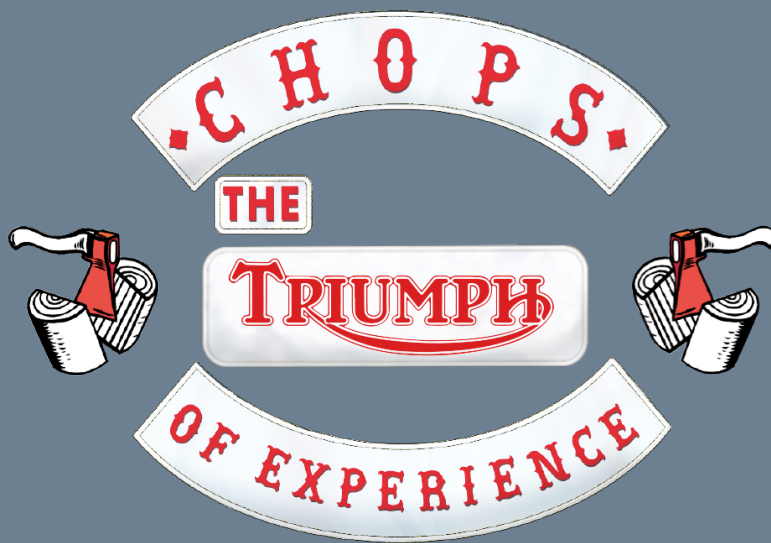


Lynne Parker

Crossing lines.



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Michael Frayn once made a beautiful TV documentary about London suburbs. He noticed that, viewed from above, the districts adhered to their old medieval boundaries. My guess is that if you looked at Dublin in a similar way the boundaries would be less obvious - but there, nonetheless, if you searched hard enough.

During the recent lockdown I took to cycling the circumference of my limit for the first few weeks - 2 km was an overdue introduction to my own patch, but when it got to 5km I began to notice the city in a new way. The delineation of social history was visible as I travelled through the north city suburbs - Cabra, Glasnevin, Ballymun, that 1940s explosion in decent housing for the upwardly mobile working class; solid, individually-stamped houses for the nuclear family that have their mirror image in the south side - Kimmage, Crumlin, Walkinstown... And boy do you notice how the money hugs the coast, gracious Georgian terraces from Howth to Clontarf, from Dalkey to Sandymount - except for the proud artisan enclaves of the East Wall and Irishtown/Ringsend (although the latter has a famously nebulous boundary with plummy Ballsbridge).

These days there are new enclosures, and rather glamorous they are, vast, steel-and-glass, gated apartment complexes that sprout from derelict inner city sites and occupy stretches of open countryside with gleaming new townlands; served by Dublin bus routes but seeming to offer a lifestyle closer to that of Helsinki, and a deliberate sense of spiritual distance from the old postcodes of 20th century Dublin.

The most obvious border in Dublin is the Liffey. I went to the Lighthouse cinema with a pal when it first opened on Smithfield Square.

A gentleman came in just as the film was starting, 'My goodness' he exclaimed 'it's a wonderful building but why did they put it so far from where anyone lives!'



The two halves of Dublin have their stereotypical identities, but one of the discoveries on my lockdown cycling trips is how much they actually mirror each other - some streets have their north and south iterations (Georges, Frederick and so on - the 18th century groundplan) but the interlocking districts are a strange kind of fan-shaped looking glass (I'll let you decide which is the more surreal).

And as for the river - Dublin is held together by many splendidly named waterways, the Poddle, the Dodder, the Camac, the magnificent Tolka - several underground - bracketed by the Grand and Royal Canals, delineating the city. That underground element is interesting; central Dublin is a rat-run of subterranean passageways, secret conduits enabling transgression of boundaries, an echo of the Harry Lime facet of Dublin's personality.

Borders are a fact of life, particularly if you come from Belfast as I do. I have frequently been surprised by the way the weather changes between Dundalk and Newry, maybe it's something to do with the Mourne/Carlingford mountains. The roads used to get worse as you crossed into the Republic, now they get better, and you know you're over the line when your phone tells you. I do remember a documentary by one of those pop science people that showed how the tectonic plates of North America and Europe actually fused in a violent collision between Ulster and the rest of Ireland. Made sense to me...

When I came to Dublin as a student I was horrified at the litter lining the road into the city, from the airport to O'Connell Bridge. How ghastly, I thought, entering the hallowed walled garden of Trinity College; it was the week after the visit of John Paul II in 1979, the mega-Glastonbury of modern Irish history, no wonder the party hadn't been tidied up.



I was billeted in Trinity Hall in Dartry initially, deepest south side - only after a year or so did I venture across the Liffey. But all through my college career the journeys home were disrupted because of a bomb scare on the Belfast Enterprise, a tedious admission of the greater partition.

I got into hot water a few years later at a conference, *'Is There a Border in the Arts'* chaired by the BBC's Seamus McKee. I put up my hand to opine that there was indeed and that the BBC was at the heart of it and the mic was whisked away in alarm. What I had clumsily tried to allude to was the fact that in the 70s and early 80s the country was still divided into 1 and 2-channel land. Anywhere west of Kildare was RTE territory - but for the East Coast, popular culture comprised that plus all the British broadcasters including shiny, radical new Channel 4. I had three pals at College, one from Croydon, one from Dublin and one from Galway. The Dub, my Nordy self and the Brit were conversant in the language and culture of *Blue Peter* and *Doctor Who*; the Galwegian had no such point of reference (reader, she managed just fine). But that cultural border, the invisible one that ran vertically through the Republic and much of the North, only dissolved at the introduction of cable TV. And that smashed through many borders.

Every second, borders in behaviour are being crossed, defined, transgressed, and dissolved in media and art. Scientific discovery is constantly yoked to the concept of frontiers, but is really a kind of fractal, a series of patterns that multiply as you push further into them.

Another fun activity I discovered during lockdown was a video demonstration of the unexplored and almost incomprehensible distances to the ocean floor.



Borders - boundaries - are at present much discussed. The British border in Northern Ireland has been porous from its implementation. Brexit has brought it into focus and shown us how ludicrous it is; COVID-19 has underlined that absurdity. I have amused myself by imagining Sinn Féin lobbying for a hard border to keep British COVID chaos out of the land of Dr Holohan. The virus, of course, is oblivious. But hard, soft, actual or theoretical, that border – The Border – continues to divide and make us different, classifying us and defining our citizenship in unhelpful ways. All borders are trouble, even Robert Frost's good fences.

In theatre we like to invade liminal space, pierce the fourth wall, cut our way through the fence...

2022 marks the anniversary of Partition, a border drawn short-sightedly in the service of political expediency. My theatre company *Rough Magic* has a plan to walk that century-old line with entertainment as a provocation, through words, music and spectacle. We will stitch as we go, crossing the border for each iteration to a town on the opposite side, in a kind of medieval pageant for the internet age. So we'll tackle partition and its implications - but also gender, racial and economic barriers. Those psychological borders, the ones in our heads – that's the hidden frontier.

So eyes on the horizon, here's to live performance in the era of lockdown. Don't fence us in.



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Lynne Parker

Artistic Director and co-founder of award-winning theatre company *Rough Magic*, founded in 1984. An Associate Artist of *Charabanc*, she has also directed for *the Abbey*, *the Lyric*, *Druid*, *Theatre Lovett*, *the Almeida*, *the Traverse*, *the RSC*, *the Old Vic*, *West Yorkshire Playhouse*, *Birmingham Rep* and *the Teatrul National Bucharest*. Awarded the Irish Times Special Tribute Theatre Award in 2008 and an Honorary Doctorate by Trinity College Dublin in 2010.

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