

**On Ignoring Risk**  
**Patrick Duggan**

Without knowledge there can be no freedom, without freedom there can be no power.

John Arden and Margaretta D'Arcy (1991: xvi).

**'Guantanamo Granny'**

Ireland, by loose government policy rather than constitution, is a neutral state.

For several years now, I've been trying to have a conversation with the Irish State about why they are allowing Shannon Airport to be used illegally as a transit point for US troops. On 15 January 2014, the Irish State abruptly stopped the conversation and sent me to jail. (D'Arcy 2015: 9)

On 7 October 2012, protesting the use of a civilian airport by the US military, Margaretta D'Arcy scaled the perimeter fence of Shannon Airport (an international airport in the west of Ireland) and strolled across the 'no man's land' of scrub until she reached the runway. Once there, she unfurled a banner (with her 'partner in crime' Niall Farrell) that read 'US Military out of Shannon'. She was continuing a career of political activism that perpetually refused to let the risk of what might happen to her physically, legally or socially stop her from performing what she has termed a 'conversation with the state'. She was 79 and suffering from cancer.

In January 2013, still not having formally been charged, D'Arcy decided to write to Shannon Garda Station, asking:

Am I going to be charged? The reason I want to be charged is because the open court is the only public space left where my questions concerning the

whole role of Shannon in aiding and abetting the US military can be heard.  
(D'Arcy 2015: 32, my emphasis)

In February, her demands were met, and she was taken to be questioned at Mill Street Garda Station in Galway. She reports that she told the interviewer that she did not 'like the smell' of his questions:

- 'I do not like where this questioning is going, I don't mind being charged ... but this line [of questioning] is beginning to make me feel uncomfortable'
- 'We're trying to establish how you got on the runway? Would you yourself be able to climb over a fence that high?'
- 'I suppose I could. Amazing what one can do if you have high enough adrenaline'
- '... how would you be able to climb over?'
- 'You'd have to bring me there and see if I could. Everything's possible'

(D'Arcy 2015: 33)

In April, D'Arcy was summoned to appear at Ennis District Court on 10 July 2013, charged with interfering 'with the proper use' of Shannon Airport. On the day, she wore an orange jumpsuit and presented 'two wheelbarrows of evidence, including several dictionaries, so that the meaning of the word "proper" can be defined' (D'Arcy 2015: 38). During the proceedings, D'Arcy insisted on clarifying the terms of the charge, particularly around the use of the word 'proper', much to the judge's chagrin. As D'Arcy reports it, he 'leaves the court with me crying out for him to come back and talk to me...The court is in confusion. He has lost control. He has lost face' (39–40).

Not content to focus on the precarity of her legal situation, on 1 September 2013 D'Arcy is arrested on the runway of Shannon Airport for a second time. Wearing the jumpsuit, she was pictured smiling and holding a placard insisting 'US War Machine Out of Shannon'. She returned to Ennis Court on 11 September 2013 and here D'Arcy's heritage as a dramatist was clearly in evidence as she declaimed she was a whistle blower and proceeded to produce and blow a whistle to 'laughter in court. It is now a pantomime' (45). Dressed once more as 'Guantanamo Granny', on what she

describes as 'judgement day' in December 2013, D'Arcy attempts to make a citizen's arrest on Judge Durcan 'for making Irish people active allies and participants in illegal wars' (47).

After sentencing, D'Arcy is offered the opportunity to sign an affidavit agreeing not to trespass at Shannon again. She refused on the grounds it would make her complicit in the very things she was protesting. The octogenarian 'Guantanamo Granny' is sent to jail.

### **Confounding the state**

In the introduction to their collected works, John Arden and Margaretta D'Arcy contend that 'the State everywhere is clamping down on freedoms of speech and exchange of information, striving at all points to control knowledge for its own purposes' (1991: xv). The disruption of such control is at the heart of D'Arcy's protest actions. These actions, that D'Arcy may term 'loose theatre' (2005), are attempts to bring to view that which the state would wish to remain hidden, or at least unnoticed. While of course not aesthetic performances 'proper', her actions call upon a quiet kind of spectacular presentation, and a theatrical and dramaturgical construction in which her safety and freedom are ignored in the service of protest with affective impact.

In her use of:

spectacle: 'I am a now a bit tired and... decide to take a nap [on the runway]' (D'Arcy 2015: 29);

rhetoric: 'You'd have to bring me there and see if I could [climb over the perimeter fence on my own]. Everything's possible' (33);

farce: 'I am making a citizen's arrest' [on the judge] (47);

panto: 'I am a whistle blower' (45);

costuming: 'in my jump-suit, with Zimmer frame and the two wheelbarrows of evidence' (45);

repetition: 'over the fence again' (41);

props: 'several dictionaries, so that the meaning of the word "proper" can be defined' (38)

D'Arcy creates what Umberto Eco calls a 'performative situation':

in which 'a human body, along with its conventionally recognizable properties, surrounded by or supplied with a set of objects, inserted within a physical space, stands for something else to a reacting audience.' (Eco 1977: 117, my emphasis)

D'Arcy's actions are underpinned by what we may think of as a 'radical dramaturgy', a deliberate re-presenting of the iconography, systems and symbols of 'the state' as a means of critiquing the state. D'Arcy's insistence on being heard formally is an attempt to force a conversation with the state through legal process. Her actions are grounded in a refusal to allow 'the state' off the hook even if that means demanding to be arrested, charged, prosecuted and sent to jail. As such, D'Arcy's actions are a means of illuminating the state's complicity in violence, a means of reframing and recalibrating public, and importantly popular and news-media perceptions so as to engage the state in a meaningful debate. The artist's eye for composition and the dramatist's knack for the dramaturgical are apparent with theatricality used as a sustained strategy in the tactics of direct action. This is a radical practice in so far as it might be seen to be deploying techniques of the theatre to dig around in the politics of the state and of state-sanctioned violence.

This may be seen to accord with Herbert Marcuse's proposition that art has the 'radical quality' of being able to express the reality of an event through its inherently 'unreal' form (1978: 1). That is, art practices have the potential to bring into sharp focus 'established realities' in order to enable a questioning of the hegemonies that create them. Art, he says, can 'explode [a] given reality' in order to produce 'new consciousness' (7). More recently, Liz Tomlin has argued that we may understand 'radical' as "digging down", in order to reveal the contradictions, falsehoods or hidden agendas at the heart of ideological illusions of the real' (2013: 5). This seems

precisely to marry with D'Arcy's desire to expose systems and structures of power and knowledge in the operation of the state.

The careful calibration of the Shannon interventions, and later in the operations of the state's legal frameworks, their staging, awareness of context, deployment of characterization or persona, design, timing and so forth, makes them tightly performative in so far as they are both 'like' theatre events and that they enact something in the world. They do something potent: they make visible something that the state wanted to keep invisible. To recall Eco, they are something else to multiple reacting audiences, including the state itself.

Nevertheless, for Sophie Nield this mapping of 'protest is like theatre' may produce a reading of such actions as being only symbolic, 'referring to some "real" activity or set of relations elsewhere' (2006: 54). The moniker 'theatrical' can highlight the temporality of the event to detrimental effect as 'the symbolic exchange between power and opposition [is seen to take] place and then both sides depart and all continues as before' (ibid). But in overcoming significant physical impairment, ignoring the looming shadow of aeroplanes, and by insisting on being charged, taken to court, having her day there and then refusing to sign a seeming 'get out of jail free' card D'Arcy ensures that this is not really the case as her refusal to be cowed by personal risk intervenes in this proposition in interesting ways.

Through the deployment of theatre and performance as mechanisms of protest, D'Arcy's image gained traction in news media (especially in UK and Ireland), and in insisting that the state send her to prison, D'Arcy's orange jumpsuit-ed 'Guantanamo Granny' entered the public imaginary in such a fundamental way as to extend her protest after the protest action 'finished'. The Shannon protests render ridiculous the systems and structures of power that D'Arcy encounters and re-present this to a wider public audience. In so doing, D'Arcy's actions in controlled spaces produce new meaning for those spaces; they recalibrate their rules, change their 'representation', and engage and affect the people who pass through and operate within them.

If, as Foucault contends, 'space is fundamental in any exercise of power' (cited in Rabinow 1984: 252), then the (successful) disruption of that space, physically and in representation, must in turn be the fundamental exercise of the disruption of that

power. Nield raises an interesting complication here as she contends that 'authority actively encourages both legible resistance and the interpretation of resistance as legible' as a means of ensuring that such resistance is read and encountered on the terms of that authority (2006: 59). In such instances, resistance can be reduced to 'mere' representation. However, D'Arcy's precision in making ridiculous the nature of some of the things that are going on is both captivating for the public and politically difficult for the state. The nuance of the protests and D'Arcy's actions thereafter, run contra to the 'normal' way that people behave in the face of the state (challenging the terms of the charge, arresting the judge, refusing the get-out-of-jail card). There is a humour and theatricality that make the actions 'illegible' insofar as they are not easily assimilated into the state's own discourses. The state doesn't want to send this whistle-blowing whistle blower to prison because, in doing so, the *state* illuminates precisely the thing that D'Arcy is trying to illuminate. In sending a 79-year-old cancer sufferer to prison the state's structures and systems of power and 'justice' are arguably rendered ridiculous.

D'Arcy's actions gain political agency by establishing a relationship with risk that firmly declares it as 'risk', and from there operates through mechanisms of performance both to make her point and to produce an opportunity or demand for political recalibration of thought on behalf of the spectator. This includes (especially) agents of the state, who have the responsibility for the events being protested placed firmly on their shoulders through D'Arcy's actions. Undoubtedly, then, this 'heroine of pacifism' (Kershaw 2014) understands and deploys the potency of performance as practice of protest.

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