



SALLY ROONEYS

INTERMEZZO  
A BALLET ADAPTATION

BY MEGAN GERMAN AND MARIA CARVAJAL

# INTRODUCTION TO THE PROJECT

Adapting *Intermezzo* (2024) by Sally Rooney into a ballet production required us to study the author's work as translators. The language of dance forms as an alternative approach to rewriting in ways that none of her novels have been developed into before. Despite the popularity of *Normal People* (2018) and its numerous translations, a prevalent art form such as contemporary ballet offers an innovative structure to reinvent Rooney's prose, relying solely on physical movement.

The Literature and Publishing since 1820 module introduced us to the political concept of 'soft power', used to promote a country's culture internationally, to leave a positive impression that would encourage diplomacy with other nations. In an era where media and marketing industries play an essential role in literary publishing, the idea of creating a project where these two concepts merged seemed interesting, considering the best-seller status of Sally Rooney's novels, and the online popularity that Ireland as a country has gained in recent years. This latter trend might be connected to the social response towards the official withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the European Union in 2020, which forced Ireland to adjust its place in Europe after losing its primary economic ally.

With this idea in mind, we gathered a collection of old Royal Opera House programmes to study and replicate the format for this production. The programme for *Intermezzo* is an amalgamation of late 1990s programmes from the company, as well as the programme from the 2024 ballet adaptation of *MADRIDADAM* (2013) by Margaret Atwood. For this reason, the formatting of this project focuses on using the mission statements of the Royal Opera House to promote diplomacy between the United Kingdom and Ireland, mimicking the opening page on the 1997/98 season production of the opera *Elisabetta*. Throughout the research project, we became aware that the founder of The Royal Ballet, Ninette de Valois, was a prominent Irish ballerina born in County Wicklow. We decided to dedicate the production to her, to stress the influence of Ireland in the heritage of the Royal Opera House. Other elements of the project that were created with the concept of soft power in mind include the addition of Culture Ireland and the philanthropic network The Ireland Funds as patrons of the ballet production. In addition, the ballet became a co-production between The Royal Ballet and Ballet Ireland, bringing Irish performers into the stage of The Royal Opera House.

The 'Why an Adaptation' section begins with a fictional quote by Max Richter that initiated our interpretation of these real-life people's potential engagements on this conceptual project. Our primary aim

was to focus on the outreach to young audiences, as this mirrors a constant initiative ought out by Royal Ballet and Opera. This contemporary lens offers a new way to express reimaginings for young audiences in hopes of promoting future patronage. We believe that contemporary ballet is what will draw in these audiences, because of its experimental and untidy nature. Following Professor Andrew King's recommendation to draw from Max Richter and Wayne McGregor, our research for the entire production took a clear direction. Our initial character concepts involved each character taking on their own unique style of dance. However, this posed the risk of cultural appropriation and oversimplification. This was resolved by researching the history of dance, as well as an adoration for old Hollywood musicals through their elegance and theatricality.

Considering the readership of Rooney is primarily structured by millennials and gen Z, most advertisements we created are meant to be targeted to these audiences, although we kept past advertisers on the programmes such as the brand Rolex, due to their recurrent sponsorship of the ballet seasons. Similarly, Young RBO is a marketing tactic that many university students join, this is important to highlight in a project trying to influence younger generations into becoming patrons of the arts. Furthermore, our selection to have a Duolingo advertisement promoting learning Irish empowers those to return to the lost language, reclaiming the national identity Rooney represents.

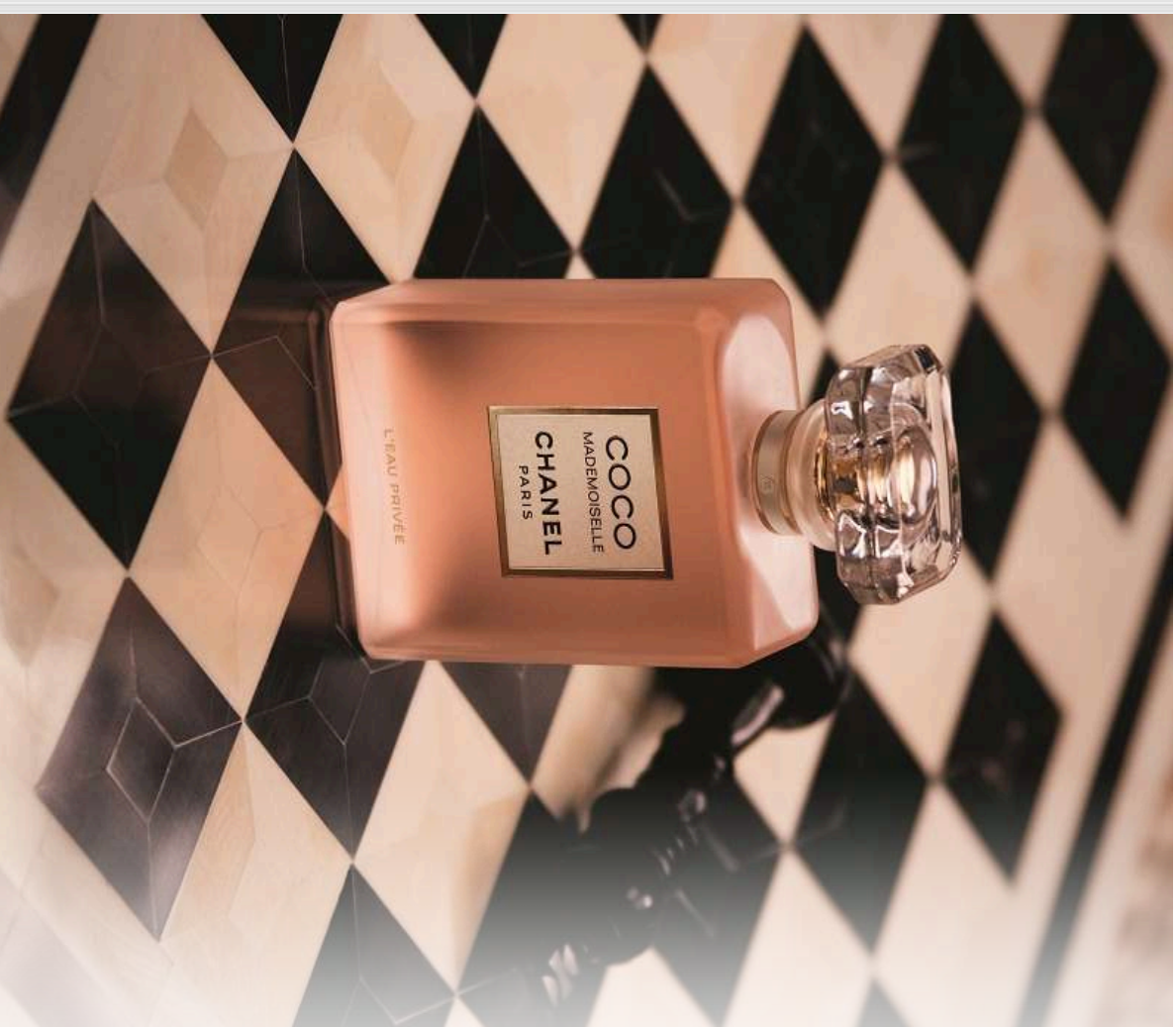
All of the information of the creative team is taken from the crew's real biographies. They are not copied word for word, rather we focused on selecting just the most relevant details. This was a unique exercise in rewording facts that have already been written to be brief and blunt. The interview between Rooney and McGregor was one of the main writing pieces focused on for this project. We listened to and read multiple articles and interviews on Rooney and McGregor individually, using these sources, we built a structure based on real interview flow, combining authentic quotes with imagined responses relevant to this fictional ballet. The result equates to proper tonalities and little quirks of the artists. This is exemplified in Rooney's longer sentence structures, and inclination to personal anecdotes. Further helping both perspectives to be understood, as well as opened room for further interpretations across this adaptation. Similarly, Max Richter's statement was adapted from his interview in the 2024/25 programme of *MADRIDADAM*, integrating direct quotes into our vision for the orchestration of the ballet, digitally editing the scanned sheet music on this section, due to our limited knowledge on composition.

The images that are not credited in the Bibliography section are made with the help of Canva AI Magic-Media imaging, as well as basic photoshop knowledge. The process involved having to learn what to write in the prompt boxes to produce the images, followed by much trial and error.

# THE PROGRAMME



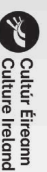




*Chief Executive* Alex Beard

At The Royal Opera House we are working to honour our history as we keep on building our heritage. The aim of our two companies – The Royal Ballet and The Royal Opera – is to offer the public a space where innovation and tradition converge. Our commitment is to support our artists, staff and those who have enriched the nation's artistic and cultural life throughout history.

## The Royal Ballet *in a collaboration with* Ballet Ireland



The activities of The Royal Ballet and The Royal Opera are substantially supported by grants from the Arts Council of England  
Ballet Ireland is generously supported by Culture Ireland





## INTRODUCTION

### *Ireland at The Royal Opera House*

In 1905, young Edris Stannus moved to England from County Wicklow, Ireland. At thirteen years old she started her professional dance training at the Lila Field Academy for Children, debuting a year later at the Lyceum Theatre under the name Ninette de Valois. In 1926, Ninette founded her own school of ballet, and five years later her own ballet Company, which would undergo several transformations until becoming the resident ballet company at The Royal Opera House, now known by the public as The Royal Ballet. Today, Dame Ninette de Valois legacy remains alive, remembered as one of the many Irish artists whose work and vision transformed England's cultural heritage and changed the trajectory of The Royal Opera House.

In 2024, Culture Ireland and The Irish Baroque Orchestra partnered with The Royal Opera House for a production of Vivaldi's extraordinary opera *L'Olimpiade*. After its success, we have proudly collaborated with Culture Ireland once more in the 2025/26 season, bringing Ballet Ireland and The Royal Ballet together on stage in the first ever adaptation of Sally Rooney's *Intermezzo*.

Under the direction of Wayne McGregor, Rooney's sensual prose is reinvented in this contemporary production that draws from the legacy of Valois ballet *Checkmate* (1937), in which the melancholic landscapes of modern Ireland are brought into life while we experience the complexities of grief, loss, lust and love through the Koubek brothers.



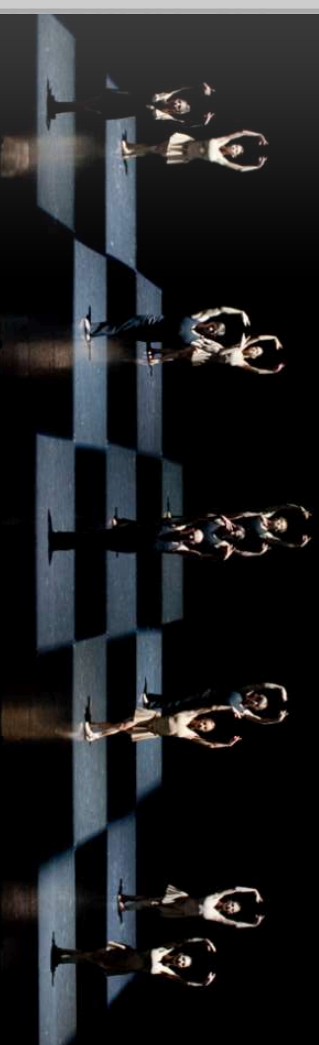
ROYAL  
OPERA  
HOUSE

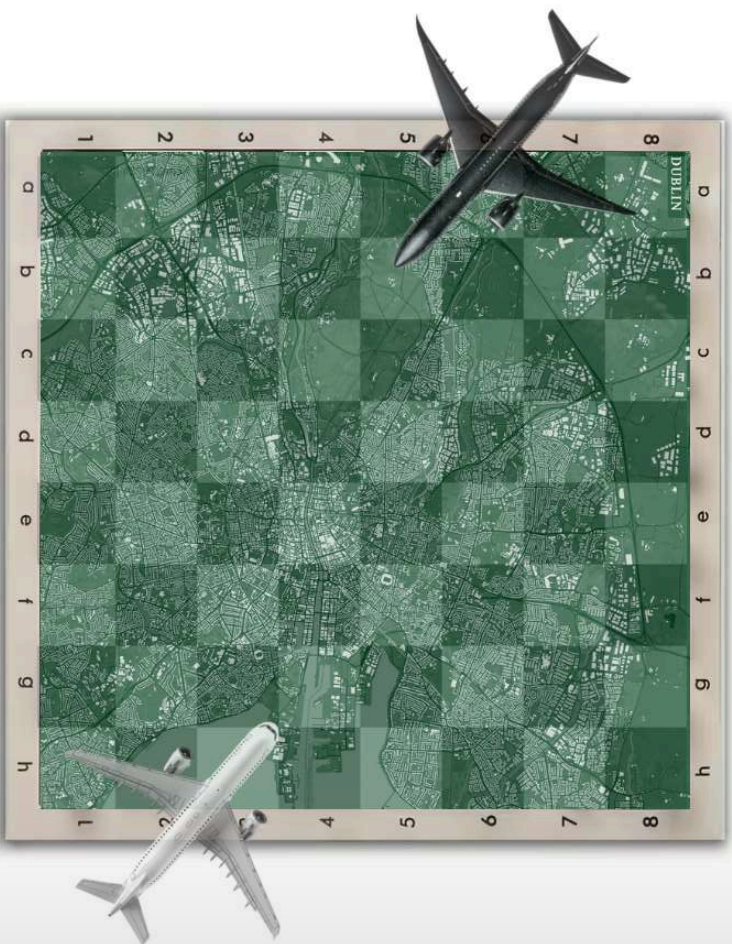
SALLY ROONEY'S

# INTERMEZZO

WAYNE MCGREGOR

SEP – OCT 2025





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# WHY AN ADAPTATION?

*When the opportunity for Intermzzo to be adapted into a ballet arose, it made both so much sense and none at all.*

~Max Richter, on composing Intermzzo



*Intermzzo* is a story about communication. It follows conversations which are mistranslated by those who speak the same language we have always known, due to our own predispositions. With the momentous popularity of *Conversations with Friends* (2017) and *Normal People* (2018), as well as their television adaptations, it was time to sit back and question what we, as readers, and consumers of art, take away from Rooney. The realisation was that something fresh was *needed* out of whatever adaptation of Rooney's was next to come.

A ballet adaptation opens opportunity to witness our everyday romantic relationships explored through intimate physicality on stage. Often in the works of Sally Rooney, the characters are lost in the ability to communicate with each other through words, often finding their best understandings of each other and themselves through bodily intimacy. When words fail, bodies become understood.

With the popularity of the best-selling author rising among Generation Z and Millennials increasing with each publication, this ballet adaptation serves as an imperative stance on how the younger generations can support the live arts going forward.

At the Royal Opera House we strive to curate an environment accessible for all, which is why we decided it's time to show how we support the voice of the younger generations. We want to show the rising generations' ability to consume, create, and critique art in a way that shows their predecessors just how capable they are of changing the world with a nuanced, well researched perspective.

There are aspects of Rooney in each of her characters, as much as there are in all of us. We may not be lawyers like Peter, professors like Sylvia, or chess prodigies like Ivan, but we are all humans with the desire to be loved and understood. What Rooney, and this production, grasp at is the concepts we use to cope with our everyday lives; questioning the reasons behind why we have yet to properly put into words what grief, something so universal yet isolating, feels like.

This production reaches out to new audiences through its daring nature. We aim to explore sexual expression through dance. Although this is not a new concept in ballet, what makes this production different is the ability to translate the mundane intimacies of everyday life to the stage. No two relationships are alike. Ivan's approach to dating is quite different to Peter's. No two romantic partners are alike. Naomi's interactions with Peter are disparate to Sylvia's. Even sibling relationships become a unique centre point that sets up the foils of brothers displaced in different generations.

Modern society being connected to those they are closest with comes at a cost in this day and age. Texting and social media conversation disconnect the vital human-to-human interactions that fulfil our needs. Something so simple as a hug, staring into someone's eyes, to hear a genuine laugh is often lost. However, it is artists like-minded to Rooney who remind us of these important actions that evolved the human condition.



# WHY CONTEMPORARY BALLETT?

There is quite a significant contrast between classical ballet and contemporary ballet. While there has yet to be a definitive definition of contemporary ballet, it is relatively agreed upon within the dance community that it is an amalgamation of classical ballet with contemporary dance. So what are these distinct differences?

Classical has a long history of being “black and white”. It leaves little room for personal interpretation, with movements executed precisely as they’ve been taught for generations, typically aligned with music that drives a clear narrative. Classical ballerinas are cold and calculating in their technique, strengthening the muscles in the body that elongates the limbs. This style of dance requires very strict discipline in a person.

Contemporary dance, by contrast, is rooted in innovation and emotional expression. It invites dancers to explore diverse perspectives and often defies traditional structure. Movement can shift unexpectedly, making use of different levels and directions that subvert expectations. One hallmark of contemporary dance is the use of breath, understanding how to breathe through movement not only enhances stamina but also deepens emotional immersion.

Both of these styles are very important in a dancer’s training. As choreographer Michael Wise often says, the style of dance has to speak to the dancer. Dance is ultimately an expression of self, existing on a spectrum between rigid formality and uninhibited freedom. Contemporary ballet merges these opposites, blending classical discipline with fluidity of movement. Its unique power lies in its expressiveness, particularly in the upper body, creating a balance between structure and softness, between control and release.



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# PRODUCTION INSPIRATIONS

*It is impossible to acknowledge Internecio without nodding to those who have helped transcend the genre and influence the world of dance we know today.*



## MADDADDAM



*MADDADDAM* (dir. McGregor; comp. Richer): This adaptation of Atwood's dystopian world is lifted from the page in collaboration with The National Ballet of Canada. The behind the scenes production is most admired and homaged in this adaptation of *Internecio*. The meet ambition of McGregor to adapt a trilogy seemingly effortlessly sets the standard for the production's conceptualization.



## WOOLF WORKS

*Woolf Works* is another adaptation admired and researched for this production. The ability to translate the stream of consciousness and its desires, as well as complex relationships between the self and others, are supported through depictions of sensuality and mental health. *Woolf Works* vastly different styles across three acts portraying a different novel per act, becoming an inspiration as to why each character in *Internecio* performs with their own genre-specific flair.

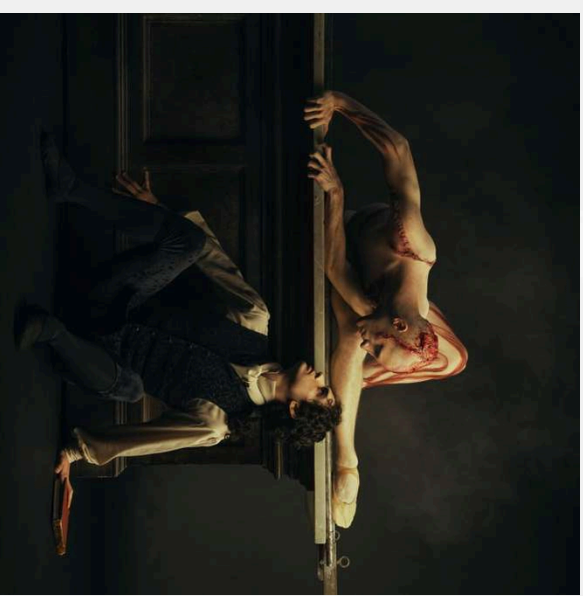


## A STREET CAR NAMED DESIRE



Blanche DuBois is one of the most famous main characters in stage history. This production is effervescent in ambiguous sensuality and becomes an abyss incapable of separating illusion from reality. As relationships are pressurized by the surrounding opinions of others, *Streetcar* deals with themes of death, love, and violence and reaches into similar territory of *Intermezzo*. For the means of this production, the depiction of intercourse defies the boundaries of how ballet has been depicted thus far.

## FRANKENSTEIN



The relationship between Frankenstein and the Creature is one that is very interesting to compare to Peter and Ivan. There is heavy tension in this scientific fiction of a dance, overthinking to the point of imaginability, fear of not living up to standards, and a desire to be loved are all aspects that seemingly different narratives share. The attempt to control an unreliable narrator's perspective also comes into play, as *Intermezzo* reminds audiences not to necessarily take everything we witness on stage as fact.



## WUTHERING HEIGHTS

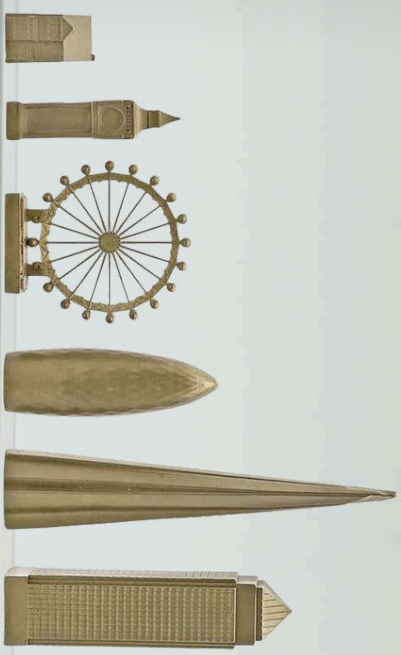


The desire that leaks from Northern Ballet's adaptation of *Wuthering Heights* is one that is so compelling in its portrayal of lust on stage, as well as its ability to translate this Victorian Gothic to modern audiences. While the text itself is a beloved classic, this visualization of tragedy and lost communication without words is quite powerful. This style works for *Internzzo* as the book nods to Realist George Eliot, and an adaptation of this ballet is an adaptation from another Realist novel published at the same time.

## PLAY THE CITY

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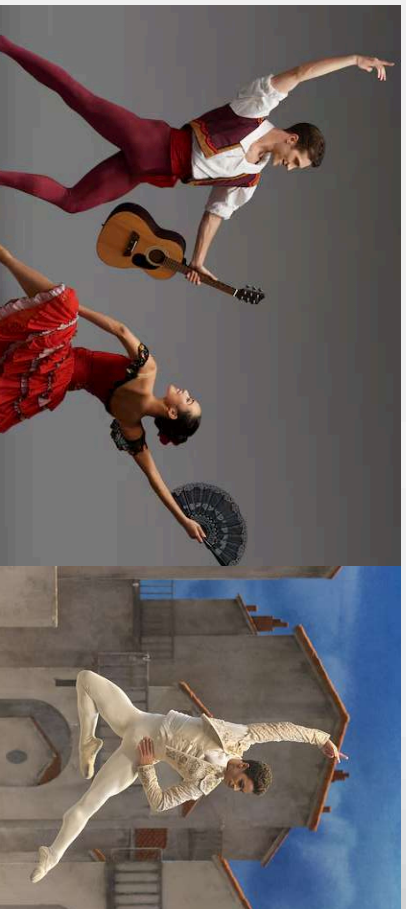
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# BALLET—FUSION INSPIRATION

*Contemporary Ballet is a broad umbrella term that allows for many genres of dance to fuse with Classical Ballet. The goal of adapting a Contemporary Novel into a ballet gives an opportunity for further boundaries and borders to be pushed and crossed. For this production we aimed to blend old and new, both in style and influence for each character. The dancer comparisons further define the unique personalities that we have seen throughout history.*

## PETER

Inspired by Basilio in *Don Quixote* (1869)



Basilio is a natural charmer and the stereotypical romantic lover. His flirtatious nature resembles Peter's bravado. Both seem to be deeply in love with a woman they have planned to marry, but that does not stop them from flirting around town. While charming on the page (or the stage), they both are flawed characters with often unpredictable actions when they do not get their way. This dancer must be rigorously technical with ankles the strength as their pointe counterparts. This reflects Peter's strict lawyer background as well as failure to understand and contrast his brother.

## IVAN

Inspired by The Creature in *Frankenstein* (2016)



The Creature is one of the most tragic characters in literature, and it is easy to compare to Ivan as both think themselves unworthy at times. Peter's reference to "Ivan the Terrible" within the first few pages of the novel, exemplifies this level of disgust for oneself within the novel. The Creatures dance is a blend of contemporary and classical ballet, staying technically perfect, with an addition of frequent stumbles as both characters are portrayed learning to navigate in the realities they are forced into.

# BALLET-FUSION INSPIRATIONS

*For the portrayal of Peter and Ivan, we chose to give them a character study of a highly specific skill set, with not much room for genre-altering interpretation per dancer. To contrast this, we chose specific dancers/choreographers to refer them to rather than characters. This helps each of the women to create a new archetype that has yet to be explored in ballet. In the novel, Rooney purposely challenges the way women are perceived through the masculine lens, adding a layer of misinterpretation and exploitative nature. We felt the women's masculine-gazed complexities told through the brothers' perspectives would be mistranslated on stage, as it is hard to depict an unreliable, slightly patronising, narration to an audience, without acknowledging its inherent sexism, thus counter-pointing with an alternative feminist perspective through these women.*

## MARGARET

Inspired by Ginger Rogers  
*ballroom, jazz, and tap dance*



Smoke Gets In Your Eyes,  
Roberta (1935)



The Last Waltz, The Sign of the Cross  
and Irene Castle (1939)

Renowned in 1930s Hollywood for her charm and wry humour, it is Ginger Rogers' vibrant movements alongside her sass that curate a very sophisticated performance, especially when dancing a duet. While talented in tap and musical-styled dancing, she mesmerizes audiences with her waltz abilities easily stealing the spotlight from anyone on screen with her, including Astaire. This characterization fits Margaret's character as she is enigmatic and classic, but is not afraid to be independent. Her divorce and relationship with a younger man have made her consider herself to be transgressive in existence. The contrast of this 'new woman' ideal of the 30s being outdated but reimagined also fits into Margaret's fears of being an 'expired woman' past her prime, as that is what society has taught her to believe. She is vintage and classic, but with much more talent than spectators give her credit for. She is the icon.

## NAOMI

Inspired by Vera Ellen  
*ballet, tap, modern, Broadway*



A Day in New York, On The Town (1949)

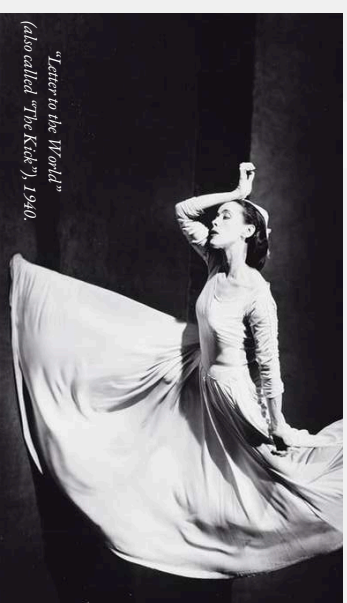


Come On Papa, Three Little Words (1950)

Vera-Ellen was the Hollywood it-girl of her day. While effortlessly graceful with panache, her ability to hold complete sensuality and a childlike spyness makes her replicable of Naomi. In *Intermezzo*, Naomi is the Gen-Z interpretation of the 'modern woman'; trying to navigate her place as a young woman in a patriarchal society. Like Vera, she is able to transform herself for the male gaze in order to profit off what has been meant to oppress. She feeds into the system to benefit herself.



Night Journey (1947)



"Letter to the World"  
(also called "The Kite" c. 1940)

Martha Graham is a fiercely independent and expressive personality. Praised for her communication-styled dance, this style compliments Sylvia due to their ability to gain respect and overcome obstacles despite physical limitations. Graham's stark, angular movements contrast well against a classical pointe dance, to emphasize the chronic pain Sylvia endures after her accident.

## SYLVIA

Inspired by Martha Graham  
*modern, fused with ballet*



# COSTUME

*Costume and set designer Mortiz Junge has previously worked at The Royal Opera House in the productions of Infa (2008), Limen (2009), Les Troyens (2012) and Woolf Works (2017). In this section, his sketches for the Intermezzo ballet are accompanied by Junge's interpretation of the characters' essence, explaining how he translated their identities into his final costume designs.*



## PETER

Drawing from the dynamic yet simple designs of contemporary ballet attire, Peter Koubek's main costume consists of a grey full body suit with flowy lines. The design includes loose pieces of fabrics that connect Peter's wrists to his torso, subjecting the dancer's moves to the fabric in the same way that a king chess piece is subjected to limited moving patterns, in which the piece can only move one square at a time in any direction.



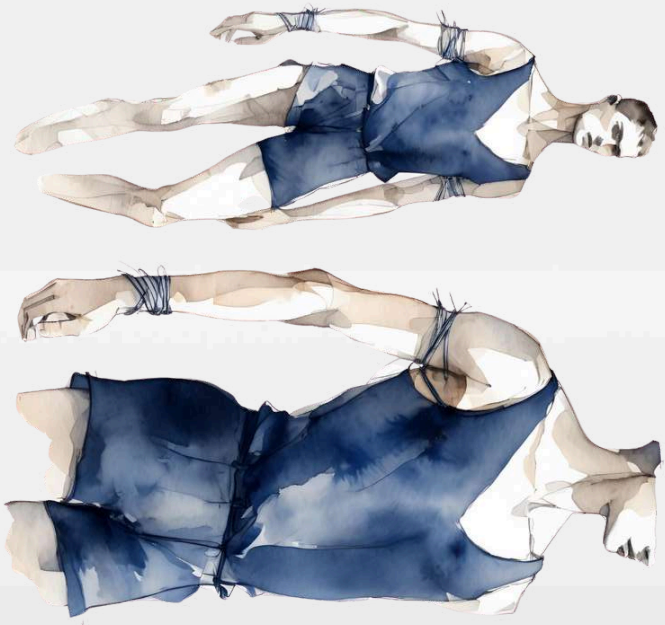
## SYLVIA

Sylvia's gown pays tribute to traditional ballet attire while embodying the silhouette of a white queen chess piece. The costume consists of a corseted bodice on the front, while the back depicts a human vertebrae alluding to the vulnerability of her body after the accident. The tutu is made out of two layers, the white one that matches the rest of the gown and the reddish ones underneath, that symbolise her pain and inability to engage in intimate sexual relations.



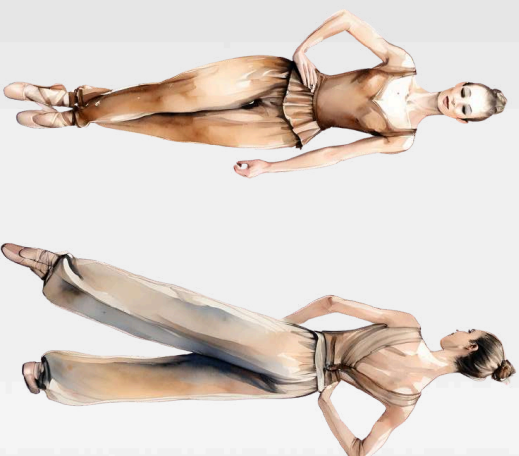
## NAOMI

Naomi's attire transforms the figure of the black queen chess piece into a modern design that alludes to Generation Z streetwear. The styling is less conventional and more loyal to the book character making use of untied hair, a nose piercing and a black choker necklace.



## IVAN

Ivan Koubek's main costume consists of a simple two piece suit in a dark blue shade. The shorts aim to evoke a more youthful figure, while the stylistic choice of using rope for the forearms and wrists represent the pressure he is under, also alluding to the moving patterns of the king chess piece.



## MARGARET

Margaret's costume consists of a two-piece design that draws attention to the baggy trousers, denoting elegance despite its simplicity. The attire draws away from the traditional ballet attire, as the character does in the book by getting involved in a romantic relationship with someone considerably younger than her.

## ALEXEI

Played by a young dancer, the representation of the dog Alexei was approached in a minimalistic way, making use of make up and hairstyling to achieve the playful, innocent look of the pet without losing its elegance. The blue shade of the leotard matches that one of Ivan's, but the brighter colour represents a childish trait of him that only manifests when he reunites with his beloved dog.



Six year-old Melody played her first chess tournament  
in March 2025.



Despite its proven benefits for cognitive development, chess does not qualify for government funding due to not being considered a sport.

Twice a week, with support of The Ireland Funds, a tutor from The Irish Chess Union visits Melody's home and teaches her how to play as part of our Young Minds initiative.

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# INTERMEZZO

*Direction and Choreography* Wayne McGregor  
*Music by* Max Richter  
*After* Sally Rooney's novel *Intermezzo*

ORCHESTRA OF THE ROYAL OPERA HOUSE  
*A co-production between THE ROYAL BALLET and BALLET IRELAND*

September - October 2025



# SYNOPSIS

## Act I: The Opening

Two brothers grow up through the progression of building a chessboard. With a ten-year age gap, one eventually moves to the city; the other takes care of their terminally-ill father and dog, Alexei. Following his passing, the two brothers, Ivan and Peter, struggle to reconcile their fragile relationship whilst dealing with their grief. In Dublin, Peter, a 32-year-old barrister, turns to the comfort of his ex-partner Sylvia, a college professor who struggles with chronic pain, and Naomi, a college student who financially supports herself through the selling of explicit online photos.

Meanwhile, Ivan, a 22-year-old chess prodigy, meets Margaret, a 36-year-old divorcee, at a chess exhibition in Cloghneken. The two continue to see each other, despite the controversy surrounding their age-gapped relationship. Things take a turn for the worse when Peter and Ivan meet up for the first time after the funeral and a fight breaks out between the brothers, cutting off all communication between them.

## Act II: The Middlegame

With tensions at an all-time peak, the brothers remain avoiding each other. Margaret and Ivan's relationship flourishes, with Margaret opening up about the intricacies of her divorce, and Ivan explains his feelings of resentment towards his older brother. Sylvia and Peter attempt to be intimate but are unable to due to Sylvia's condition. This leads her to call out Peter for hiding himself in his relationships. Disliking what she said, he turns to Sylvia for comfort, but all is ashamed as the pair break up, and Naomi travels to the brothers' father's house to retreat.

## Act II: The Endgame

Ivan retrieves Alexei from his mother's house, in which another family feud is advanced. Ivan returns to his father's house, where he meets Naomi. They discuss their relationships with Peter, but when he arrives at the house, a confrontation between him and Ivan escalates into a physical altercation leaving the younger brother bloodied. Ivan returns to Margaret where their relationship is actualized, despite Margaret's early fears. When Peter returns to Dublin, he is met with both Sylvia and Naomi who have teamed up to confront him. The three reconcile in an unusual relationship, discovering a new way of navigating love.

In the finale, Peter watches Ivan play a chess tournament, the first in a while. There, he meets Margaret and acknowledges her place in his brother's life. In a final scene, the brothers play a match of chess, Ivan beats Peter, but not in the brutal way Peter once did. They deconstruct the board in a manner resembling their childhood, starting a new game of reconciliation.

ALEXEI

MARGARET

NAOMI

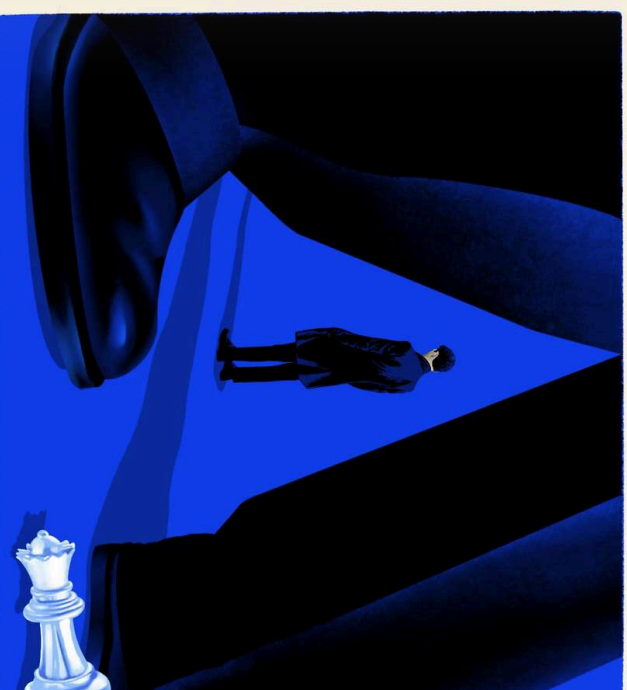
SYLVIA

PETER

IVAN

## CHARACTERS

# SALLY ROONEY



# INTERMEZZO

# CREATIVE TEAM

## WAYNE MCGREGOR

*Director/Choreographer*

Sir Wayne McGregor is a cutting-edge multi-award-winning choreographer, director, and trailblazer. He founded Random Dance (now Company Wayne McGregor) in 1992, emphasizing precise degrees of articulation through his concept of thinking through the body. In 2006, McGregor was named Resident Choreographer at the Royal Ballet, the first from a contemporary backgrounds in dance. On top of his many honorary doctorates, McGregor has travelled the world working in Venice, New York, Canada, and Paris.

## MAX RICHTER

*Composer*

Max Richter is a world-renowned British composer and pianist. His merging of classical and electronic technology being a trailblazer of the 21st century. Drawing from poets such as Wordsworth and Redgrave, Richter likes to explore themes of hope, activism, and environment in his music. Making his Royal Ballet in 2008, it was not long until he worked synonymously with McGregor. He has worked in London, Zurich, New York, Edinburgh, and owns a studio in Oxfordshire with his wife and dogs.

## MORTZ JUNG

*Costume Designer*

Mortiz Jung is a German-born international costume and set designer. He debuted his costume design at the Royal Opera House in 2004 for Ton Ades' *The Tempest*. Since then, he has worked across London, Australia, Germany, and the U.S.

## UZMA HAMEED

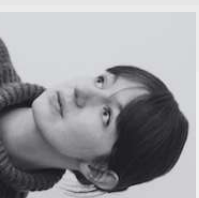
*Dramaturgy*

Uma Hameed has worked on multiple previous productions with the Royal Ballet, including *Wolf Works*, *Obsidian Tear*, and *Multiverse*. First trained in Cambridge in Modern and Medieval Language, she went on to train in classical Indian dance. She founded Big Picture Company in 1997, combining contemporary writing with film and dance. Additionally, Hameed writes reviews and features in multiple performance-based journals.

## ANISA TEJPAR

*Intimacy Consultant*

Anisa Tejar is an award-winning Canadian dancer, choreographer, and creative contributor. Having worked in collaboration with The National Ballet Canada, she can be found teaching Consent and Boundaries classes for dancers, assisting in the creation of dance into the immersion of total intimacy and comfortability between partners performing on stage. When not instructing or consulting, Tejar serves on the Board of Directors for Canada's National Ballet School in Toronto.

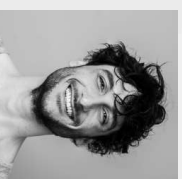


## SALLY ROONEY

*Writer/Production Consultant*

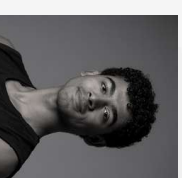
Sally Rooney is an Irish novelist. She graduated from Trinity College Dublin, completing a masters degree in American Literature in 2013. Her first published novel *Conversations with Friends* (2017), was nominated for multiple awards. Her second novel *Normal People* (2018) gained her even more popularity after the 2020 BBC Three adaptation. She has published two novels since then, *Beautiful World, Where Are You* (2021) and *Intermezzo* (2024). She continues writing novels, short stories and essays when not engaged in politics.

# CAST



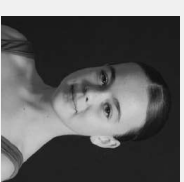
## MASSIMO MARGARIA

*Peter*



## ARTHUR WILLE

*Ivan*



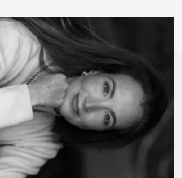
## ANNA SHIELDS

*Alexis*



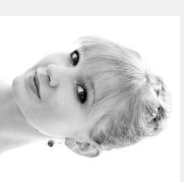
## NICOLA KILMURRY

*Naomi*



## LAUREN CUTHBERTSON

*Margaret*



## MELISSA HAMILTON

*Sylvia*

# A LITERARY INTERLUDE

*courtesy of Culture Ireland*

The most enticing character in *Intermezzo*, and perhaps the most important one, lingers in the background of each scene like an omniscient presence that manifests differently in the minds of Rooney's narrators, who throughout the novel

are surprised by unexpected events that challenge their preestablished perspectives of life. Avid chess players or aficionados recognise this concept from a move that forces an immediate response from the opponent, changing the game drastically, an 'intermezzo.'

The novel begins in Kildare, where Peter and Ivan Koubek bury their father, and where their childhood home still stands empty after his passing, like an unconquered land that grief has made inhospitable.

In Skerries, their mother's home stands invulnerable to their loss – as the Queen's piece does on a chessboard, forcing Peter and Ivan to search for a new home beyond the restricting borders of nostalgia.

For Ivan, Leitrim is where he frees himself from the weight of loss. This County in the north of Ireland is where he meets Margaret at a chess tournament, and where he visits her every weekend, taking readers with him through his bus journey between Dublin and Sligo. Ivan and Margaret drive to the coast and dive in its grey waters, where she feels 'immensely heavy and ancient', and later stop at an old country hotel in Knocknagarry, where something as subtle as the touch of Ivan's hand prompts her to 'perceive the miraculous beauty of life itself.'

Peter, however, seems to keep himself within the structured borders of Dublin city, where he works as a barrister at Four Courts Court House. As the weeks pass, Peter guides readers through James Street, gets drunk in Mulligan's, walks with Sylvia through the campus of Trinity College, and 'between the exhaust fumes and the street lighting, they laugh.'

Still, Peter cannot hide himself from the city that witnesses his grief as he visits Naomi in Waling Street, picks her from the police station in Kevin Street, and takes her back to his flat in Herbert Street after she is evicted. As 'something understood between them that can't be expressed' blooms, Peter drags himself into a love triangle doomed by his own inertia, his inability to make a move.

In Rooney's novel, Ireland acts as a chessboard in which two generations face an endless number of possible moves, and yet the ultimate strategy is the overdue dialogue between Ivan and Peter, the 'intermezzo' – in music theory, that brief composition between acts – that delays their reconciliation.

The production you are about see has been supported by Culture Ireland. We believe contemporary Irish arts are deserving of a worldwide audience, and that by creating and supporting opportunities, Ireland's cultural excellence can be enjoyed by international audiences.



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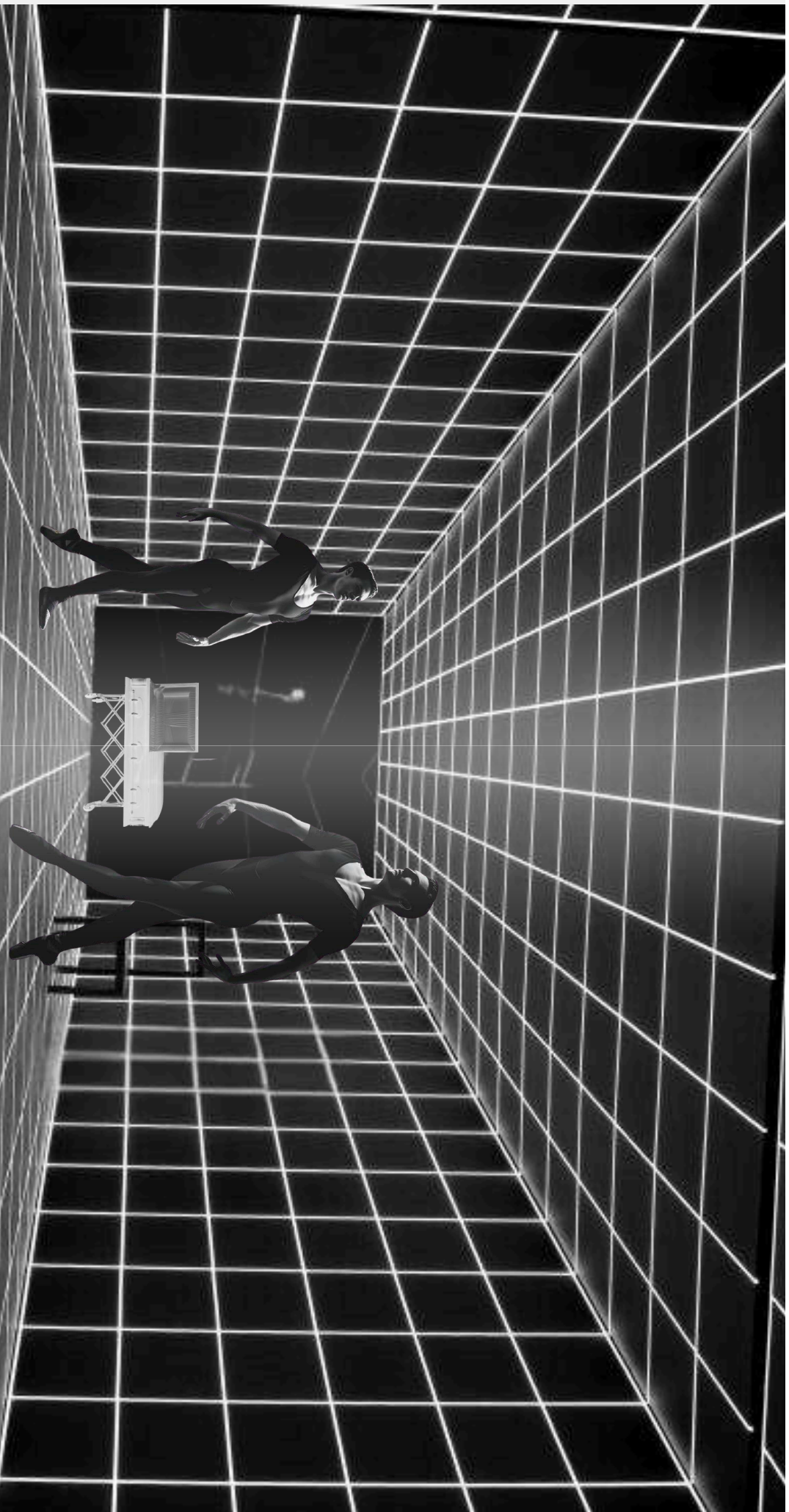
# THE LIGHTING STAGE

When deciding how we wanted to create a set and lighting to help propel the narrative, we had back-and-forth before eventually deciding on new set styles for each act, appropriately suiting the symbolic nature of the characters' journey.

Act I is that of a contemporary design in which lighting is naturally dark across the stage; contrastingly use of neon lasers further indicates rigidity in the dancers, causing restriction of the character and the audience. The ultimate goal of this effect is to highlight what is at the centre of these people's pain and desires. The dance between the lasers not only sensationalises the fit and upright feel, unable to break a straight edge but also captures the physical nature of Rooney in which the Romantic lighting indulges us.

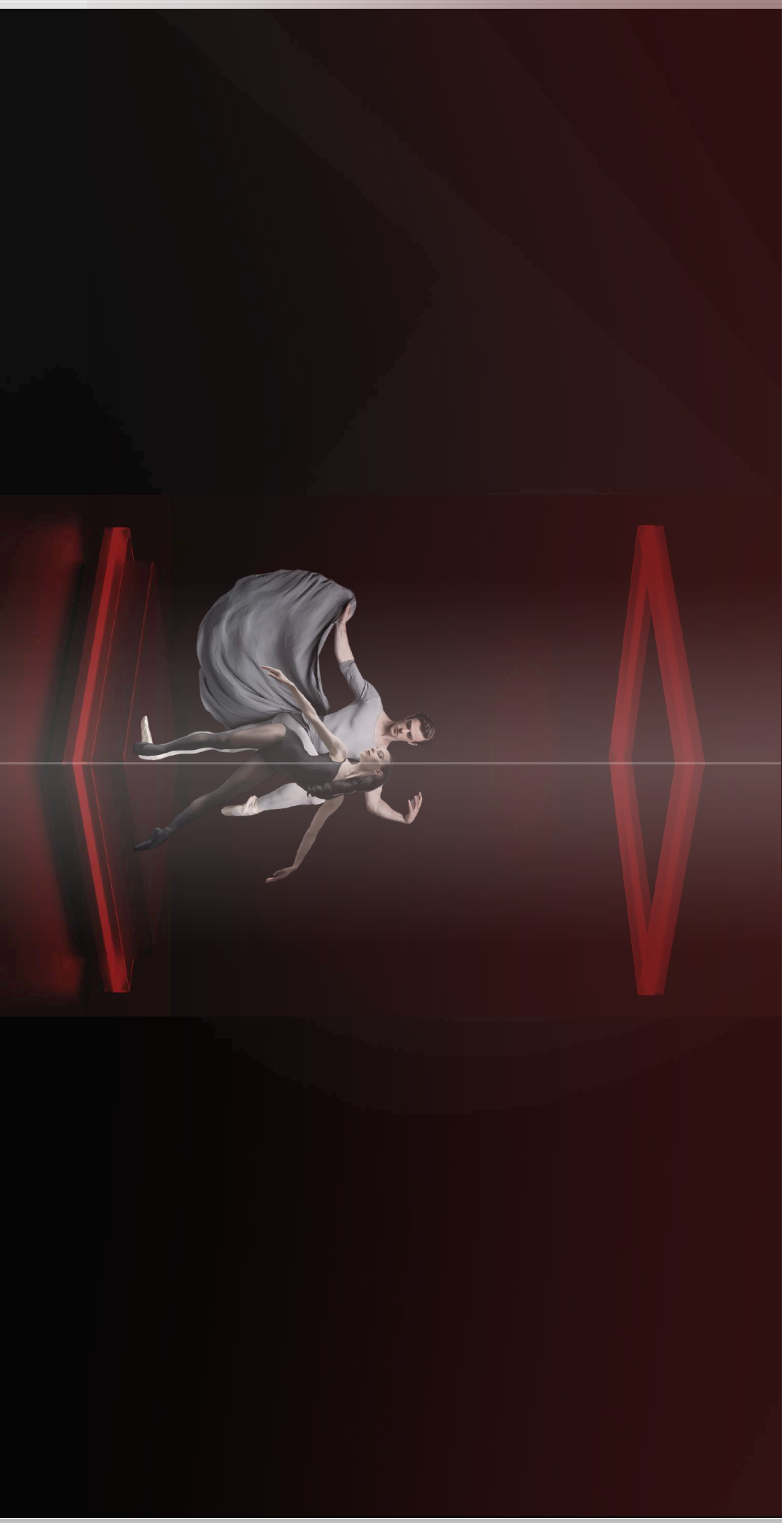
Act II is contrasting to its predecessor, curating a more naturalistic depiction of the stage. This is not the naturalism one may think of, however, a blend of Romantic set designs of the past with realistic photos of specific environments intensified through dramatic lighting. This serves as an effective tool for portraying this act as, like chess, the middle game is where romantic relationships explore their full potential. There are minimum dramatic plot points, which opens the opportunity to explore the fears and playfulness of each type of relationship.

Act III has a semi-similar set to the first. Except it uses bright colours with heavy shadowing. The brothers are in a stage of their grief where they resume their daily lives, and now must carry the burden of their isolating lifestyles. Ominous lighting and smoke further implicate ghosts of the past (or brothers of the present) that may come back and haunt, requiring unrequited vulnerability. Actions become much more symbolic, as the end game takes up its final battle between the two kings. This contemporary set design becomes abstract and nearly avant-garde with its checkered pattern usages. Colours are the brightest they have been seen so far, symbolizing the eruptions jump into reality grief can pull us in and out of.



ACT I

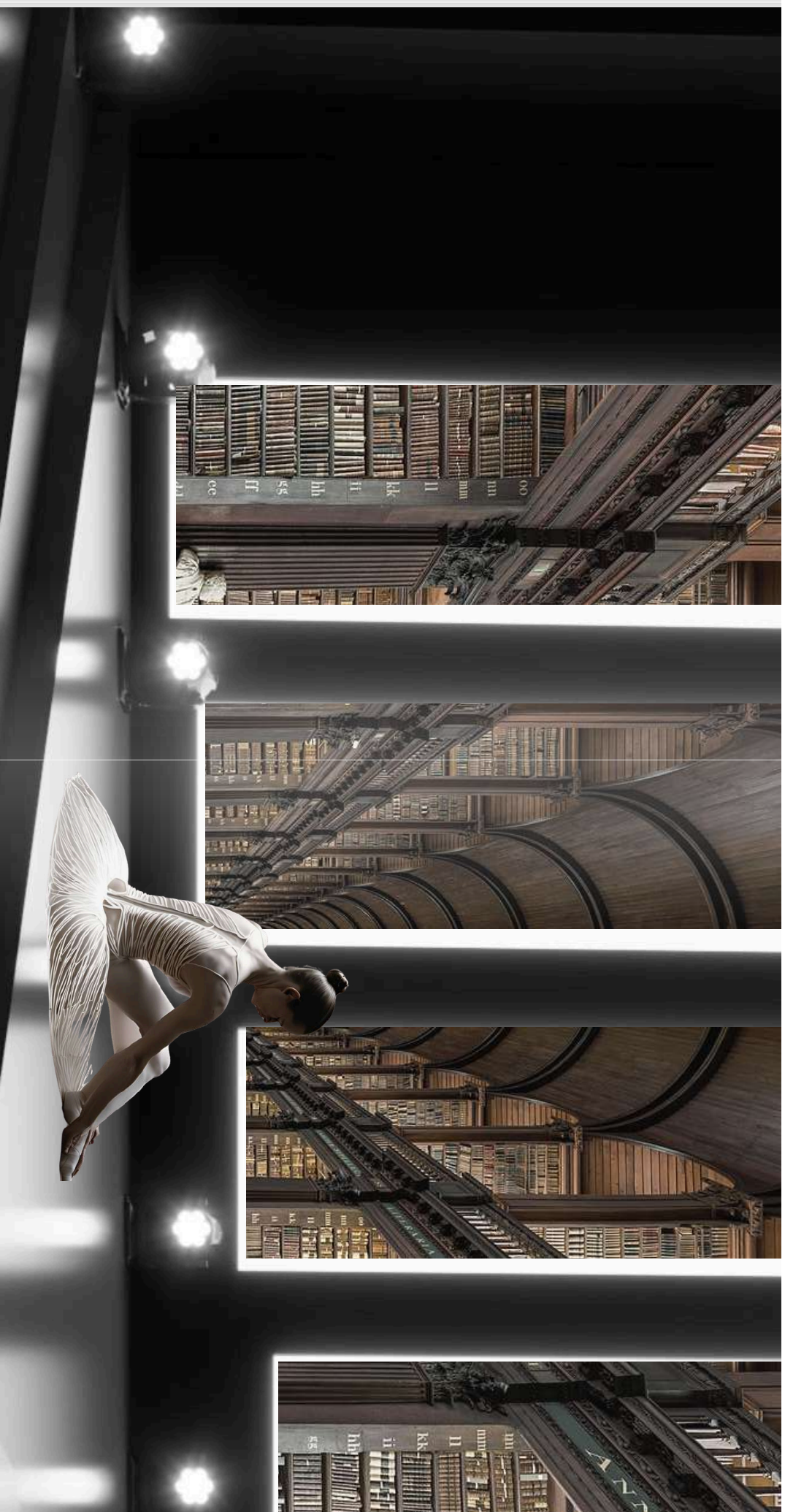
THE OPENING



ACT II

THE MIDDLEGAME





ACT II

THE MIDDLEGAME





ACT II



THE MIDDLEGAME



ACT III

THE ENDGAME



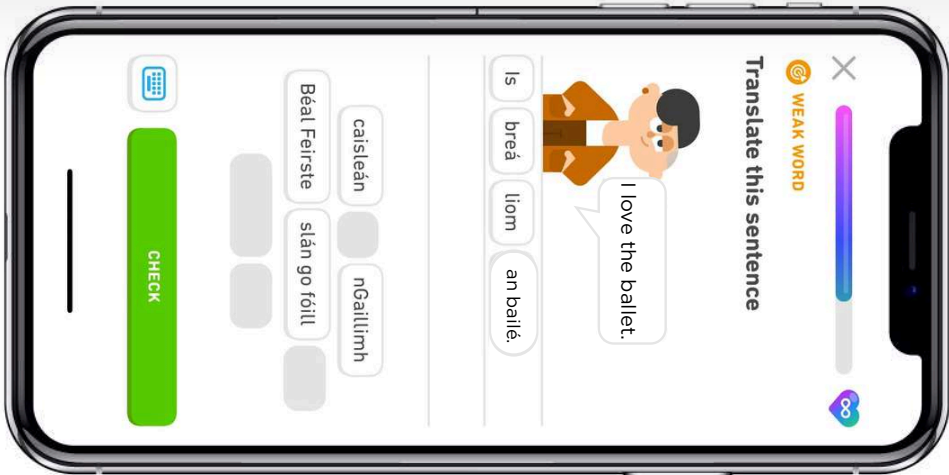
# BALLET IRELAND AT THE ROYAL OPERA HOUSE



Established in 1998 by Gunther Falusy and Anne Maher, Ballet Ireland was founded years after the dissolution of the Irish National Ballet in 1989, created with the conviction that there was a future for ballet in Ireland.

Today, Ballet Ireland acts as the pioneer of classical and experimental ballet in Ireland, with the mission to create accessible productions that meet the highest standard of international excellence while collaborating in innovative projects that unlock the endless potential of dance.

Ballet Ireland is proud to take part in the 2025/26 ballet season at The Royal Opera House for the production of Sally Rooney's *Intermezzo*, honouring the legacy of our culturally diverse dancers while representing modern Ireland on the stage.



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# CONVERSATIONS WITH ARTISTS

*An Interview between Sally Rooney and Wayne McGregor*

SR: You've been drawn to works that many wouldn't immediately think could be interpreted through movement—*Orlando*, *The Divine Comedy*. Are you seeking out complexity? What does a book need to have for you to believe it can live through dance?

WM: I need to feel it in all my senses. Not just intellectually, but emotionally, physically... Complexity doesn't scare me. In fact, I often find that within so-called difficult works, there's a very simple, essential core. You just have to find it, like cracking a code. People sometimes say, "This dance is hard to understand," but it's about accessing the piece on a sensory level, not trying to decode it like a thesis.

SR: So you're not trying to translate the text in a literal way.

WM: No, not at all. It's more about what the book awakens in me. When I choreographed around Ivan's and Peter's movements—yeah, it was about trusting what was already there. There are no rules. When you're working with extraordinary performers, it becomes effortless in a way. Technique of classical ballet can often be a trap, boxing dancers in, make them prioritize form over curiosity. Sometimes their idea of physical beauty gets in the way of real exploration. I don't think there's any point in making art now if it's just going to repeat the past. It should set a precedent of the times we live in now. Ground us as humans, as we contemplate how to get through the everyday of demanding modernity.

SR: There's something about that approach that gave me a new way of thinking about language while writing *Intermezzo*, too. That it's relational. Often, language only has meaning if there's someone receiving it, but at the same time can never communicate the exact intensity we want to get across... A novel is the same. A character is nothing without their relation to others, and those relations shift over time... Still they struggle to communicate with each other.

WM: That really resonates. I feel the same about movement. A gesture is empty unless it's directed toward something (or someone). I believe dance is an expression that words cannot always do, something I believe will be heightened with your characters, who very often struggle to communicate with each other... Something we struggle with in a post-COVID world. For example, during the pandemic, even non-dancers became hyper-aware of the body. Suddenly, we were conscious of every touch, every proximity. We pulled away from one another instinctively. We had to relearn something we used to do unconsciously. I think that's made everyone more aware of form—not just what movement is, but how it's perceived and received. The choreography of daily life changed.

SR: That idea of form feels central to the novel. We often forget the novel has form—people just ask what it's about. My friend Tom Morris, a brilliant short story writer, always jokes that short-story writers get questions about structure, while novelists just get asked for the plot. But the novel is a formal space... it holds tension.



WM: And in both dance and fiction, the real power comes from relation: how people move in relation to one another, not just how they move alone.

SR: Exactly. It's not about isolated expression. It's about energy exchange. That's why, when I read Alexandra Schwartz's review of my first novel *Conversations with Friends* in *The New Yorker*, it struck with me. She compared capitalism in contemporary Ireland to the role Catholicism played in Joyce's time... That oppressive structure, I believe, young people are trying to navigate. We think we've moved forward by shedding religion, but sometimes I wonder: did we just replace it with another system that's equally invasive, equally ideological?

WM: Absolutely. The arts aren't immune to that. Capitalism has a way of inserting itself into everything, especially in the UK post-Brexit. With



funding cuts and conservative institutions, there's so little room for risk. It's sucking the oxygen out of what dance could become. Artists need space and support to imagine, otherwise it's just survival.

SR: I think I agree with you there. And I think that comes across as one of the biggest problems these people, these characters face. They are just trying to survive, to get through the day. Naomi and Ivan both struggle with stable income but seem too preoccupied with life-interferences to make earning their main priority. Peter seems to be a character that lives to work rather than work to live, often using his intense job as an escape, if not work, drugs, if not drugs, women. Every one of these characters is hiding a part of themselves from themselves, which ultimately affects how they live with the people who look at a different image of them. See them more optimistically.

WM: I noticed that the brothers see the version of each other that they want them to be. Peter holds unrealistic expectations for Ivan, Ivan thinks Peter to be condescending. The biggest miscommunication is between the brothers, and in turn they rely on the women in their lives to avoid their unrealistic perceptions.

SR: It's interesting that you say that. With lovers, there's an expectation of miscommunication, but with siblings there's an expectation of knowledge, because you had a childhood together. I think people often have fixed roles within family dynamics. I don't mean that people become entrapped. It's not necessarily a negative thing. But, the younger sibling will always be the younger sibling. For me, it was interesting to think about how those dynamics change when the younger sibling, who has always been the baby, and is indeed ten years younger than his only, elder sibling, is now an adult himself. How can he conceive of himself as an adult within their family unit?

WM: And that's definitely a question that can never be fully answered, isn't it? (*Laughs*). This has been a wonderful discussion with you, but there was one last aspect of the show I wanted to talk about. When conceptualizing, you made the wonderful suggestion of casting Alexei as a child. What was your thinking behind that?

SR: In the novel, the dog becomes a beacon of pure honesty, which isn't always pure kindness. Sometimes your dog wanders away when you need comfort the most. Dogs don't just provide love and care—there's something else, animated by an inability to be dishonest. I think I suggested a child to perform due to kids' natural ability to see the BS in adults. They have a wonder about the world in a way that is raw and authentic, and felt the only correct way to portray a dog who is always honest. It creates an interesting presence on the page compared to my dishonest human characters dealing with adult topics.



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# REMEMBERING NINETTE DE VALOIS

## *The Irish woman behind our ballet Companies*

Dame Ninette de Valois was a dancer, teacher, choreographer and director of classical ballet. Considered one of the pioneers of Irish and English ballet, de Valois founded The Royal Ballet, The Birmingham Royal Ballet and The Royal Ballet School. Her contributions to British ballet have established her as one of the most celebrated and honoured figures at The Royal Opera House, and one of the most prominent ballet icons in the world.

By the age of twenty-one, de Valois became principal dancer with the Bechham Opera at The Royal Opera House in Covent Garden, studying under the mentorship of Edouard Espinosa, Enrico Cecchetti and Nicholas Legat. Continuing their legacy, she founded her own ballet schools: the Abbey Theatre School of Ballet in Ireland (1927), and the Academy of Choreographic Art in London (1926), joining the then director of the Old Vic Lilian Baylis in productions of Shakespeare and various operas.



In 1931, de Valois moved her school to the Sadler's Wells Theatre after its reopening by Baylis, founding her first ballet Company as a lead dancer and choreographer. Drawing from the legacy of Russian ballet, she mounted a variety of classical production with the vision of training dancers in a unique British style of ballet. She also created and choreographed her own pieces, producing remarkable works such as *Job* (1931), *The Rake's Progress* (1935) and *Checkmate* (1937).

After touring through England during the World War II, the Sadler's Wells Ballet became the resident ballet company at The Royal Opera House in Covent Garden, eventually becoming The Royal Ballet, while her second company established in the Sadler's Wells Theatre would come to be The Birmingham Ballet.

In line with our mission to celebrate our history, The Royal Opera House remembers Dame Ninette de Valois and honour her memory in this production of *Intermezzo*. Her invaluable contributions to British ballet have enriched the nation's culture, inspiring generations of artists and audiences alike to be part of our legacy.

# FROM CHECKMATE TO INTERMEZZO

'For life is a kind of chess, in which we have often points to gain, and competitors or adversaries to contend with, and in which there is a vast variety of good and ill events, that are, in some degree, the effect of prudence, or the want of it.'

– Benjamin Franklin, *The Morals of Chess*.

Chess has been used as a metaphor probably since its birth in India, being a successor of the ancient game *chaturanga*. A short Pahlavi treatise dated around the sixth century relates its origins while describing it as a 'game of war', an idea that came to be associated with the game as it spread throughout the Middle East into Europe, and it is still quite prevalent today.

The core elements of the game such as strategy, loss and the different roles of its pieces are what prompts us to think about chess as a war game, yet the possibilities of what can occur on the checkered board are what motivates audiences to watch players sit down for hours in deep thought. This fascination is perhaps stimulated by one of most overlooked characteristics of chess: the acknowledgement of the board as a stage in which every move, although subjected to preestablished rules, is open to endless interpretations. This performance executed by the players is what really attracts masses to chess, in which each match holds, put into words by Sociologist Alan Fine and Historian Harvey Young, 'the ability to stand for something beyond itself.'

Undoubtedly, there is endless symbolic potential in the components of chess, from its checkered board of sixty-four squares in which only one piece can stand per square, to each piece's unique moving pattern, as well as the duality represented by the two colours. In *Checkmate*, a life-sized game of chess unfolds on stage, in which Love and Death oppose each other through the affair between the Black Queen and the Red King. When a duel between the two occurs, the Red King cannot deal with the idea of killing the Black Queen because of his love for her, and so she seizes the opportunity to fatally attack the Red Knight, leaving the King unprotected until she slays him in a final 'checkmate'.



Margaret Barberi as the Black Queen in the Sadler's Wells Royal Ballet's 1982 production of *Checkmate*.

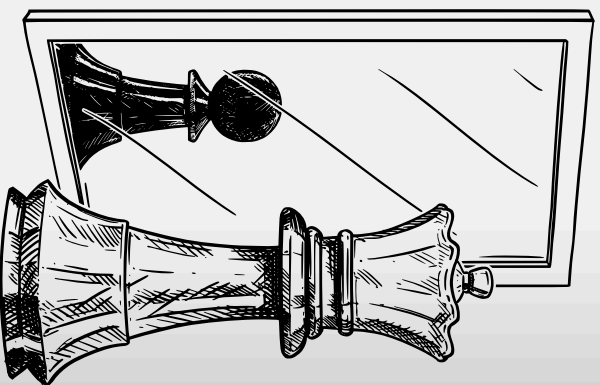
# CHESS AS A METAPHOR...

The tensions of love and betrayal take over the stage of *Intermezzo* in a completely different sense. The ballet is divided in three acts that mimic the anatomy of a traditional chess match: The Opening, referring to the starting move, followed by The Middlegame, where most strategic movements take place, until The Endgame, where few pieces are left on the board, leading to the game's end.

The production also took careful consideration of the pieces movements and how they could be translated on stage, with the characters of Naomi and Margaret executing more dynamic choreographies around the stage, similar to the movements that a Queen on the board can execute, moving any number of spaces along any direction. Sylvia, on the other hand, embodies the more uncertain destiny that a fallen Queen could face, having been replaced on the board by a different piece, with a choreography that alludes to the more precise techniques of classical ballet.

In contrast, the tensions between the Koubek brothers are embodied by their respective dancers through a choreography inspired on the limited movements of a King, with more purposeful dance moves that at times feel static, but remain graceful. The slowness of their solo scenes is meant to evoke the cautiousness employed by chess players in the process of plotting their strategies, making audiences remain patient and attentive to the next move.

Even though chess deals with the art of attack and defeat, this adaptation of *Intermezzo* seeks to portray the game as a discipline in which understanding the opponent leads players closer to victory, stressing the beauty of Peter and Ivan's unique abstract strategy through dancing and interpretation.



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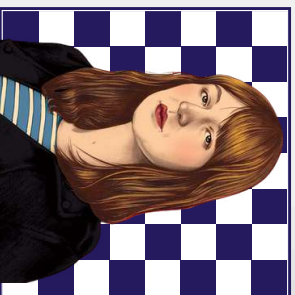
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# STAGING 'THE VOICE OF A GENERATION'

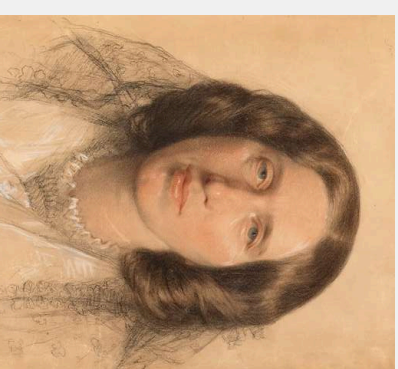
There must be something about Sally Rooney's prose that encapsulates the millennial experience in ways that surpass culture and language, as her most successful novel *Normal People* has been translated into forty-seven languages since its publication in 2018. Her work, notoriously minimalist in style, focuses on the inner lives of characters that coexist with the omnipresence of the internet while navigating the moral, social and economic struggles of late capitalism. Yet these distinctions are insufficient for a label that remains vague in the literary world, for it is not clear what the true meaning of 'millennial' is, apart from being the demographic born between 1981 and 1996, or how it echoes into its successor the 'generation Z', born between 1997 and 2010.



This ambiguity increases the complications of defining what 'the millennial novel' is, but literature is not an exact science, and neither are generational cutoff points, subjected to the influences that manifest differently depending on individual circumstances. A person born within the millennial range might have younger siblings and lean more towards the generation Z, while those who grew up as only children or with older siblings might self-identify solely as millennials. What we know is that both demographics have been affected to different extents by an early exposure to the internet, witnessing its evolution throughout an economic recession. These elements are not only present in Rooney's novels, but they also construct the structure of her characters' identities, subjected to a hierarchy where, 'millennial is greater than Irish, but post-recessionary may be greater than millennial', as Lauren Collins observed in *The New Yorker* in 2018.

For readers of the millennial and Z generations, this label might be the result of a set of moral values that we believe differ us from our parents, although the current political climate rooted in division might suggest otherwise. Perhaps 'the voice' is a certain set of aesthetics that express our generational apprehensions so accurately that it must lose its individuality and turn into a choir to earn the label. Yet this contradictory concept suggests the repression of what makes the voice unique, bringing questions about what parts of it must be quietened down to earn the title of praise, the privilege of representing the generation.

The foundation of this idea might be in the reliability of Rooney's characters, the way they 'read' the internet rather than surf it in *Conversations with Friends* or stop in the middle of their streams of consciousness to reflect on 'the absolute cringe' in *Intermezzo*. In her article '*How Should a Millennial Be?*' Madeleine Schwartz comments that Rooney's characters 'love to announce where they fall on the matrix of taste and social awareness. They read Patricia Lockwood and watch Greta Gerwig movies; they read Twitter for jokes' which might signal a different approach to culture from our predecessors, the alienated 'Gen X' and 'Boomers'. Still, this might be the most superficial lens to read her characters through, which do navigate the strange ever-changing world we currently live in, but their revelations might not be that distant from what has been explored in literature before.



*George Eliot by Sir Frederic William Burton (1865)*

If Rooney's characters watched Gerwig's films, then they would have encountered one of the most remarkable lines from George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* in the 2019 adaptation of *Little Women*:

'WE COULD NEVER HAVE LOVED THE EARTH SO WELL IF WE HAD HAD NO CHILDHOOD IN IT, IF IT WERE NOT THE EARTH WHERE THE SAME FLOWERS COME UP AGAIN EVERY SPRING, THAT WE USED TO GATHER WITH OUR TINY FINGERS, WHAT NOVELTY IS WORTH THAT SWEET MONOTONY WHERE EVERYTHING IS KNOWN AND LOVED BECAUSE IT IS KNOWN?'

— GEORGE ELIOT, *THE MILL ON THE FLOSS*

They most certainly would have, not just because of their affinity for literature, but because Rooney's characters navigate life in Victorian sentimentality. Maybe we all do, as the quote sits a kind of melancholy, evoking a childhood in which climate awareness was prioritised in education, of activities on Earth Day, school projects about recycling. Now our adulthood is filled with anxiety around the climate crisis, we wonder if it is ethical at all to have children, we read about ecofeminism, and yet we see ourselves as powerless in our own political frames, thinking that everything is performative.



The author herself admitted the influence of these novels in her work, 'A lot of critics have noticed that my books are basically 19th-century novels dressed up in contemporary clothing', she told Collins in 2018. It is not so difficult to see why, as the characters of George Eliot, Elizabeth Gaskell, and Charles Dickens navigated the pressures of the Industrial Revolution in similar ways that Rooney's characters live in the world today in *Normal Heart*. Naomi resorts to self explicit pictures of herself to afford books for college, Ivan states that profit is a kind of inefficiency, stating that 'if we organise everything in view of profit, we get things happening in economy that make no sense', and Peter in his own bubble of isolation reflects on this matter too:

'IT CAN BE EXPLOITATIVE TO GIVE MONEY; ALSO TO TAKE IT.'

There is a sensation that the world should be different, but an uncertainty in how. That is perhaps the result of our generation's particular circumstances, we have inherited a promising world, but we have also inherited its chaos. Those who have grown up with divorced parents understand love's potential brevity, while those who have not, face social structures in which their parents' marriage might not be attainable anymore, with connections reduced to dating apps where successful courting is the result of self-advertising. Yet, we all keep trying to navigate the uncertainty of our odd, shifting approaches to emotional intimacy. We believe in evolution, yet what comes after it might be more frightening than stagnation.

When Naomi tells Peter that she understands the complexities of his relationship with Sylvia, and she does not mind her presence in his life, he resists it in an unflexible manner, 'That's not real life. That kind of thing, what you're talking about, life doesn't work like that', but it does already. Perhaps if we look back at the predecessors of Rooney, we might discover it always has, releasing our generation from the pressure of pigeonholing our voice so early in our history.



GUINNESS

EN POINTE.

# *Max Richter on composing* INTERMEZZO

*Composer Max Richter holds a longstanding career in a wide range of art forms including theatre, opera, ballet and cinema scores. His power to produce atmospheric and emotionally charged pieces has turned him into a praised collaborator of renowned choreographers like Sir Wayne McGregor. The duo has created several successful productions at The Royal Opera House, including Intra (2008), Woolf Works (2017), and MADPADDAM (2022). Here, the composer talks about the process of developing the ballet score for Intermezzo.*

The process of adapting a book into a ballet requires vast research, and a novel like *Intermezzo*, with a variety of voices and immersive narrative approaches, demands to get deeply into the text. Rooney's writing is very rich, with psychological and sensory material, so I spent a lot of time reading and rereading, trying to discover the kind of atmosphere I wanted to evoke for the overall tone of the book, but also how I wanted the essence of each character to sound like.

When thinking about the project, I was looking at how the book operates in several levels. You have the micro scale: the inner lives of these characters and their loneliness. Peter, Naomi, Sylvia on one side and Ivan and Margaret on the other, and of course the relationship between the brothers that ties everything. But then there is also the broader societal dimension, the clash between generations, the surge of unconventional relationships so love can survive, the need for a dialogue that cannot be delayed. That suggested to me that I needed multiple musical languages to speak to that synergy.

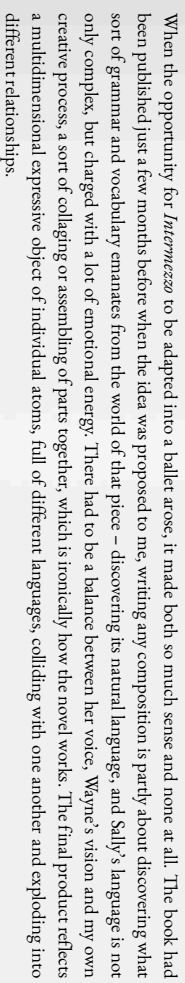
There are multiple languages created in terms of the various use of instrumentation, scale, emotional register and musical grammar to match the different voices in the novel. Peter and Sylvia come from a traditional relationship that was fatally affected by her accident, while Margaret carries the weight of her divorce. These voices are heavy with the pain of experience, while Ivan and Naomi belong to a new generation where nonconformity is much more accepted, but despite this shared trait they are completely different. These complexities forced me to create a very diverse repertoire: there are tunes inspired by abstract electronica and techno, pieces influenced by Irish folk music and a spine of orchestral material. This orchestral music is very contrapuntal. The individual melodic lines intertwine constantly, interacting with one another as they develop and echo each other, evoking a sense of nostalgia that I believe haunts all the characters in the novel.



When the opportunity for *Intermezzo* to be adapted into a ballet arose, it made both so much sense and none at all. The book had been published (just a few months before when the idea was proposed to me, writing any composition is partly about discovering what sort of grammar and vocabulary emanates from the world of that piece – discovering its natural language, and Sally's language is not only complex, but charged with a lot of emotional energy. There had to be a balance between her voice, Wayne's vision and my own creative process, a sort of collaging or assembling of parts together, which is ironically how the novel works. The final product reflects a multidimensional expressive object of individual atoms, full of different languages, colliding with one another and exploding into different relationships.

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