarcely existed.” (74). Mary Coughlan’s questioning on stage is starkly contrasted with the dancer’s silence demonstrating how she never spoke up in her younger life.

Brokentalkers use linguistic features and musicality to bring the spectators back to a time before “the delusion and the denials were exposed” (Ferriter 8). Education is the most powerful tool in order to bring about change and in this way postdramatic theatre plays an important role in informing society about the evils of the heretofore.

The audience is made to feel a part of the happenings onstage as “the strength of this reciprocal bond between theatre and society primarily stems from the fact that theatre is about human existence” (Lehmann 5). One of the most striking elements of this performance is the simulated birth where the dancer breaks through a membrane at the back of the van accompanied all the while by a haunting music score with Coughlan beside her repeatedly asking “what am I supposed to do with a girl?” ([www.vimeo.com](http://www.vimeo.com) 18:25). Roles are reversed then when Mary sings about the power of touch. “Let your touch feel the trauma she is holding in her body” followed by a chorus of “Terrified bodies need a sense of where they are in space and time.” ([www.vimeo.com](http://www.vimeo.com) 22:40). Helen Bamber, a therapist who worked with holocaust survivors emphasised the importance of being physically present to their pain. Not just to talk, but to receive and “hold” the suffering” (228). During the performance, Mary continues to advise “If she is held she will be healed, she will not always have to guess who she is and where she is going.” ([www.vimeo.com](http://www.vimeo.com) 22:15). The soundscape helps the audience to identify with Coughlan’s pain which is then reinforced by her utterance, “For now touch will remain a painful thing leading to confusion and violation, legs black with contusion no wonder she sings the blues” (24:55).

However, the most chilling sound in the whole performance is the clip-clop horse effect alongside sinister dark, ominous eerie wind like sounds that precedes the depiction of abuse by Mary’s uncle who is played by Ailbhe Dunn. “I would rather go blind” by Etta James plays over radio undoubtedly chosen for the parallels of addiction between Coughlan and James. Later in the show Billie Holiday’s “All of me” is played and while the earlier singer also suffered from sexual abuse and subsequent addiction, Coughlan makes no secret of her admiration for the latter citing a connection to her darkness (248). The song is accompanied by Molly O’Mahony, who represents her father, playing the mouth organ.

The shared vulnerability between father and daughter is made evident by not only the music but also Mary’s uncle blowing bubbles into her father’s face ([www.vimeo.com](http://www.vimeo.com) 1:10:24). Not only does this visual metaphor enhance the soundscape but is even further intensified by the spectators’ imagination to supply that which is left unsaid. Mary’s father was most likely incapable of protecting her from the harmful effects of abuse. This is reinforced later when he explains the purpose of a hole that he dug in the garden, was to use as a car pit as he did not trust mechanics. His repeated utterance of “Keep everyone safe that was my job” (1:19:30) is accompanied by a cacophony of sound and flashing lights, after which he crashes into the hole.

The juxtaposition of what actually happened, according to Mary, and her father's perception of the situation is starkly portrayed. Jenny Kitzinger has investigated how women are often discredited in the media as having false memory syndrome and priority is given to patriarchal testimony (Reavey and Warner 9). In fact, Coughlan's silence is not unusual as many victims of abuse say there was no point reporting it as they knew they would not be believed. Research in this field has determined that "creating open-ended opportunities for discussion, as well as being empathic and responsive to the women, increased the possibility of the women disclosing abuse." (Rhodes 620). As depicted during this performance and reiterated throughout Mary's autobiography no safe space was provided for her to recount what was happening to her.<sup>13</sup>

*Woman Undone* with its use of musical soundscape and repetitive language in a fragmented disjointed way, typical of the postdramatic method, encourages the audience to relate their own experiences to what is happening onstage in order to fill in the gaps. This heightens the emotional tension and moves the action towards the audience, thereby resulting in a much more immersive experience than that which is provided by realism. Erica Fischer Lichte terms this "the feedback loop" (150), which contributes to the authenticity of that which is being conveyed.

### **Embodied Trauma**

The bodily movement during this performance disrupts the norm particularly with the simulated birth of the dancer. The back window of the post office van is covered with a membrane that limb by limb she breaks through and falls to the floor wearing just a pink bodysuit ([www.vimeo.com](http://www.vimeo.com) 17:51). This foreshadows the difficult life Coughlan will experience in the future. O'Reilly bears a striking resemblance to the blues singer with similar hair colouring and both women dressed in blue to indicate a symbiosis between the two performers. While the later staccato type dance movements can be seen to display teenage rebellion, they could also be interpreted as showing evidence of trauma ([www.vimeo.com](http://www.vimeo.com) 29:15).

Often it is bodily movement that can convey much more than any text and may be seen as a way of providing an invitation to the audience to travel on an experiential journey with the performers. From the very beginning the spectators are left in no doubt that this is going to be a harrowing ride. Interestingly, dance therapy has been used as a means of healing for victims of sexual abuse. There is therefore a dichotomy evident in this performance whereby it may be seen as not only a depiction of, but also a possible

treatment, for trauma. Often survivors of abuse transcribe their suffering on to their flesh and although they are unable to verbalise it, even years later, it is often possible for them to work through it with bodily movement (Oh 4).

There is an emotional scene before which Coughlan carefully strips down O'Reilly to the leotard of her birth and then gently leads her into a bath. The movement of the young dancer's body by continually slipping and sliding with her feet seemingly stuck to the side of the bath suggests the entrapment Mary felt during the periods of abuse. The situation is heightened even further by the older woman's utterance "your little feet don't touch the ground" ([www.vimeo.com](http://www.vimeo.com) 41:54). The blue dress is replaced by a yellow one for the representation of Coughlan's wild phase where the kinesiology takes on suggestive gyrating motions while simulations of smoking and drinking alcohol are portrayed to the audience. This is chillingly, accompanied by a distorted voice ringing out "Giving him the eye, was it? Leading him on, was it?" and Mary all the while shouting "Stop!" in the background (44:13).

Sexual abuse victims often blame themselves for what has happened to them. Vicary et al, in their research on date rape, have identified a connection between this feeling of self-blame and long-term psychological problems and even, worryingly, incidents of re-victimisation (300). Concomitantly, Filipas and Ullman have found that abuse victims who blame themselves are much more likely to demonstrate risky behaviours often leading to alcohol and drug addiction as they grow older (653). This is something that Coughlan continually addresses in her autobiography as her life has been totally controlled by what her uncle forced her to do against her will.

Research undertaken just last year (2022) by the Dublin Rape Crisis Centre demonstrates that 70 per cent of Irish people believe that there is a problem with consent in Ireland. Noeline Blackwell, CEO, has said, the organisation has made a commitment to a "long term initiative (working) with survivors, individuals and communities across the country, to help us better understand consent and its importance and how to shape our society towards one that does not tolerate sexual violence and sexual coercion." ([www.drcc.ie](http://www.drcc.ie)). Brokentalkers has put these words into action by displaying the abuse and subsequent psychological damage that Coughlan experienced throughout her lifetime by using dance and bodily movement to convey trauma. While this is mostly executed by the professional dancer other performers particularly Dunn (playing her uncle) also play a part. He simulates the sexual act using a bottle of bubbles accompanied by a grinding noise and mounts young Mary and rides her like a horse ([www.vimeo.com](http://www.vimeo.com) 30:26). The

absence of words can make the message even more clear. In fact, according to Carlson it is the “slapstick, violent physical action, pop cultures, breaking of the illusion and even seemingly spontaneous hysterical outbursts” (581) from the actors that assist greatly in the audience interpretation. He continues that “in order truly to approach the postdramatic, . . . the body must be freed from the constraints of the mimetic character, traditionally derived from the dramatic text, and set free to register as purely performative” (588).

Brokentalkers set out to do this in *Woman Undone*, by telling Coughlan’s life story in an impressionistic use of memory rather than in an orderly fashion primarily utilising the use of the body over language to recount what happened. According to Julian Beck, it would appear that the company facilitated Mary to reach “into (her) entrails and (and have them) strewn . . . about the stage in the form of questions”(10). While language and indeed, as previously explored music, are both very beneficial to convey the horrors of what happened to Coughlan in this performance it is even more impactful when done with the use of bodily movement.

Marie Bardet has investigated the connection between dance and self-actualisation comprising the core characteristics of significance, fulfilment and spirituality (364). German theatre director, Georg Fuchs, identified that those “rhythmic movements of the human body in space” infected “other people with the same or similar rhythmic vibrations.”(13). It is with the use of bodily movement that Brokentalkers has the most success in bringing the audience on the experiential journey of not only what happened to Mary Coughlan but also more importantly, all women who have been abused in a similar way.

The phenomenological feeling that results contributes to not only possible awareness of the social issue but also more importantly might lead to a later discussion. It is the lived experience of the spectators that contemporaneously fuses with the movement onstage to result in individual interpretations that is at odds with objective analysis more relevant to realism theatre.<sup>14</sup> Bert O States feels that the audience who is merely interested in the text of a performance would be best served to stay at home and read the script (236).

Certainly, staying home to read the script of *Woman Undone* would not achieve what Brokentalkers is highlighting in this performance, as the movement onstage is such a major dramatic strategy in order to tell Coughlan’s life story of abuse. During the performance O’Reilly runs incessantly on the spot to portray Coughlan running away from home with her boyfriend, played by Cara Dunn. Simultaneously a road is simulated on the audio-visual screen at the back of the stage ([www.vimeo.com](http://www.vimeo.com) 1:01:37). The frantic movement of the dancer is used to suggest that no matter how fast or how far she went there was in fact no escape. In her autobiography Mary recounts how while in

a drunken haze, after one of her own performances, she would lie down to an analepsis of her childhood and horrifically describes it as (her) grandfather kissing her, (her) uncle masturbating in front of (her), (her) father beating her.....(alongside) (t)he fear that (she) was being sucked into a black hole of shame”(203). She also describes how she felt bitterly that she had never moved on and was essentially always a “sexually abused, physically and emotionally violated child” (223). This is demonstrated onstage with Coughlan removing O’Reilly’s dress over her head and the latter getting into the bath once again where her arms become covered in blood ([www.vimeo.com](http://www.vimeo.com) 1:02:25). Self-harm is a way for those who have been psychologically damaged by abuse to try to numb the pain incurred and cutting as a method is particularly associated with future suicide attempts (Hawton et al). On stage the dancer’s arms, covered in blood foreshadows Mary Coughlan’s numerous suicide attempts during her lifetime.<sup>15</sup>

In a postdramatic performance, it is often only on reflection afterwards that it becomes clearer to the audience what the actual message is. Wolfgang Hoffman believes that theatre should incorporate a surprise factor to encourage this reflection ([www.auroranova.org](http://www.auroranova.org)). This occurs in *Woman Undone* when Mary becomes extremely annoyed by the other cast members questioning her about her mother. She vehemently refuses to talk about her absence as she too has been an absent mother.

By implementing postdramatic strategies, including bodily movement, I would argue that Brokentalkers achieves this fine balance between artistic integrity and care for the audience in *Woman Undone*. Victor Turner the symbolic cultural anthropologist termed this a liminal space where the ethical and aesthetic go hand in hand. It is the very intertwining of life and art that makes us think and question what we are exposed to (6). *Woman Undone* addresses not only the atrocities that Mary Coughlan was made to endure but also what Turner referred to as the *communitas* or collective responsibility the general population should take for not only child abuse, but also the abuse directed at any woman in our midst. It is the cross gender casting in this performance that draws immediate attention to the imbalance of the situation as author Louise O’Neill has said “we are not raping and killing ourselves ([www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com)). The juxtaposition of female characters playing male ones in *Woman Undone* can be seen as a feminist action (Miller).

Male characters have dressed as females since Ancient Greek theatre when patriarchal practices included the prohibition of women onstage as it was considered dangerous ([nctheatre.com](http://nctheatre.com)). However, the opposite is a relatively recent phenomenon as the prologue to the Shakespeare’s Globe Theatre’s 2003 performance of *Taming of the Shrew* demonstrates “Vice-versa’s very rare. But in this odd piece, The girls do get the chance

to wear the codpiece. Our new productions, crammed with female talents, May help in some way to redress the balance.” (Klett 166).<sup>16</sup> It is the cross gender casting with females portraying males in *Woman Undone* that facilitates what Paulo Freire describes as critical pedagogy to recognise the oppression that occurs to individuals who are marginalised in society (17). All four members of the band in *Woman Undone* represent the male presences in Coughlan’s life interchanging roles at times to demonstrate how Coughlan’s life was predominantly influenced by patriarchal forces. It is particularly striking that the dancer and Mary are the only females represented onstage. The billowy costume worn by Muirrean Ni Cheannabhain playing the monsignor enlarges him to represent a looming figure lauding over young Mary to constitute the control the church exerted over society at the time of her youth. All the while the cleric is saying, in an ironic, flippant way “you know you can always talk to me” ([www.vimeo.com](http://www.vimeo.com) 34:43). The postdramatic strategy of repetition is again used for extra emphasis. He is also superimposed on the audio-visual equipment at the back of the stage to accentuate the power the religious organisations had over the general population in the 1960’s.

Brokentalkers is bringing alive onstage Coughlan’s personal experience of patriarchal control and subsequent abuse with the postdramatic dramaturgical strategy of cross gender casting. Alisa Solomon observes that it is the incongruity of what the actor plays and what her body shows that helps to disrupt ritual and subsequently raise the consciousness of the audience in the cross-gendering process (19). The fact that “the uniqueness of the all-female cast gave . . . more room to push the boundaries of the play.” (Chung 1) has thus also allowed Brokentalkers to draw even more attention to the male behaviours that affected Mary throughout her lifetime. It is by the very act of females displaying typical male characteristics, especially those of an unsavoury type, that the audience become even more aware of the abuse to which Coughlan has been exposed. While wrong in any guise, the heightened tension as a result of subverting gender roles makes it even more unacceptable.

## **Conclusion**

The postdramatic dramaturgical strategies that are employed by Brokentalkers in *Woman Undone* particularly those of musicality and storytelling, bodily movement and cross gender casting have allowed the audience not only to witness past injustices but also to raise awareness of present ones also.

However, as Emilie Pine cautions, social responsibility should not fall solely on the shoulders of the Arts (221). It is, nevertheless, a major first step in the process of addressing the fate of the marginalised in our society where audiences are encouraged to not only be made aware of what happened in the past but also to question their involvement in any collusion.

*Woman Undone* is drawing attention to, not only Mary Coughlan's experience of child sexual abuse but also, to the one in five women and one in six men (out of a randomly selected survey of 3,000 adults in 2002 by Sexual Abuse and Violence in Ireland SAVI) who have been the victims of child sexual abuse with direct contact. Almost half of those who responded had never before told anyone of their horrific experiences. Unfortunately, this survey was not immediately followed up by either a repeat study or even a political discussion. It actually took sixteen years for a subsequent study to be called for. It is scheduled to be published this year (2023), five years after its commission. ([www.independent.ie](http://www.independent.ie)). If presence at this performance has encouraged even one person to talk about their experience of child sexual abuse, Brokentalkers will have achieved, where the state has failed, in keeping the light shining on an aspect of Ireland's dark past.

Mary Coughlan was very brave to expose her story of abuse in such a public way but she felt safe doing so in the hands of Cannon and Keegan and wanted to highlight the fact that it was not just happening in her house. Many of her childhood friends in Galway contacted her after her autobiography was published to let her know they had had similar experiences. While it may not be solely the responsibility of the Arts sector to encourage change it is nevertheless vital that governmental funding continues to be provided to theatre companies like Brokentalkers in order that they can produce more groundbreaking work in the future and provide that small first step of a very long journey.

## Notes

- 1 Tim Etchells of the Sheffield based theatre company, Forced Entertainment, describes a similar process whereby they use “a few scraps or fragments of text, an idea or two for action, a costume, an idea about space, a sketched out piece of music-everything unfinished, distinctly incomplete-so there'd be more space for other things to fill in.....more dots to join” (50).
- 2 This is something familiar to this theatre company as in a previous production called *Have I No Mouth* dealing with bereavement it was deemed necessary to actually have a psychotherapist onstage.

- 3 If presence at this performance encourages even one woman to share a story it will have served a very important purpose.
- 4 The Brokentalkers duo was very aware of their male privilege during the making of this performance, often leaving the rehearsal room to give the women privacy to work through whatever was necessary. It was while collaborating with Fiona Whelan, on the *What Does He Need* project concerning the creation of a public dialogue about the current state of masculinity, that these two theatre makers became better informed on gender and feminism ([www.fionawhelan.com](http://www.fionawhelan.com)).
- 5 Cannon has said it was unusual to have a script nearly ready prior to rehearsal.
- 6 Set design was by Sabine Dargent in performance viewed.
- 7 This was not the first time that Mongoose had championed women’s rights as they released music in support of the repeal the eighth movement in 2016.
- 8 The Russian oral tradition, skaz, moves towards the field of “verbal signification ... and to the cognition of aural phenomena (in order to involve the audience) with its affective and emotional registers” (Weygandt, 195).
- 9 Allen James asserts regarding the linguistic layers and social semiotic functions of the postdramatic that it is the vocality and verballity that take precedence over the setting and characterisation of dramatic theatre and are, in fact, important play defining elements (134).
- 10 Sprechstimme is a cross between speaking and singing in which the tone quality of speech is heightened and lowered in pitch along melodic contours indicated in the musical notation.
- 11 Diarmuid Ferriter has discussed how in the 1950s London became a refuge, in particular, for Irish women who did not feel welcome at home in Ireland (475).
- 12 The Women of Honour arose from a documentary of same name investigating a group of defence forces who had been victims of sexual assault during their work.
- 13 As the performance is based on Coughlan’s book it could be termed a looser form of verbatim theatre. Hammond and Steward, in their introduction to an anthology devoted on this particular genre of contemporary theatre, define verbatim as “the origins of the text spoken in the play” (1) where the spectator is almost in conversation with the performers who are confiding intimate details of what happened to them.
- 14 Renowned Irish playwright Samuel Beckett also relied on movement and spatial awareness over words expecting the audience to fill in the gaps based on their own personal experience (McMullan, 10).
- 15 When interviewed for the *Irish Times* she talked about the staggering thirty-two times she ended up in hospital with alcohol poisoning ([www.irishtimes.ie](http://www.irishtimes.ie)).
- 16 Galway’s Druid Theatre celebrated their 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary by staging what they simply called *DruidShakespeare* “an epic story of families, wars and the making of nations

played out over six hours and staging Irish women as English kings and men as bawdy widows.”(wildefirefilms.net).

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ABEI Journal – The Brazilian Journal of Irish Studies, v. 25, n. 2, 2023.

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