Interviewing Vincent Woods

Beatriz Kopschitz Xavier Bastos

Vincent Woods is an Irish playwright, poet, arts critic and journalist whose work includes the plays *A Cry From Heaven*, *At The Black Pig's Dyke*, *Song of The Yellow Bittern* and *On The Way Out*. A new play *Broken Moon* will be staged in Paris in winter 2008. He has also adapted Ignazio Silone's novel *Fontamara* for stage and Alfred Jarry's *Ubu Roi*. He has written two plays for children, *The Brown Man* and *The Donkey Prince*, and radio plays that include *The Leitrim Hotel* and *The Gospels of Aughamore*.Vincent has published two collections of poetry, *The Colour of Language* and *Lives and Miracles*, and co-edited *The Turning Wave*, an anthology of Irish-Australian poetry and songs. At present he presents an arts programme on RTÉ (Irish national radio).

BK: Vincent Woods – welcome to Brazil, welcome to Bahia. It's been a pleasure to have your company here at the *Third Symposium of Irish Studies in South America*, held at Federal University of Bahia.

VW: Thank you. It has been a great pleasure to be here. I have to say that all of this started about two years ago when I turned on my computer and was delighted to find an e-mail from somebody called Domingos Nunez in São Paulo saying that he was translating my play *A Cry from Heaven* and his theatre group would like to produce it, and I am delighted to say that that will be happening next year. So we met in Dublin, Domingos, Beatriz and myself, and Beatriz said that there was this event that would be happening in Salvador, and why didn't I come. So I very happily said yes. And thank you to everybody for making it possible for me to be here. I want to begin briefly by reading a very short piece from the beginning of one of the plays that Beatriz mentioned, *At The Black Pig's Dyke*, a play I wrote in 1991/92, and it was first staged in September of 92. It's a big play about memory. It relates to lots of the things we've been talking about over the last few days – how we remember, what we remember, borders, what endures, the power of storytelling, the power of mythology. And this is the beginning of the play:

> It was a long time ago, Elizabeth, and it was not a long time ago . . . It was a time when to go east was to go west, when to go south was to go north, when people sang songs at a wake and cried when a child was born. It was in a land where the sun never rose and the sun never set, where the dead prepared shrouds for the livin' and straw people walked the roads.

> It was not a long time ago at all and it was not far away. It was in a land where the black pig had furrowed an endless tunnel under the earth and where it ran still, trapped and frantic beneath the ground.
>
> At that time there was a Strange Knight on the road. He met a woman with a riddle. How many people were in the world before the world was made? How many graves did it take to bury them? What way were they laid – facin' north, south, east or west? And did they rest or not from then till now? He said he'd answer any riddle in three parts but not in four. So she rose her hook to kill him – but if she did he shot her first, through the heart with a golden bullet.
>
> The Strange Knight went on till he arrived at a fair where two men were havin' a dispute over a piece of land. He said he could settle it and offered a fine price to whichever of them would sell it to him. One man said he'd sell it that minute, the other said he wouldn't sell it for love or money. So the Strange Knight said to the second man, 'You're the owner, it's your land.' Then he shot the two of them and had the land for himself.

BK: Vincent, the passage you've just read shows a lot of influences, both from folklore and history. Could you comment a bit on that?

VW: I suppose the influence of folklore and history in general on my work is immense. I've said before that in a sense I grew up at the tail-end of tradition. I was born in 1960, in a small town in the north-west of Ireland, in Leitrim, very close to the border with Northern Ireland, and it was still a very traditional society. I experienced a great deal of that tradition as a child, and one of those traditions that strongly influenced this particular play was the tradition of mumming. Around Christmas groups of mostly men, occasionally with some women joining in, would go round from house to house to perform these small ritual plays of conflict, death and resurrection. And they were dressed in straw, wearing these extraordinary straw costumes, with enormous masks so that they might be eight feet tall. I saw little of that. It was dying out as I was a child. It came from a tradition of strawboys, where there were a lot of people dressed in straw, who went around to celebrate a wedding, but there was a slight element of danger to that and threat as well, because the couple who were being married were obliged to welcome these figures, and if they didn't show hospitality, the strawboys as they were called could break things in the house, could cause a small riot. There were stories of the bride being abducted briefly, all kinds of things went on. But I grew up with a very strong tradition of story-telling, and my grandmother had been an Irish speaker, so that there were two languages at work constantly in my upbringing – English, but an English strongly influenced by Gaelic, and Irish. And all kinds of stories of fairies, of ghosts, and political history. And they were all very closely bound. And my mother and

grandmother used to talk about this place called The Black Pig's Dyke, which was a pre-Christian fortification between the old kingdom of Ulster and some of the West of Ireland. And some of the actual fortification exists still. It has been excavated, running roughly, in places, parallel to the border between the six counties of Northern Ireland and the Republic. And when it came to writing this play, where I wanted to write about memory and sectarianism, a play that I wanted to confront our recent history of violence in Northern Ireland, that image came to me as an image from mythology but with a very strong grounding in reality. So it was this poetic impulse towards an art, where, rather than saying this is the Border, this is now, I wanted to tell a story that might be timeless, that was confronting how contemporary politics might be addressed through mythology, through stories, through poetry, because the text is strongly poetic.

BK: In relation to the mummers in the play, in fact they are an organic part of the play, they unite the different parts of the play. It has been said by critics that the fact that you introduced the mummers into your play reinvented the categories of Irish drama because the Revival dramatised narratives, while you used the traditional drama. Do you agree with that?

VW: It was a very flattering quote. It was Fintan O'Toole who said that this play, *At **The** Black Pig's Dyke*, reinvented the categories of Irish theatre. It didn't. But it brought back into public consciousness an aspect of folk theatre that had been neglected, and I am forever indebted to two books, to two writers, two great people: folklorist, Henry Glassie from the United States, who lived in Fermanagh, on the Border, very close to Leitrim, through the 1970s, and he wrote a marvellous book called *All Silver and No Brass: An Irish Christmas Mumming*, which was an examination of mumming traditions in a particular part of Fermanagh. If he hadn't come there and done the work that he did, those traditions would have been forgotten. He wrote down from the old people, men and women, the rhymes, the precise rhymes that they used, the descriptions of the mumming, the stories about mumming and its traditions. It's a wonderful book. If you ever get a chance to read it, do. And Alan Gailey's *Irish Folk Drama* is a very fine book, looking at various aspects of our traditional drama, probably linking it back to pre-Christian Ireland. We don't know exactly where mumming came from. Undoubtedly some of it came in from England with the settlers, with the planters. But it merged with something much older, probably pre-Christian. I should say that, in those little dramas that I talked about, Conflict, Death and Resurrection, there was a Captain who led the group, and two Heroes who fought a mock battle. In the little play one of them is killed, and is brought back to life by a Doctor. There are two Fools – a male Fool and a female Fool, who play with the audience, the audience being the household, the people who are there, have fun, and present an element of danger. So it's both very funny and yet there's something sinister about it, something strange and unsettling, and I think that's what attracted me from the beginning. I was familiar with it before Glassie's book: my father talked about it, I'd seen the remnants of it as a boy, as a small kid, I'd done something

similar on St. Stephen's Day, on Boxing Day, when we went around as Wren Boys and Wren Girls, from house to house, making these performances, singing songs, for money. That went back to an old tradition where people actually carried around a wren, this small bird, and there was a rhyme, "The wren, the wren, the King of all birds, On St. Stephen's Day is caught in the furze. Up with the kettle and down with the pan, And give us a penny to bury the wren." Again, bringing good luck or bad, if the people in the house didn't give hospitality and money, sometimes the wren was buried, close to the house. So you're looking at something that's very old, that has many, many functions. And those mumming plays, because they were performed mostly in mid-winter, I think were also plays of the conflict of light and dark, and, briefly, darkness triumphing over light, with light restored at the end. They're fascinating, and obviously as well I spotted that they were inherently wonderfully theatrical. And who could resist those costumes, extraordinary masks – it was made for theatre, and it's no accident that it was a theatrical performance. So it gave us a very natural route to the stage. I remember actually, in Toronto, because the play went to various parts of the world, there was a who man came from Montreal to see it, and he was from the Valley of The Black Pig, in North Leitrim, and he told me this very sad story about how, when he first moved to Montreal in the 60s, there was an old woman who lived beside him in Leitrim, who made mummers' costumes – those entire outfits, the masks, the suits, from straw. And, when he was going back, he asked her to make an entire costume for him to take back to Canada. And she did. But in going through Customs, going into Toronto, they took it from him and burnt it, before he had time to say this is terribly important, it's for anthropology etc. And they said, it's too late, it had already gone into the furnace. And, whenever he went back home, the old woman would say, do you still have that suit I made for you, and he would say that he did have.

BK: Your play was extremely successful, both in Ireland and abroad. Do you think it was because of the costumes, the theatricality? Why do you think there was such a good national and international response, in spite of the local colour?

VW: I think the play has a very particular power, and some of that power is about the theatricality of mumming, and those spare plays of death and resurrection. In the bigger play also, I try to mirror those plays in terms of *At **The** Black Pig's Dyke* telling a story of conflict, death and the possibility of resurrection. It confronted various stories of hatred, of violence, of sectarian violence disguised as politics. It was a very controversial play as well. There was a minor riot in Derry when it was put on, because a group of young local Republicans saw the play and they read it as being anti-Republican, as being anti-Nationalist. So on the opening night of the play they disrupted the ending, and they took over the stage and performed a parody of the end of the play. The actors who were on stage, with these masks on, they didn't know what had happened, they were terrified to be there. So in a sense it entered a great tradition of Irish theatre, the riot. I think it hit a particular note at a very important time. Nationally, it seemed to

anticipate some of the changes that were to come. And, internationally, I think many people recognised the story, the Irish story, as their own, and people have come to see me in many parts of the world, and they say, yes, we see the story – and we know that it could be Bosnia, it could be various parts of Africa. It's been translated into a few languages, including German and Czech. People have said to me we see the power that comes from a particular folk tradition, it opens out into many traditions, and into many histories, because, in telling that story of love and obsession and hatred, it sought to be timeless and international, and I think it probably is.

BK: Now, in national terms, it was first staged by the Druid. What is the importance, or interest of the Druid Theatre in your own work? What is the importance of the Druid Theatre in the process of regionalisation of theatre in Ireland?

VW: Druid is a theatre company founded about thirty years ago by a woman called Garry Hynes, who's gone on to become one of the most famous of modern Irish directors, a woman of extraordinary energy and vision. She founded it in Galway, in the West of Ireland, with a number of other young actors, Mick Lally and Maire Mullen. They were just out of college at the time, and really in Ireland then, there was the Abbey and that was about it. There was the Gate, which was going through a strange time. So this force, these people came together and created a very, very fine new theatre company, seemingly out of nothing, and they had no money. They started it up at university, and out of sheer determination and vision, and extraordinary will and ability, they created a theatre group that is at least as important as any other group in Ireland now. They showed that theatre did not have to be centred in Dublin. They put on the plays of Tom Murphy, one of our great, great modern playwrights. For instance, one of the plays that Druid produced and that Garry Hynes directed, and which strongly influenced me in terms of writing was a play of Tom Murphy's called *Bailegangaire* (the town without laughter), which is a tour de force of story-telling, of memory and loss, it's a magnificent play. And I was lucky enough to see the late Siobhán McKenna, one of our greatest actresses, in the main role of Mommo in that play, and it went straight into my heart. It somehow made me feel that I had stories to tell, that I might tell through theatre, and I remember that moment very vividly. So I can say that Druid was very, very important to me before I began to write. And my writing for them then was almost accidental because I worked as a journalist in the 1980s. I knew that I wanted to write – I wanted to write something, I wasn't sure what. And in order to do that I left Ireland, went to live in Australia, and met Maeliosa Stafford, who was moving back to Ireland, to the Druid, to take over as artistic director. I gave them a short play I had written, and out of that contact came all the rest.

BK: So, on the one hand you have *At The Black Pig's Dyke*, Druid, folkloric drama. On the other hand, we move to your 2005 play, *A Cry from Heaven*. We have another theatre – it was staged at the Abbey. It's a retelling of the myth of Deirdre, so going back

to the material that the Revival dramatised. So, why such movement, and why did you think it was relevant to revisit this story in the twenty-first century?

VW: Jocelyn Clarke who was then literary manager at the Abbey, approached me probably around 2002 or 3 to ask me to write a play at the Abbey. He said what would you like to do, and I immediately said I'd like to write a new version of Deirdre, and he was surprised. Why did I think it was relevant? Because I think it's one of these eternally rich and relevant stories, and a great tragedy of Irish story-telling. Deirdre and the Sons of Usna is a story with parallels in mythology and story-telling all around the world. A young woman who is fated to marry, betrothed to marry an old man, falls in love with his nephew. They run away together and are pursued eventually by the old king and are surrounded. Then Deirdre and the sons of Usna are lured back to Ulster, and Naoise and his brothers are killed. And it has everything, it has love, it has sex, it has great passion. For me it is one of these eternal stories. It fascinated me at the time – I was a small boy when I first read a very basic version of it, and I felt that I strongly wanted to tell this story again. Yeats had done a version of Deirdre, Synge had done a version of Deirdre, various people had, but not for a long, long time. I wanted to write it in verse as part of that great and glorious tradition, and because a good deal of *Black Pig's Dyke* is also written in verse. And, because I'm a poet as well, I'm always attracted to writing in that form. So, over the course of probably about two years, I wrote this version of Deirdre, which became *A Cry from Heaven*. That title comes from what for me is one of these most extraordinary images, not only out of the story of Deirdre, but out of all of Irish story-telling, which is that, before she is born, Deirdre is heard to cry in her mother's womb, to call out, to cry. For me, that image of the unborn child calling out to life, as a warning, is an extraordinary image, an extraordinary concept. And, in the play, that cry becomes a cry right down to the present, and, in a sense, it's a cry of grief for all life and all death, and there's a good deal of death in the play.

BK: You mentioned that you wrote part of *At The Black Pig's Dyke* in verse, it's the mumming plays, and *A Cry from Heaven* is entirely in verse. You have already said that it's because you're a poet. Is this the only reason, or is there another, maybe theatrical, reason for staging *A Cry from Heaven* in verse?

VW: It was partly again a nod to the past, to the great work of Yeats and Synge. It seemed to me the most natural form in which to tell this story. I wasn't interested in trying to make it modern. I didn't want to make a version of Deirdre which would have motorbikes and cocaine. For me, the poetic in particular is eternal, and many of the playwrights that I most admire, people like Lorca, have imbued their plays with this core of poetry, that is timeless. Blank verse can carry something extraordinary. It's a very different form, there's a little rhyme, but very little. But what there *is* there is a very strong sense of rhythm, and the whole play is perhaps a little bit like an opera. From the opening word to the last there's a very particular rhythm and sound, and it's almost all of one piece. I've been reading *Snow* by Orhan Pamuk, and a good deal of that is about exploring this notion of where inspiration

comes from, where poems come from, and I remember writing a lot of this, exactly where I was, exactly where I was sitting, and, at times, not knowing where concepts were coming from, where the words were coming from. Occasionally when you're writing, maybe it sounds ludicrous, but sometimes when you're writing it feels like something is coming through you, and it's a much bigger force than you are. And I feel very lucky when it gets out onto the page and I've captured it, I hope, in something like my play.

BK: What was your source when it all came to you? Was it the dramatised versions? Old stories? Oral versions from childhood?

VW: It was everything. I read everything that I could possibly get my hands on over a few years, and then put them all away, and started with a blank page, a blank screen. First I put the skeleton, a kind of construct there, and then I put the flesh on the play, onto that body that I'd shaped. I should say as well that I changed the ending of the story. In all of the traditional versions of Deirdre, after her lover Naoise and his brothers are killed, time passes and she is held captive by Conor, the king, and she eventually kills herself. In the version I've made she's already pregnant with Naoise's child, and she gives birth to the child, but tells Conor that the child is his. And then she kills herself. But this child is left, this boy is left, who might be the son of Naoise, or might be the son of Conor. So this child who represents hope, the future, unity, peace, is left, and in the end of the play he too is killed. And so, in fact, the ending of *A Cry from Heaven* is much darker than the ending of *Black Pig's Dyke*. *Black Pig's Dyke* ends on a note of hope. Actually I might just read a little, following on from that story of the Strange Knight, which runs as a Prologue and Epilogue to the play and Prologue to Act Two:

> The Strange Knight walked on again till he came to a castle. There was a rook perched on the rampart with blood on its beak. The Knight asked whose blood it was and the rook said, 'It's the king's blood. The people have killed the King and his body is in pieces in the courtyard inside.' So the Knight thanked the rook and went inside to the people. He told them they had done a wonderful thing and he wanted to be their leader. So they elected him their leader and that night held a great banquet where he set one half of them against the other; and they fought till there was no one left alive but the Strange Knight.
>
> And he was happy then: to have evaded answering the riddle, to have the piece of land for himself and to have the castle without King or people to bother him.

And then, at the very end of the play:

> The Strange Knight remained in his castle. He watched from the ramparts and no one came. The land around him grew rancid from the decay of bodies in the ground.

> He ordered a banquet but there was no food; a ball but there were no musicians; a duel but there was no one to fight. He posted orders that a beautiful woman be brought to him to sire an heir: all night he lay alone, naked, in his bed.
>
> And the Strange Knight grew lonely and came to be filled with sorrow. He walked back along the road he had travelled till he came to the place where he'd met the woman with the riddle. He fell to the ground and begged to be forgiven. His tears fell like rain on the soil and the water soaked down, down into the heart of the dead woman.
>
> And out of her heart grew a flower – a blood-red poppy. And the Strange Knight plucked it and when he did it fell asunder. Petal after petal drifted to the ground and out of each sprang a dozen women with hooks and seeds and implements to sow and harvest. They yoked the Strange Knight to the plough and so began the endless task of restoring the land to life and the beginning of happiness.

And I should say that, at the end of the play, that image there of the poppies comes directly from an incident – in 1987 the IRA set a bomb at a Remembrance Day ceremony in Enniskillen, Fermanagh, very close again to where I grew up. And many people were killed. I was working as a journalist at the time in Radio Éireann, and I always remember that the following morning a recording came in to the studio of a man talking about his daughter's death in that explosion. The man was called Gordon Wilson and his daughter was killed, and she'd been a nurse, and she was trapped underneath the rubble of the explosion. And he talked about how he'd held her hand, and talked to her. And I was listening to this voice, and thinking why is this so familiar? And I realised, subsequently, two things: he was originally from County Leitrim, but he was also unconsciously using an old story-telling device, the form of three, where he said, "I said to her once, are you alright? And she said, yes, Dad, I am. And I said to her a second time, are you alright? And she said, I am, Dad, I love you. And I said to her a third time, are you alright? And there was silence. She was dead." And he went on to make the most moving and generous plea that there be no retaliation, and that her death represent a future and hope, as opposed to retaliation and a continuance of violence and horror. And within *Black Pig's Dyke* there's a huge element of that story, of his words and her words, and the character who tells that story of the Strange Knight in the play is, in theatrical terms, suspended in darkness, she's dressed in white, she's holding a clutch of poppies and she, in my mind, represents the spirit of Maire Wilson, and also represents the spirit of many other people who died, and when the play was on tour it went to Enniskillen, and Gordon Wilson who, by then was a Senator in Dublin, was there in the audience, and he came to me afterwards and we talked for a while about it all. So the power came out of many sources for that play, and I suppose that's sometimes what we do, as artists, as writers, we tap into other sources of power as well. And, in *A Cry from Heaven*, there is a great darkness in it, which seems strange

because it was written after the peace had been sealed in Northern Ireland. And yet I think the pessimism at the heart of *A Cry from Heaven* is again linked to some of what we've been discussing in the past few days, which is, what's left after the peace, what kind of society has it made, and how do we remember, how do we truly represent all aspects of the past and go from that in the best way into the future? Also, we talked about the enduring power of nature and the power of poetry, like of Ossian, a conflict with the modern world and development, and, within *A Cry from Heaven* as well, is a kind of lament for landscape and the destruction of some of the great and sacred landscapes of Ireland, including Tara. I'm sure many of you will know that there's a huge controversy over a motorway, which is being built through part of the Gabhra Valley, very close to the Hill of Tara and, for me, that represents a great deal of what we talked about in the last few days, the force into the future that denies so much of the past, and won't allow even time to properly explore the past in its movement forward. To what? To becoming consumers? I didn't want to be too deliberate about that. I thought, if anyone sees it in the play, they will. It is there, and that is the pessimism at the end of that play. Again, I'll read a little: I've always been haunted by the scene describing the return from Scotland of Deirdre, Naoise her lover, and his two brothers, from exile with the promise of a pardon and the promise of a future life, and they're betrayed, and they're under siege. Conor and his soldiers have surrounded the place where they are, and they play a form of chess inside, and the men go out one by one to their deaths, 'til Deirdre's the only one left. And this is that scene from the play:

Deirdre:
What do you see?
Ardan:
Fergus has kept his word.
His nephews, Finn and Roe,
Have thrown a circle round
To shelter us.
Ainle:
Legion of the Red Branch,
Standing with them:
Gone from Conor.
Deirdre:
What do you see now?
Ardan:
A fire of battle on the snow.
The lines advance, retreat
Like twin seas that face each other's tide.
Ainle:
Each retreat leaves frothings on the shore;
A scattering of limbs, the moaning dead,

A hand that clutches at the chilly air.
Deirdre:
Has it finished? Who has won?
Ardan:
They rest.
Ainle:
The ravens come;
Two hundred scald crows rise and fall again.
Deirdre:
What was the thing of greatest beauty
In your life?
Naoise:
The sight of you that morning, naked.
Ardan:
That morning, too;
We sat and watched the morning grow.
Ainle:
My brothers swimming
In the river's light.
Deirdre:
The dream I dreamt of you
And of us all.
Ardan:
The battle starts again:
Roe is wounded.
Ainle:
Roe is dead:
His men fall back.
Ardan:
Conor comes forwards,
The battle stops.
Ainle:
Finn goes to him,
The ranks part for him.
Deirdre:
He will betray us.
Ardan:
They talk. Finn turns.
Ainle:
He is bought and fights against us.
Deirdre:
Then you must go.

And Naoise’s brothers go out to fight.

Deirdre:
What do you see?
Naoise:
My brothers like two dancers in the snow;
They hold the horde at bay –
Their swords are faster than the eye.
As fierce and fast as two young wolves
They move among the living and the dead.

The siege draws back, but gathers force again:
Conor at its head.

The snow is muffling life –
Clean limbs are falling;
The hacking axe is whirled
As joyful as the plaything of a boy.

Their men are scattered now:
I must go out to them.
Deirdre:
Tell me before you go,
Of Ulster’s beauty.
I never saw it.
Naoise:
It is not as beautiful as you:
Yet it’s my life:
By day it is as green and fertile
As a tree fresh drenched by rain.
At night the skies are endless,
With stars cut out of all the glorious dead;
The moon now palest blue, now red, now yellow,
I swear it must be the loveliest sky
In all the world.
The journey down to Tara,
Some day you’ll see it:

The way the land rolls back
And opens out,
The plains of whitest cattle,

Swift rivers full of trout,
The little rolling hills,
The forests full of deer,
The clear blue lakes
Which hold the world in perfect upside-down;
Each tree, each rock, each shore of waving sedge
So glassy true the lake might be the world
And world water – maybe is.

Deirdre:

Don't go:
Love's power is the only force we have:
If we can raise it now
And make it like a flame
To scorch the fires that blaze around,
Then we burn beyond these walls of siege
And burn and burn and live;
And take your brothers with us
From this wounded snow.

Naoise:

Love's power is not so great,
And I must go:
Live, that I may live if I should die:
Your eyes will look on day and see,
And it will be as if my eyes, too,
Are seeing light;
And these sweet ears will hear for me,
Will hear night fading into dawn,
The joyful throat of morning open wide,
Its song defiant, heard anew each sun,
And heard again by me, though I am gone.

He goes out to battle, and she watches his death.

Deirdre:
(How can I bear to hear the dawn without you?
If you die, I am dead, all but this life in me.)

He was hunting with two others;
It was winter.
The deer was young and lithe.
The snow

Was everywhere, great branches
Silent in the white of day.

(What do you see now?)

They cornered him upon the crest of Manaun,
His fawn cried in a hidden slope;
He was dappled with the light
Of autumn appling.

He was trembling, with his hands
Upon her throat.

A thread of blood runs round;
The stitch unravels,
His head held back, the grip
A tautened bow:
The thread is drawn again,
The main knot severs –
His life pours hot and staining in the snow.

(Applause)

BK: While you were reading I was wondering, moving from creation and motivation to performance, how did audiences and critics react when it was first staged at the Abbey?

VW: It had a very mixed reaction. It was directed by a very famous modern French director called Olivier Py. I chose him to direct the play because I'd seen some of his work in France, and it was extraordinary. We had differences about aspects of the production. The most striking feature of the production was this pretty ceaseless rain on stage. In my text the one weather feature is snow. But it rained pretty ceaselessly, relentlessly, in the production, and I think that that metaphor, of rain, which was in a sense imposed on the play, overwhelmed the text of the play. But, despite that, I think it had a power – some people hated it, some people loved it, some people walked out. I met a young waiter, and, when I was signing the cheque, he said "Are you the man who wrote the play at the Abbey?" and he said, "I went to see it six times." For me, the play is now there. It exists, it has entered a realm of its own life. And I'm so very happy that it will be seen in Brazil, and that it has been translated into Portuguese. Because, again, while it is a particularly Irish story, at least, for me, it is also truly a universal and timeless story, as the best of all myths are, and I hope that it could be seen anywhere.

BK: Do you have any expectations, concerning its production in Brazil?

VW: No, I'm just delighted that it's happening, and everything I've heard and read about the work of Domingos Nunez makes me very confident that it will be a very good production, one that I'm looking forward to.

BK: Moving now to more recent work, *Broken Moon*, a new play, which was premièred in French as *Lune Brisée*, is a more personal play. You've somehow moved gradually from *Black Pig's Dyke* to *Cry from Heaven*, and now, abandoning a little of the historical burden, moved to something more personal. Could we say that this is a trait in very contemporary Irish drama?

VW: I don't know. I suppose I can really only speak for myself, and this play, *Broken Moon*, is very simple, a very short play with two actors. It's a story again about love and loss, and peering very uncertainly into the future. It's set deliberately and ambiguously "somewhere in Europe", it's never given an absolute definition. It's really in France. I wrote it in English, it was translated into French, and it's been done in French. I suppose I'm drawn more and more towards those personal, smaller and yet immense, details of love, and loving and loss and hope and those very important narratives in all our lives. And perhaps for the moment, yes, moving away from, as you say, the burden of history to perhaps the burden of individualism and personal history. I should also say that that's not the only story in the play. But if we look at the broader gamut of modern Irish drama, I suppose that you do see perhaps a move away from the bigger stories of history, drawing from history and mythology as I have done, and to the work of somebody like Conor McPherson, who began with monologue and made it an art form. It's a strange time in Irish theatre because I don't think you can define any particular strand happening at the moment. The best thing you can hope for is that more young people, especially, are writing and will write. But my concern is that the numbers going to the theatre are dropping off. So I would ask the question, how can young people write plays if they don't go to the theatre, if they don't read plays, if they're not actually engaging with all that from a young age? The Peacock, for instance, the second, smaller, theatre in the Abbey, which, when I was first in Dublin in the late 70s and through the 80s, showed about ten plays a year, I think, mainly for financial reasons, has been dark largely over the last couple of years. And that was a theatre where young writers could find their feet, have their work put on, see what work was being done. And it wasn't this constant expectation of a new masterpiece, of a new play that would go to Broadway, of something that was going to be a huge hit and a world première. And I say why can't a new play simply be a new play, why does each new play have to carry this burden of expectation, that it's going to be an important part of the canon? It may be or it may not be, but to have written it at all and had it staged is a significant achievement. And I think we should mark that,

and put things in their proper perspective, and that just seems distorted, especially in modern Ireland.

BK: You have just spoken more as a critic than as a writer, so let's talk a little bit about your work as an arts critic. Do you have any particular critical approach? Do you consider yourself as a ground-breaking critic in any sense?

VW: I should say that I present a programme on radio, an arts programme which is broadcast on Irish National Radio four days a week. It's an hour long and it covers theatre, visual art, music, poetry, literature, everything. So I interview writers. I facilitate reviews, I don't actually do the reviewing myself, because I think that would be invidious. We review, critics review the new plays, new novels, new poetry, and we revisit work that may be forgotten. We try to do a lot, I suppose. Since it's an hour long each day, we actually have quite a bit of time. It's worth having a look at the web-site, which is www.rte.ie , and the programme is called *The Arts Show*, because there are lots of very interesting interviews, some of them with modern Irish authors, and it's both an archive and a register of what's happening now. I recently did a public interview with the playwright Tom Murphy who I mentioned earlier. During the course of that interview he read quite a long excerpt from a new play, for example, and it was great to record that, and record him also reading from some of his other works. So that is there, we hope, forever, in the sound archives in National Radio. So we're trying to document and preserve some of what is happening in the arts in Ireland now. I began work as a radio journalist in current affairs and news, so it seemed a natural progression to do this.

BK: I have one last question for you and, after that, maybe you would read something of your own choice. Considering all this – adaptations, creative and critical work, your relationship with theatre groups, your creative process – do you feel your work is taking any specific direction now?

VW: I suppose that, more than anything, what I want to do, and I suppose it's what most artists would say, is that I want to go on making my art, I want to go on writing. It's always a challenge. It's a particular challenge at the moment because of the nature of the other work I'm doing. So in a sense, for the moment, I've got some of that creative work on hold. But, to be perfectly frank, it's great to earn decent money again, after years of struggling financially. As a writer in Ireland it's relatively civilised – we have a good deal of support for writers, for artists. There's a group called Aosdána, where if you're not making a serious income, they now pay you about 20,000 euro a year to do your work, which is a big help. It won't make anyone rich, but it may well keep the wolf from the door. I want to keep writing, both poetry and plays. I don't know what shape or form those will take in the future. I'm working on a new collection of poetry, a lot of which is already written, and I suppose what I try to do with each new play is slightly set

a challenge for myself, so that I don't too easily fall into the trap of reproducing the previous play. I seek to do something each time that will stretch myself, while still looking very much towards the original sources from history, tradition, folklore, poetry. To finish, I'm going to read one very short piece for you, which is a kind of prose-poem, and it links to something that was touched on this morning, which was the self-sufficient farms of Donegal, the sort of farm I grew up on. This is a short excerpt from what will be a much longer poem, entitled "Thirteen Acres", again partly about memory, time, place:

> Babble pulls you down and back. The voices gabbling in the frozen thaw. All rush in one great meadow of scythed time. The men with flailing arms, the woman racing in impatient wake, a boy and girl who drowned and hanged, the seasons flow and flux of all that's gone. A tumbled pig house and an echoing gable ruin. All weeds and flowers shoot, trees fall, the summer stink of nettles and green rot. In this stone house a black tomcat did battle with a bride intruder into men's domain. He spat and arched and sprayed against her being; but lost and drowned or smoked to death inside a pot. In this white room five children slid to life; new afterbirth crackles in a blazing fire. A woman not-yet-old sits vigil with each child, iron tongs criss-crossed upon the cradle against fairy craft. One boy is dropped head first from her sleeping lap and bears a bruise to chapel for his christening. The first of many falls and risings up. Pink roses spatter the whitewashed wall. The cobbled way shines up a single stone through muck and mud. The hundreds who stepped here, the come and go of boots and summer feet, the shadows thronging wake and wedding, voices flinting the dark night. One man appears too late across the threshold, takes his whistle from his coat, asks the tall man Hugh how to turn the tune and plays a bar or two. "You'll turn straight round and out that door again, we'll turn the tune in daylight." Tall enough for any regiment, Hugh; his brother James is small and stout, wrapped in a cooper's apron in that brown photo of working men in Edinburgh. A dozen eggs thickyellowwhite fry perfect on the pan, the losset out for praties, cold buttermilk in the shaded churn. A wooden cup hooked up beside it for dipping deep, the cure for summer thirst. This was the haggard where the donkey kicked in hayful dust, let loose from bands and harnesses, sweat lines smearing his grey belly and his sides. Rolling, snorting, the great brays of lonesome humanness, near-humanness, bonded, bound, all labouring, all fed now and thirsted in the shade. Gone the garden sanded from the blue lough shore and gone the path, well cowdunged from the dunkle at the byre door.

(Applause)

BK: Vincent Woods, thank you very much for a most fascinating interview.

Note

"I was delighted to be given the task of transcribing the public interview that the renowned playwright Vincent Woods gave in response to questions from Dr Beatriz Kopschitz on the second day of the Irish Studies Symposium in Salvador, 11th September 2008. I myself met Vincent for the first time when I arrived at Salvador Airport on a very hot afternoon, just prior to the conference. Noélia Borges, one of the organisers of the Symposium, was waiting for me when I got off the plane, and with her were two of the invited speakers, Larry Taylor and Vincent Woods. Vincent, not surprisingly, was looking rather pink in the heat, and I noticed that he was holding in his hand, in a spirit of pragmatic optimism, a copy of Orhan Pamuk's novel *Snow*. Staying in the same hotel as Vincent I had a number of opportunities to chat with him, and I always found him very approachable. The interview was certainly the highlight of an excellent symposium for me. Vincent's soft-spoken, modest delivery underlined a powerful emotional charge which was felt by all who were privileged to be in the audience that afternoon. In transcribing and editing the interview I have cut only some moments of hesitation and repetition. Vincent himself was kind enough to proofread the completed transcript, so the final text has his seal of approval!" (Peter James Harris).