

Famished: A historical, musical and poetic account of the Irish Famine

Cherry Smyth, Ed Bennett and Lauren Kinsella come together for enlightening show

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Cormac Larkin



Cherry Smyth: 'I spotted a poster advertising an exhibition about Queen Victoria, and as I looked closer, I saw that someone had scrawled the words 'IRISH FAMINE' across her forehead.'

Cherry Smyth was hurrying through a London tube station in 2012 when she suddenly realised she needed to know more about the Famine. For the Antrim-born poet, who has lived and worked in London since the 1980s, it was the start of a journey that would end with *Famished*, her extraordinary new multi-disciplinary collaboration with composer Ed Bennett and improvising vocalist Lauren Kinsella.

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“It struck me like a slap”, remembers Smyth, “and I experienced the shock of recognition and belonging, but I barely knew to what. That’s what I needed to find out through *Famished*.”

Smyth's previous publications have included three collections of poetry and *Hold Still*, a novel about Irish woman Joanna Hiffernan, muse to both Whistler and Courbet. In 2006, she won the Raymond Williams prize for *A Strong Voice in a Small Space*, an anthology of women prisoner's writing.

For *Famished*, Smyth delved into historical records of the famine. "What struck me very forcibly was that most of the people who died were native speakers. Four million spoke Irish before the Famine and only two million afterwards. Also, the feistiness of women has been overlooked until recently: how they stole food for their children, fought workhouse masters, attacked corn meal carts and depots."



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Secretly knowing

The resulting text is scattered over fifty-plus pages, a sprawling, open-textured dossier, part lyric poem, part documentary, that veers from tender evocations of women, like Catherine Larkin who was arrested for daring to cross the lawn of Strokestown Demesne to beg for meat for her children – "too weak to walk the long way, my feet choose/the smooth oval lawn of bright, mown grass" – to poignantly matter-of-fact passages, like a parish inventory from Gweedore in 1837 detailing the pathetic belongings of a community that owned "one shovel among two hundred people" and "no looking glass above 3d in price/no bonnet, no clock".

But strong and affecting as the poems are on the page, *Famished* began to take on other layers and meanings when Bennett and Kinsella came on board.

Like Smyth, Ed Bennett is a northerner living in England, and he too felt compelled by how little he realised he had been taught in school. “On the one hand I thought this was an opportunity to educate myself in more depth about the history of my homeland and it’s troubled past”, he says, “but on the other, I wasn’t sure if I was really ready to face what we all secretly know – that this really happened, and in the relatively recent past. Like a television news report about an atrocity from some distant nation, I was aware of it but strangely detached from that reality.”

In performance, *Famished* elides the literal, voiced meanings of Smyth’s text with the more abstract inferences of Bennett’s atmospheric score, and Kinsella’s wordless vocal improvisations.

“Working with spoken poetry forming the central basis for the trio opens up new possibilities”, says Kinsella, one of the foremost vocal innovators of the contemporary European jazz scene.

“The main vocal role is not through myself but through Cherry. For me, it’s a rare chance to work as a side instrumentalist rather than front line vocalist. *Famished* holds a powerful emotional narrative and my job is to try and express and engage around the text, to colour and highlight through pitch, sound, texture and spoken word, mirroring Cherry in both abstract and concrete ways.”

Contemporary resonances

Kinsella has worked with Smyth before, mining the poet’s words as lyrics for performances with *Roamer*, a forward-looking quartet of Irish jazz musicians, all based abroad, who assemble occasionally when the members happen to be home for a visit.

Smyth’s experience with *Roamer* meant that she had some idea of how the musicians might offer new layers of meaning to *Famished*.

“I wanted a form of collective lament to happen through the words, vocals and music, that reading poetry alone cannot give,” Smyth explains.

“Lauren, Ed and I devised and rehearsed the piece together at the Tyrone Guthrie centre in Annamakerrig, building it intuitively through improvisation, allowing the emotion of the words to be pulled out by Lauren’s extraordinary song and noise, which approaches garbled rage, and Ed’s score that provides cinematic sonic contours, moving between eulogy and elegy.”

Performing the work to British audiences has been an intense experience for all three. “The live performances have had some weeping,” says Smyth, “especially at the London Irish Centre. A special kind of honouring silence takes place, accentuated by

the pauses in Ed's score and Lauren's vocals, which someone compared to 'the blight talking to itself'.

The silence splits into shades of shock and guilt in the white English audience and tones of shame and indignation in Irish listeners. One second-generation Irish woman told me that her mother could never say the words 'the Famine' but left a gap in her sentence. Then she realised that 'that silence', so often used as a coping mechanism, permeated her own silence on trauma."

But the contemporary resonances of the Famine keep asserting themselves too, and Smyth sees a direct parallel between dinghies of desperate migrants in the Mediterranean and Irish coffin ships crossing the Atlantic, and between 19th century British imperialism and populist rants about the backstop in the Brexit debate.

"You know they rounded up 15,000 paupers in the streets of London and Liverpool and dumped them back in Cork and Dublin at the height of the famine?" says Smyth. "There was a lot of protectionism against the Irish coming into Britain, and that just felt very contemporary to me."

"Famished seemed to bring up other areas of conflict that people needed to voice or discuss," agrees Kinsella. "Whether that was talking about Syria and the refugee crisis, or Brexit and the notion of borders between people, the work acted as a catalyst. Audiences needed to share their thoughts collectively. A lot of the audience seemed shocked or in disbelief because there is so much detail in the work about what actually happened."

Exposed

For Bennett, the silence that descends when they perform *Famished* is part of the music. "The silence in the room has been palpable. In many ways there is a lot of silence in the work, moments of pause and reflection, and that's where the work is most effective in a performance situation. The rawness of the text is exposed and it feels like there is nowhere to hide, both for the audience or the performers. At times I am sitting on stage thinking 'we are so exposed here' but then I realise that is part of the intimacy of the work which seems to connect with people."

At a time when British-Irish relations are again under strain, *Famished* might seem like an act of provocation, but for Cherry Smyth, there are stories still to be told about this dark moment in our history, stories that can shed light on our present.

"Much of the legacy of colonialism hasn't been digested yet," says Smyth. "I wanted this project to point to the contemporary maritime migrant crisis and the ideologies of hatred and xenophobia that affect us all, no matter what your background is."

Famished receives its Irish premiere in Smock Alley, Dublin on May 25th as part of the Dublin International Literature Festival; more at ilfdublin.com. The show then tours to Uillinn West Cork Arts Centre (May 28th), Bere Island (May 29th), Limerick City Arts Gallery (May 30th), Playhouse Theatre, Derry (June 13th), Flowerfield Arts Centre, Portstewart (June 14th) and Crescent Arts Centre, Belfast (June 16th). More at cherrysmyth.com/famished