Remaining still and staying present

by Grace Dyas

Britain and Ireland Lives Entwined

Grace Dyas, an acclaimed artist, activist, writer, theatre director and actor, makes theatre, film and large-scale participation projects because she wants to change the world. And to change the world you must change power. In 2017, she shared her experience of abuse of power in the theatre world in Ireland, contributing to the global #MeToo movement. Her post to her blog opened the gate for others who followed from across Irish public life. This became an ongoing cause. Grace explored the legacies in her play *We Don't Know What's Buried Here.*

Grace creates durational art campaigns to coincide with important social moments. For the centenary of 1916, Grace co-authored *IT'S NOT OVER* with Barry O'Connor, a campaign to expose the reality that the conflict in the North of Ireland is unresolved. For the abortion referendum, she toured across Ireland to small towns and cities with *NOT AT HOME* – performing an archive, co-authored with Emma Fraser, of women's experiences of travelling for abortion.

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I'm writing from Inisheer, the smallest of the Aran Islands. The day after I was asked to write this essay, I moved here from Dublin, to start a new life with my husband, Martin, after ten years of incredibly busy theatre-making and activism. I don't know what I'm going to do next.

I do some late night YouTubing and learn I am in liminal space: something has ended, but the next thing hasn't started yet.

Inisheer is an island because it's surrounded by the Atlantic Ocean. The beauty is breathtaking. Martin says that living on the island is like waking up every day doing the same play but in a different set.

There's a population of about 250 islanders who live here full-time. There's one shop, three pubs and a small café. I'm intrigued by the life of the islanders. In my first few weeks here, while hanging around the one shop on the island (trying to make friends), one woman tells me that she has been on the island every Christmas for her whole life.

On the day before Christmas Eve, she loves watching the last ferry as it leaves the pier. She knows that everyone who is on the island is staying here and she knows everyone here. There's a clear border, a clear break between her and the rest of the world.

During the summer, every day the island fills up with waves of visitors who come here for the day from Galway and Clare. In the evenings they fan out and leave, like waves crashing off the rocks on the shore, they make their imprint into the 'set' of the island for that day, and then they are gone. In winter, the boats don't sail as often and there are no visitors. I ask another woman if it feels lonely in the winter, she says no, she loves it when the visitors stop coming because you know that if you go to something, it will only be islanders there: you know everyone.

On this island, we speak Irish. We're far enough from the mainland that the language has survived here, insulated by rock and seaweed. I learned the language in a school in Dublin's inner city. I'm complimented several times by the islanders and told that I have good Irish. I am grateful for knowing the language and not having it be a wall between us.

While we are washing dishes, Martin turns to me and says: 'It's nice to be known, isn't it?' Everyone says hello to each other as they pass each other on the beautiful roads lined with dry stone walls.

On my way to the island on the bus through Connemara, I was listening to a podcast. Russell Brand was interviewing Brene Brown. According to Brene's research, the people with the most compassion are those with the strongest boundaries.

Wedding portents

I got married on this island. On the morning of our wedding, we heard the news that Britain had voted to leave the EU. For most of the guests, it felt like terrible shocking news, the combination of Brexit and the 2016 US election was spelling out overtones of 'the end of the world', and we were getting married, starting our lives, looking out at the sea in the same direction, towards our future. And the world as we knew it was changing exponentially.

I wondered, in keeping with Brene's research, would having stronger boundaries make the UK more compassionate to outsiders?

My aunt stuck out among the wedding guests. A UK resident, she had voted to leave the EU. She wanted better hospitals and schools. She felt the UK needed to do a better job looking after its own citizens. She believed being a member of the EU was preventing them from doing that. She had moved to the UK herself when she was 17, she had seen the signs on the doors of pubs that said 'No blacks, no dogs, no Irish' but now, 20 years after the Good Friday Agreement, and married to an Englishman, living in one of the Shires, with a good British job, she felt the UK was her home, and she didn't want to let anyone else in. They were full. She was closing her boundaries. She was voting to leave. For her, the results boded well for her future. It was in keeping with the wedding festivities. My uncle, a Marxist, who had lived in London all of his adult life, also voted to leave the EU. For him it was about shaking up the establishment, and using the power of his vote to exercise his dissent and vote against the government.

To most of us, it felt like a shocking result that signified the rise of the right, that the world was moving backwards, not forwards.

I remember that the topic was carefully avoided. It's often thought wiser not to get into politics at an Irish wedding … on an island, especially about England. England is like the ex-husband or father of all the guests, who did really well in the divorce and got the six counties. Except what Ireland doesn't really know a lot of the time, is that now they don't really want them either. Talk of England, at a celebration with drink taken, can send a shiver through the party. Those wounds are still raw.

For the last three and a half years, I've watched as Brexit deals were delayed and debated and kicked down the road again. Deadlines loomed in red and white letters on the news. The world is ending, but we don't know what will happen next. The UK is stuck in liminal space, and Ireland is the reason it can't move on. They can't find a solution to the problem of the Irish border. The only option – Theresa May tells us – is to leave and not leave at the same time, in the hopes that the solution will be invented in the future; the solution being to create a border that is there and not there at the same time. Trump is elected and the world feels more and more surreal.

Performing Brexit

I didn't really get 'into' Brexit. I treated it like people in Britain in the 1970s and 1980s who used to change the channel when the North came on the television. It felt laborious, never ending and painful. I don't engage, and I don't feel compassion. But for the purposes of this essay it felt like the only thing to write about. I start to try to turn towards it and understand it.

I go for walks on the island and I let the last ten years catch up on me. I'm processing, I'm healing – I am in liminal space. I pick blackberries. I witness incredible sunsets. I watch crows on the road eat horse shite. I listen to Boris Johnson on Sky News. Why is it so hard to move on?

One day, I was finding it difficult to write this essay, and Martin offered a view, as we sat on the rocks on the boundary of this island with the sea, that Brexit is easier to perform than to write about.

In a way, it is nothing but a performance. To me it feels like Britain's membership of the EU is a fake problem, invented to distract the people from the real problem, their suffering under the weight of late capitalism. People want jobs and houses. They are scared that the stranger on the tube wants to blow them up. They are looking for a way to feel safe. For people in the UK, Brexit became the answer.

Brexit is the fake solution to the fake problem. It doesn't exist with any material substance that can truly be written about, only performed. It is a fiction. The emperor has no clothes, and the little boy who points it out is met with 'oh yeah, so what? We know he has no clothes. We don't care, he's entertaining us. Why aren't you in school little boy?'

I reflect on my last ten years working in theatre; I was fixated on the truth as were many other makers of my generation. I felt like the urgent problems of the world could only be confronted if we sat together and looked at the truth. I didn't want to provide any respite. I didn't want to show any fiction. As the truth floated from the screen of the television news and documentaries and onto the stages, the news became a Shakespeare play, where news itself ceased to exist, and the commentators focused on what they thought could or might happen next. When an event actually took place, it was barely dissected, just reported in big letters, a clip that was played over and over, and then back to guessing, surmising, imagining what could happen next. The world was in liminal space, caught in past and future thinking, with no capacity to regard the present.

Why is performance stronger than ideology? The viewers lost patience with analysis and everything became about entertainment, chaos, and the rhetoric of the desire to keep order, to feel safe. To reclaim our borders became the only soothing antidote.

It occurred to me, that in terms of this performance of political language, the partition of Ireland in and of itself was the 'backstop' of its day.

After Ireland's War of Independence, partition was put to Michael Collins and the delegation as a way to deal with the loyal unionist population in the North, a way of Ireland being in England and Ireland at the same time. But, like the sinister motivations behind Brexit and in the world of late capitalism, it was probably just a way of keeping the ports and the money in the North.

Collins and the delegation didn't have the military strength to resist Lloyd George's threat of war 'most bloody and awful', so he tried to sell the treaty to the rest of the teachtaí dálas of the first Dáil as a 'stepping stone' (read 1922 for 'backstop') towards a united Ireland. It's what we're going to do until we can think of something else; which is in short, how nearly 100 years later, Theresa May tried to sell the backstop to her parliament. It's only temporary, we'll come back to it later, we just need to get this done.

Brexit, like the partition of Ireland, is a trilemma. None of the solutions work for everyone, because we can't yet conceive of how to be in more than one place at the same time.

For the 2016 commemorations, I made a piece of work with Barry O'Connor that looked at the conflict between Ireland and England on this island. Inspired by the words of an IRA volunteer we interviewed, we named the project *IT'S NOT OVER*. The conflict in the North of Ireland had been largely sold to us in the South as resolved. It felt odd to me, to commemorate the Easter Rising of 1916 when the ideals that had been set forth in the Proclamation hadn't happened yet.

My generation had been sold the narrative that the conflict was well and truly over, and it wasn't to be discussed. We learned for our exams that the North was now at peace, that everyone was happy with the situation and that it was time to move on. We played 'IRA' in the schoolyard: I don't remember the rules but I do remember that rather than betray my teammates, and reveal my letter (I think?) I risked having a stick of dog shit smeared on my face and I gained the respect of the boys in my class. To us, the IRA was an abstract idea, happening somewhere very far away. It was as historic and ancient as Cowboys and Indians, so it could become a schoolyard game.

Real war

In 2015, I was visiting a group of teenagers in Downpatrick, just outside Belfast. They would be coming as a class to see my play *HEROIN*. I asked them why they thought people took drugs. A young man said: 'Because they feel abandoned'. I inquire further: 'Abandoned by their fathers? By the state?' 'No,' he said, 'abandoned by you, in the South'. The teacher intervened: 'She doesn't want to hear about that, she's from the South, it's boring to them'. 'No,' I said, 'I do want to hear about it'. I listened as the young people told me about

an articulated truck that stood perched from a height in their town watching them. About family members who had died as a result of the same conflict, only weeks ago, that I had believed had ended 20 years ago.

For them, this wasn't a war game. It was still a real war and I had abandoned them. More people have died by suicide in the North of Ireland in the years since the Good Friday Agreement than died in the conflict.

In the course of making *IT'S NOT OVER*, I found myself sitting across the table from men and women who had devoted their lives to the cause of Irish freedom. I felt it was an incredible honour to meet these people and hear their perspectives which are so often dehumanised.

One volunteer told me a story about finding himself talking to his cellmate in prison; they had fought together for years and considered each other close friends. They were talking about what the new Ireland would be like. He was shocked that his friend had completely different views to him – he wasn't a feminist, he wasn't a socialist and he described a very different Ireland than the one this volunteer was fighting for. He explained that very often that happened. The priority was to get the English out, and we'll deal with all that later. It's only temporary, we'll come back to it later, we just need to get this done.

From being with these volunteers and trying to really listen and hear them, I realised that this conflict wasn't about borders or identities. It was about rights and having their basic needs met, the right to a house, the right to a good job.

NOT AT HOME

In 2017, I made a piece with Emma Fraser, called *NOT AT HOME*. In the lead up to the referendum in the Irish Free State on abortion rights, we wanted to give voice to the women who had travelled to access safe abortion services in another country. Very quickly, we discovered that in this narrative, for women in these crisis situations, England became the hero and Ireland became the aggressor.

I flew to John Lennon International Airport for the day with Frank Sweeney, the sound designer on the project. We asked taxi drivers if we could interview them about bringing women back and forward

to the clinic for the price of a fare. I'm struck by one man, who talks about walking a very young Irish girl to the door of the clinic, to shield her from protestors. He said that it wasn't right, that she should be with her own father. The compassion he felt for these women was palpable.

I wonder if he had very strong boundaries?

Since the Good Friday Agreement, the border between North and South has been invisible, but it's felt. Since the referendum to repeal the eighth amendment in the South passed, women on one side can access healthcare at home, and on the other side they have to travel. My Ireland, encouraged by these social victories, the repeal referendum and the marriage equality movement, now felt that change was possible. 'The North is Next' was now the new slogan. People began to go back to what they had abandoned, and the language and feeling of solidarity rang true.

Suspended spaces

It's very hard to leave a relationship, even one that isn't working for you. There are times when I catch myself on the island, and realise that in a way I haven't left Dublin, I'm still there in my head. I watch Leo Varadkar say of Brexit: 'There's no such thing as a clean break'. Nothing about any of this feels clean. I understand why Johnson wants to 'get it done'. In some ways the UK hasn't even reached the liminal space yet, because nothing has happened, they are in a suspended space.

For many of the volunteers I met while making *IT'S NOT OVER*, they lived in that suspended space for over 30 years. One man spent four years going to the same pub every day waiting for a phone call. Another told me that after 30 years of fighting, they had gained 'not one blade of grass' on either side of the Irish border. Not one blade of grass. The staticness of that image, compared with the chaos of the rest of his stories of the conflict, moved me. It can feel like everything is happening, when in some ways nothing is happening. Everything is moving and it's impossible to keep up, but really; we're stuck, not one blade of grass.

The more I think, the more I walk, the more sunsets I see, I think a lot about Ireland and England. There are times when it's painful, times when it's frustrating and more and more I realise I am seeing it

differently than I used to. There is a negative excitement in conflict that the viewer can get caught up in. But without that negative excitement, I start to see that same desire in the people who voted to leave the EU in Britain, as I heard about the lives of Catholics in the North that set off the conflict. Jobs, housing, safety.

The Catholics were being denied these things by an apartheid unionist state. The working classes in Britain were being denied these things too, by years of austerity.

Nineteen million people in Britain live in poverty, according to a UN report. Poor, young working-class men from UK cities were sent to Ireland, killing other poor, young working-class people from cities in the North. The system we are living under means we are perpetually stuck, not being able to get what we need. We never hear the word 'capitalism' in vox pops, but more and more to me, it seems like that's the root cause.

Another backstop?

James Connolly said: 'What does it matter what flag flies over the GPO if people don't have enough to eat?' Most of my work has been about Ireland and what Irishness has meant. I've looked at polemic subjects like Brexit, and been asked to say what the work meant – is it either or? Are you doing a positive play or a negative play? Are you pro-IRA or anti-IRA? Are you pro-choice or pro-life? I've tried to avoid getting into those spaces, to be both and neither at the same time, to give audiences a perspective outside of politics and journalism where the true complexity of the situation can really be seen.

In 2018 I wrote a play called *We Don't Know What's Buried Here* where two women, magdalene ghosts, tried to unearth the secrets of Ireland, but the problem was they kept burying everything they found. This is how I see Ireland, a constant cyclical liminal landscape, perpetually between 'then' and 'next' with the border cutting off the circulation, finding it impossible to move on, looking for the next oppressor, the British, the Church, the next right-wing government.

In 2019 I wrote a play called *It was easy (in the end)* based on a concept by myself and Doireann Coady, inspired by the Zizek quote, 'It's easier to imagine the end of the world, than the end of capitalism'. I toyed around with the idea that capitalism would end on a certain date. It was 26 April. You may have noticed that it hasn't ended. I thought it would be fun to try and imagine it.

Is the world in a post-capitalist state of liminality? We know that capitalism has failed us, it has become what was and now we are waiting for the next. I crave resolution. But capitalism creates the problems it proposes to solve, so nothing gets resolved, everything is kicked down the road, to resurface again, be debated again, but not really talked about and never solved. Is capitalism now a 'backstop', something we'll do until we can think of something else?

I stand on this island, looking at the sea and thinking about the two islands of Ireland and Britain. I try to think about their relationship and I find it hard to see them as nationalities any more, now I just see people. People who aren't satisfied and who don't have enough to live, with no solution in sight, just reams of back-up plans. Do we want to stay entwined? It's a good distraction from our common problem – we don't have a system of living on this earth that supports our survival.

Liminal space is the time between what was and what's next – it is where all transformation happens.

Imagining compassion

I imagine what the world might look like if we replaced capitalism with compassionism. An 'ism' is where that thing becomes the basis on which all decisions are made. So for the person suffering from alcoholism, all their decisions become about alcohol. Under capitalism, all decisions become about money, capital and greed. What if all our decisions were based on compassion? How strong would our boundaries need to be to enable us to travel towards that space? What would it take for that transformation to happen?

We are stuck.

It gets colder on the island, and it's hard to really be. We have days where we feel like we are going mad. I struggle to be on the island. I'm here in the now and in Dublin in the past in my head at the same time.

My brain feels mushy the more of Brexit I watch, and I think about the deadline of 31 October, when Johnson says the UK will leave the EU. It will be Halloween. In the Celtic calendar it's the end of the year and the beginning of the next one. Martin and I commit that we will stay here until then.

What will happen between now and then?

I am pretty certain that the sun will rise and set. Inisheer will still be an island. Tomorrow I will submit this essay, and there will be notes, and back and forth. Less and less tourists will visit the colder it gets. We can never predict when the 'next' will start.

Things will get worse, things will get better, but all the while transformation will be happening, and we won't know what it is, it will be imperceptible to us, as it's happening. Water will flow all around us. We won't have what we need. We'll be waiting for the next thing. The sky will always be there. There'll be land under our feet. There'll be a deadline looming.

We'll watch journalists guess at what the news is going to be. Sea levels will rise, temperature heats up, we'll see maps of how the boundaries of the world are changing forever, everything we once knew is falling into the sea.

Water will flow

There will be love, and I will hold Martin's hand. A couple of times a week we'll walk to the back of the island. When we get there we'll stop at a holy well, I'll pour the water on my lapsed Catholic forehead. We'll look out at the horizon. We'll gather stones and place them on top of each other; ancient Celtic prayers. Things will change. I will change. My creativity always leads me to truth and love. I try to believe that it will all work out for the best. I look at the news. I try to stay present and not change the channel.

We arrive at the back of the island again, and see that our prayers have survived the recent storm, precarious stones lying together, one on top of the other. They haven't collapsed under the force of the winds' change.

When I was in my early 20s I first discovered meditation on YouTube. One of the online instructors recommended getting a stone to hold in your hand during the sitting. She asked us to repeat a mantra: 'The stone has survived everything by remaining still and staying present'. In the midst of all this chaos, that's all we can do.

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