

THE BORDER GAME

by Michael Patrick &
Oisín Kearney

|| SAMUEL FRENCH ||

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THE BORDER GAME was co-produced by Prime Cut Productions and Lyric Theatre, Belfast on 2nd October 2021. The production was directed by Emma Jordan, with set design by Ciaran Bagnall, lighting design by Zia Bergin Holly, sound design by Garth McConaghie, costume design by Enda Kenny, movement direction by Dylan Quinn. The Technical Manager was Peter Milloy. The cast was as follows:

SINEAD Liz Fitzgibbon
HENRY Patrick McBrearty

The play was remounted for an Irish tour (August-October 2022), performing at Lyric Theatre Belfast, Town Hall Theatre Galway, Axis Ballymun, The Market Place Theatre & Arts Centre Armagh, Roscommon Arts Centre, Garage Theatre Monaghan, An Táin Arts Centre Dundalk, Hawk’s Well Theatre Sligo, An Grianán Theatre Letterkenny, The Lime Tree Theatre Limerick and Droichead Arts Centre Drogheda. The executive producer was Jimmy Fay, the senior producer was Morag Keating, literary management by Rebecca Mairs, the company stage manager was Aimee Yates, the deputy stage manager was Stephen Dix, the deputy stage manager was Sinéad Owens, the assistant stage manager was David Willis, the assistant stage manager Emily Danby. The Head of Production was Adrian Mullan. The cast was as follows:

SINEAD Cat Barter
HENRY Patrick McBrearty

AUTHORS' NOTE

In late January 2020, we were honoured when Prime Cut Productions selected us as the commissioned playwrights on their REVEAL programme. Prime Cut had been instrumental in encouraging us to start writing in the first place, with Emma Jordan taking us under her wing and inviting us to Tyrone Guthrie Centre in summer of 2017 to write our first play, *My Left Nut*.

We had a vague idea for *The Border Game*. Something about a man and woman in a place divided by an invisible line. 2021 was fast approaching – the Irish border would simultaneously become 100 years old and the newest frontier of Europe due to Brexit. The border has been thrown into global consciousness for the first time since 1998. We are living in a time of change, with shifting social, political, and constitutional structures and we wanted to respond to that. As we looked back over 100 years of history, we asked ourselves: what do we really know about this place we come from? We set out to tell the stories of those ordinary people living along the border line, and hoped to tell a story that would be relevant to people who live along any border worldwide.

And then the Covid pandemic hit. We were stuck inside, watching the first act of a bad disaster movie, afraid to even open our front door in case the virus creeped in. All work was cancelled. There was nothing to do but wait. And wait.

During this time of uncertainty and worry, the REVEAL Programme gave us the artistic focus as well as much needed financial and emotional support. We had a purpose. We delved into the work of other writers who have set their stories along the border: the novels of Eugene McCabe, Pat McCabe, Shane Connaughton, and Benedict Kiely; the plays of George Shiels, Paul Vincent Carroll, and Vincent Woods, and even a pre-border piece as early as 1916 – DC Maher's *Partition* set in a fictional border village in an imagined future of Irish partition. We followed Colm Tóibín on his 1980s border trip in *Bad Blood*, and Garrett Carr on his expedition following Brexit in *The Rule of the Land*. We also sought international inspiration from pieces like *I am Yusuf, This Is My Brother* by Amir Nizar Zuabi, which dealt with the effects of the partition of Palestine in 1948 using haunting dream-like poetry; *Drawing the Line* by Howard Brenton, which dealt with the carving out of the India-Pakistan frontier in 1947 through the experience of a border commissioner. We also looked at stories which convey the feeling of a single place over a long time, such as Tom Stoppard's *Arcadia*, or Dylan Coburn Gray's *Citysong*.

The area referred to as 'borderland' encompasses a large area of land across ten of Ireland's thirty-two counties, with the line itself running at just under 500 km, or 310 miles. We decided to make three research trips over the summer of 2020, and when Covid restrictions eased slightly, we jumped in our two Renault Clios – Oisín's black and Michael's grey (a pure coincidence – we did not mean to coordinate our cars) and we drove around the borderlands.

For the first trip, we started in the middle, heading to probably the most ridiculous part of the border, the infamous Drummully Polyp which squiggles around like a man following a bee. Drummully is a pene-enclave of sixteen townlands of County Monaghan that is almost completely surrounded by County Fermanagh, and can only be approached through the Northern territory. It is itself a borderland between East and West, and the ancient Gaelic lordships of Arigiälla, Fear Manach and East Breifne, and is marked by slow rolling drumlin hills as if the landscape itself has buckled up against the border.

Over a couple of days, we drove around, recording interviews with locals at a social distance in Aughnacloy, Emyvale, Rosslea, Mullan village, Redhills, Belturbet, Scotshouse, and Clones. We asked these 'borderlanders' how the border had affected their attitudes, their hopes, their fears. It takes a lot for someone to trust you with their stories and we didn't want to be insensitive. Thankfully, they were extremely welcoming and gave up so much of their time to help us. We were so grateful to hear their tragic and funny tales. We heard stories of people's grannies smuggling whiskey in tea flasks, the old army checkpoint at Aughnacloy, stories from the GAA and from flute bands and the difference between the Catholic Santa and the Protestant Santa.

We visited Brackenridge's Folly, St Patrick's Chair and Well, and Castelruine at Crom – the remains of an original plantation castle that was the scene of bloody battles in the Jacobite rebellion when the water of the lake turned red with the blood of the slaughtered. On an ancient formal lawn next to the old castle, we found a pair of conjoined yew trees, a male from the 19th century and a bigger, 800-year-old female, reputedly the oldest in Ireland. It seemed to us that the borderland had long been attracting natural metaphors and symbols of an entwined conflict.

Our second trip took us to the part of the border Oisín calls home – South Down, South Armagh and North Louth. A mountain land of gorse pegged down with standing stones, erratic tomb and souterrain, massrocks and hilltops, rock-ringed and cairn-topped. Once peppered with castle, fort, and sangar, now replaced with haggard hedges, stone walls, telegraph pole and metal wire, and asphalt rippling side-by-side on gravelly roads. The sound of tractor engines spoil the air whilst the Belfast-to-Dublin motorway hums in the distance.

We interviewed locals in Dundalk, Newry, Dromintee, Forkhill, Mullaghbawn, Jonesborough, Red Rock Orange Hall, and Keady. Many's a corrugated shed of oxblood red lies weather-bleached and rusting next to yards of scrap. Cut grass piled high in airtight plastic bales. Yellow plates. White lines. White plates. Yellow lines. Diesel flows in red and green. We heard stories of fake DVDs at Jonesborough market, boy racers in their hatchbacks, the importance of townland names and stories of teenage discos at NV nightclub.

Around this part of the border, we couldn't help but feel steeped in history and surrounded by ghosts. We observed the beginnings of the border at Narrow Water, where it creeps out of the sea, and where eighteen British soldiers were blown up in 1979. We looked upon it from above at Flagstaff, where the Boundary Commissioners would have done the same when attempting to redraw the line in 1925. We drove the hill of Faughart, the birthplace of St. Brigid, and we went clay pigeon shooting on the side of Faughill Mountain, where until 2006, watchtower Romeo Two One stood on its summit.

We passed an abandoned Famine village as we climbed Bearnavave (Maeve's Gap) where Queen Maeve is said to have cut into the rock to invade Ulster and steal the brown bull in Ireland's epic *Táin Bó Cúailgne*. We drove by Clermont Carn, where Setanta famously hit a sliotar to Emain Macha, thus inventing the poc fáda. We looked up to Slieve Foy, from where Fionn mac Cumhaill slung a rock (Cloch Mór) to kill Ruscaire, the giant on the northern shore at the foot of the Mourne, and lay down to sleep, the outline of his body shaped into the rock. This place has always been borderland. Always Crossing Land. Cuchullain, Owen Roe. Edward The Bruce.

We visited the more than 5000-year-old Clontygora Court Tomb, Moyry Castle (the first border checkpoint made by the Normans) and Kilnasaggart Standing Stone, which marks an early Christian graveyard on one of the five great highways (*slighe*) of ancient Ireland. We stood on the spot where the ancient kings of Ulster were crowned at Tullyhogue Fort in Tyrone, and where in 1602, Lord Mountjoy smashed the inauguration stone to symbolically end the sovereignty of the O'Neill's. A local leaving the fort told us "There's not much to see. Just a pile of old stones." We had gotten so wrapped up in all the history, we needed to be reminded that we were here for the people, not the old stones.

Our third trip took us to the lakelands of Fermanagh, the badlands of North Leitrim, and through the backlands of West Tyrone/East Donegal. We talked to locals in Lisnaskea, Enniskillen, Kiltyclogher, Glenfarne, Manorhamilton, Belleek, Pettigo, Bundoran, Strabane, Lifford, and Derry. We drove over the Marble Arch caves and climbed Cuilcagh's peak, queuing to get to the top. From this highland of shale and scree, we descended to wetland of shivering reeds, following the path to

purgatory – the road which ultimately leads to Lough Derg. We paid a visit to the Boa Island Janus figure of a two-faced Celtic deity, written about by Seamus Heaney, and the spot where Pyper and Craig express their love for each other in Frank McGuinness' 1985 play *Observe the Sons of Ulster*.

We stopped to bounce on the springy floorboards of the Rainbow Ballroom of Romance where many locals had their first kiss. We were welcomed warmly at the Kiltyclogher Heritage Centre, where they had an exhibition about the Easter 1916 Proclamation signatory Seán MacDiarmada, and we ventured to his family cottage a few kilometers outside the village on the overgrown backroads to Corranmore. We drove past stone circles and castles, forests and over countless border bridges. And just a 15-minute drive from Derry city centre, up into the hills of Donegal, we stood at An Grianán of Aileach, an almost 4000-year-old stone fort, which was a historical centre of culture and politics during the rule of early Irish chieftains, and one of only five Irish locations marked on Ptolemy of Alexandria's 2nd century map of the world.

We spoke to a physicist who remarked that the border follows many of the rules of quantum mechanics. It is not a defined line, but a fuzzy area of probability. The more you look at it and think about it, the more it changes. Some people think of it as a hard line, others don't think it's there at all – and they can both be true. The fools, the fools, they have left us our quantum bed, and we must lie in it!

They say a hundred years was yesterday.

A century in a blink.

Six millennia to stew the brew,

The bitter stew of a boggy dew.

Time ticks by on glacial scale,

Measured in valleys and peaks.

Drawn. Trapped.

One thing becomes other.

One thing becomes neither.

A bloody meiosis,

Neurosis,

Psychosis.

We are caught.

In bottomless bog.

Soft and wet.

Reaching back through the curtain of time.

To something we can no longer see

But we can feel.

In total, we recorded seventy separate interviews and spoke to a hundred people of various backgrounds, ages, religions, ethnicities, and sexualities, on both sides of the border. This source material was the basis for our research, the stories of real people giving voice to real experiences of the border. The title of the piece *The Border Game* was influenced by both a Cross Border Youth Drama piece 'Border Games' (part of the Leitrim Fermanagh 'Across the Lines' International Fund for Ireland cross border youth project) and a quote from a former member of security forces: "There was no border. There was only a border if you wanted to play the border game."

We were committed to respecting the stories of the people we have talked to, whilst creating an engaging and cohesive narrative that spans 100-years of history. Large epic tales of smuggling and killings seen in the news. Personal stories of love and heartbreak. Ancient mythical tales of the region. And of course, any nuanced picture of the borderland would be incomplete without Frederick the fluffy lion. He's apparently Northern Ireland's mascot, and he is real.

We worked with the incredible dramaturg Ruth Little sending her draft after draft. Thankfully, she was not perturbed by the first 'draft' we sent, which was more of a loose collection of themes than a play. Unfortunately audiences need some kind of a story. They're needy like that. Ruth encouraged us not to force a form on the piece but to let it develop organically, and we were always struck by how she could pull meaning and resonance out of what we considered to be a mess. Two readings and one workshop took us to the rehearsal draft of the play, and to all the actors and creatives who gave us their input over the last year – we cannot thank you enough. Equally a massive thanks to everyone at Prime Cut and The Lyric for believing in us to write this play and for helping us every step of the way. We couldn't have done it without them. A special thank you to Emma Jordan for her fearless approach in taking this script from page to stage. Finally, thank you to all the border people we met on our travels, the people we interviewed, and the people we bumped into along the way. Their generosity was incredible.

*

The Irish border has shaped us as human beings more than we can understand. It is, strangely, the thing that first drew us together when we met in Cambridge. It is something that has shaped our identities and just won't go away. Despite being the cause of so much conflict and political stagnation, the border region is incredibly misunderstood as a place. To Dublin, it is no man's land. To Belfast, it is a bog of culchies. To London, it is a place of bandits and criminals, if it's even thought about at all. We are obsessed about 'where we come from' and 'who we are', both on a personal and historical level, and we feel the narratives

of nationality do not match the reality of lived experience. We want to make political art about what it means to be from here.

We want people to look at the border – not the politics, not the symbols, but at the real effects of an arbitrary line on the psychology of a people. From our interviews, our travels, our research – from all that work – our two characters of Sinead and Henry began to emerge from the bog. Once they arrived we needed to be true to *their* story. *The Border Game* is about the border. It's about its geography, its mythology, its history, its future; but all that sits in the background.

The Border Game is about Sinead and Henry – it's their story.

Over to them.

Michael Patrick & Oisín Kearney,
October 2021.

NOTES ON STAGING

The play draws upon experiences of people all along the borderline and is intentionally ambiguous as to where exactly on the border it takes place. We ask that when staging the production, you make a decision on where exactly your version is set and have the characters and accents be authentic to that part of the border.

“ - ” denotes an interruption by action/thought or difficulty continuing the sentence

“ / ” denotes an interruption by another character speaking

“...” denotes a character trailing off

CHARACTERS

SINEAD

All characters played by Sinead:

OLD WOMAN

SINEAD'S DA

COMMENTATOR 1

TEEN SINEAD

SINEAD'S MA

IRA VOLUNTEER

YOUNG SINEAD

YOUNG DAMIAN

HENRY

All characters played by Henry:

SOUTHERN CUSTOMS MAN

GOSSIP

DRUNK FOOL

BLOW-IN

BORING BROTHER

COW

DOG

COMMENTATOR 2

TEEN HENRY

NORTHERN CUSTOMS MAN

HOST (H)

CONTESTANT (H)

To the border.

May it last forever / go away soon.

(Delete whichever is appropriate).

ACT ONE

(Late morning. Early Autumn. Light slowly rises on a grassy hill where an old manky portacabin sits; a layer of dirt hides its off-white colour. Nettles grow around its edges. One of the windows has been broken. A T-shirt is slung over the half-open door.)

*(Next to it, a wooden stake and barbed wire fence has been knocked down in the middle. The posts lie in the mud. It has rained overnight. Rubbish is scattered on the ground, empty beer and cider cans; plastic SPAR and MACE bags, old clothes, old bike handles, a tyre, a broken washing machine, an animal's skull. An old telegraph pole sits at an angle atop the hill, now disconnected. A sign reads 'NO SHOOTING' with a few bullet holes in it. **SINEAD**, mid-thirties, appears from over the horizon and walks towards us. She wears wellies, and carries a toolbox and some empty black rubbish bags. She listens to music through modern Bluetooth headphones. She knows this land well – this is her land.)*

(She surveys the destruction, inspecting the fence and tutting in exasperation. She notices a fence post has been removed and sits partially charred in the ashes of a recent fire.)

*(**SINEAD** puts on a pair of work gloves and begins picking up rubbish and putting it into one of the bin bags. She works efficiently*

*singing along to the music on her earphones.
A song by Jinx Lennon.*)*

(HENRY, mid-thirties, pokes his head out of the old portacabin door. He's topless, out of shape and hungover. He does not want to be seen by SINEAD. He creeps down the portacabin steps and looks around for his T-shirt and jacket, but he cannot find them. He notices his T-shirt hanging up on the portacabin door, but as he moves to get it, SINEAD turns around. HENRY panics and jumps behind the portacabin to hide.)

(SINEAD notices the T-shirt hanging off the door. She grabs a large screwdriver from the toolbox and charges inside to see if anyone is there. SINEAD comes back out, satisfied that no one is inside and takes the T-shirt off the door and throws it into a bin bag. HENRY accidentally steps in nettles and stings himself. In his attempts to muffle his pain, he trips and falls over. SINEAD hears this, and turns immediately.)

SINEAD. You're trespassing!

(HENRY freezes.)

Did you tear down my fence you wee shit?! This is my land!

HENRY. I surrender.

(A moment.)

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SINEAD. Henry?

HENRY. Well.

(They look at each other, lost for words.)

SINEAD. You scared the life out of me.

HENRY. You can put the weapon down now.

(SINEAD keeps the screwdriver up. She looks at HENRY, topless. HENRY points to the bin bag. SINEAD lowers the screwdriver, goes to the bin bag, opens it and takes out HENRY's T-shirt and throws it at him.)

It was soakin'.

(HENRY airs it out a bit and pulls it on.)

Your land? Pretty sure it's your father's land, Sinead.

SINEAD. My father's land is my land.

(They look at each other awkwardly.)

Did you sleep in my hut?

HENRY. Em... yeah.

SINEAD. Comfy, was it?

HENRY. Not overly.

SINEAD. Right...

HENRY. I was walking. Saw the fire. There was a lock of young ones drinking.

SINEAD. So you came up to join in?

HENRY. Naw. Have a go at them. But they scattered when they saw me. Then the rain came on. Didn't fancy traipsin' back in the wet, so...

SINEAD. Did they wreck my fence as well?

HENRY. I think so.

SINEAD. Who was it? The Carraig Loanan ones?

HENRY. *(He shakes his head.)* Dunno. Some car heads.

SINEAD. Flip sake.

(Beat. Another awkward moment.)

It's a brave walk out this direction.

HENRY. Ach, yeh.

SINEAD. Where were you going?

HENRY. Trying to get the steps in. Shift the old Corona stone.

SINEAD. Good luck with that.

(Beat.)

Well, do you want anything?

HENRY. No no, I was just...

SINEAD. What?

HENRY. I'll grab my bits.

(HENRY goes back into the portacabin to collect his things. SINEAD turns to her tool box. HENRY comes out again, a bit panicked.)

You haven't seen my jacket have you?

SINEAD. What?

HENRY. My jacket.

SINEAD. No.

HENRY. Right... D'ya mind if I -?

SINEAD. Henry, I need to get this place / cleaned up.

HENRY. It's blue / with a white collar.

SINEAD. If I find it, I'll drop it into your shop.

HENRY. Right.

(HENRY takes a phone out and looks at the screen. There's no signal. He holds it up, trying to get signal.)

Shite.

(HENRY pulls another phone from his other pocket, and does the same thing, trying to get signal.)

Fuck sake.

SINEAD. Walk down a bit, you'll get signal.

(HENRY pockets his phones. He looks back around at the mess and then to SINEAD. SINEAD realises he hasn't left.)

Did you hear me?

HENRY. Yeh.

SINEAD. So...

HENRY. Do you need a hand?

SINEAD. I'm fine.

(SINEAD attempts to lift the old washing machine, with very little success.)

(HENRY watches her, and subtly checks out her ass. She nearly catches him and he turns away.)

HENRY. The place is a right mess hai.

SINEAD. Some prick's been fly-tipping for months.

(SINEAD tries to lift again, but it does not budge. She is exhausted.)

(HENRY watches her struggle a bit more. She definitely needs help.)

HENRY. I'll help you.

SINEAD. Go away!

Henry! I'm up to *here* today. I don't have much time.

HENRY. Well I'll help you / then.

SINEAD. No I'm grand.

HENRY. It'll be / quicker.

SINEAD. Henry, I don't need your help. Just go on home
would ye?

HENRY. Ah... well... I just...

SINEAD. You just wha?

HENRY. Ach, I can't go back to the house right now.

SINEAD. Oh...?

HENRY. Yeah. So, I'll give you a hand.

(SINEAD considers him.)

Come on. You can boss me around. You love that.

SINEAD. No.

HENRY. You used to.

SINEAD. You'll only get in the way.

HENRY. No I won't.

SINEAD. Hanging out your hole.

HENRY. I'm not hungover... If anything, I'm still drunk.

(Beat.)

But I'm also a big strong man.

SINEAD. Are you indeed?

HENRY. Who's useful for lifting washing machines.

(SINEAD looks at the washing machine and back at him.)

SINEAD. Alright.

HENRY. You won't regret it.

SINEAD. I doubt that. But there's rules, OK?

HENRY. Naturally.

SINEAD. One: You have to do as I say. You shop people are useless at real work.

HENRY. My work has the Henry Taylor guarantee!

SINEAD. And rule number two: we're not getting into anything... personal.

HENRY. Right.

SINEAD. Whatever's going on with me, whatever's going on with you... no talking.

HENRY. No chatting at all? A bit dull.

SINEAD. I just... I don't want to... d'ya know?

HENRY. Sure. Whatever you say, Mo Mowlam.

(SINEAD doesn't rise to the challenge, and moves back to the washing machine. SINEAD puts her hands on the lip at the top of the machine.)

SINEAD. Right, come on.

HENRY. Naw, you need to lift it from the bottom.

(SINEAD rolls her eyes and bends down to grip it at the bottom.)

SINEAD. Right. One, two, THREE!

(The two of them just about manage to lift the broken washing machine.)

HENRY. Where are we going?

SINEAD. The hut! The hut!

(SINEAD grimaces.)

Eugh, Henry! Was that you?

HENRY. It slipped out when I lifted it!

SINEAD. Aw ye tramp! Quickly, move, move, move.

HENRY. Which side?

SINEAD. Fuck sake Henry. Smells like poo! Just move!

(They carry it over and tuck it into the side of the portacabin.)

Rule number three. No farting.

HENRY. That's the Guinness for you.

SINEAD. Just put the rubbish in the bags first. Then, we'll move on to the fence.

HENRY. Sounds good.

(HENRY nods. They both pick up bin bags and start lifting rubbish.)

She's the spit of you.

SINEAD. Who?

HENRY. The we'an.

SINEAD. Holly?

HENRY. Saw yis outside the shop yesterday.

SINEAD. Did you?

HENRY. Aye. Absolute double of you.

SINEAD. S'pose.

HENRY. How old's she now?

SINEAD. Three.

(They quietly sort through the detritus of rubbish. SINEAD picks up a few empty beer bottles, spilling out the remnants onto the ground, and tosses them to HENRY to put them in bin bags. He ties up a bag and goes to place it by the fence.)

No! Not there!

(SINEAD angrily directs HENRY to put the bags over to the side of the portacabin.)

HENRY. What?

SINEAD. By the hut.

HENRY. What has you clearing the place?

SINEAD. I've some lad from the estate agents coming to have a look the marra.

HENRY. That what you were doing up there yesterday then?

SINEAD. Aye.

HENRY. Never thought you'd sell up.

SINEAD. Not selling the whole lot – just this one.

HENRY. End of an era.

SINEAD. Be glad to see the back of it.

HENRY. Be glad to see the profit more like.

SINEAD. Ach.

HENRY. Your family always played the border very well.

SINEAD. Did we now?

HENRY. Land both sides... That washing machine was probably put there to launder money.

(Beat.)

So who'd be buying it?

SINEAD. I dunno. Whoever wants it.

HENRY. Maybe I'll buy it.

SINEAD. If you can afford it.

HENRY. Build a wee house right up to the borderline.

SINEAD. On you go.

HENRY. We could have a wee cuppa over the border fence.

SINEAD. That's not the border.

HENRY. It is. You told me.

SINEAD. Only for a bit. Do you still not know where it is?

HENRY. Not here. But I'd know it on the road – slam across it enough times a day.

SINEAD. I like to keep my eye on it.

HENRY. So where is then Miss Google Maps?

SINEAD. Runs across to the fence for a car-length, turns back and cuts right through the hut.

HENRY. Ah right right. And are you selling the hut too?

SINEAD. Yip.

HENRY. Ahhh, you can't get rid of the old customs hut!

SINEAD. Well, we are.

HENRY. Your dad was mad for it.

SINEAD. Still is, but sure...

HENRY. Some aul historical society might buy it.

SINEAD. A developer'll take it away and build a lock of holiday homes.