



# **Not Another Troubles Play**

## **Theatre of Conflict in Northern Ireland 1968–1998**

*A Troubles Archive Essay*  
Imelda Foley



*Cover Image: Jack Packenham - Totem and Mask Theatre*

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# About the Author

**Imelda Foley** was born in Derry and educated at Queen's University Belfast and Trinity College Dublin where she gained a PhD in Theatre Studies from the Samuel Beckett Centre. She has worked for most of her professional life with the Arts Council of Northern Ireland, as Regional Officer based in Derry City and then as the Council's first Community Arts Officer for Northern Ireland, establishing an infrastructure of Community Drama groups and other organisations. She was Drama Officer for seven years before leaving the Council in 2002 to pursue a free-lance career.

As theatre producer she took Ulster Youth Theatre to represent the best in UK practice at the National Theatre, London and to win awards including the first Belfast City Council Arts Award for Drama. She helped to found independent theatre company, Ransom Productions and produced its award-winning *Hurricane*.

Most recent work has been with Local Authorities and communities in devising and managing projects while acting as part-time administrator of the Stewart Parker Trust. As a critic, Dr Foley contributes articles to specialist journals. Her book, *The Girls in the Big Picture: Gender in Contemporary Ulster Theatre* was published by The Blackstaff Press in 2002.

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### Theatre of Conflict in Northern Ireland 1968-1998

"It falls to the artists to construct a working model of wholeness by means of which this society can again begin to hold up its head in the world."

**Stewart Parker *John Malone Memorial Lecture*** (1986)<sup>1</sup>

"You're doing very well. You've got the wrong head on that body... his head can't be going left if his feet are going right. Not unless his head is on a swivel or he's a politician."

**Graham Reid *The Death of Humpty Dumpty*** (1979)<sup>2</sup>

## Introduction

In the closing decades of the twentieth century, the vast space between "yes" and "no" in Northern Ireland politics was sparsely populated. Inhabitation of a new socio-political cultural space will take time. If the migration of mind-sets may be engineered, there is no doubting the language and ontology of governmental determinism, which directs that shift. Unequivocally, we have been given our marching orders in the document, which directs a power-sharing executive and informs the future lives of Northern Ireland citizens – *A Shared Future*.<sup>3</sup> The visual impact of that Westminster and Dublin decree has been signified by the daily broadcasted camaraderie between Ian Paisley and Martin McGuinness, replacing images from more than a decade previously when Paisley and Trimble danced hand in hand in a triumphalist tribal duet along Garvaghy Road. In 2008, the cloyer relationship at the top of Northern Ireland's political administration is perhaps more comprehensible and realistic. Martin McGuinness and Peter Robinson share few chuckles, but knuckle down to deliver decrees absolute from Westminster.

A recent documentary tracking the backward gaze of now renowned war journalists who had early posts in Northern Ireland, at the beginning of what had been described as "disturbances in the Province", reveals an astounded confusion, shock at the "raw hatred" and most of all, an awareness of a "colonial outpost ... thirty years removed" from life on mainland Britain.<sup>4</sup> Given that thirty-year deficit, compounded by another thirty years of bloodshed and a decade of floundering political negotiation, the positive dictum of *A Shared Future* echoes the cruder and less magnanimous strategy of a previous regime. The prescience of Brian Friel's *Translations* (1980) may now be received as a further allegory of 2008 in Northern Ireland. Illustrating the quarrel between tradition and new values, *Translations* may signify the complexity of resolution of that lengthy societal deficit intimated by Kate Adie, "30 years behind the times" – and indicate a positive future. Field Day's fifth province of the imagination, a site



for dissolution of old hegemonies within which oppositional factions might coalesce, may today be incubating to deliver a new generation of “normality” in Northern Ireland. Friel’s characters, Hugh and Jimmy Jack in *Translations* pose issues, which have been that of theatre throughout the times of the Troubles in Northern Ireland.

Hugh: It can happen that a civilization can be imprisoned in a linguistic contour which no longer matches the language of ... fact.

Jimmy: Do you know the Greek word *endogamein*? It means to marry within the tribe. And the word *exogamein* means to marry outside the tribe. And you don’t cross those borders casually – both sides get very angry. Now, the problem is this. Is Athene sufficiently mortal or am I sufficiently godlike for the marriage to be acceptable to her people and to my people? You think about that.<sup>5</sup>

While our playwrights have grappled with “that” for 40 years, dissolving old hegemonies, predicating new *mores*, theatre companies, actors and creative teams have, throughout the Troubles, presented images, imaginings of a shared future in subtle and complex form. The title, *Not Another Troubles Play* echoes a common dictum, a familiar response to the new work of the 1970s and ’80s, a reaction based more on a plethora of television dramas than theatre representation and a perceived genre of realism, an interpretive re-enactment of events from which audiences wished to escape at the doors of auditoria. The title also defies a superficial preconception that the specific setting of a text, its time and locale, may deny enduring potential or more universal resonance.

## Prelude to 1968

At the beginning of the twentieth century, WB Yeats refused the founding of a northern branch of his and Lady Gregory’s Irish Nationalist Literary Theatre. Banishing members of the Protestant Nationalist Association back to Belfast founded a pre-political partition separatist theatre movement, a regional theatre, The Ulster Literary Theatre. Defining separatism and regional identity, the theatre was to be “satiric rather than poetic” and to build a “citadel”, terminology which, represented cultural separatism from the South and an enshrinement of values more based on pragmatism and industry than the heroic mythology base of Yeats’ Irish theatre movement.

Plays produced evidenced a comic wit and first staged Ulster sectarianism in Gerald McNamara’s *Suzanne and the Sovereigns* (1907), followed by *Thompson in Tir na Nog* (1912). In the latter, difference is satirised by bringing Andy Thompson from Sandy Row into discourse with mythical Grania, parodying Yeatsian mythological idealism and scrutinising the accepted wisdom of Andy’s sectarianism. These binary opposites become the standard formula of Ulster comedy.

In 1911, St John Ervine’s *Mixed Marriage* was produced in Dublin and not in Belfast until many years later, beginning a tradition of Northern playwrights finding first production outside Belfast. Based on the 1907 Dockers’ strike, *Mixed Marriage* presents sectarianism, not as a quaint folk culture, but as a hegemonic function of politics religion and sexism whose human and political manifestations are unpalatable. Historically, *Mixed Marriage* raised issues which awaited diagnosis, particularly by Joseph Tomelty, a Northern and very Irish playwright whose work interrogated local discrimination and Ulster bigotry. *The End House* was produced in Dublin in 1944 and 50 years later in Belfast by his daughter’s company, CentreStage.

A silence of mute intangible negativity and board room politics was broken in 1959 when the Chairman of the Ulster Group Theatre, founded in 1940, issued a press statement: “It is the policy of the directors of the Ulster Group Theatre to keep political and religious controversies off our stage.”

The play in question was Sam Thompson’s *Over the Bridge*, directed by James Ellis not at The Group Theatre but, in protest, at The Empire Theatre in Victoria Square and to audiences set around Ulster’s rural hearths and legitimising colourful characters as innocent emblems of an acceptable sectarianism was replaced by urban realism.

Throughout the fifties and sixties, an amateur movement was thriving, led by Cork born, Mary O’Malley: the Lyric Players. Based in her home extension, O’Malley rallied the artists and actors of the time to reinstate Yeats

as godfather of theatre in Belfast, coming full circle, to be instated by northerners after his banishment of them. Producing a dozen plays a year and founding the Lyric Theatre building, which was to open in October 1968 overlooking the Lagan, the Lyric Players' endeavour of that time may have seemed to gratify its idealised Yeatsian vision of looking "in the sun's eye" while at ground level, Belfast was smouldering<sup>6</sup>

Entering a new phase of professionalism and public accountability, there were as many debates off as onstage, with three meetings in as many weeks before the opening to resolve the issue of statutory playing of the National Anthem. The aftermath of the banned Civil Rights March in Derry, 5th October 1968, with images broadcast around the world, was to prove even more contentious, not only for the new theatre but the industry as a whole.

## Incidents

Not only artistic licence but the fabric of theatre venues, suffered varieties of onslaught, particularly during the 1970s and '80s. The first casualty was the Grove Theatre, which closed in 1971 following a series of fires and bomb scares. The venue might not have survived, given that the Lyric, as a dedicated purpose-built theatre provided more than the Grove for audiences and performers alike. The Group Theatre next to the Ulster Hall and home of the amateur theatre movement was closed from 1971-76. The Arts Theatre, on Botanic Avenue was closed following the bombings of Bloody Friday, 1972, reopening in 1976.

Mary O'Malley writes in her autobiography that in 1976 there were 129 explosions in the space of two months.<sup>7</sup> However, the Lyric experienced minimal disruption during the Troubles with one controlled explosion at the Ridgeway Street side of the building causing no structural damage but putting the cast in full dress rehearsal costume out in the residential street. O'Malley also recounts the fact that the night after Internment, August 1971, there was a cast of 22 and an audience of eight for Yeats' *The King's Threshold*! When, in O'Malley's absence the theatre closed during the United Ulster Unionist Council strike of 1974, with transport, food supplies and industry shut down, the lady was not happy that the old maxim, "the show must go on" had been negated without her consent.<sup>8</sup>

The Grand Opera House had been reopened by the Arts Council in 1980 and lauded as a contribution to the rebirth of Great Victoria Street as "The Golden Mile". The refurbished building's proximity to the Europa Hotel, (the most frequently bombed building) and next door to Glengall Street Unionist Headquarters, always caused concern, which was realised in severe bomb damage in both 1991 and 1993.

For most theatre practitioners controversy takes place behind closed doors more often than on the public stage and relates to issues of means of production. Major public controversy during the Troubles was relatively minimal. Druid Theatre Company from Galway suffered most. In 1992, the company toured *Carthaginians*, directed by playwright Frank McGuinness to Derry's IMPACT 92 Festival. Some Derry City Council representatives had travelled to Galway to preview the production and, claiming that it was "a travesty of Bloody Sunday", held a Council meeting to discuss cancellation! On Derry's first night, the play was on trial and triumphed with standing ovations.<sup>9</sup> The following year, Druid's *At the Black Pig's Dyke* by Vincent Woods encountered worse. Members of Derry Frontline, a community theatre group, mounted the stage and in the mummers' costume of the play, wielded a meat axe. Actor Frankie McCafferty, who lives in Belfast, stated that, "throughout the Troubles and since, I have never been so frightened".<sup>10</sup> The play represented a version of republicanism, which was antipathy to members of Derry Frontline. Needless to say, as a consequence, northern venues found it difficult to attract touring companies from across the border.

## Sectarianism and Realism

The traditional comic representation of sectarianism has been challenged by playwrights from the 1970s. It is not so much the concept itself, but its fall-out, the licensing of a host of related prejudices within a broader political construct, which became the dominant subject and represented within the traditional form of realism. The characters are victims/victimisers, oppressors/oppressed, colonisers/colonised, with some joining of hands across the barricades and religious divide. John Boyd, Graham Reid, Martin Lynch, Christina Reid and Gary Mitchell deploy the dominant form of realism, linear narrative and recognisable characterisation which may allow an audience the comfort of prior stances, whether "for" or "against". So too, within a seemingly linear journey, they may sometimes signpost disturbances to unsettle and fog straightforward audience reception, to interrogate fixed values.

The first Troubles play, John Boyd's *The Flats*, produced at the Lyric Theatre in 1971, was set in Unity Flats 1969, where the single remaining Protestant tenant made the concept of "unity" absurd. Within the Donnellan family flat, domestic normality has been turned upside down and within a timeframe of one day, a bottle of whiskey has been consumed, guns and ammunition have been trafficked in the front and out the back door, a bout of marital sex and a flirtation with a British soldier occur before a Protestant mob gathers. This anarchic chaos is concluded by the address to the audience, "Who is to blame?"

*The Flats* not only represents an historic marker in terms of "Troubles plays" but its actual physical siting realistically maps a stretch of inner city road, which was later to become the stomping ground of the "Shankill Butchers" and christened "Murder Mile". Boyd's realism, which introduces civil and domestic disintegration, can be remembered even today by its location on an uncomfortable urban dual carriageway, not designed for pedestrians, running between the entrance to the Falls and Shankill Roads.

The issue of finding appropriate form, which allows for the absorption of raw tragedy, is highlighted by Brian Friel's much quoted response to his Bloody Sunday play, *The Freedom of the City* (1973). Perhaps unnecessarily, Friel states that he wrote "out of some kind of heat and some kind of immediate passion that I would have wanted to have quieted a bit before I did it".<sup>11</sup> Such doubts also concerned Patrick Galvin about his productions as Writer in Residence at the Lyric during the same tumultuous period of shootings and failed political agreement. However, in 1975, Galvin's research with communities most affected by events was presented in musical revue form of snapshots representing the traditions and prejudices of both sides, with loud echoes of the Ulster comedies and of course, positive audience reception.<sup>12</sup>

The stark realism of *The Flats* matures with age in Graham Reid's grim theatrical representations of the Troubles, a decade on. Best known for *The Billy Plays*, televised dramas with James Ellis, Kenneth Branagh, Julia Deardon and Mark Mulholland, the representation of a Protestant working class culture moving between living room and pub on Belfast's Donegall Road provided a soap opera as comfortable as *Coronation Street*, but with the uncomfortable backdrop of Belfast's sectarianism. Reid's comments on issues relating to the Troubles are pertinent reminders of complicity. He states that, "no one is totally innocent and no one is totally guilty. We are social animals. If we don't recognise problems, like what makes a paramilitary, then we are part of the problem."<sup>13</sup>

Graham Reid left school at 15 and as a mature student trained as a teacher. His work is thus informed by an unusual intimacy with both working and middle-class cultures. Animal imagery pervades Reid's texts. Woman is constantly "bitch". Ruby and Eric, *The Closed Door*, "live like insects in a cage" and Doyle, *The Death of Humpty Dumpty*, is a "tadpole in a tropical fish tank", while George has become "the eyeless legless chickenless egg", and the dog's new bed in *Dorothy* becomes a recurring image of domestic and social alienation. Reviewers also endorse this imagery, one voicing a suspicion never far from Reid's plays, that "people are pigs" and another suggesting that "people should be brought in cages to the ... theatre".<sup>14</sup> So too, characters are or become lonely isolated figures within a wider panorama of dispossession. The nuclear, middle-class family disintegrates in *The Death of Humpty Dumpty*. In *The Hidden Curriculum*, Boyd and Allen are from broken homes, In *Dorothy*, Doris would rather rear a dog than a family. In *The Closed Door*, Victor and Doreen have a childless marriage and the staff room teachers of *The Hidden Curriculum* are separated, widowed or spinster. This disintegration of social units is matched by recurring states of siege both literal and metaphorical, with paramilitaries as the wielders of power, which also allows them literal freedom of movement while victims are trapped behind varieties of closed doors. As John Boyd asked, "who is to blame?"

Reid's first play, *The Death of Humpty Dumpty* (1979), opened in Dublin at the Abbey's Peacock Theatre with a cast including Liam Neeson and Colm Meaney. The narrative of George Sampson, history teacher, father, husband, respected within his Protestant community and shot by paramilitaries for having witnessed gun dumping on Cave Hill, is compelling in eliciting sympathy for an innocent victim who is paralysed from the neck down. Reid's adherence to character and plot may seem to narrate the struggle for individual survival within a society beyond individual control, the consequence of an act of violence within a violent society. But, from prologue in, a complexity of signifiers presents an altogether different story, a sophisticated theatrical image of Northern Ireland as colony with the colonised becoming colonisers.

Doyle, a Catholic who has shared a hospital ward with George speaks in valediction from the grave: "George told me ... that Belfast is built on piles. It has no hard rocky foundations. The Protestant Volunteers formed a guard of honour when the first chapel opened".<sup>15</sup> Respectable George has been having an affair with Caroline, a colleague from school and is with her on Cave Hill, the historic site of Belfast political campaigns and, for George, an incident

among incidents (he has told his wife that he is attending a lecture on the Pig in the Irish Economy), which have led to his paraplegic state. Taunts from Doyle's ghost in a schizophrenic series of voices, convert George into a monstrous, unmanageable duality. While Reid charts the fissure perpetrated on one family by a single act of violence, his subtext continuously signposts images of larger disruption. The hospital orderly, Willie John, tortures George with small acts of subtle hatred and supremacy, voiced during a bed bath: "There it is, like a member of the Unionist Party stripped of its power of independent action."<sup>16</sup>

Uneducated working class Catholics control George, pillar of liberal middle class Protestant establishment. Within a series of realistic and metaphysical juxtapositions, reversals and inversions, there is a single survivor, ward Sister Thompson, "a Catholic from over the border". Her identity and integrity remain intact, her roots in firmer foundations than "the piles" on which Belfast has been constructed. Reid's coloniser George and emergent colonised Catholics (Doyle/Willie John) are prescient symbols of what would happen in future years; the colonised slowly moving towards another colonisation.

The issue of finding appropriate form in which to contain tragedy is highlighted by Brian Friel's already quoted response to his expiation of Bloody Sunday, *The Freedom of the City*. Friel's technical strategy of interspersing voices of varieties of authority representing church, the military and media alongside the narratives of a Derry trio trapped in the Guildhall after a Civil Rights March riot presents the didactic dichotomy of oppressor and oppressed within two oppositional theatrical styles. Another Derry trio, created much later by Frank McGuinness, represents the tragedy of Bloody Sunday within an open feminist form, that of *Carthaginians* (1988).

The audience is not led into preconditioned acquiescence or rejection. There is no room for Ulster's "yes" or "no" in the glorious vastness of the in between. Critics, whose orientation is towards the certainties of "yes" and "no" often misinterpret McGuinness' formal strategy which is perfectly summarised in Dido's epilogue: "What happened? Everything happened, nothing happened, whatever you want to believe, I suppose."<sup>17</sup>

Dave Duggan completes a North West trilogy of playwrights. *Scenes from an Inquiry*, based on the Saville Inquiry<sup>18</sup> presents 14 scenes, 14 witnesses, 14 dead. Like Friel, the linguistic distance between bureaucratic and human terminologies, between truth and its fabrication form the core. The poetry of human speech, what McGuinness refers to as "the memory of wounds"<sup>19</sup> is persistently intercepted by the mechanical pot shots of an unsympathetic judiciary. The black and white of right and wrong of maps and photographs, bounds the vast dark space of human tragedy. We are reminded of an earlier mapping exercise, the ordinance survey of *Translations*. Each scene ends with Counsel requesting technicians to show "photograph P387", "hotspot H719", or an extract from published literature, "E221". In the penultimate scene, the technology breaks down completely!

COUNSEL: (to technicians) The link seems to be down. Can somebody do something?<sup>20</sup>

The final scene 14 is a poem, *Lament*. This elegy echoes an earlier lament for the victims of the Enniskillen bombing. Frank McGuinness' *Caoin* was commissioned as part of a dramatisation of Seamus Heaney's *Station Island* together with a piece by Jennifer Johnston, *The Names*, linking the Protestant dead of the Derry siege and the Catholic dead of Bloody Sunday.<sup>21</sup> The mourning women of *Caoin* and *Lament* are direct descendents of Synge's keen in *Riders to the Sea* where Maurnya is condemned by grief to a living death. McGuinness' *Carthaginians* is an exposition of how we begin to come to terms with private and public grief and how the living may survive the dead. Duggan's *Scenes from an Inquiry* in his collection *Plays in a Peace Process* may, after thirty years, help bring peace to the Derry victims of Bloody Sunday.

The process of this trilogy mirrors the process of grief, raw emotion followed by numbness of loss and eventually peace in remembrance. Together, these plays are testimony to what Duggan refers to as "the universal poetic voice that cries out in the face of awful violence, that salves and heals in the face of the utter hopelessness of death and loss."<sup>22</sup>

If oppression in these plays is orchestrated by state and a professional elite it is self managed within Gary Mitchell and Christina Reid's loyalist communities. So too, Frank McGuinness' *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme* may be read as a sympathetic allegory of a contemporary Loyalism whose political ideologies and allegiances have been betrayed, as Marianne Elliott states, "by the very forces to which they adhere, loyalty to the Crown, to Britain".<sup>23</sup> McGuinness' men of the 36th Ulster Division display obsessions with a sense of place, of Ulster. Away from it they keep a tenacious grip on it. Back on home leave, this identification has dissolved and is



replaced by symbols and emblems, which have lost meaning. Fear of the inevitable turns the war in the heads and the war in the trenches into a nightmare state of desolation, betrayal and disassociation. The volunteers become a microcosm of a Protestantism dispossessed.

Gary Mitchell's Loyalists have bypassed dispossession to create meta communities whose relativity to normality, to structures of social democracy, is the central, chilling feature. First performed at the Abbey, Peacock stage in February 1997, the very title *In a Little World of our Own*, captures the ethos of a contented, separatist and dysfunctional community, which actually appears to be functioning not too badly. *As the Beast Sleeps* is the first post-Good Friday Belfast play and was also produced, not in Belfast but at the Abbey, Dublin, June 1998. The naturalistic settings of the living room within family homes on the Protestant Rathcoole Estate accentuate a superficial normality. But the action of both plays systematically dissolves tenuous links with normality to create a world apart, whose inhabitants have constructed their own ethical canon, complete with the resources for its implementation.

The machinery of official Government is either totally ineffectual or exists to be exploited. The "Dole" pays the rent for the Housing Executive flat in which paramilitary confessions are extracted and torture rituals conducted. Henchmen with grandiose titles police the estate and instructions for day to day activities are issued through a hierarchical "chain of command". But, it is Agreement time and a new order must be established, its *raison d'être* and purpose incomprehensible, as confused and redundant foot soldiers obey edicts from "the chain of command". The new Officer in Charge of Security at the Club has been beaten up by a friend and begins his auspicious new job with his arm in a sling! The refrain of the UDA's local Communications Officer is, "I'm not saying nothing". Meanwhile, violent acts are conducted with frightening regularity and absurd logic, always in the midst of domestic trivia. Gordon, who has a legitimate job in insurance is persuaded into knee capping his mentally disabled teenage brother. A foot soldier agrees to torture his best friend. A local girl is raped and dies in hospital. Throughout all these horrors, the tea drinking, card playing and chat continues. As the "new regime" of peace and the requirements of the Good Friday Agreement unfold, a Head of the local Punishment Squad is appointed. The social mutations within Mitchell's naturalisation of abnormality will take generations to correct. Normality seems impossibly distant.

That distance is emphasised by *Tearing the Loom*, Mitchell's second stage play, produced in Belfast by the Lyric Theatre. Set in 1798 in rural Ulster and featuring feuding within one family, violence is more pronounced as witches are hanged for supporting the rebellion and a daughter commits suicide to avoid being hanged by her father. Again, domestic to-ing and fro-ing, the lighting of lamps, tea making and hearthside wisdom accentuate the horror of violence as the ludicrous acts of the past interrogate equally appalling contemporary acts in urban Belfast. In Mitchell's three plays, legitimisation of violence within a fissured Protestantism is masterminded by individual males whose supremacy is unchallenged and communally accepted. Within this culture too, rape is also acceptable as an act of patriarchal social revenge, rather than sexual gratification.<sup>24</sup>

Self-appointed despotism is not a Loyalist hegemony. Anne Devlin's indictment of Republican processes within Catholic communities, diagnoses a patriarchy within which the gap between ideology and behaviour is textually measured. In *Ourselves Alone* (1985), Devlin challenges an orthodoxy which publicly promotes freedom and privately subjugates lives. The socially accepted absurdities of Gary Mitchell's henchmen have their Catholic equivalents.

A prisoner's partner convinces herself that he is "safer" inside since he will no longer be picked up by the security forces! Father and local Commandant, "freedom fighter" imprisons his female family to run a safe house and gives them money "to buy chocolate" while the son insists that his sister must have an abortion. Sanctification of martyrs is matched by subjugation of women and Irish patriarchy is presented as a seamless garment from 1916 through to the Hunger Strikes of 1981. So too, death, actual and metaphorical, is a recurring motif and the perpetrators of violence are themselves its victims. Frieda, the most independent of the women and who will eventually emigrate, challenges: "You know something, Father? You've been burying your friends since sixty-nine. But, do you know something else, your friends have been burying you".<sup>25</sup>

Conscious and unconscious duplicity is summarised, ironically, by the undercover British agent: "If you smile to deceive, how will I know when it's for real?"<sup>26</sup>.

More stringently than any other playwright of the Troubles, Devlin contextualises political conflict as a male construct in which women's lives are governed by orthodoxies that may be more conservative and authoritarian

than those the male leadership strives to replace.

With both Mitchell and Devlin, violence has become a way of life. Once violence has been sanctioned as a means of solving political problems, it becomes the solution to every other kind of problem. The perpetrators suffer most. One of Mitchell's more discerning foot soldiers concludes that of all the back room tortures over 25 years, "all our victims were Protestants". Similarly, in Devlin's *West Belfast*, her acts of violence are not committed by the security forces and their one appearance on a house raid seems no less imperial than the daily traffic which parades unannounced in and out of the female home.

While Mitchell's two Belfast plays were first produced in Dublin, Devlin's *Ourselves Alone* was produced by The Royal Court Theatre, London and toured to Enniskillen, Derry, Dublin and Limerick but not to Belfast. Written and set post-Hunger Strikes of 1981 when Republican sympathy was at a height and IRA recruitment at a peak, the play may have seemed too controversial for safety. Devlin states that, "the management at the Lyric Theatre were [sic] ... nervous about the title ... [and was] still nervous in 1994, so when *After Easter* opened at the RSC in May, they took that play instead".<sup>27</sup>

Both Mitchell and Devlin depict equivalent meta societies, on both sides, under a paramilitary governance which prescribes its own legalities and administration of justice. State violence is absent from these texts, replaced by a quotidian and acceptable violence, the norm of Mitchell's Rathcoole and Anne Devlin's *West Belfast*.

The antithesis of Anne Devlin's interpretations is presented by DubbelJoint and JustUs, professional and community theatre companies combining to depict community identity from researched memories and individual stories in *Binlids* (1997). As Byrne states, this was "in your face theatre";<sup>28</sup> raw events from Internment on, presented in chronological order with one state brutality after another. In the midst of media controversy relating to propaganda and issues of state funding, another argument is the fundamental right of a community to express its past in its own words and imaging as an act of catharsis to be witnessed by those not sharing the expressed ideology. It would seem that the latter is central to any comprehension of opposing experiences. The *Belfast Telegraph* critic and Gerry Adams, Sinn Fein President almost agree:

Just Us has sketched the first tentative lines on a picture of their suffering. If only someone from the other side would add their memories to the canvas. (*Belfast Telegraph*)

It appears...that part of the process of building peace includes and needs people reclaiming their own stories. This has to be a fundamental part of any healing process. (Gerry Adams, *The Irish Voice*)<sup>29</sup>

Issues of location and timing affecting audience reception are again apparent in Damian Gorman's *Loved Ones* (1995). The personal becomes political for most citizens within a war-weary society, demonstrated by the grief of two mothers whose sons are perpetrator and victim respectively. Gorman's fictionalised distillation of researched interviews pushes audiences into identification with oppositions and a suspension of disbelief, or perhaps "beliefs", essential as Adams suggests for any peace building.

## The Eighties

Playwright, Martin Lynch has often stated that the 1980s represented "a golden age" in Northern Ireland Theatre, and he is right. Lynch was Writer in Residence at the Lyric Theatre, followed by Christina Reid. Field Day was founded in 1980 by Brian Friel and Stephen Rea, closely followed by Charabanc Theatre Company and then the Arts Council's Theatre Ulster, Youth Drama and Community Drama Schemes. Playwright Stewart Parker was in his prime and from the entrepreneurial templates of Field Day and Charabanc, independent companies of young actors emerged with Replay Productions (Theatre in Education), Big Telly Theatre Company and Tinderbox Theatre Company. Institutional change in terms of funding and policy perhaps recognised that "the disturbances in the Province" had transmuted to "the Troubles" and the edict of "an acceptable level of violence" indicated that there would be no immediate resolution.<sup>30</sup>

Field Day's ideological dedication was matched by a pragmatism, which involved long annual tours to every part of Ireland. The company attracted the country's best theatre talents, championed by Stephen Rea, and first nights in



Derry's Guildhall attracted the international media. So, in 1980, Brian Friel's *Translations* presented the world with a sophisticated allegory of colonialism and its descendant fallout of violent counter action, the story of Northern Ireland.

Co-habiting the big picture, Charabanc Theatre Company was formed in 1983 to create work and roles beyond the traditional cliché of females as "wives, mothers or the background for some guy on stage".<sup>31</sup> Foregrounding the lives of women, the company's work was based on authenticity within a framework of black comedy, which has become the hallmark of playwright Marie Jones' international success. While Charabanc's consistency, quality, intelligence and socio-political relevance matches that of Field Day, an elite establishment privileged the latter. Issues of Ulster conservatism, gender bias, in the broadest sense, are apparent. Founder member, actor Eleanor Methuen summarises: "They [Field Day] had academic and literary heavyweights on their board .... We were always praised for the rawness and the energy. There was just a slight edge of patronisation there".<sup>32</sup> Jones went on to write plays more in the subjunctive territory of the imagination, creating imagined potentials in *A Night in November* and *Stones in His Pockets*, both commercial successes in their universality of seeking freedom in literal and metaphorical excursions from the cultural confines of Northern Ireland.

Martin Lynch and Christina Reid, from different segregated communities, shared the Lyric stage throughout the 1980s. Intimacy with their respective traditions and immediate communities informed the work, in revealingly differing styles and genres. Reid interrogates a Protestant culture which has sacrificed so much for so little gain, illustrated by war portraits which have no commercial value, (*Tea in a China Cup*, 1983) and the return of men from war, either in boxes or as shell-shocked wrecks, living symbols of loss and human exploitation (*The King of the Castle*, *The Belle of Belfast City*, *Did You Hear the One About the Irishman...? My Name, Shall I Tell You My Name*). Contemporary males, devoid of role models and ideology are overbearing bigots within a patriarchy of racism and sectarianism. Reid's forgotten people, the dispossessed, are counteracted by Lynch's characters who, because they possess so little, have little to lose. As the risen people guard neighbourhoods in new roles as nocturnal vigilantes, comradeship, community and, most of all, a sense of cause and purpose are forged (*Castles in the Air*, *Minstrel Boys*), culminating in *The History of the Troubles, (accordin' to my Da)* (2003). The ingenious title appendage 'accordin' to my Da' licences the innocent hilarity of it all while camouflaging difficult deficits within the much loved Ulster form of comedy. The Troubles seem to have been sunnier in West Belfast. But, Lynch's location of the RUC Station in *The Interrogation of Ambrose Fogarty* (1982), the title itself and the deft linguistic counterpoint between interrogators and interrogated, depicts a microcosm of an unhealthy and polarised society. Instruments of state are unable to implement justice as the local jester, Willie Lagan, is charged and the potentially guilty Fogarty is released. Contradictions abound within an anarchy of bad faith and personal confusion. Following the Hunger Strikes of 1981 and enquiries into allegations of torture at Castlereagh RUC holding centre, *Fogarty* was provocative. A remount in 2007 at the Grand Opera House, Belfast allowed a retrospective reception. Lynch's superficial didacticism has more sophisticated and sinister overtones, of a centre, which cannot hold.

In comparison, Stewart Parker's men and women seem almost normal, ordinary people trying to make a living and a life against a backdrop of explosions, violence and bigotry, which uncovers a miasma of institutional bad judgement, localised paramilitary hierarchies and botched love partnerships. Parker's present tense of scepticism is supported by historical flash backs, ghosts and technical experimentation with theatrical forms, to provide a continuum of centuries of sectarianism and its consequences. Escape is through obsession with bicycles, *Spokesong* (1975), house conservation, *Pentecost* (1987) and the music industry in *Catchpenny Twist* (1977). In these and other plays, the issues themselves are theatrical devices and not as important as an abhorrence of the effects of public intrusion on private lives and its corollary, the inability of the individual or collective to affect political and social change. Parker's plays opened in Dublin, London or the US until 1984 when the Lyric commissioned *Northern Star*, followed by Field Day's commissioning of *Pentecost* in 1987, just a year before Stewart's death from cancer. The two plays in very differing forms express and summarise a dissident regret for the current and historical plight of Northern Ireland.

## 1998 – A Conclusion?

The year of 1998 brings this essay full circle, back to the Good Friday Agreement and its proposed implementation as laid out by *A Shared Future*. The Good Friday Agreement was followed by a positive Referendum and then the Omagh bombing and commemoration of the victims at St Anne's Cathedral in Belfast.

Kabosh produced Owen McCafferty's *Mojo- Mickeybo*, a depiction of innocence ruined by sectarianism. Stewart

Parker in his introduction to Sam Thompson's *Over the Bridge* provides a lasting reminder of not what constitutes sectarianism, but how it operates as an unseen virus, "a seepage, a kind of fog of religiotics which seeps in everywhere".

My finale to that mixed year was Field Day and Tinderbox's co-production of Parker's *Northern Star*, directed by Stephen Rea, appropriately in Rosemary Street First Presbyterian Church. Theatre and politics combined to remind of history, of dissidence and of love and around the corner from where the most recent bomb victims had been commemorated just two months previously.<sup>33</sup>

When Frank McGuinness intimates that the war on the streets may be over, he also reminds that the war in the heads will take much longer to settle. Gary Mitchell intimates that the *Agreed* truth and the *Real* truth may be two different and incompatible entities.<sup>34</sup> There is still much to dramatise.

I'm riddled with it. The past. The truth. The truth of the past. All through me. Stuff that happened between 1969 -remember that? – when the country collapsed into crisis under its own weight – and 2005 – with the stuttering Peace Process continuing.

Dave Duggan *AH 6905*<sup>35</sup>

## Dr Imelda Foley

### End Notes

- 1 Copy of lecture delivered by Stewart Parker, held Stewart Parker Trust Archive
- 2 Heather Sampson, jigsaw puzzle with daughter Mary; *The Death of Humpty Dumpty*, (New Irish Plays) Dublin CO-OP Books 1979 p.6.
- 3 *A Shared Future on Improving Community Relations in Northern Ireland*, NIO January 2003
- 4 *The Troubles I've Seen* UTV 24th March 2008
- 5 *Translations* Selected Plays Brian Friel, Faber and Faber Limited 1984 p.446.
- 6 A full summary of the history of the ULT is given: *The Theatre in Ulster*, Sam Hanna Bell, Macmillan Ltd. 1972. Founder of The Lyric Theatre, Mary O'Malley relates events in her autobiography, *Never Shake Hands with the Devil*, Pub. Elo Press 1990. The quote from Yeats, 'look up in the sun's eye' was the Lyric's adopted motto and engraved on foundation stone of the theatre.
- 7 Ibid., vi.
- 8 Even in South Belfast, there was not a shop or a public house open over those days.
- 9 Imelda Foley, *History's Moral Guardians Alerted*, Fortnight 305, April 1992 p36-37.
- 10 Frankie McCaffertie in conversation with Imelda Foley.
- 11 F O'Toole, *The Man From God Knows Where*, In Dublin 28, October 1982 p20-23
- 12 *We Do it for Love*, Patrick Galvin, Lyric Theatre, 1975
- 13 Quoted by Christopher Murray, *Recent Irish Drama, Studies in Anglo Irish Literature*, ed. Heinz Kosok, Bonn 1982 441.
- 14 Paddy Woodworth, 'The Hidden Curriculum', Theatre Ireland No1 1982 p16. Gus Smith, 'Explosive Drama at Peacock', Sunday Independent 9th September 1979.
- 15 GJ Reid, *The Death of Humpty Dumpty*, New Irish Plays CO-OP Books, Dublin 1975, p5.
- 16 Ibid, 21
- 17 Frank McGuinness, *Carthaginians and Baglady* Pub. Faber and Faber London, 1988 p70.
- 18 Dave Duggan, *Plays in a Peace Process*, Pub. Guildhall Press, Derry, 2008, Scenes from an Inquiry based on the Saville Inquiry into Bloody Sunday, January 1972. The Inquiry has allegedly cost millions and at time of writing has not submitted report which is due December 2008.
- 19 Frank McGuinness, *Inscription; Carthaginians*, 1988: *It is possible that there is no other memory than the memory of wounds*, Czeslaw Milosz.
- 20 Ibid.,xiv. P122.
- 21 *Stations* was commissioned by Ulster Youth Theatre 1989, Stranmillis College Theatre, Belfast festival at Queen's and Lombard Street Studio, Dublin 1990. The production was nominated for Best production in Ireland, 1990.

- 22 Ibid., xii, Foreward p 6-13.
- 23 Marianne Elliott, *Watchmen in Sion: The Protestant Idea of Liberty*, Field Day Pamphlet, No8, Field Day Derry, 1985.
- 24 Gary Mitchell, *In a Little World of Our Own and Tearing the Loom*, London, Nick Hern Books, 1998. *As the Beast Sleeps* 1998, Rehearsal Text.
- 25 Anne Devlin, *Ourselves Alone* London, Faber and Faber 1986. p78
- 26 Ibid., p82.
- 27 Anne Devlin in conversation with Enrica Cerquoni, *Theatre Talk: Voices of Irish Theatre Practitioners*, Ed. Lillian Chambers, Ger Fitzgibbon and Eamonn Jordan, Pub. Carysfort Press, Dublin 2001 p110
- 28 See below, O Byrney
- 29 Ophelia Byrne, *State of Play*, Pub. The Linen Hall Library 2001 p123. Another debacle ensued relating to DubbelJoint-JustUs' production of *Forced Upon Us*, 1999. Outside the time framework of this particular essay, 1968-1998, another essay must discuss issues relating to the play and to work after 1998.
- 30 The Arts Council of Northern Ireland's programme during the seventies focused on direct touring of imported companies. As indigenous companies evolved and Theatre Ulster was formed in 1984, to assist the programming of the Arts Theatre, Riverside Theatre, Coleraine and Ardhoven Theatre, Enniskillen, the need to provide employment for local actors was also recognised with funding to new companies.

It was during James Callaghan's reign as British prime Minister that the adage 'acceptable levels of violence' was applied to Northern Ireland.

- 31 Carol Martin, *Charabanc Theatre Company*, Toulane Drama Review, June 1986, p 97.
- 32 Panel discussion IOSAL conference, Belfast 1995. For further reading Charabanc, see Imelda Foley, *The Girls in the Big Picture: Gender in Contemporary Ulster Theatre*, Pub Blackstaff Press 2002.
- Charabanc was founded by Marie Jones, Eleanor Methuen, Carol Scanlon (Moore), Brenda Winter and Maureen McAuley.
- 33 Stewart Parker's *Northern Star* is a masterpiece of artistry invoking theatrical styles from Farquhar, Boucicault to Beckett in the double metaphor of the life of Henry Joy McCracken and the stages of the botched revolution of the United Irishmen of 1798.
- 34 Gary Mitchell, quoted by Liam O'Ruairc, *The Agreed Truth & The Real Truth; The New Northern Ireland*, Variant 29 Summer 2007, p 17.
- 35 *AH 6905 Plays in a Peace Process*, Dave Duggan, Guildhall Press, Derry 2008, p.83/4.