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Project Title: The River Shannon Project

UOA: 33 - Music, Drama, Dance, Performing Arts, Film and Screen Studies

Research Timeline

Date	Rationale of research activities and decisions undertaken
Aug – Sept 2012	<p>Stage 1: Scratching the Surface</p> <p>The genesis for this practice as research project began with a conversation with Irish actress and film/theatre maker Maedbh McGrath, about creating a piece of testimonial theatre work for the inaugural Elemental Arts and Culture Festival which was taking place in September 2012 in Limerick City, Ireland. The festival was looking for artists to create work that would in some way respond to the elements – fire, air, wind and water.</p> <p>I remembered reading a blog post by actor and local businessman, Nigel Dugdale a few months previously about a boat trip he took on the River Shannon. Describing his experience as a 'lesson in citizenship' he was struck by the wisdom of 'ordinary people' who had direct lived experience of the River. He described how this trip which enabled him to see the city from the perspective of the river led to a change in his view of how the city could work. My creative practice research since 2006 has centered on the use of personal testimony and theatre and is propelled by the belief that sharing our stories and experiences can lead to greater insight and understanding about how society operates. This planted the seed to use my 'theatre of testimony' methodology to explore how people engage with the landscape, physicality and presence of the River Shannon as it flows through the city of Limerick.</p> <p>An immediate challenge presented itself. I was based in the UK at the time and concerns arose about how to gather data. The personal interview is at the very heart of my practice. My interviewing style is person centered and heavily influenced by oral history and life story approaches and is underpinned by anthropologist Marjorie Shostak,</p>

claim that such an interview is an occasion where 'one with unique personality traits and particular interests at a particular time of life, [...] answers a specific set of questions asked by another person with unique personality traits and interests at a particular time of life' (2008: 100).

My dramaturgical choices when creating and staging the script are underpinned by what Sangster refers to as the interview's 'circumstances of creation' (1994:44) where she argues that '[s]ince the interview is not created as a literary product is created, alone and as a result of reflective action, it cannot be divorced from the circumstances of its creation, which of necessity is one of audience participation and face to face confrontation' (44).

I could get home for the weekend of the festival but I was concerned that it would not give me enough time to gather personal testimony and create something performative.

In an attempt to gather some initial primary data which might lend itself to being used to create performance material for the festival, I turned to social media. I set up a Facebook page and Twitter account and also submitted a press release to the local papers in Limerick. People were encouraged to send in recordings of themselves talking about their experiences and memories of the river, post pictures on the FB page and also tweet their memories. <https://www.thejournal.ie/river-shannon-stories-584815-Sep2012/>

An email accompanied by an audio recording was received from a woman in New York, who's cousin had contacted her after reading about the project in the local paper; the woman's father had left Limerick when he was a teenager. Ireland has a long history of emigration and in particular to the US and this led me to consider all the people who had emigrated from Limerick and how memories of the river and the landscape might live on in future generations.

September
2012

The Festival

During the weekend of the Festival in Limerick, I set up a pop-up space in the Limerick Local Heroes hub in Arthur's Quay Shopping Centre in the city centre and invited people to come and share their stories with me. As it happened the hub was run by Nigel Dugdale, author of the blog post.

Articles were placed in local papers and also on the Elemental website. The aim was to gather stories on the Friday and Saturday morning and then create a short scratch performance or sharing to be presented on the Saturday afternoon in the foyer of the George Hotel also located in the city centre and close to the River Shannon.

A number of people came to see me, including a group of men from the St Mary's Maritime Project, the same group that had taken Nigel on the river. They offered to take me on a boat trip on the following Monday on the river. This trip had a similar impact on me as it has on Nigel. I had

never experienced the city in this way. I write about this in my reflective writing piece that featured as part of the Watermark exhibition. I listened once more to the stories the men shared with me about their lives on the river and how they were trying to get the city to realise the impact it once had and could have on today's young people and future generations, but it needed recognition and investment. This trip also gave me an embodied experience of being on the river and it was on this boat trip that the idea began to form about staging the play on a boat on the river. A selection of photographs that I took on this trip are included in the e-portfolio.

The short scratch performance ended up being more of a sharing of some of the data that I had gathered, including the audio recording from the lady in New York, a story from my aunt about falling into the river as a child, some photographs I had taken of the river during the weekend and the singing of the song *Shannon River* by Limerick man Dennis Allen. The song begins with the lyric – "I'll be home Shannon River to your side one day" and this really resonated with testimony submitted by the lady from New York who spoke about her father's love for the River Shannon and how he instilled this in his children growing up in New York.

The findings from this stage of the research indicated that there were a lot more stories out there and that people were interested in how theatre could be used as a platform to share these stories.

Inspired by the solo performances of Anna Deavere Smith, I also began to consider how I might create a solo performance from the multiple stories and memories.

October 2012 –
Sept 2013

Stage 2: A literature review and an audio walk

Contextual research. During this period I conducted a literature review and began to immerse myself further in the archive to understand the history of the river. An exploration of mythology, legends, folklore and music about the river enabled me to get a sense of the presence and changing nature of the river and its relationship to the people and city of Limerick. This resulted in an increasing collection of sounds, songs, historical facts, poems, legends as well as contemporary material that related to the River Shannon particularly along its banks as it flows through the city.

21 May 2013, an expression of interest proposal was submitted to the Limerick City of Culture 2014 to stage a one woman multi-sensory testimonial performance about the River Shannon in 2014.

This was successful and I was asked to submit a more detailed proposal.

As the research developed and more stories and material emerged, I decided to explore and experiment with audio and sound as a way of presenting the research while waiting for the Limerick City of Culture

decision. I created an audio walk which was presented at the 2013 Elemental Arts and Culture Festival. The piece called *Shannon's Way* takes participants on a guided audio walk along a certain section of the River in the city and includes a collection of songs, found recordings, poems, historical facts.

During the festival in September 2013, I led two guided walks around the route in person. People had the sound recording on their phone and could access the material at the various points we stopped at along the way.

Feedback from participants about how it encouraged them to think more about the history of the river, their own connection to the river and their memories. Throughout the walks the participants shared with me various stories about the river. They also put me in contact with other people to interview. A more detailed proposal submitted on 30 Sept 2013. A grant of €30,000 was secured to stage the performance on a boat during the Limerick City of Culture.

The next stage involved assembling a production team and gathering firsthand testimony material and finding a suitable boat to stage it the performance on.

February 2014
– April 2014

Stage 3: On the river

Limerick is my hometown, so I was able to base myself in Limerick for six months to conduct the fieldwork. This included conducting interviews to gather in person first hand testimonies for the performance. Further calls were put in the press and social media looking for stories.

Began research to find a boat and contacted various agencies and organizations involved with the River.

February to
April 2014

Return to Ireland to commence interviewing and conduct more research for the play.

Date for performance pushed back to August as finding a boat to stage the play on was proving difficult.

Contact made with American lady who submitted the aural recording. She and her brother handed out flyers calling for stories at the New York St Patrick's Day Parade in March.

Contacted famous Limerick people to see if they would record themselves speaking about the River Shannon and what it means to them. Initial thoughts were to use this as promotional and contextual material. Email received from Terry Wogan's agent saying Terry has agreed to record a short extract – it was decided at a later stage to use this in the actual performance of the play. (Audio recording in portfolio)

Email received from Malaysian lady now living near Limerick with a love story about the River Shannon.

Trip to Exeter – Interview with woman who has memories of going to Parteen to visit her aunt and walking along the banks of the river when she was a child.

May 2014

R & D week with Director and members of the production team. This week proved really useful as it gave myself, the director and the designer a chance to engage with the physicality of the river as well as some of the testimonies and material that I had gathered to this point.

I wanted the piece to represent the depth and breadth of material that I had collected. Questions emerging at this point included: what dramaturgical framework could contain a montage of characters, real life testimonies, images and video footage of the River along with an original score, live music and audience participation? What theatrical structure or framework could enable me as a solo performer to embody the wide variety of testimonies in an authentic manner? What did authenticity look like in this project? How could I give the audience a sense of what I had experienced through the process of collecting these testimonies?

Myself, the director and set designer took a boat trip on the river with a local Limerick man with extensive knowledge of the river – selection of photos included in the e-portfolio. Both the director and set designer had personal family connections to the river but this trip gave us a chance in person to experience the physicality and rhythm of the river and bring that embodied knowledge back into the rehearsal room.

Later in the week myself and the director walked around the banks of the river to exploring the possibility of a site-specific performance or alternative venues if we could not secure a suitable boat as a performance space. This also helped us to acquaint ourselves in person with the river and explore various dramaturgical strategies.

Audio recording received from Terry Wogan. Exploring possibility of using it in play. Exploration of the various themes that were emerging from the narratives – growing up, childhood, playing, environmental issues, fishing, industry, love, swimming, suicide, flooding,

Meeting with Jacinta Kahn of the George Boutique Hotel where the original scratch performance sharing took part in the initial stages of the research. Mentioned trouble finding boat – she happened to know someone who was going to be sailing an 80ft boat ton the river through Limerick. Put me in contact with her. (Image of 80ft Dutch Barge)

Meeting and interview with the late Micheál O'Suilleabhan, Director of the Irish World Academy of Music to discuss his experiences of the river and the building of the Irish World Academy of Music on the banks of the river at the University of Limerick. On the wall of the academy is a mural of the legend of Sionna and how the river got its name.

	<p>Meeting with sound designer and musician Patrick O'Brien to discuss possible soundscapes for the performance. Took me for a walk by his home in Pallaskenry on the banks of the estuary, telling me more about the history and giving me a deeper sense of the landscape of the river.</p> <p>Interview with a woman about her experiences of swimming in the river. Invite to join her swimming.</p>
June 2014	<p>Meeting with University of Limerick International Office to discuss possibility of support and connections in New York for the streaming of the play on a boat on the Hudson.</p> <p>Research trip to New York to connect with Irish organisations and emigrants and to meet with the woman who submitted the original audio recording in 2012 of her memories of the River Shannon. Selection of photographs from that trip are included in the portfolio.</p> <p>Meetings with the Irish Arts Centre to discuss gathering stories and the possibility of presenting the play in the future in New York. Also researching possibilities of venues to stream live performance to.</p> <p>Stayed in Mary Farren's home for two nights. Mary took me and my production manager on a boat trip on the East River and we walked along the banks of the river in Brooklyn.</p> <p>Started swimming in the river three mornings a week during June, July and August with a group of people. This gave me a new appreciation for the river. (include pictures). I saw another aspect to the landscape and the beauty of the river. This led me to include a section on this in the play.</p> <p>1st Draft of the play sent to the director and other members of the production team. Exploring the idea of various themes that are emerging from the interview material. Struggling to find the appropriate dramaturgical framework. Ideas about Storm Darwin, flooding, the goddess Sionna as being the character who narrates the story and then somehow morphs into other characters.</p> <p>Email discussion with Mary Farren about the challenge of finding a suitable venue to stream the performance in New York. Suggested to contact Coogan's Irish Bar. Contact was made and Pat Coogan agreed to host the screening there.</p>
July 2014	<p>Draft 2 of script – ideas explored about the legend of Sionna</p> <p>Plotting of a rough temporal line incorporating themes such as growing up on the river, childhood, geography, activism, love, knowledge, immigration, recreation, fishing, suicide, death, search and rescue, flooding.</p> <p>Decision to base the main character as a collector of stories based loosely on me and my experience – the boat is her home and she is inviting people into her world to share experiences of the other worlds</p>

that she has been gathering information about. This would provide me with dramaturgical framework which would enable me to embody all the various testimonies without actually becoming the character. Drawing on various storytelling and narrative approaches.

Revision of script to incorporate this idea

Commence three week rehearsal period for public performance of *The River*. Various rehearsal strategies considered to embody the testimonies. Explore some of Brian Astbury's techniques. I had used these when embodying the testimony of a single character in one of my earlier testimony plays. How might it work for embodying multiple testimonies as a single character?

13 August – 1st
September
2014

Stage 4: Performance

36 Public Performances of *The River* on board an 80ft Dutch Barge at Custom House Quay, Limerick. The performances ran daily from Tuesday to Sunday at 1pm and 7.30pm.

A special midnight performance was streamed live to Coogan's Irish Bar in New York on Wednesday

11th & 12th
September
2014

Presentation of paper 'Staging Testimony: Extending Beyond the Bounds of Performance' at the Learning Together Conference, Hunt Museum, Limerick. In this paper I explored the idea of Baz Kershaw's extension of Schechner's definition of performance which includes how 'everything that is done in preparation for the performance' (1992: 22) can affect its 'socio-political significance' and 'potential efficacy', I argued that the manner in which the interview is conducted when collecting testimonies has significance and should not be dismissed.

There were many moments during the gathering of the testimonies that have significance for both the interviewer and interviewee that are not always possible to present within the framework of the performance.

Watermark exhibition launched at the Irish World Academy of Music and Dance, University of Limerick. The reflective essay and some photographs that I had taken during my research that were featured in the exhibition are included in the e-portfolio.

November 2014

I gave a talk called *When Two Forms Collide* at Hearsay Audio Festival, Killybegs, Ireland. In this talk I considered the overlap between radio documentary making and verbatim theatre and discussed the process of seeking, drawing out and shaping narrations for the theatre. I drew on examples from *The River* and one of my earlier testimony plays *Walking Away*. *Walking Away* was created using multiple personal narratives of domestic abuse survivors lived experience.

Guest Speaker at 'The Artist as Active Citizen' symposium at a convocation of artists and academics entitled *Sounding Forward*,

	<i>Listening Back</i> hosted by the Irish World Academy of Music and Dance. I spoke about the importance of artists creating spaces where personal recollections of lived experience could be shared and listened to in order to break silences and deepen society's understanding of the challenges and complexities of human life.
June 2017	Performance of extract from <i>The River</i> as part of Down by the Riverside in Bristol.
Ongoing	Currently seeking a publisher to publish a book which features a collection of the stories and images that I have taken of <i>The River</i> . Further exploration of the Irish emigrant's connection to the River.