Active Speech

Critical Perspectives on Teresa Deevy

Edited by
Úna Kealy and Kate McCarthy

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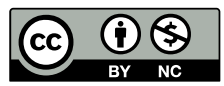

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 Suzanne Savage and Lianne Quigley performing in Teresa Deevy's *Possession* which was created and directed by Amanda Coogan in collaboration with Lianne Quigley, Alvean Jones, Linda Buckley, Dublin Theatre of the Deaf, and Cork Deaf Community Choir. Creative producer Lynette Moran produced *Possession* at the Project Arts Centre 21–24 February 2024, while Susan Holland produced the production at the Granary Theatre for the Cork Midsummer Festival performances, 21–23 June 2024. *Possession* was funded as part of ART:2023: A Decade of Centenaries Collaboration (the Arts Council and the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport, and Media).

8. Finding Money in the Walls: Uncovering the Feminist Power of Teresa Deevy's Dramaturgy through an Embodied, Practice-Based Approach

Ann M. Shanahan

The recent renewal of attention in Teresa Deevy's plays has included embodied, practice-based approaches, methodologies that are uniquely useful to appreciating her work as an artist, and her feminism, in particular. As a scholar-artist, I apply a method of analysis to plays about women and houses in performance founded on inclusion of my personal lived experience that situates my own body centrally as a source of knowing and site of authority. Drawing from my specific physical experience, including the pain experienced from endometriosis, led me to develop a method of practice-based analysis emanating from my pelvis, from my 'gut', which I apply to reading the spaces and overall meanings of plays in performance.[1] As opposed to using traditional

1 This work is summarised in: 'Making Room(s): Staging Plays About Women and Houses', in *Performing the Family Dream House*, ed. by Emily Klein, Jennifer-Scott Mobley, and Jill Stevenson (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), pp. 87–105; 'The Gender Politics of Spectacle in Staging Sarah Ruhl's Adaptation of Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* and ATHE 2018: Theatre of Revolution', *SDC Journal*, 6.2 (2018), 37–39; Ann M. Shanahan, Prudence A. Moylan, Betsy Jones Hemenway, Bren Ortega Murphy, Jacqueline Long, Susan Grossman, Hector Garcia, and Mary Dominiak, 'Performance: An Approach to Strengthening Interdisciplinarity in Women's Studies and Gender Studies', *PARtake: Performance as Research*, 1.1 (2016), 1–41; 'Playing House: Staging Experiments About Women in Domestic Space', *Theatre Topics*, 23.2 (2013), 129–144; 'Un-"blocking" Hedda and Medea through Feminist "Play" with Traditional Staging Forms', *Theatre Topics*, 20.1 (2011), 61–74.

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models that separate conceptual analysis from practical aspects in production, I move back and forth between theory and practice in order to engage feminist, experiential methodologies explicitly and reveal how material circumstances, including limits, can inspire artistic choices, thereby exposing resonances between the fictitious conflicts in the plays and the real-life constrictions that artists often face when producing them. Working from both of these feminist principles—the personal and the embodied—has yielded an understanding of Deevy's larger project across her career. I believe that embodied methods of analysis particularly illuminate Deevy's dramaturgy because of their synergy with her similar approach to writing. Deevy wrote from her personal life and created the plays from the experiences of her specific body in a way that was radical for a woman of her time. A sort of alchemy occurs when the content of her plays meets with an embodied approach to analysing them; the uniquely creative, even generative materialist features of her dramaturgy come to life.

An assessment that Deevy wrote from her personal experience is shared by Judy Friel, Caoilfhionn Ní Bheacháin, and Gerardine Meaney who argue that Deevy's characters and dramaturgy arise from her material experiences. For example, directing *Katie Roche* at the Abbey Theatre in 1994, Friel describes how she recognised in the character of Amelia Gregg, 'a mocking self-portrait' of Deevy and that Deevy had also 'actively written herself into the script as director, fine-tuning the dialogue with countless stage directions'.[2] Ní Bheacháin and Meaney compare Deevy as playwright to the bravely transgressive, imaginative women in her plays, including Annie Kinsella, Katie Roche, and Ellie Irwin. The centrality of the personal in my approach resonates with Deevy's dramaturgy.[3] Foregrounding a personal and embodied approach also resonates with the artistic goals Deevy formed after seeing Shaw's *Heartbreak House* in London: 'One night returning from the theatre I felt very strongly the urge to put "the sort

2 Judy Friel, 'Rehearsing *Katie Roche*', *Irish University Review*, 25.1 (1995), 117–125 (p. 117 and p. 118); Teresa Deevy, 'Katie Roche', in *Teresa Deevy Reclaimed*, 2 vols, ed. by Jonathan Bank, John P. Harrington, and Christopher Morash (New York: Mint Theater, 2011 and 2017), I.

3 Caoilfhionn Ní Bheacháin, '"It Was then I Knew Life": Political Critique and Moral Debate in Teresa Deevy's *Temporal Powers* (1932)', *Irish University Review*, 50.2 (2020), 337–355; Geradine Meaney, 'The Sons of Cuchulainn: Violence, the Family and the Irish Canon', *Eire-Ireland*, 41.1 (2006), 242–261.

of life we live in Ireland" into a play'.[4] This seemingly casual but specific construction of 'putting' life '*into* a play' (emphasis mine), and 'the sort of life we live', suggests Deevy's recognition of the material power of the theatre, her role as a playwright, and the significance of inserting Irish subjects, including women, into this potent medium. Bodies—Irish bodies, women's bodies, her own body—could be put into, i.e., materialised in a play, making it a container of life. Additionally, Deevy's phrase acknowledges the meaningful interplay between lives onstage and those in the audience. Analysis of Deevy's dramaturgical project, when interpreted thus, necessitates a material reading that prioritises her proprioception of bodies as they interact with each other and with the material world in which they are situated, both inside the plays and across the proscenium line in the theatre. Application of feminist approaches, such as mine, reveals the interactive materialism of Deevy's dramaturgy. Drawing upon the specifics of her embodied experience as woman as she aged, who became deafened, who remained single, and had no children, she forged a radically material theatre spanning stage and radio plays, one in which she both implanted and gestated matter in the theatre, foreshadowing embodied, feminist methods decades ahead of their time.

This chapter considers Deevy's style and use of space, then explicates the personal and embodied methodological approach applied here to Deevy's work. Initial analysis considers Deevy's use of domestic and liminal spaces and material objects, before defining how Deevy incorporates embodied meta-audiences into her drama. The latter section of the chapter illustrates this practice-based approach through reference to *Strange Birth* (1946) and *Light Falling* (1947), two especially beautiful plays, written when Deevy was in her mid-fifties, writing both for radio and stage.[5] The chapter concludes by arguing that a practice-based approach is uniquely valuable in illuminating Deevy's feminist dramaturgy, expressed in a body of work designed to evoke connective, embodied experiences of healing, reconciliation, and love for audiences both inside and outside her dramas.

4 Teresa Deevy, 'Autobiographical Note', in *Teresa Deevy Reclaimed*, II, xxi–xxiii (p. xxi).

5 Teresa Deevy, 'Strange Birth', in *Teresa Deevy Reclaimed*, I, 53–59; Teresa Deevy, 'Light Falling', in *Teresa Deevy Reclaimed*, II, 63–75.

Style, Setting, and the Personal in Deevy's Dramaturgy

Theatre critics in the 1930s identified Deevy's dramas as stylistically complex, mixing elements of realism with other styles: as Ní Bheacháin outlines, reviews in 1930 describe *Reapers* as 'a crazy farce', a 'fantasy' with the 'paraphernalia of realism', which she argues prevents 'any easy categorization' and makes 'for an unsettling theatrical experience'.[6] Several critics since, including Lennox Robinson, Seán O'Casey, Judy Friel, Christopher Morash, and Ní Bheacháin, have identified the stylistic ambiguity and meta-theatricality of Deevy's plays.[7] In light of her dramatic influences—Chekhov, Ibsen, and Shaw—Deevy's stylistic references to realistic tropes are perhaps unsurprising. Morash notes the generic subversions of the standard peasant play that would have been familiar to audiences at the Abbey in 1932, while Ní Bheacháin highlights that contemporary critics noted 'Deevy's Chekhovian technique' and concerns in *Reapers*.[8] Developing the argument for Deevy's stylistic ambiguity, Ní Bheacháin maintains the setting for *Temporal Powers* 'is expressionist' and that the few objects noted in stage directions become symbols—such as the packet of money, stolen from the state, that is hidden in the ruin's walls; debate over the proper use of which becomes the material centre of the conflict.[9] Ní Bheacháin cogently argues that Deevy's dramaturgical project is one of 'uneasy realism' that deliberately references other plays and styles to 'disrupt the sense of verisimilitude experienced by an audience'.[10]

The setting of a house is central to Deevy scholarship, which treats the home as a symbol of marriage and its restrictions. As

6 Ní Bheacháin, 'Political Critique and Moral Debate', p. 339.

7 Digital Repository of Ireland (DRI), The Teresa Deevy Archive, Robinson, Lennox 1886–1958, 'Review of Three Plays by Teresa Deevy', PP/6/178 (22), https://doi.org/10.7486/DRI.95944b60b; Seán O'Casey to George Jean Nathan, 14 February 1938, in *The Letters of Seán O'Casey 1910–1941, Volume 1*, ed. by David Karuse (London: Cassell, 1975), p. 703; Friel, 'Rehearsing *Katie Roche*'; Christopher Morash, *A History of Irish Theatre 1601–2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 121; Ní Bheacháin, 'Political Critique and Moral Debate'.

8 Morash, *History of Irish Theatre*, p. 342; Ní Bheacháin, 'Political Critique and Moral Debate', p. 342.

9 Teresa Deevy, 'Temporal Powers', in *Teresa Deevy Reclaimed*, I, 7–50; Ní Bheacháin, 'Political Critique and Moral Debate', pp. 342–343.

10 Ní Bheacháin, 'Political Critique and Moral Debate', p. 351.

one example, Cathy Leeney considers the setting of the ruin a metaphor for the lives of Min and Michael Donovan in *Temporal Powers*.[11] Several scholars focus on the liminality of settings, notably Christie Fox, Anthony Roche, and Úna Kealy, with the features of the often domestic settings mirroring the social liminality of the period following the Irish Civil War—a period between constitutions, and particularly of regression from promises of equality for women in the early 1900s.[12] In her illuminating analysis of *The King of Spain's Daughter,* Kealy reviews scholars whose work has positioned and considered the nuanced ways that Deevy's work has responded to 'the social, political and cultural context of Irish life in the 1920s and 1930s', but further asserts that:

> [...] additional critical opportunities emerge when historiographic and cultural-materialist methodologies are supplemented with analysis of a playwright's proprioception of actors' bodies, of scenography and of stage properties and costume. Deevy's proprioception, particularly her awareness and manipulation of the resonance of kinesthesis and stage properties, demonstrates a highly-refined skill in activating non-verbal communication.[13]

In alignment with practice-based approaches, Kealy highlights the detail of Deevy's stage directions, the role of physical expression within her work, and her meticulous attention to physical detail in her dramaturgy. Kealy's embodied spatial analysis of *The King of Spain's Daughter* concludes with a reading of Mrs Marks' last line—'The Lord preserve us! that she'd find joy in such a thought!'—thus:

> In the final moments of the play Deevy undermines the conventions of realism by making direct comic appeal to the audience. Mrs Marks'

11 Cathy Leeney, 'Teresa Deevy—Themes in Context', in *Abbey Theatre Research Pack: Teresa Deevy: Katie Roche*, researched and compiled by Marie Kelly, School of Music and Theatre, University College Cork (Dublin: Abbey Theatre, 2017), pp. 21–27.

12 Christie Fox, 'Neither Here nor There: The Liminal Position of Teresa Deevy and Her Female Characters', in *A Century of Irish Drama: Widening the Stage*, ed. by Stephen Watt, Eileen Morgan, and Shakir Mustafa (Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 2001), pp. 193–203; Anthony Roche, 'Woman on the Threshold: J.M. Synge's *The Shadow of the Glen*, Teresa Deevy's *Katie Roche*, and Marina Carr's *The Mai', Irish University Review*, 25.1 (1995), 143–162; Úna Kealy, 'Resisting Power and Direction: *The King of Spain's Daughter* by Teresa Deevy as a Feminist Call to Action', *Estudios Irlandeses*, 15 (2020), 178–192.

13 Kealy, 'Resisting Power and Direction', p. 181.

> last speech constitutes a deliberate breaking of the fourth wall, a comic device that facilitates this 'messenger' character to deliver the final stark warning that, if women and men are directed to live repressed both physically and psychologically dysfunction will ensue.[14]

Kealy's assessment of the play's conclusion correlates with Brechtian strategies of direct address and breaking of the fourth wall, through which theatre can create a thinking, critical audience by promoting thinking actors, critiquing characters' choices as they show them. Brecht wanted audiences to observe and compare possible alternative choices, and to understand them within specific material contexts. For example, Brecht's concept of 'not-but' (showing something as '*not* this, *but* that') involves the actor metaphorically standing alongside of, and adopting a critical stance towards, the character they play, demonstrating both the choice the character makes and all the choices they do not, simultaneously.[15] Through making the familiar strange, the plot, the space, and the style(s) of performance are revealed as constructs so that they, and ultimately the world they reflect, can be changed.

Whereas Brecht aims to foster a thinking audience, Deevy wants a physically free audience (including women's sexuality). Kealy ties this to what bell hooks called a 'community of resistance' in what Kealy labels as the play's 'feminist call to action'.[16] According to Fox, 'what is searched for in Deevy is legitimacy itself, the space to be free'.[17] The methodology I have developed, based on Ibsen's plays (also tying hooks to Brecht), likewise centres on climaxes and lines spoken in denouement, such as Judge Brack's famous last line in *Hedda Gabler* after Hedda's suicide (precipitated by a similar conflict to that experienced by Annie Kinsella), translated variously as 'God in Heaven! People don't do such things'.[18] This closing line, similar to that of Mrs Marks', pressures the fourth wall and forges a space of resistance at realism's definitive proscenium line.

Scholars comment that Deevy's plays sometimes end in ambiguous,

14 Teresa Deevy, 'The King of Spain's Daughter', in *Teresa Deevy Reclaimed*, II, 17–26 (p. 26); Kealy, 'Resisting Power and Direction', p. 188.

15 *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, trans. by John Willet, 13th edn (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964), p. 174.

16 Kealy, 'Resisting Power and Direction', p. 188.

17 Fox, 'Neither Here nor There', p. 194.

18 This is a paraphrase of the gist of various translations.

dramatically unsatisfying ways. Meaney writes: 'Like Annie, Deevy's play can reference the mythological but not realize it [...Deevy's work] refuses to mythologize and remains uncanonical'.[19] Likewise, Friel considers that 'Katie Roche [...] is on the threshold of being a revolutionary young feminist [...] but in the end she goes quietly with her husband', an ending Friel argues is 'too abrupt and tidy'.[20] Deevy's drama, and particularly her endings, were criticised by playwrights and critics such as O'Casey as being 'vague, ingenuous, and incomplete'.[21] However, when using a practitioner's, embodied approach, which takes into account the material of actors' and audiences' bodies as they interpret these 'vague' and 'incomplete' plot reversals, experienced within the specific spatial architecture of performance, and in context of the social, political, and corresponding stylistic transitions in which Deevy was writing, I, like Kealy and Ní Bheacháin, reach a different conclusion. Deevy's plays only complete themselves in embodied performance, in material collaboration with an audience.

For its depiction of women's sexuality and physicality, and treatment of the crisis of landlessness, combined with its stylistic mix, Ní Bheacháin calls *Temporal Powers* a 'political intervention on the national stage', arguing the fact that *Temporal Powers* as produced by the Abbey 'underlies the subversive and challenging nature of her project'.[22] As Leeney argues, Deevy's plays centre on characters who, at profound moments, struggle to express the inexpressible.[23] Rather than being about the impossibility of humans to fully comprehend one another's inner lives, as some scholars have observed, I sense, rather, that Deevy's plays mine the potential and the role of bodies in communication.[24] Deevy inserts breadcrumbs of *matter* into her plays: scones, potatoes, roses, turf, letters, dogs, bodies in contact. Through physical identification with it, this matter invokes bodily experiences in each audience member which are personal to them, but which allow for powerful connection to others in the audience who experience a similarly personal embodied experience.

19 Meaney, 'The Sons of Cuchulainn', p. 255.
20 Friel, 'Rehearsing *Katie Roche*', p. 123.
21 *Letters of Seán O'Casey*, p. 703.
22 Ní Bheacháin, 'Political Critique and Moral Debate', p. 342 and p. 349.
23 Leeney, 'Teresa Deevy'.
24 See Christopher Morash, 'Teresa Deevy: Between the Lines', in *Teresa Deevy Reclaimed*, I, ix–xiv.

This method evokes experiences that are both personal *and* collective, drawn out by a unique set of layered, materialist, embodied strategies which Deevy revised, but which remained essentially consistent throughout her career. This dramaturgy occurs in liminal spaces, in a style I call liminal materialism, one best discerned through an embodied approach. Deevy's goal is that we, as audiences, experience the content of her plays *in our bodies* so that—beyond merely seeing, understanding, or feeling the content—like Sara hugging a love letter to her breast at the end of *Strange Birth,* we 'have something'.[25]

Applying Practice-Based Analysis of Plays about Women and Houses to Deevy's Work

The conclusions about Deevy's work drawn by scholars and practitioners working from an embodied perspective resonate with the findings of my research into plays about women and houses. By applying the feminist criticism of Sue-Ellen Case to stage space, as well as criticism by Hanna Scolnicov, I have traced a pattern in plays—notably also inspired by plays of Ibsen—linking a woman's creativity and agency, and conflicts concerning these, to domestic space in plays.[26] I read the house as the central woman character's body. The plays' climaxes usually involve violence inflicted by the central woman character against herself and/or her children. Thwarted by social limits, she is left with no agency over her creative power except to kill herself or her offspring, or abruptly leave. Playwrights often script a reaction to the climax by the members of the surrounding community. These reactions in denouement either re-inscribe social and gender norms or suggest new possibilities given their obvious inadequacy in answering or containing what has just occurred.

Tracking the action of such plays through an embodied approach leads to liminal spaces—either literally spaces between, i.e., a threshold (limen) or wall, or stylistically, such as the fourth wall, at the proscenium, separating real life from stage fiction, or where mixed styles such as

25 Deevy, 'Strange Birth', p. 57.

26 Sue-Ellen Case, *Feminist Theatre* (London: Routledge, 1988); Hanna Scolnicov, *Women's Theatrical Space* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

abstraction and realism intersect. For example, I understood the action of *Hedda Gabler* because I placed myself—specifically all of my five-foot two-inch body (including the parts that Judge Brack would not have us talk about)—*in* the frame, disrupting and defying the male gaze, both literally in the rehearsal hall and through projecting my body through an actor's imaginative approach. I used this approach as a way of learning about space and style within the play, learning, for example, where Hedda felt restricted, trapped, afraid of being penetrated, impregnated, and where she felt she had agency and breathing room. The latter was largely found in liminal spaces, doors, and windows, between audience and actors and the stylistic divides between realism and abstraction. In turn, this embodied, experiential approach to interpreting space from within the play illuminated design and staging choices in other plays about women and houses. The practice-based method supplied the same illuminating results with Deevy's plays: I think Deevy was doing the same thing, imaginatively occupying the stage with her body, facing limits (often of domestic space), and mining liminal spaces in the setting and between styles to expose oppressions and make room on stage and in the lives of the audience for alternative realities.

Women are at the centre of most of Deevy's plays: there are several women in their fifties (I have never encountered as many women in their fifties in plays by any writer in the Western canon). This is, in itself, meaningful, but is especially so in relation to my argument about her dramaturgy. Strikingly, unlike the plays by Ibsen and others that formed my methods, relatively few of Deevy's central women protagonists have children, and while their childlessness is sometimes a factor (as in the case of Min Donovan and Mary Scully, for example), the symbolic and real creative conflict (or destruction) of children does not figure overtly in the action of the plays. While they do not have children, Deevy's women character's sexuality figures large in relation to houses, notably in *Katie Roche*, *The King of Spain's Daughter*, and *Light Falling*.

Deevy's Use of Domestic and Liminal Spaces and Material Objects

The majority of Deevy's plays are set in a domestic space or a space which includes architectural features of a house. *Temporal Powers*, for example,

is set within a ruined house with partial walls, while *The King of Spain's Daughter*, though set on a roadside, is enclosed by a wall with a doorway to fields beyond. From *Temporal Powers* to *In the Cellar of My Friend*, the defining characteristic of most of the spaces Deevy suggests is *liminality*.[27] There is an open door, or full-length window, or door with a mail slot in the upstage centre of most of the plays under consideration here. With rare exception, most of the plays surround a question of marriage, proposed or actual, and a conflict between men and women, often across generations in marriages. In *Temporal Powers,* the characters' relationship to the house is unstable and, in the main, transience, hardship, and/or trauma characterise the domestic spaces in Deevy's plays written in the 1930s. Women's relationship to the house is more stable in Deevy's later plays, though central questions about women's relationship to the house remain. In several plays, maiden sisters determine the changing relationship of a central woman character's relationship to, or situation within, a house. Related to this instability is the role of food in the plays, and a centrally placed table: potatoes in *Temporal Powers*, scones in *Katie Roch*e, Patricia's insistence on eating breakfast in *In the Cellar of My Friend*, and the fettling of the dogs and potatoes in *Light Falling*, lunch arriving in *The King of Spain's Daughter*, serving breakfast in *Dignity,* and crumbs for the birds in *One Look and What It Led To.*

Similar to the plays that informed my method, the climaxes of Deevy's plays often involve a woman working out a profound decision in relation to a house.[28] Scholars have observed how interior experience is not spoken: Deevy's plays 'do their work with what happens between the lines', she had 'conflicted feelings about the limits of language in translating visual phenomenon'.[29] Making sense of those moments of transition, decision, and struggle at the end of each of the plays requires an engagement by the spectator, listener, and/or reader to interpret in these non-verbal spaces between, and experience or *feel alongside* the

27 Teresa Deevy, 'In the Cellar of My Friend', in *Teresa Deevy Reclaimed*, I, 111–122.

28 Through my practice-based work as a director staging a series of plays with women and houses as subjects, I have discovered similar features in both plot and spatial dramaturgy that are expressed either explicitly through stage directions, or implied by conventions of the time (see Shanahan, 'Making Room(s)').

29 Christopher Morash, 'Teresa Deevy: Between the Lines', p. xvi; Emily Bloom, *Blindness and Insight in Teresa Deevy's Radio Plays,* online video recording, Active Speech Conference: Sharing Scholarship on Teresa Deevy, 19 February 2021.

characters. Reading *Temporal Powers* for the first time I was fascinated, *super*-engaged reading and imagining the reckoning between Min and Michael Donavan at the end of the play. An American, unaccustomed to the Irish syntax and colloquialisms in Deevy's texts, I read parts aloud to aid my understanding, imagining the lilt and cadence of the speech as I read, and listened to myself. By the time I got to the final reckoning I was engaged bodily, reinforced by Deevy's materialisation of domestic space in the play, and the liminal materialism of its ending. As Min and Michael reckon, Min gathers belongings, the stuff of their home (a stool, etc.), into her shawl, which Michael has just asked her to take off her back. As they leave their liminal lodging—disconnected and resigned to separate—Michael puts over his back the shawl that just shortly before had warmed Min's body; their temporal home becoming even more liminal as it is shifted across gendered bodies as they leave the ruin and cross the border of the stage frame.

In *The King of Spain's Daughter,* the resolution is worked out between two women of different generations, Annie Kinsella and Mrs Marks, in a likewise complicated dance of the material and liminal as described powerfully by Kealy above. The climax in *Katie Roche* echoes this end of *The King of Spain's Daughter*, and also occurs between two women, but as a bond between them, not rupture. Katie is separated from the house for being 'too free with the boys'; her older sister-in-law, Amelia, tries to comfort her with the thought that at least she and her husband will be together.[30] When Katie complains that she would rather be together there, in the house: 'There's no grandeur in this! Taken away…my own fault', Amelia replies: 'If you're brave, you can make it grand. My dear, you must!' After a look at Amelia, Katie agrees 'I *will* be brave!', and they clasp hands and make a pact between them both to be brave. Katie acknowledges, 'I think *you* were, always… 'Tis a promise between us—whatever'll come, good or bad'.[31] Making that bond with Amelia to be brave, within limits of the restricted and mundane, Katie finds her grandeur. As Katie leaves, she declares, 'I won't forget. I'll keep my word…', and leaving, wishes the boys, with whom she was too free, 'a good night'.[32] Amelia, her sister in bravery, watches her from the

30 Deevy, 'Katie Roche', p. 101.
31 Ibid., p. 102, original emphasis.
32 Ibid.

threshold of the centre door—the matron-maiden holding down the limen in a pact of courage; both women finding strength and meaning (grandeur) to sustain them in their shared endurance of limits.

The climactic moment of *In the Cellar of My Friend* is a reverse to *Katie Roche*—the staging starts where *Katie Roche* leaves off. The plot moves in the reverse order: as the play opens, the older Patricia, alone in the house, is joined by and clasps hands with Belle. The ending is also a reverse to *Katie Roche* when Belle, the younger women, agrees to take over as the woman of the house. More than any of the other plays considered here, the characters' motivations driving the climax of *In the Cellar of My Friend* are unclear. Belle does not speak her thoughts fully, leaving many gaps to fill. Deevy connects us to her and the play, in general, through material objects: Belle wraps a piece of paper from a letter around her finger, breakfast food, a bowl of strawberries, a basket of flowers.[33] The term 'matter' is used regularly in this play (and increasingly in later plays), for example, Belle says, 'Need that matter?' and then, 'It doesn't matter'.[34] These items tie Belle's thoughts and feelings to her body; at the same time, the bodies of the audience are engaged.

Living through each of those climactic moments, I experienced the transformations physically. I think this experience was instigated by the centrality of other women characters in these moments, specifically Amelia at the end of *Katie Roche*, mirrored at the beginning of *In the Cellar of My Friend* when Patty and Belle 'catch hands'.[35] In each of the plays other women figure in what will be the future of and how it will be understood by the central women characters. I used an embodied approach to select *Strange Birth* and *Light Falling* as examples of plays for in-depth focus here because they move me more than most plays I have read, by anyone; similar to John Jordan with *Temporal Powers*, I was almost 'unbearably moved'.[36] He calls *Light Falling* 'very nearly a gem',

33 Christopher Morash and Emily Bloom illuminate the significance of this basket as a container in their papers included in the Active Speech Conference. See Christopher Morash, 'Knew Nought of All This': Teresa Deevy's Dark Matter', Active Speech Conference: Sharing Scholarship on Teresa Deevy, 19 February 2021, https://web.archive.org/web/20210610101001/https://activespeech2021.org/keynotes/; Emily Bloom, *Blindness and Insight*.

34 Deevy, 'Cellar', p. 121.

35 Ibid., p. 111.

36 John Jordan, 'Teresa Deevy: An Introduction', *Irish University Review*, 1.8 (1956), 13–26 (p. 16).

placing both plays in a period when 'Deevy began to work in a field of pure, unexplicated, poetic statement'.[37] In this sense, he thought these plays were 'unactable'.[38] Rather than being unactable, I think the power of these plays requires (and evokes) the collaboration, an embodied co-enactment, by the audience. Deevy accomplishes this by inserting meta-audiences, sometimes multiple, within her hybrid style.

Embodied Meta-Audiences

Working within a feminist, personal, and embodied approach, I read the plays as reconciling and healing for women, in particular in the moment of performance. This reconciling happens in a liminal space between the ideal and the material, which the highly imaginative women in limiting circumstances occupy, and is experienced within their bodies. In several cases, the reconciliation is fostered by an exchange with another woman who also occupies and holds the tensive, liminal space within her body, and this encounter between the two women forms yet another liminal space between. The women form an embodied audience to each other. Importantly, the plays themselves (all of them) offer meta-examples of Deevy's unique, layered dramaturgy and how it functions, internally. They do this by offering physical, experiential signs to guide the liminal material dramaturgy of form and style, modelling and internally mirroring the intended overall effect. This liminal material dramaturgy has two elements. Firstly, it presents a complex moral question or piece of art or writing at the centre of the story, which encapsulates or mirrors the concerns of the play. Secondly, it offers audiences stand-in bodies inside the play/container to encounter and attempt to make sense of the play's question, artwork, or experience, which encapsulates or mirrors the encounter/experience of a live audience of the play. For example, the plot in *Temporal Powers* centres on a complex moral question (material versus spiritual priorities) with audiences internal to the play, i.e., the villagers, observing the courtroom below and Michael and Min's trials in the ruin, while in *The King of Spain's Daughter* and *Katie Roche* the audiences within the play are the older women, Mrs Marks and Amelia

37 Ibid., p. 21 and p. 22.
38 Ibid., p. 24.

Gregg. In *Dignity,* Mrs Hally creates her youthful self to Mr Wade in a flashback, *Within a Marble City* centres on an advertisement with multiple audiences and, in *Beyond Alma's Glory*, the radio audience is embodied within the play.[39] In the section below, I outline how this liminal material dramaturgy works in *Strange Birth* and *Light Falling* as chief examples.

Strange Birth and *Light Falling*

Significantly, *Strange Birth* was written for live theatrical production, and was first published in 1946; produced as a radio play in 1948, but was not presented on stage until the Mint Theater produced it in 2018.[40] Just as Jordan called the play 'unactable', it is challenging to encapsulate the 'unexplicated, poetic statement' of the play in written criticism, outside of its intended form of performance experienced by an audience.[41] *Strange Birth* is about the birth (note the material word) of love, love born through creation of a work of art, shared and interpreted between two people. The setting is inherently liminal, at the threshold between public and private—a hallway with multiple doors, including a main door with a mail slot (note vaginal connotations), which people enter to come and go, and receive letters. The work of art/writing is a letter delivered (inserted) through the slot—addressed to an imaginary future person, 'Mrs. Kirwan'. Imagining a future thing in material form brings into existence something that has been there all along: *a strange birth*.

39 See *Teresa Deevy Reclaimed*, I.

40 *Strange Birth* is published in the following sources: *Irish Writing,* 1 (1946), ed. by David Marcus and Terence Smith, F129; DRI, The Teresa Deevy Archive, Teresa Deevy, *The King of Spain's Daughter and Other One-Act Plays* (Ireland: New Frontiers, 1947), pp. 17–23, PP/6/97A. (1), https://doi.org/10.7486/DRI.5999vb55x; DRI, The Teresa Deevy Archive, *Life and Letters and the London Mercury, Irish Writers*, 61.140 (1949), ed. by Robert Herring, pp. 22–30, PP/6/100 (B), https://doi.org/10.7486/DRI.95944b899; *Teresa Deevy Reclaimed*, II; *Strange Birth* was first broadcast on Home Service Northern Ireland on 28 February 1947, see Martina Ann O'Doherty, 'Deevy: A Bibliography', *Irish University Review*, 52.1 (1995), 163–170. Produced by Mint Theater Company, the world premiere of *Strange Birth* (dir. by Jonathan Bank) ran from 21 July–30 September 2017 at the Beckett Theatre, New York. Public performances of *Strange Birth* in Ireland include a rehearsed play reading on 22 September 2017 at Garter Lane Arts Centre, Waterford, as part of Ireland's national Culture Night programme (dir. by Rebecca Phelan).

41 Jordan, 'Teresa Deevy: An Introduction', p. 24 and p. 22.

Deevy's dramaturgy explores the interrelationship of the material and immaterial world; how immaterial things, such as feelings and future people, can be realised through the creation of and interaction with material objects (in this play, Bill Kirwan's letter to Sara). These material objects, when encountered and interpreted by bodies, give 'birth' to new experiences—in Sara's case, love. Deevy's dramaturgy—her use of the liminal space of the play's setting and the arrival into this space of material objects in the form of letters—illustrates how people read each other's intent through physicalised constructs of imagination, a work of art or, in this case, a letter given and interpreted, making from something abstract something real, which can be held to the body. Love is born because of a letter addressed to a Mrs Kirwan, who, as Sara says, does not exist in the house. However, Mrs Kirwan is brought nearer to existence by the letter. In a short exchange, Bill and Sara discuss this possibility:

Sara: Do I live here Bill-the-post?

Bill: Don't you come here daily working?

Sara: Sara Meade—if you could make a Mrs. Kirwan out of that…

(*Silence: they look at one another.*)

Bill: It might be made… It might very well be.

(*Silence.*)[42]

The love letter from Bill to Sara creatively materialises a possible future and, in so doing, gives 'strange birth' to a feeling within Sara that has been there all along, although she 'didn't know' it.[43]

Deevy's stage directions are, as noted previously, crucial in enacting her dramaturgical project. Her embedded direction of Sara and Bill's bodies and their interaction with Bill's letter (as if it was a child) enacts how people interact with material objects as a means to aid and express difficult, but intensely important moments of communication. Sara and Bill fight over it:

42 Deevy, 'Strange Birth', p. 56.
43 Ibid., p. 58.

Sara: Here! Give it to me! (*Springs forward, seizes the letter.*)

Bill: Did I give it? or did you take it?

(Sara, *arms crossed on breast, the letter clasped tightly in one hand, stands facing him.*)

Sara: I took it Bill. I'll keep it now—come rain or sorrow. Tell it to me—all you said.[44]

The full meaning of the layered, material dramaturgy is impossible to convey in a form other than in embodied performance. Bill described the letter, intermingling acts of imagination and abstraction with physical, emotional, and sexual references:

Bill: I said you were a mine of wisdom—

Sara: *Me*, is it? (*A happy laugh.*)

Bill: I said I didn't know you yet.

Sara: And you don't either. (*A shadow.*)

Bill: But that I know you're the mine I could dig in forever.

Sara: That is queer—

Bill: I said you had nature; kindness and depth in your easy ways, and you are happy.

Sara: If you shut the door Bill, we could have a kiss.

Bill: But then you'd be destroyed entirely, since I'm not going to marry you.

Sara: (*After an instant.*) For a minute that went stabbing through me... I knew this is the way I'd be if love got born.[45]

But love has been there all along:

Bill: Got born! (*Roughly catching her wrist, and drawing down her*

44 Ibid.
45 Ibid.

arm—uncrossing the arms.) You have loved me for a long time past. I have seen it often in your eyes.

Sara: I think you're right. I didn't know. Now I'll keep a hold on it always. (*With great gentleness.*)[46]

This poetic, choreographed communication—where abstract ideas are born with the aid of material objects—is sexual and elementally creative, creating experiences which materialise in both the bodies on stage and the bodies in the audience, in simultaneously personal and profoundly connective ways. The significance of the interpretive processes described above goes beyond illuminating the play's content to include meta-theatrical references to its form and style as a play for live production and radio. This process of understanding a letter sent to a future person is the same creative process—bridging idea and matter, real and imaginary—as an audience appreciating the physical world of a radio play. For a radio play, *Strange Birth* makes substantial references to sight and seeing, and to physical engagement with place and things, including the letters: there are references to eyes, eyeglasses, light, and blinds. Deevy requires audiences to create material objects in their minds but, by connecting the visual elements with material elements in the play, she also engages their bodies. Sara and Bill's experience of birthing love as something material which can be held to the body is a meta-example of the imaginative process audiences undergo to create the props, settings, and characters' bodies in radio plays, and of the potent transformative implications to their lives as they do so. As Bill leaves with a promise to return the next day to ask Sara to marry him, Sara sits down holding his letter, 'her arms crossed again as though hugging a treasure to herself, the envelope held tightly in her hand'.[47] When Mr Bassett, a lodger in the house, returns to the hall, ready to complain at a slight he has received from a woman who did not write him, Sara replies: 'What matter…what matter…(*Quietly*) you *have* something'.[48] This poetic line, which can only be understood along with the stage directions, suggests that even expressed by its absence, communication between people produces something material you can have and hold. *Strange Birth* makes human feelings material, by a layered,

46 Ibid.
47 Ibid., p. 59.
48 Ibid.

shared physical encounter with a piece of writing, a work of art (or its absence). In this, the play is a metaphor for Deevy's whole project, a map for understanding the plays and their aims that come before and after.

Written in the same year as *Strange Birth, Light Falling* contains a similar metaphor for the way Deevy's plays are intended to work on an audience. Again, love is shared and/or expressed via matter and, similar to *Strange Birth*, the climax surrounds birthing and negotiations of the use of words referring to a future person, namely the use of the word 'Grandpa', which Mary, the central woman in the play, hopes her father-in-law, Pat, will be when she has a child. Like *Strange Birth*, *Light Falling* is about a shared experience of love between a man and a woman: the play offers a counterpoint to the disintegration of the marriage in *Temporal Powers*, an ultimate reconciliation and affirmation of deep love and mutual commitment between Mary and John, although it must be noted, following instances of what we would, today, call abuse.

The setting of *Light Falling* contains all the hallmark liminal elements: a middle door, this time on the front of a house; a dancing board (like an ancient Greek dancing circle) set on the grass, importantly in front of a house (skene); a hill; at the seaboard; a chair. There are repeated references to material items (potatoes); importantly, Mary has flour on her hands, which gets on other things, including Pat, a physical symbol of her impact on him; she bemoans 'the flour from my hands is on you now'.[49] Pat replies: 'No matter, no matter' (note the precise same line as in *Strange Birth*), then: '(*To himself.*) The flour from her hands...and the whole blossoming flower of her around me...'.[50] Deevy's construction toggles the material flour to a metaphor for the feeling of Mary's affect on Pat—the smell of a blossoming flower—by changing a word through spelling, but not sound (or physical formation in the mouth). The flour/flower exists physically and abstractly arousing him in mind and body: 'Old,—and not old enough. God give me grace. (*Brushes the flour from his clothes.*)'.[51] Like the choreopoem that is *Strange Birth, Light Falling* weaves a similarly complex spell, as communicatively complicated as expressing and experiencing smell in a radio play. Pat urges John to see Mary's love for him:

49 Deevy, 'Light Falling', p. 65.
50 Ibid.
51 Ibid.

Pat: Often I see her all a-flower opening to you, but you don't see it…

John: Fragrance…a-flower… What's on you, old man?[52]

This lack of awareness to the truth of love also refers to the larger, central idea of the play's title, 'light falling', which is 'always' there 'but very often we don't see it'.[53] The painter, Mr Leslie, describes:

> For me truth is embodied in light falling… (S*peaks with quiet intensity.*) if I can get that down on canvas others will see in it the eternal mystery, the beneficence—oh, damn it all,—there's nothing new. Others have said it, thousands of others, yet I must say it my own way: I *must* capture the moment.— [sic]

Pat: I think, Mr. Leslie, what a man captures he'll destroy.[54]

Making repeated references to the actors' physicality and their interaction with material items, Deevy's text precisely directs the actors' bodies and emotions: they laugh, move, bend, breathe, catch, jump, and brush off one another. There is a climactic moment of dancing where bodies in collision create powerful change and the final, carefully choreographed moments of the play express the truth of love which, like in *Strange Birth*, has been there all along. At the end of the play, John and Mary argue over her right to use that word 'Grandpa':

Mary: Grandpa, isn't that a nice way he'd treat me?

John: 'Grandpa' is a queer word in your mouth.

Mary: John! (*In sudden pain.*)

John: 'Grandpa'—he isn't as you know well.[55]

This prompts Pat to stand and lunge at John, causing Pat to fall. Having worked together to lift and make Pat comfortable after he has fallen, Mary and John arrive at a moment when they are gentle and can '*laugh*

52 Ibid., p. 66.
53 Ibid., p. 70.
54 Ibid., p. 69, emphasis in original.
55 Ibid., p. 73.

joyfully, standing close together'.[56] John expresses his love for Mary through his body and his words:

> John: He'd say I don't prize you. How can he tell? (*He grips her arm.*) You, and none other, it is for me. And you know that?[57]

In the physicality of the dance, the collision, the restoration of Pat to his chair and, in the examining of potatoes, Deevy's hallmark dramaturgical approach is enacted as a precise choreography of text, voice, sight, emotion, bodies, and material objects. Furthermore, the exchange between John and Mary is experienced aurally (like a radio drama) by Pat, positioned as an embodied meta-audience. Pat sees and hears John's expression of love for Mary, and then shares this with Mr Leslie who has returned for his pipe, accidentally left behind:

> Pat: [...] I *saw* what you were *saying*, Mr. Leslie [emphasis added].
>
> [...]
>
> What's this you called it—'light falling' and we don't see it. (*Very eager.*) It was when they were talking, usual-like, about the turf and potatoes... then I saw it...falling around them.
>
> Mr Leslie: (*Kindly.*) You've had a rare moment, Mr. Scully. [...]
>
> Pat: (*To himself.*) A 'rare' moment. Very clear...[58]

Pat's narration to Mr Leslie forms another act of meta-theatre, toggling between aural and visual. The play dramatises light falling in a way an audience can see it, and feel it, by means of a stand-in audience to a layered experience. Could such a rare moment be staged so that we see this in the standard live theatre, without Deevy's layered, liminal materialism? Could light falling in this poetic sense be adequately designed by a theatrical lighting designer? Or must this existential idea be expressed in a theatre that casts our bodies into the drama, so we experience the play's events along with the characters? Deevy's theatre draws our bodies in, places potatoes in our hands, and moves our bodies with the characters

56 Ibid., p. 75.
57 Ibid., p. 74.
58 Ibid., p. 75.

as they dance and collide and sit on the grass, and fall. The 'rare moment' is presented in a liminal frame that marries the experience of the radio play for Pat with an audience experience in the theatre seeing John and Mary embodied, speak, in front of, not *in*—i.e., the liminal (and inherently theatrical) house. In Pat, Deevy creates a meta-audience who serves as a stand-in, in and between, both media. This marriage of modes—visual, aural, and embodied—enacts the ideal dramaturgy of Deevy's project for the theatre, creating a rare moment that captures the truth of things in a dramatic form, designed to express and promote experiences of the 'sort of life we live in Ireland today', experiences of connection, union, and love.[59]

Conclusions

As an artist working in a method focused on my own and other women's reproductive bodies, I recently followed a hunch and did the math to discern that Deevy was fifty-three and fifty-four when she wrote these plays, the age I was when I read them, in my first year of menopause. While we perhaps can never know when Deevy experienced the cessation of her menses, that she is writing plays about the pains of childlessness and births through other means in her fifties seems significant. First, literally, in *Temporal Powers*, and then in her unique material abstractions in plays for theatre and radio written after that, Deevy impregnates the walls of her plays with matter, with bodies, with herself; simultaneously, she holds this creative matter within herself in the containers of her plays, in a way whereby audiences share this dual experience of inserting/implanting (inseminating) and gestating, carrying, and bearing, also. Perhaps she was investigating the potential products of her writing at this point of her life and her ability to generate material (to make people) outside the means of live production of the Abbey mainstage. Inserting audiences into the plays is its own strange birth: an embodied experience of love for audiences, which in later plays extended even to the experience of the love of God. In *One Look and What It Led To*, with several stand-in audiences including the Virgin Mary, Mary Magdalen, and Jesus Christ, Deevy completes her project of evoking joy,

59 Teresa Deevy, 'Autobiographical Note', in *Teresa Deevy Reclaimed*, II, xxi–xxiii (p. xxi).

happiness, and union between a man and a woman, woman to woman, and human and God.[60] In Deevy's theatre, God's love is born, materialised by watching, hearing, and feeling it born in other people.

Reading the plays in this way, the radio plays can be understood as a continuation of, indeed an *advancement* of, the dramaturgical goals of Deevy's earlier plays, and driving her whole career.[61] In the radio plays Deevy forges a dramaturgy informed by material limitation, including her deafness. I propose that in addition to the visual elements of the dramatic world that the words of the radio dramas reference, Deevy is also conjuring the embodied, the material of the stage drama—the physical realm, shared with an audience. Just as I experienced physically, as a reader, the experiences of Min, Annie, Katie, Belle, Amelia, and Patty, listeners and readers are prompted and/or encouraged to not only imagine the visual scene of the plays' climactic moments, but also their physical *experience* of actors embodying those moments while watching from the auditorium of the theatre. It is as if Deevy is mining the potential of radio to render ('birth') the same truth ('light falling') that she was exploring for the live stage—as if she is trying to provide the experience more directly through the potentialities and limitations of radio. This is achieved chiefly by inserting material elements, such as the money in the walls, that are crucial to the plot: food, animals, and *bodies* (falling, dancing), and a meta-audience within the drama that become a 'stand-in' for the live audience, so that they cast themselves, their bodies, within the play, experiencing the story. This trend reaches a crescendo in the radio plays. One might even posit that the liminal material space of the radio plays was a better container for the experiential truth Deevy strove to convey, that *imagining* the embodiment/embodied experience in the theatre as more expressive of the truth than seeing it enacted in the theatre—as it engages our/an audiences' own unique body truth—we construct and fill it in ourselves. The theatre cannot 'contain' it (like the houses, paintings, and flower baskets). A liminal medium is required to contain the truth—to show light falling on the experience of Deevy and Irish women.

This chapter takes its title from the metaphor of finding money in walls, and the political potency that Ní Bheacháin identifies in Deevy's

60 Teresa Deevy, 'One Look and What It Led To', in *Teresa Deevy Reclaimed*, II.
61 Bloom, *Blindness and Insight*.

hybrid-realism.[62] In *Temporal Powers*, the money stolen from the state, over which the Donovans fight, evolves into larger material embodiments of theatre's potential to affect real life, i.e., theatre's ability to effect individual and/or social change; the walls evolve to include those containing the audiences' experiences of plays beyond the Abbey, including Deevy's radio plays. In *Temporal Powers*, the matter wedged into the, importantly, *ruined* walls, of the traditional box set can be read as a larger metaphor for the power of an embodied feminist dramaturgy, which Deevy wedges into the materiality of realist staging, i.e., the apparent trappings of realism's walls (including fourth walls between actor and audience). This 'money' is the creative, material potential of Deevy's embodied approach to affect change in the lives of Irish people in the audience—a potential employed or inserted in between mixed dramaturgical styles, which include expressionist abstraction and fantasy. In this, Deevy employs a complex, embodied, feminist strategy, inserting her specific woman's body in split/mixed styles, decades ahead of materialist feminist playwrights inspired by Brecht, such as Caryl Churchill and Timberlake Wertenbaker, and the application of embodied hybrid styles by playwrights of colour, women, and queer artists, situated between dance and poetry, such as the choreopoems of Ntozake Shange, the 'spells' of Suzan-Lori Parks, and the mix of realism and expressionism of María Irene Fornés and Latine playwrights in her tradition. As testament to Audre Lorde's idea that 'The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house',[63] Deevy creates new stylistic tools, similarly to these later women poets and playwrights who seek to make more space on stage for the experiences of people who have been historically marginalised and oppressed: people of colour, women, people with disabilities, queer folks, and more.

Applying a personal, feminist analysis based in the body has proven revelatory of the power of Deevy's dramaturgy across her career. Deevy's theatre evokes a truth about communication in the theatre that could only have been generated by a person who could hear and became deafened, who remained single, without children, who was writing as a woman in a specific period of Irish history and theatre history, likewise who experienced

62 Ní Bheacháin, 'Political Critique and Moral Debate'.

63 Audre Lorde, 'The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House', in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Freedom, CA: Crossing Press, 1984), pp. 110–114.

a shift in access to production from the live stage to radio. In each of Deevy's plays, the central women assume into their bodies the impossible social and material contradictions, often in connection with other women. Love is not only inclusive of limits, but achieved *through* limits. Deevy works in recognition of these limits, in a unique, liminal materialist dramaturgy, which is based in the personal, and in concert with a collective (and with God in later plays), in a way that heals the audience, and brings them joy. Deevy places our bodies in the container of the play; like Pat Skully experiencing light falling and Sarah birthing love, ultimately, we are made the money in the walls.

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