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SoloSIRENs Collective's *Cessair*: Feminist Performed Ethnography

The SoloSIRENs Collective's production *Cessair*, staged in South Dublin in the summer of 2021, represents the second production of this burgeoning company. The Collective is a community-based theatre group comprised of an all-female ensemble that has been creating together since 2019. For this production, it used the Irish myth of Cessair as a starting point to consider the female experience, and invited women from across the world to share their stories and lived experiences. Drawing on close observation of the devising process, analysis of the final production, and conversations with members of the Collective, this article argues that the production should be considered as an example of feminist performed ethnography.

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WHICH STORIES get told? Which stories are lost? What can we learn from female stories that are forgotten or hidden? These were among the questions offered to the audience for contemplation in the SoloSIRENs Collective's production, *Cessair*. Running from 30 June to 3 July 2021, *Cessair* marked a long-awaited return to in-person performance in Tallaght and the larger Dublin area. The production was devised by the SoloSIRENs Collective (SSC), a community arts-based group of women in South Dublin County that is supported by Tallaght Community Arts (TCA), and inspired by the obscure(d) Irish myth of Cessair, a goddess who founded the country.¹ In such productions, the Collective documents the lived experience of women through performance and uses an 'applied theatre' approach to devising. While the umbrella of applied theatre is broad, the SSC's mode of working centres on the use of drama activities and collaborative performance techniques as both the mode of investigating experience and the method of meaning making, as is outlined in detail below.

Jenny Macdonald created the SoloSIRENs Collective with the aim to:

create a space where women who were writing and performing their own work could support and be inspired by one another. I was tired of competitive creative spaces that pitted artists against one another without proper financial or pastoral care. I wanted to create a space of care and true creativity. I wanted to support and amplify women's voices and to explore the issues that affect us.²

The initial idea was to create a theatre festival that would feature three one-woman shows performed by the women who wrote them, as well as a devised piece created by a collective of women. Jennifer Webster joined as producer, and the pair secured a place in the Abbey Theatre's 5x5 2019, a development series that provides space, technical support, and funding for five community-based projects. For the devised piece, the pair 'gathered the community collective by invitation', focusing on local amateur participants of previous projects facilitated through TCA: 'We felt that the Abbey 5x5 and the SoloSIRENs Festival would be an amazing opportunity for women who had experience of community projects and were ready for a very deep and committed experience.'³ The Festival ran from 1 November

to 14 December 2019 at the Civic Theatre in Tallaght, where the Collective has been in residence since May 2022, and included the group's first devised performance, *Falling*.

Falling explored the individual and collective narratives of an intergenerational group of women based in South Dublin County. Claire Keogh elaborated on the performance in her paper at the SoloSIRENs Symposium in 2020:

The eight performers in *Falling* drew on their own personal stories to jam on topics created by prompts such as 'I Remember', 'I Believe', and 'I Come From'. Their stories spanned tales from childhood to adulthood, with one memory prompting another as the women listened and responded to each other's stories with one of their own.⁴

The unity of the Collective was obvious to the audience, who remarked on this repeatedly 'in post-show vox pops and during the audience/panel discussion'.⁵ This strong bond saw the women decide to continue creating work together after the Festival under the name, the SoloSIRENs Collective. It operates on a porous basis, with members being free to come and go as they need.⁶

Cessair is the second production by the group and marks a distinct broadening of its scope from the experience of women in South Dublin to women globally. The production centres on the Irish myth of Cessair, who, in many iterations, is a relative of the biblical Noah. After being told that she is not welcome aboard his ark, Cessair assembles a group of 150 women to build three large ships in preparation for the great flood. Macdonald described this moment as Cessair being thrust into leadership, which she argues is a recurring motif for women.⁷ Before they depart, three men appear requesting safe passage, which is granted on the understanding that they would ride in Cessair's boat and that she would remain in charge. When the time comes, they set sail from North Africa with fifty women aboard each ship. Two of the ships sink during the journey, with one hundred women's lives and stories lost. The only surviving ship, containing Cessair, fifty women, and the three men, lands in Ireland, where they settle.

Just as the myth spanned continents, the Collective opened their creative process up and invited female-identifying participants from around the globe to collaborate, a shift that was made possible by the need to move their workshops onto Zoom during the Covid-19 pandemic. These participants will be referred to here as storysharers to distinguish them from the SSC ensemble members. Through including these storysharers, the production was able to incorporate the voices of one hundred women from across the world, giving testimony to their lived experiences and symbolizing those women lost at sea in the myth.

Feminist Performed Ethnography

Before analyzing the production in detail, it is useful to introduce the notion of feminist performed ethnography, which is a combination of the concepts of performed ethnography and feminist ethnography. In defining performed ethnography, D. Soyini Madison draws an important distinction between it and performance ethnography, that is, performances that take place during fieldwork. She asserts that:

*performed ethnography will have enacted, re-presented, and theatricalized those quotidian, symbolic, cultural, and local acts of performance ethnography. In summary: when performances in the field or performance ethnography is adapted for the stage or communicated through modes of performance it becomes performed ethnography.*⁸

Performed ethnography is a beneficial tool because it 'invites the audience to travel empathically to other worlds and to feel and know some of what others feel and know. Two lifeworlds meet, and the domains of outsider and insider are both and simultaneously demarcated and fused.'⁹ Adapting collected research into a staged production provides an important connection to feminist ethnography, which embraces both traditional and experimental methods of data collection and methods of sharing the findings.¹⁰

Dána-Ain Davis and Christa Craven acknowledge that 'feminist ethnography does not have one single definition, nor can

“doing” feminist ethnography be confined to a single scholarly trajectory’.¹¹ However, they posit that feminist ethnography involves ‘a project committed to documenting lived experience as it is impacted by gender, race, class, sexuality, and other aspects of participants’ lives’.¹² Further, they stress that it ‘involves a feminist sensibility, and commitment to paying attention to marginality and power differentials’.¹³ Talisa Feliciano explains the benefits of this approach as follows: ‘Feminist ethnography opens up, for me, tools that have often been overlooked. It allows me to centre art, literature, expression, and people’s own accounts of themselves rather than hegemonic accounts of people made by others in the name of preservation, keeping order, and policy.’¹⁴ This idea of coalescing around an arts-based approach that allows people to express their own stories resonates closely with the approach of the SoloSIRENs ensemble in creating *Cessair*.

The wide range of methodological approaches utilized by feminist ethnography and the dispersal of the knowledge acquired makes it particularly apt for an analysis of *Cessair*, while combining it with performed ethnography allows for greater nuance and a clearer accounting of the project and production. Feminist performed ethnography is thus understood as a project guided by a feminist sensibility that produces ‘knowledge about people and situations in specific contexts with attention to power differentials’ and communicates it to an audience through a staged performance that invites them to experience the world of the characters and their mindsets.¹⁵

The Methodology of the SoloSIRENs Collective

The SSC uses theatre to explore the participants’ lived experiences as a way of promoting positive social change within their community and providing an alternate vision for organized society in opposition to the patriarchy. The Collective operates within the field of applied theatre, aligning with what Judith Ackroyd describes as ‘a belief in the power of the theatre form to address

something beyond the form itself’.¹⁶ Further, its work corresponds with Helen Nicholson’s argument that applied theatre focuses ‘on its intentionality, specifically an aspiration to use drama to improve the lives of the individuals and create better societies’.¹⁷

SoloSIRENs member Melody Chadamoyo has explained how the SSC has enriched her life, describing the deep connection she feels with the other women in the group and the fact that they are a collective of equals, despite their differences in age, background, and/or experience, who work in an atmosphere of inclusion and mutual respect. She also noted the cathartic experience of attending the weekly workshops: ‘You’re going there to feed your soul and you come back really replenished.’¹⁸

Both *Falling* and *Cessair* were developed through collaborative devising workshops with the community-based artists who comprise the ensemble. As such, SSC productions are made by, with, and for the community of South Dublin. While the work produced by the Collective often uses outside material such as myths, stories, interviews, newspapers, or film as a springboard for exploration, as in the case of *Cessair*, it is the lived, embodied experience of the ensemble that informs the direction, enquiry, and ultimately, the performance.

Macdonald describes her devising process as follows:

I would use a lot of image theatre, a lot of body-based work. I often ask people to try to do things without speaking because I think the verbal, in our hierarchies, is very dominant . . . I love exercises where those hierarchies are inverted and things need to be expressed through the body, through movement, or through image . . . I think discussion comes much later, like when a group is really solid and maybe you’re working towards making something that you’re going to share with other people.¹⁹

Macdonald’s work with both the ensemble members and storysharers involved in the *Cessair* project incorporated all of these elements. The devising workshops began in July 2020 and ran until May 2021. Due to Covid regulations in Ireland, the workshops were



Figure 1. Shankill Beach workshop. Photographer: Hannah Levy, courtesy of the SoloSIRENs Collective.

held via Zoom, with the exception of one workshop that took place in December 2020 on the beach in Shankill (Figure 1). Initially, these workshops were limited to the women of South Dublin who make up the SSC ensemble, along with members of the production team and the director. However, from March 2021 onwards an additional sixteen workshops were held that included guest storysharers. For example, the SSC held a workshop with the Irish Hospice Foundation that focused on grief and loss, and another with Midie Corcoran, a storyteller who lives in Galway near one of the Cessair sites.²⁰

In April, the Zoom workshops were opened up further to female-identifying storysharers from across the globe to take part in the project. This idea to collect stories and involve participants from outside of the SSC ensemble in order to honour the one hundred women lost at sea was initially proposed by Macdonald and Martha Knight, the sound designer for the project, and was done with the support of the ensemble members. The entire process included eight months of workshoping with just the ensemble members, three months of workshoping with the

ensemble and the online storysharers, and three weeks of in-person rehearsals with the ensemble.

With the myth of Cessair being used as the springboard for an exploration of female experience, the ensemble was encouraged to consider ideas around women and leadership, migration, and grief, among others. To do this, Macdonald drew on a range of approaches from applied theatre practices, including storytelling, embodied image theatre, found visual works (including both pictures and original artworks created by the ensemble), reflection, writing, music and song, and improvisation, and led the ensemble through specific exercises.²¹

For example, after sharing the myth with the rest of the ensemble early in the process, she asked them to draw a picture of how they imagined Cessair to look, making sure not to worry about being realistic and allowing for figurative representation. Using these drawings, they were then asked if they knew a woman like Cessair and were given an opportunity to share a story about that woman. It was during this exercise that SSC member Neltah Chadamoyo introduced the African

goddess Nehanda, who was included in the final production. At other times, the ensemble was encouraged to improvise as characters in the story through extemporized gesture sequences and 'hot-seating', with each member having the opportunity to embody Cessair.²² Prior to this, they were given the prompt: 'If you could meet Cessair, what would you ask her?' Their responses and questions were then used in the exercise.

Despite having to work on Zoom, Macdonald leaned into gesture, movement, and embodied image work by incorporating exercises such as 'a movement exercise like flocking and the focus is on everybody moving as one'.²³ Other activities in this vein included simultaneous breathing exercises, prompts to put their hands on their body where they felt the story, and small group work in breakout rooms to create rituals to honour Cessair. Further, during the one in-person workshop, the choreographer Deirdre Murphy led an exercise in which the ensemble was asked to imagine they were on a ship over the course of a twenty-four-hour period. They were tasked with finding the movements they might go through while turning their bodies 360 degrees. Throughout the process, these gestures, images, and movements were noted for incorporation into the final production.

Opportunities for reflection and dialogue, both open and prompted, were layered into each workshop and over the course of the entire process. Space was also created for members to contribute individual writings or songs created outside of workshops to the creative process. Similarly, at a reflection session in October 2021, the group shared that different aspects of the workshops had been led by various members, and that anyone who had an idea or wanted to lead a movement or vocal activity was welcomed and encouraged to do so.²⁴ This democratic ethos allowed the workshops to become living laboratories for enquiry, which led to discoveries as well as the excavation of the knowledge that each member carried inside their embodied, lived experience.

The open workshops also incorporated elements of gesture and image theatre, especially for check-ins and warm-ups at the start

of each session, but they primarily focused on storytelling, dialogue, and reflection with the guest storysharers. In these workshops, the Collective experimented with different methods of recording and collecting stories while also continuing the exploration of the Cessair myth. Macdonald and her team alternated between giving the storysharers specific prompts and leaving the door open for them to share whatever they might want to disclose. They also experimented with asking storysharers to record their responses before attending the workshop, so that everyone could listen to it together for the first time, and giving the storysharers the opportunity to witness their stories being heard by others. Over the course of the workshops, Macdonald and her team observed that some people found it difficult to tell their story to the whole group, so breakout rooms were employed to allow them to share it with one or two SSC members at a time.

Reflecting on these workshops, Macdonald explained:

The more people you invite in, it changes, doesn't it? The more people are working on something, it keeps developing and it keeps changing, and that definitely happened a lot. It was a big moment when the workshops opened because, I think also because of Covid, it was really intense . . . the connection between all of us . . . It was a January night in Ireland and the wind was whipping outside and then we were all on the computer talking about mythology and the goddess – and then suddenly it was spring and the whole world was coming on.²⁵

She recalled that the SSC were struggling with the part of the story where Cessair dies of a broken heart. It was in the open workshops that a solution emerged organically when a storysharer suggested that Cessair's heart might have expanded so much that she died of an exploded rather than a broken heart. This offering was complemented by another storysharer's suggestion that people leave a piece of their heart everywhere they go, meaning that their heart is never fully complete.

Paraphrasing these storysharers, Macdonald explained that, 'On the one hand you're always heartbroken, but on the other hand you're always heart-heavy, like your heart is

really big.²⁶ Both contributions resonated with what the SSC had been hearing from women across Ireland about the sites near them that were associated with *Cessair*, and all of these ideas were incorporated into the story that was eventually told in the SSC's production.

Even in the lead-up to the performances, the entire group would sit down to discuss content, placement, and transitions from one piece to the next, with each member's concerns being listened to and taken seriously. There remained an openness among the Collective to try out ideas physically in order to consider their efficacy. This approach calls to mind Dwight Conquergood's concept of 'performance-sensitive ways of knowing' in which 'performance-centred research takes as both its subject matter and method the experiencing body situated in time, place, and history'.²⁷ Norman K. Denzin links this concept to performance ethnography, explaining: 'Performance approaches to knowing insist on immediacy and involvement. They consist of partial, plural, incomplete, and contingent understandings.'²⁸ The SSC members reiterated the importance of exploration in the process, trusting the process, and learning through the process, and they attested to the knowledge construction taking place that was both individual and collective. As one member stated: 'The explorative process was huge, it was so broad . . . it was that you learned so much about other people and yourself.'²⁹

When discussing the devising process in relation to performance ethnography, Madison argues:

Devisers are not only making an embodied performance, they are intellectually and theoretically asking questions, analyzing material, assessing information, articulating assumptions. Devised performance is a collaborative method of embodied research through the transformation of field data into staged enactments. Devising is an epistemological journey where the mind and body conjoin.³⁰

This description aligns with the Collective's devising process as the members interpreted and reinterpreted the myth of *Cessair*, and shared stories with each other and the guests

invited to the open workshops. Each story and each response became a new data point for investigation and impacted on the final production. Martha Knight acknowledged this when reflecting on the importance of listening to the process:

I think I've really changed my own relationship with listening because of this process. I've kind of stepped into listening as a powerful thing to do and accepted in myself that listening, both because I'm such a sound and music person *and* because watching those workshops where the Collective were listening to stories in the breakout rooms was so beautiful and affecting, and that was what made so much of the piece. I think as an artist, I felt pressure to respond, respond, respond. Sometimes all you can do is listen. Even the amount of times that we listened to the myth and the amount of the things that would come from each listening of the myth. If we had listened once and responded, the piece wouldn't have been as thorough, deep, and rich as it was.³¹

Knight describes here a reciprocal listening with the whole body that is 'not simply the sense of hearing, but it is listening as a dynamic and complex layering of a multi-sensory engagement'.³²

The Production

Cessair opened on 30 June and ran for four days, with four performances on each day. It was composed of two distinct movements. The first movement took place outdoors in Tallaght's Chamber Square in front of the Civic Theatre and opposite the Rua Red South Dublin Arts Centre; the second movement relocated the audience inside the Civic Theatre (Figure 2). To adhere to Covid restrictions, only six 'official' tickets were sold for each of the performances, and this audience was seated in chairs placed two metres apart in front of the theatre doors. However, the outdoor section garnered many additional audience members in the form of passers-by who chose to sit on nearby steps or lean against the buildings in the square to take in the performance. This added approximately twenty additional audience members to each performance of the first movement.

For the production, the SSC made two major alterations to the myth as it is typically



Figure 2. Opening ritual. Photographer: Hannah Levy, courtesy of the SoloSIRENs Collective.

told. The first crucial change was to the ending. Traditionally, the story concludes with Cessair having taken one of the men, Fintan, as her lover and, when he turns himself into a salmon, she dies of a broken heart. As discussed above, the group struggled with this ending: 'We don't buy that this woman who lost a hundred of her friends, who built three ships, who survived a journey of three months . . . a broken heart? That wasn't the undoing of her, we just don't buy it.'³³ Incorporating the discoveries made through the open workshops, the SSC's production concluded with Cessair's heart becoming so large that it burst and the pieces scattered all across Ireland.

The other crucial change in this telling of the Cessair myth was the inclusion of the African goddess Nehanda. In the production, she appears at the moment of greatest despair on the journey after two ships are lost, the rain continues, and there is no land in sight. Nehanda, played by Neltah Chadamoyo, appears to Cessair as a sister spirit, encouraging her onward and providing hope that the end of the journey is near. The inclusion of Nehanda was the result of a contribution from

Neltah (originally from Zimbabwe), who sensed parallels between the two and wrote a similar scene during the devising process. The scene was embraced by the group and incorporated into the story. This is another example of the Collective's collaborative devising process. Three musical compositions written by Pauline Dalton, Farah Elle, and Martha Knight were similarly incorporated into the final performance.

In the first movement, which lasted approximately twenty minutes, the myth of Cessair is relayed to the audience by seven women through collaborative and responsive movement, spoken narrative, underscored music, and song. Four performers – Neltah Chadamoyo, Pauline Dalton, Aoife Dempsey, and Sailí Áine Ní Mhurchú – were positioned on the designated stage area. The three other performers – Melody Chadamoyo and Nicola Whelan, who functioned primarily as narrators, and Farah Elle, who provided the soundtrack – were placed just off to the left under a tent. All of the women contributed equally to the story, with each being highlighted at certain points without any overpowering

the others. Instead, they were responding actively to one another like well-trained jazz musicians who know the music by heart and riff off one another, making each performance a little different while maintaining the substance and character of the story being told.

The first movement began with a sea shanty prologue composed by Dalton. The song floated through the air as the performers entered the space from three different directions, singing while moving into their positions. Neltah Chadamoyo, Dalton, Dempsey, and Ní Mhurchú moved towards the stage and worked together to finish constructing their 'ship', which involved connecting four large barrels with masts on top of them with coarse rope, as designed by Pai Rathaya. Once the ship was ready, they moved into their places on the stage. After a brief pause, Ní Mhurchú came forward and proclaimed: 'We would like to dedicate this performance and installation to all the women who have gone before us, to all the women who are with us, and to all the

women who will come after us.'³⁴ She moved back, and there was a beat of silence, with the exception of the cool and playful breeze fluttering through their ship's sails.³⁵

Melody Chadamoyo and Whelan began to tell the tale of Cessair as the four women on stage launched into a movement sequence (Figure 3). The narration was interspersed with lines from the on-stage performers and supported by simple, but powerful, musical improvisations from Elle. At various points each of the seven performers became the embodiment of Cessair, as her spirit seemed to move between and amongst them, which was highlighted to the audience by Elle repeating the refrain 'I am Cessair and I . . .' at each turn in the story. Deirdre Murphy's choreography was informed by the movement improvisation workshop in December 2020 and centred on synchronous movement that became individualized and frenetic at moments of trial and tribulation for Cessair. As the performers are not trained dancers, the movement reflected the range of age, life



Figure 3. First movement. Photographer: Hannah Levy, courtesy of the SoloSIRENs Collective.

experience, mobility, and ability, and translated differently into each woman's body.

The first movement concluded with Nehanda drifting away from Cessair, repeating the line, 'You are closer to land than you think. You can start again. You will start again.' As she departed, the performers began to make their way inside the Civic Theatre while singing '100 Nights' by Knight. The six ticketed audience members were then invited to follow them inside to visit 'the land we found'.³⁶ The second movement also lasted approximately twenty minutes. The Civic Theatre was transformed into a large black box space for the performance, and audience members were asked to form a large circle with the performers on entry. Although this formation was required to accommodate Covid-19 measures, it also made space within the circle for the one hundred sisters who were lost at sea during the journey, as was noted after the performances.

Ten stations were positioned around the perimeter of the space comprising a chair placed in front of a large speaker and below a banner containing a key phrase from the myth recounted during the first movement (Figure 4). The phrases were: 'I am thwarted and rejected'; 'I respond with my own idea'; 'I gather my tribe to begin work'; 'I step into my power and take the lead'; 'I experience the euphoria of embarking'; 'I experience the challenge of enduring'; 'I experience the loss that comes with living'; 'I near the end of hope'; 'I see a new light. A new beginning'; and 'I start again'. Macdonald developed these phrases early in the development process and incorporated them into the workshops with the rest of the group. She explained that 'the Collective really connected with the phrases, so they stuck around'.³⁷ At each station, ten stories that had been gathered from the storysharers during the open workshops were played on a loop through the speaker. Audience members



Figure 4. Second movement. Photographer: Hannah Levy, courtesy of the SoloSIRENs Collective.

were invited to explore the stations at their own pace.

Once the audience began moving to and between stations, the space quickly filled with the various timbres and rhythms of female voices of different ages and backgrounds, all of which were backed by sounds of the sea. Although the cumulative hum of the women's voices could be heard throughout the room, the levels were adjusted to ensure that the person seated in front of the speaker could hear the story being shared at that specific station clearly. A looped video of the Killiney Beach workshop was projected onto the back wall. The performers remained physically present throughout and interacted with each other silently, including engaging in a series of gestures, performing rituals, and, at times, sleeping (Figure 5). They were positioned in the centre of the open space, which was lit with warm reds and oranges to create the sense of a campfire and reinforce their duty to take care of each other and the stories with which they were entrusted.

The stories included ranged from mundane, everyday memories of a loved one to moments of extreme emotional hardship or absolute joy and pride.³⁸ The majority of the stories referred to other women – mothers, grandmothers, aunts, daughters, friends – thus echoing the female relationships that were so vital to Cessair's journey and her survival. For example, one story told of a young woman and her brother who, in the absence of a living grandmother, asked their great-aunt to act as one. The narrator recalled how generously and lovingly her great-aunt stepped into the role, explaining that 'there was no hesitation at all to take us under her wing'. Other narrators chose to honour an important female figure in their lives by sharing her story, which encouraged audience members to think of the important women in their lives. As Macdonald explained: 'You hear yourself and everyone you know in the stories . . . I hope people feel really inspired by their personal and collective power.'³⁹



Figure 5. Second movement. Photographer: Hannah Levy, courtesy of the SoloSIRENs Collective.

Knight's soundscape encouraged the audience members to engage actively with the performance since they were given agency to move from station to station and to decide how long to spend at each. Further, the volume of the speakers and the decision to place them behind the chairs allowed for a very intimate listening experience, especially for those who decided to close their eyes. Audience members who kept their eyes open were able to take in the performers, the video, and the other audience members, and thus there was an opportunity to create a deep connection between the words they were hearing and the bodies in the space.

As the performance drew to a close and the stories concluded, the voices gradually dropped out of the soundscape leaving only the sound of crashing waves, which grew to a crescendo before cutting out entirely. The performers then informed the audience that they could access these and other audio recordings on the SSC website before inviting them to contribute to the project by sharing their own stories.

***Cessair* as Feminist Performed Ethnography**

The advertising poster for *Cessair* depicts a woman in a bright red shirt standing on the beach with her back to the camera, facing the ocean (Figure 6). Her left hand is raised above her head as if she is calling out across the sea, and written underneath the production's title are the words 'It's one woman's story and every woman's story'. It is this emphasis on female perspectives and lived experience, alongside the process of conducting research through performance that is then adapted into a lived staged event, that makes *Cessair* an example of feminist performed ethnography.

While the SSC began the project with the aim of better understanding the female experience, and of promoting an interest in stories by and about women in general, this became more complicated and multifaceted as other identifiers such as age, class, and race were incorporated. Issues around power – power held, power received, power perceived, power shared, and power given – were investigated in the sharing and consideration of

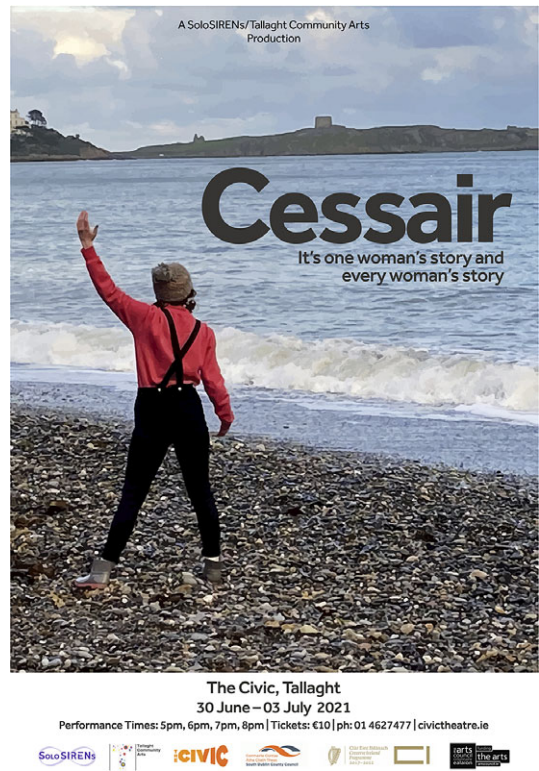


Figure 6. Advertising poster of *Cessair*. Photographer: Hannah Levy, courtesy of the SoloSIRENs Collective.

stories. During the group reflection, Jennifer Webster commented:

At the beginning of *Cessair*, when the story started coming in, I didn't feel very confident and I had a bit of a panic in that I didn't think I had this great female story that many of you had . . . I didn't feel confident, maybe, in my past female stories . . . I really didn't know where to go with it and through the process it shocked me no end . . . I shared a story about my daughter when I didn't intend to do that . . . my friend gave a story about me which I never expected. There were gifts and gains and giving and taking all around me for weeks. Whether I was listening to someone tell a story about someone, or someone else giving the gift of telling a story about someone else. I felt like I was being given a gift.⁴⁰

Webster's reflection highlights the emphasis placed on the lived, female experience and the considerations of sameness and difference that underpinned the project, while also describing the mutual self-disclosure that

Jennifer Coates argues is very common among women when sharing stories.⁴¹ Similarly, the use of collaborative, improvised performance in the first movement of *Cessair* mirrored how women engage in dialogue, where, as Coates argues,

the construction of talk is a joint effort: all participants share in the construction of talk in the strong sense that they don't function as individual speakers. In other words, the group takes priority over the individual and the women's voices combine (or meld) to construct a shared text.⁴²

This quality was not only evident in the final production, but also in the Collective's collaborative working style in rehearsals and during the final reflection on the project.

By deciding to share the results of the ethnographic research through a performance that was crafted and devised for an audience, the SSC contributed new knowledge and a new experience to the local Tallaght community. Echoing Madison's observation that performed ethnography invites the audience into the performance to travel empathically to other worlds, Macdonald stated: 'As Solo-SIRENs, we have worked together to help each of us bring more of who we are to the world. We hope the same can be true for our audiences. We want you to be part of the process.'⁴³ The active involvement of the audience was crucial for *Cessair*. It was an event that required the audience members to relocate themselves alongside the performers in different ways. In the first movement, the Collective transported audience members into a mythological world that was fused with the present day through song and narration. The ticketed audience was then invited to travel literally with the ensemble 'to the land we found' and enter the theatre space. As an immersive event, the second movement encouraged audience members to move around the space independently, explore the various stories, and make decisions about where they wanted to be in that moment. During the reflection, ensemble members spoke about the feeling of the audience as participants by also noting the number of storysharers who attended performances

and who were excited to hear their story or one of the stories shared with them during the workshops.⁴⁴

While the final production was comprised of a multitude of narratives, it was a story that became part of and belonged to every member of the ensemble. As Whelan recalled: 'I didn't memorize the piece by lines because I just knew it . . . and that was new because I wasn't acting as a character . . . I was acting as myself, a woman who was telling this story that we all have . . . and how that connects us.'⁴⁵ Other members agreed with Whelan, stating that 'it is the self but it is a heightened self, a poetic self . . . enlightened as well, it's an enlightened self . . . the self who can see the self.'⁴⁶

During the reflection, the group was asked about what they gave to the process that was particularly insightful. Each person responded by saying that they got much more out of the process, using such words as 'healing', 'care', 'leadership', 'listening', and so on.⁴⁷ This was followed by the group sharing what individual members brought to the process that they were grateful for, at which point one member said, 'I can give back this gift that I've been given.'⁴⁸ This sentiment was affirmed by all of the members present. The knowledge, wisdom, and insights that were discovered (collectively and individually) and shared throughout the process took on a reciprocal quality within the group.

When asked what she would take away from the experience, Melody Chadamoyo explained:

I think what I'm taking away with me is the love. You know me and love – always walking together. From the time we got together, even in *Falling*, there's this extra layer of care that we have for ourselves and for each other. We allow people to be themselves. To be themselves the way they want to be themselves, without asking or dictating that this is how we're going to accept you. 'You need to fit into this, into us, this way.' Which is what society does; even families do that to each other. But that's not what was happening and that's not what happened . . . You mentioned that maybe it was because of the [Covid-19] occasion, but when we were doing *Falling* things were still normal, as normal as can be, and we still had this care. This taking care of each other. This allowance to be yourself that we don't particularly get in other parts of our

lives. It was, and always is, one of the things that I really value about this group. That you are allowed to be.⁴⁹

Chadamoyo's words encapsulated a spontaneous moment that I participated in prior to the opening performance. Forty-five minutes before the show began, I heard Shania Twain's 'Man! I Feel Like a Woman' coming from inside the Civic Theatre. When I crossed the threshold into that space, I was greeted by a whole new energy that was warm, vibrant, accepting, and joyful. I saw members of the Collective – performers, production team members, designers, and producers – dancing and being silly. More and more members of the Collective entered the space over the course of the song, with everyone present and dancing and laughing by the end. It was a joyful, organic way to gather the members together for the pre-show warm-up. It is not clear if this was planned or spontaneous, but it was not out of the ordinary for how this group communicates and works together. The SSC created and maintained an environment of care for all involved, which has been described by one member as 'circles of care everywhere . . . intertwining'.⁵⁰

The SoloSIRENs Collective's production of *Cessair* stands as testimony to the lived experience of women from around the world. Diane Bell argues:

Ethnography at its best opens a discursive space in which the silenced may speak. It empowers and validates everyday experience. It brings to the threshold of consciousness the routines, rhythms, and rituals of everyday life, allows us to savour the ordinary, map the mundane, identify salient symbols, and to seek the strategies of persistence and resistance.⁵¹

Each performance of *Cessair* provided this discursive space that placed the epic and the mythic alongside the everyday experiences of one hundred women from around the world. It also created an experience that was unique for each audience member. *Cessair* welcomed audiences of all genders and challenged each to consider the female story as complicated and multidimensional. Resisting any single trope, the SoloSIRENs Collective's

production advanced female agency and, with care, defiantly affirmed the significance of female stories and the female experience

Notes and References

1. The choice of the word 'obscured' is intentional and draws attention to the fact that a female-dominant myth is rarely told, while such male-dominating myths as Finn McCool are widely spread and popularized.
2. Jenny Macdonald and Jennifer Webster, email correspondence with the author, 24 September 2021.
3. Ibid.
4. Claire Keogh, 'Making Connections, Valuing Difference', presentation at the SoloSIRENs Symposium, Tallaght Community Arts, online, 20 October 2020. The symposium was held to reflect on the process and discoveries made during the SoloSIRENs Festival.
5. Ibid.
6. For example, between *Falling* and *Cessair* some women left the group momentarily, while others joined.
7. Jenny Macdonald, in Ann Blake and Emma Langford, 'Jenny Macdonald: Building Your Own Boat', *Lady Limerick Podcast*, 14 July 2021, <https://open.spotify.com/episode/1n7ZZVmQuMAb3S4ZI1BEDf?si=OJO8RIEWTt2LdYF5UOTigw&utm_source=whatsapp&d_l_br anch=1&nd=1>.
8. D. Soyini Madison, *Performed Ethnography and Communication: Improvisation and Embodied Experience* (New York: Routledge, 2018), p. xvii (original emphasis).
9. Ibid., p. xxiv
10. See Dána-Ain Davis and Christa Craven, *Feminist Ethnography: Thinking through Methodologies, Challenges, and Possibilities* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), p. 75–96.
11. Ibid., p. 11.
12. *Feminist Activist Ethnography: Counterpoints to Neoliberalism in North America*, ed. Christa Craven and Dána-Ain Davis (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2013), p. 1.
13. Davis and Craven, *Feminist Ethnography*, p. 11.
14. Talisa Feliciano, quoted in *ibid.*
15. Ibid., p. 9.
16. Judith Ackroyd, 'Applied Theatre: Problems and Possibilities', *Applied Theatre Researcher*, I (2000), p. 1.
17. Helen Nicholson, *Applied Drama: The Gift of Theatre* (New York: Methuen, 2014), p. 4.
18. Melody Chadamoyo and Courtney Helen Grile, 'Creating Together: Before, During, and After the Covid-19 pandemic', *The Public Sphere* (podcast), 9 December 2021, <<https://soundcloud.com/tlrhub/tlrh-the-public-sphere-creating-together-before-during-and-after-the-covid-19-pandemic>>.
19. Jenny Macdonald, interview with the author, 26 February 2021.
20. According to Macdonald, at this time the Irish Hospice Foundation was inviting artists from all disciplines/fields to join in workshops about grief and loss.
21. Jenny Macdonald, interview with the author, 30 June 2022.
22. 'Hot-seating' is a common improvisation game in which a participant takes on a character, and then, in role, fields questions from the rest of the participants (who can be themselves, or also in role).
23. Jenny Macdonald, interview with the author, 30 June 2022. 'Flocking' is an exercise in which

participants stand in a group and follow each other in a series of improvised controlled movements. The goal is for the group to look as if they are moving as one.

24. SoloSIRENs Collective, audio recording of the group reflection, 29 October 2021.

25. Jenny Macdonald, interview with the author, 30 June 2022.

26. Ibid.

27. Dwight Conquergood, 'Rethinking Ethnography: Towards a Critical Cultural Politics', in *Cultural Struggles: Performance, Ethnography, Praxis*, ed. E. Patrick Johnson (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013), p. 81–103 (p. 92).

28. Norman K. Denzin, *Performance Ethnography: Critical Pedagogy and the Politics of Culture* (London: Sage, 2003), p. 8.

29. SoloSIRENs Collective, audio recording of the group reflection, 29 October 2021.

30. Madison, *Performed Ethnography*, p. 45.

31. SoloSIRENs Collective, audio recording of the group reflection, 29 October 2021.

32. Madison, *Performed Ethnography*, p. 33.

33. Jenny Macdonald, in Blake and Langford, 'Jenny Macdonald'.

34. SoloSIRENs Collective, *Cessair* Storyboard 2, 27 June 2021.

35. During the 5 p.m. performance on 2 July it felt like a storm was coming, adding to the impending flood narrative.

36. SoloSIRENs Collective, *Cessair* Storyboard 2.

37. Jenny Macdonald, email correspondence with the author, 24 September 2021.

38. All of the stories used can be accessed on the SoloSIRENs webpage on the following link: <<https://solosirens.info/cessair>>.

39. 'Exploring the Female Voice – *Cessair* at The Civic showcases diversity', *Echo.ie*, 16 July 2021, <<https://www.echo.ie/exploring-the-female-voice-cessair-at-the-civic-showcases-diversity/>>.

40. SoloSIRENs Collective, audio recording of the group reflection, 29 October 2021.

41. Jennifer Coates, *Women Talk: Conversation between Women Friends* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), p. 52, 61.

42. Ibid., p. 117.

43. 'Director's Note', *SoloSIRENs*, <<https://solosirens.info/directors-note-1>>, accessed 5 May 2022.

44. SoloSIRENs Collective, audio recording of the group reflection, 29 October 2021.

45. Ibid.

46. Ibid. (This quotation is constructed from crosstalk by multiple members of the Collective.)

47. Ibid.

48. Ibid.

49. Ibid.

50. Ibid.

51. Diane Bell, *Daughters of the Dreaming* (1983; Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), p. 297–8.